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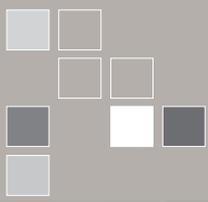
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MCLUHAN, RELIGION, GROUND, AND CAUSE

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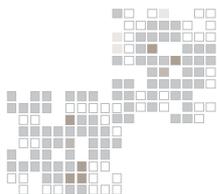
MCLUHAN, RELIGIÓN, FUNDAMENTO Y CAUSA

Paul A. Soukup, S.J.

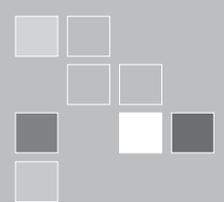
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the new environment generated by the convergence-television-internet social networks. To this end, we look to characterize the “environment” in concept proposed by Marshall McLuhan. Second, we seek a characterization of the first social networking as a means hot and cold, with the conclusion that each social network generates its own environment and that, according to the contents thereof, can be cold or hot. Finally, we propose a set of lines of work to follow the purpose of exploring the contribution of McLuhan around the environments, over all the electronic age, since it is an important path to follow to generate new knowledge about the mentioned socio-cultural environments and their impact.

KEYWORDS: CONVERGENCE; TELEVISION; INTERNET; SOCIAL NETWORKS; ENVIRONMENT; MCLUHAN.

RESUMO

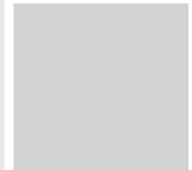
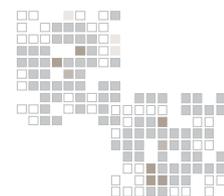
Este trabalho explora os novos ambientes gerados através da convergência televisão-internet-redes sociais. Para tanto, buscamos caracterizar o “ambiente”, em conceito proposto por Marshall McLuhan. Em segundo lugar, buscamos uma primeira caracterização de redes sociais como meios frios e quentes, com a conclusão de que cada rede social gera seu próprio ambiente e que, de acordo com os conteúdos da mesma, podem ser frias ou quentes. Finalmente, propomos um conjunto de linhas de trabalho para seguirmos explorando o propósito da contribuição mcluhiana em torno dos ambientes, sobre toda a era eletrônica, visto que se trata de um caminho importante a seguir para gerar novos conhecimentos sobre os ditos ambientes e suas repercussões socioculturais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: CONVERGÊNCIA; TELEVISÃO; INTERNET; REDES SOCIAIS; AMBIENTES; MCLUHAN.

RESUMEN

Este trabajo explora los nuevos ambientes generados a través de la convergencia Televisión-Internet-Redes Sociales. Para ello se recurre a la caracterización de “ambiente” propuesta por Marshall McLuhan, que contextualizamos en el desarrollo tecnológico. En segundo lugar, se busca una primera caracterización de las redes sociales como medios fríos o calientes, con la conclusión de que cada red social genera su propio ambiente y que de acuerdo a los contenidos de la misma, pueden ser frías o calientes. Finalmente, se proponen un conjunto de líneas de trabajo para seguir explorando a propósito de la contribución McLuhiana de los ambientes, sobre todo en la era electrónica, puesto que se trata de una veta importante a seguir para generar conocimiento sobre dichos ambientes y sus repercusiones socioculturales.

PALABRAS CLAVE: CONVERGENCIA; TELEVISIÓN; INTERNET; REDES SOCIALES; AMBIENTES; MCLUHAN.



At some point, Marshall McLuhan's biographers, commentators or critics bring up his religion. Often they do so in order to explain something about his writings or his work; in doing so, they often make the same mistake about him personally as do those who employ his analysis of media to explain something about religion. In McLuhan's words about the media, they focus so much on the figure that they ignore the ground (McLuhan, 1972/1999; 1977/1999b). Or, to use another of McLuhan's phrases, they seek an efficient causality (in the cause-effect relation of the sciences) when they should consider formal cause (McLuhan ; McLuhan, 2011). Cooper (2006) has this latter sense in mind when he writes of McLuhan, "his faith permeated his work" (p. 161).

McLuhan, the son of a devout Methodist mother, grew up in a family that followed "a loose sort of Protestantism," attending a variety of churches in Edmonton (McLuhan, 1999, p. ix). He converted to Catholicism toward the end of his doctoral studies in 1937, a Catholicism he had come to know from his readings in medieval and Renaissance educational systems, in the development of doctrine, in G. K. Chesterton, and in much else (McConnell, 1998, p. 24; McLuhan, 1999, p. xvi). Though informed by study, conceptual reason did not bring McLuhan to Catholicism; he came to the church "on his knees" (McLuhan, 1999, p. xvii). McConnell probably has it right when he comments, "McLuhan's Catholicism was strongly Pentecostal, in the sense that he sought, and found, in the church the Real Presence in the sense of the *community* of believers, rather than in the—to him, Protestant—idea of an individual, intensely private relationship with God" (McConnell, 1998, p. 25, italics original). The Catholicism that attracted McLuhan was also sacramental in the sense of adhering to the principle that, in accord with the Incarnation, God acts through the created world, that even the most ordinary things (bread, wine, baptismal waters, but also stained

glass, statues, sounds, and so on) offer an experience of God not in the rational way of reading the Scriptures but more in an environmental or ecological way.

The sacraments (and sacramentals, to use the traditional Catholic vocabulary) "cause" by signifying, by communicating based on what they are. Appleyard (1971) tries to explain this with reference to symbols. He begins with symbols, since sacraments (like narratives) involve the "symbolic mode of consciousness." Following the work of Suzanne Langer, Appleyard notes two kinds of symbols: discursive and expressive or presentational (Appleyard, 1971, p. 186). The former result from a logical reasoning, but the latter operate differently: "So long as it functions as 'a vehicle for the conception of object,' the symbol is inextricably bound up with the concept of the object which it 'symbolizes'" (Appleyard, 1971, p. 186). To explain this, he cites Coleridge on symbol: "It always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative (Coleridge, 1854, pp. 437-438, quoted in Appleyard, 1971, p. 187). Appleyard finds a further explanation in the philosophical theology of Karl Rahner:

The basic principle of his [Rahner's] ontology of the symbol is that "all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature." "A being comes to itself by means of 'expression," in so far as it comes to itself at all. The expression, that is, the symbol . . . is the way of knowledge of the self possession of self, in general" (Rahner, 1961, p. 230). So he defines symbol as "the self-realization of a being in the other, which is constitutive of its essence" (p. 234). (Appleyard, 1971, p. 187)

The symbol, then, presents something to human consciousness by representing it as an ex-



The symbol plays an essential role in people's coming to know.

That kind of immediacy seems better to fit the pattern of McLuhan's thought as well as the pattern of religious experience.

pression, related to itself but different. It does so directly, as a "presentation," and not as a process of reasoning. To more explicitly use communication terms, the symbol moves something from one medium to another—from an object to language, from an experience to an image, and so on. The symbol plays an essential role in people's coming to know. That kind of immediacy seems better to fit the pattern of McLuhan's thought as well as the pattern of religious experience.

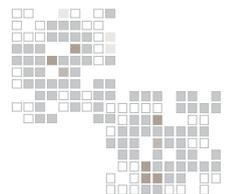
Though he seldom discussed his own religious beliefs and he denied that "his work on media derives from Catholicism or Catholic doctrine" (McLuhan, 1999, p. xix), McLuhan's sense of religion seems to have rested in and been informed by the areas of community and sacrament—these formed what, in the context of media studies, he called the ground, borrowing the figure-ground image from gestalt psychology. The ground provides that against which people perceive a figure. One does not directly perceive the ground, but one cannot perceive anything without a ground. McLuhan used the analogy in many contexts. The royal jester's motley makes sense only against the ground of the Emperor's court: all the social services and functions represented by the uniforms of everyone else (McLuhan, 1972/1999, p. 76). Or again, people perceive the automobile's full communication function only against the ground of the highway system, the gas stations, the oil companies, the suburban sprawl—the entire ecology of transport. McLuhan himself applies this to faith: "this, it seems to me, is the level at which the faith communicates, not so much by transmitting concepts or theories, but by inner transformation of people; not by expressing a *figure* but by participating in the *ground* of secondary effects that

transform life" (McLuhan, 1977/1999a, p. 145). McLuhan's private and usually unstated sense of religion fits that pattern.

Another pattern that seems to fit this sense of religion comes from the realm of philosophy. McLuhan also liked formal causality as a way to get at communication. His son, Eric McLuhan, notes, "Thomas [Aquinas] made much use in his work of Formal Causality; my father's idea of a medium as an environment of services as disservices is exactly that of Formal Causality" (McLuhan, 1999, p. xx). Following Aristotle, Aquinas analyzed actions and relations in terms of four fundamental causes: material cause, efficient cause, final cause, and formal cause. In an example of a house cited by Eric McLuhan (2005), the bricks and wood constitute the material cause of the house; the work of the bricklayers and carpenters, the efficient cause; and the goal of a house to live in or to rent, the final cause. But formal cause—often referred to as the plan or blueprint—provides something quite different, and something quite different from a blueprint, whose visual analogy misses the point. Instead formal cause relates to the definition or nature of a thing, calling to mind something akin to Plato's sense of Idea. The sense of Catholicism as community identified by McConnell functions as a formal cause of belief.

Both of these ideas—figure/ground and formal cause—reflect another almost taken for granted part of Catholicism: the sense of analogical thinking. This too was a central part of the thought of Aquinas, which McLuhan knew. Eric McLuhan comments:

This was not to say that his work derived from Thomas's but that they were in parallel. He found insight in the most disparate places and



never hesitated to co-opt it whenever it could be useful. St. Thomas was particularly useful because he had addressed many of the same problems. Aquinas pointed out that all being was by analogy with the font of being, God. My father's idea of media as extensions was that they were analogues to our limbs and organs. (McLuhan, 1999)

Such analogical thinking has become a hallmark of Catholic thought, particularly in the unreflective approach to the world. David Tracy (1981) draws a distinction between the Catholic and Protestant theological traditions, noting that Catholics look for God's presence in the world—seeing how the world acts as an analogy to God—where Protestants stress God's absence, noting how different the world is from God, a dialectical approach. The sociologist Andrew Greeley (1990) has confirmed this through a re-examination of data from national surveys of Catholics and Protestants in the United States. Catholics find the analogical approach somewhat natural and base both religious and political decisions on this view of the world, whereas Protestants tend to act out of the sense of dialectical thinking. The affinity for analogical thinking does not mean that McLuhan's thought is "Catholic," but that his thought, to use his son, Eric's phrase, ran in parallel.

We should not conclude—indeed it would be an error to do so—that McLuhan's religious beliefs somehow explain his thinking. There is no efficient causality at work. But there is analogy, ground (gestalt), and formal cause.

Such a caution should also characterize any theological or religious use of McLuhan's media or social analysis in the service of understanding religion. From the beginnings of McLuhan's popularity in the 1960s (after the publication of *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media*), those involved in churches and religious education, those puzzled by the rapid social change of

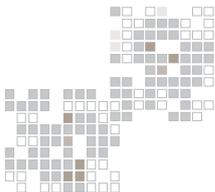
the time, and those seeing an explosion of communication media found in McLuhan a guide to the perplexed. Culkin (1968) introduces McLuhan's work to Catholic educators, explaining key teachings and offering his own organizing principles. He ends by applying these to education, noting how the principles apply to everything from ecumenism to Bible study to liturgy. His final series of questions, though, imply that a McLuhanesque approach may not only offer a new perspective but may help to answer them

1. *How can we get those God merchants with their used car salesman rhetoric off the airwaves on Sundays?*
2. *Would Pope John have had much impact in a pre-television age?*
3. *Does it make any sense to line up the following three words—communication, community, communion?*
4. *What influence has the microphone had on church oratory?*
5. *Is it possible to make great religious films?* (Culkin, 1968, p. 462)

Mixed in with a certain optimism about understanding communication we find a hint of efficient causality, a sense that McLuhan's approach hides a certain scientific method, waiting to reveal itself to the diligent scholar.

A similar approach appears in *The Christian Century*, a publication that will return to McLuhan a number of times over the years. Michael (1968) wants to know what might happen to religion. "More important for readers of *The Christian Century* is a related question: What will become of religion in the global village? Is the medium of the ministry due for a reversal?" (p. 709). He, like Culkin, seeks the answer in McLuhan's work; he, too, implies a direct causality.

Two of the more interesting approaches come from historical applications. First, Hitchcock, an historian, rather than looking forward in the



manner of prediction, looks back to test McLuhan's "hypothesis." Hitchcock (1971) turns to the Reformation, "in which so much controversy centered precisely on the importance of the Book and in which Catholic apologists came to exalt oral tradition as a fundamental source of their faith" (1971, p. 449). Examining controversies between Thomas More and William Tyndale about religion, the Bible, and translation a century after Gutenberg, Hitchcock finds confirmation of McLuhan's insights.

To a quite remarkable degree, More and Tyndale seem to have anticipated Professor McLuhan's respective characterizations of "oral culture" and "print culture." Although the author of several books, More found himself, in the course of his debate with Tyndale, progressively de-emphasizing the importance of scripture and, through it, of the printed word generally. His outlook was revealed to be essentially "tribal," in McLuhan's sense, that is, of firm reliance on the common consensus of all members of the believing community, who inherit their belief primarily through an oral and manuscript tradition....

For Tyndale, on the other hand, the printed Bible is precisely the agency through which the individual liberates himself from the tyranny and falsehood implicit in the community. As McLuhan insists, the book leads to detribalization, the emergence of an individual "point of view" which is seen as even more valid than the consensus of the community, which is based on ignorance and conformity. For Tyndale the meaning of scripture is also exclusively at the literal level, and he has no use either for More's multi-leveled medieval exegesis or for non-verbal methods of communicating truth. In McLuhan's terms, he manifests a "linear," somewhat rationalistic mentality which places great stress on literal exactness. He perceives the importance of the printed Bible as being its accessibility to individuals, which frees them. (Hitchcock, 1971, p. 465-6)

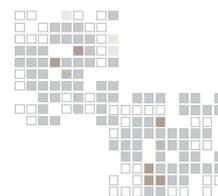
The essay brings forth careful historical research in support of McLuhan's understanding of media. The fact that this and similar historical data supported McLuhan's views led many to seek in his work some predictive value, much on the model of a scientific law.

A second somewhat similar historical approach undertaken by a theologian examines fifth century and 19th century understandings of the action of God's grace. Boyd (1974) extends McLuhan's notion of the medium to the human personality. "Marshall McLuhan's cryptic formula, 'the

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medium is the message,' may appropriately point up the key element in the dynamics of the communication of grace as that communication is interpreted in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and as that communication is described in St. Augustine's account of his own experience of grace" (p. 189). Boyd's argues that the human medium is not neutral any more than is a mechanical medium of communication. This shifts the locus of God's action:

Nevertheless there is extraordinary significance in applying McLuhan's insight to this tradition of influence theories, for the correlation of medium and message holds the potential of overcoming the dichotomy of subjective and objective with which Schleiermacher and every other "liberal" was forced to struggle in their analyses of grace. As long as one thinks of the medium (in this case, human personality) as essentially neutral, external, and passive, then necessarily all the effect of communication must be located in the consciousness of the receiver... If, however, the medium itself is active



and formative rather than passive and neutral, if it participates in shaping the reception of the message, then there is an objective or self-efficacious dimension to the communication of influence. Although the process of communication is wholly natural, the dynamics of grace are efficacious and causal because the impact of personalities is efficacious and causal, although not deterministically so. (Boyd, 1974, p. 192)

Boyd much more closely follows McLuhan's sense of formal cause here and, like Hitchcock, finds an historical application for a contemporary media theory.

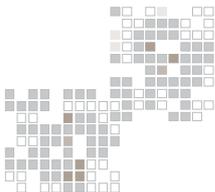
Over the next 10 years, many introductions to and applications of McLuhan's ideas appear in theological or religious journals, many of them with unspoken or spoken justifications such as this: "If we wish to control change rather than be controlled by it, one strategy is available to us: to think ahead of change in order to program its effects" (McDonald, 1970, p. 27). Many of the writers offer well considered introductions to McLuhan, finding in his work a plausible explanation to the challenges appearing in the whole gamut of religious applications: theology (James, 1969), the Gospel (Cox, 1964), the Book of Revelation and the Bible in general (Peterson, 1969), pastoral practice (Grandmaison, 1972), liturgy (McDonald, 1970), preaching (Sleeth, 1973), and religious communication (Valle, 1980). Even though they carefully identify key themes in McLuhan's analyses—the orality of the Bible, the effect of print, the changing sensorium, the speed of electronic communication—their medium of the printed journal article betrays them, much as McLuhan might have told them. Looking for the ground created by a changing media environment, their written texts focus on a figure. The method of logical explanation and careful explication summons an expectation for efficient causality and, trained by the Western education system, that is exactly

what their readers take from them. The medium is indeed the message in many of these essays.

The American Theological Library Association (ATLA) Religion Database indicates that interest in McLuhan peaked in the 1970s, but that the interest has returned in the last 10 years. In the middle period a kind of disenchantment with McLuhan's thought (and perhaps with communication in general) set in, well expressed by Kuhn's (1983) title, "McLuhan's global village is now a ghost town: Naïveté about human nature haunts another utopian vision." Kuhn focuses on the failure of McLuhan's supposed prophecies about the direction of the world in response to a new communication environment. Again, one detects a whiff of efficient causality and a blindness to the larger picture.

However, the 21st century and the rise of the Internet in particular triggered a renaissance of McLuhan studies. Two of them illustrate the range of approaches taken by more contemporary writers, one of whom expands the vision but remains in a narrower sense of causality and the other who embraces McLuhan's broader vision.

Many found in McLuhan's work from the 1960s and 1970s a kind of forerunner of the all-encompassing digital world. Krüger (2007) joins several predictions in order to invite theologians to take on a new understanding of the earth. "In this vision, the emergence of the Internet is considered to be part of a teleological evolutionary model. Essential for the religious and evolutionary construction of the Internet is an incorporation of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's model of evolution—especially the idea of the noosphere—and its adoption in media theory by Marshall McLuhan" (p. 138). These will lead to a vision of a living earth, of a group consciousness with profound theological implications. Unfortunately, Krüger may read too much into McLuhan. On the next page, he indicates that he finds McLuhan most valuable in terms of media effects, a question of efficient causality (p. 139). McLuhan would more likely have found the



Internet compelling as a further extension of the human senses, as the ground against which people can grow in self-understanding.

Tatarnic (2005) turns to McLuhan's work to puzzle out the seemingly contradictory ways that the church and religion appears in popular culture. Discounting the figure, she calls attention to what McLuhan had written about the ground: "McLuhan's insistence on the fact that the primary message of any medium is to be found in its structure, in the way it particularly engages our senses, and in its influence upon patterns of human interaction, remains critically important in gaining any insight into the fundamental influence of the mass media" (p. 452). Though interested in television, she follows McLuhan to include all media as part of that structure and to focus on information, the ground for all media. Again, she notes, "the primary message of the medium of television must be unpacked through an understanding of the way in which television has been used in our patterns of human interaction" (p. 456). Tatarnic

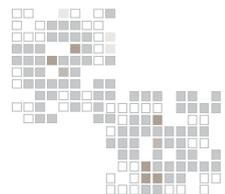
concludes that these overall patterns both enable and obfuscate the contradictory surface messages of individual television programs.

Many of the religious or theological writers who turn to McLuhan's work, whether from a perceived sympathy to religion or from a hoped-for insight into contemporary culture, look for something in McLuhan that is not there. Rather than thinking analogically or in terms of formal cause or in terms of figure and ground, they concentrate on the figure, on the efficient (or perhaps material) cause. This reflects the weight and the inertia of an educational system that stresses a scientific rationality. As McLuhan himself pointed out, the desire for that kind of rationality grows with print.

McLuhan's own religious outlook, his Catholicism, is not an efficient cause of his thought. At best, it functions as an analogy or as a ground. Nor are the various media and the contemporary changes in these media efficient causes of religious change or sensibility. At best, they function as an analogy or as a ground.

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