

McLuhan's New World

Marshall McLuhan (1911–80) was an unlikely prophet of the information age. One of those who first saw the truth in the vatic pronouncements of this obscure academic was a talented young journalist named Tom Wolfe, who helped champion McLuhan's ideas in the 1960s. Here, Wolfe reflects on the unexpected sources and continuing impact of McLuhan's vision.

by Tom Wolfe

Come with me back to the 1990s:.....and the Silicon Valley:.....and the Internet euphoria:.....and the two www.saintly-souls who first prophesied the coming of the World Wide Web:.....

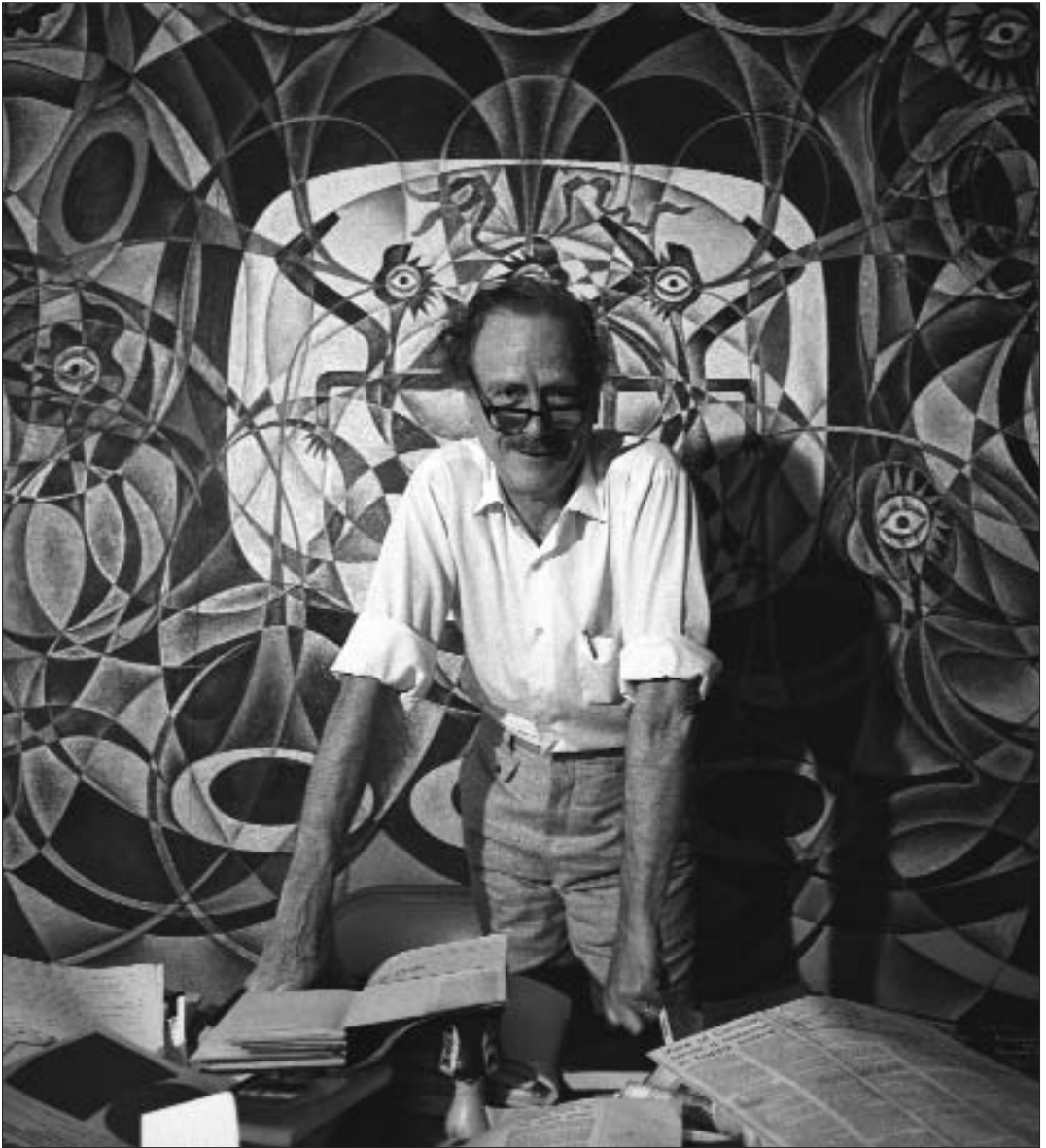
It was November of 1999, and I was in Palo Alto, California, the Silicon Valley's de facto capital. Right here in the Valley the computer industry had produced 14 new billionaires in the preceding 12 months. I saw billionaires every morning at breakfast. *Every morning*; the Valley's power breakfast scene was a restaurant called Il Fornaio, which happened to be on the ground floor of my hotel, the Garden Court. I loved the show. You couldn't have kept me away.

The billionaires you couldn't miss. They all came in wearing tight jeans or khakis, shirts with the sleeves rolled up and the front unbuttoned down to the navel, revealing skin and chest hair, if any, and leather boating moccasins without socks, baring the bony structure of their ankles and metatarsals . . . even the ones up in their fifties who had wire hair sprouting out of their ears above lobes that sagged as badly as their shoulders and backs, which were bent over like the letter *n*. They looked like well-scrubbed beachcombers. Their clothes were so skimpy, there was no way they could have been carrying a cell phone or even a beeper, let alone a Palm Pilot, a BlackBerry, a RIM

pager, or an HP-19B calculator. Walking behind every billionaire would be an aide de camp, probably worth no more than 60 or 70 million, wearing the same costume plus a sport jacket. Why a sport jacket? Why, for pockets in which to carry the cell phone, the beeper, the Palm Pilot, the BlackBerry, the RIM pager, and the HP-19B calculator. Billionaires in baby clothes! You could get high in Il Fornaio on secondhand euphoria.

But much of the sublime lift came from something loftier than overnight IPO billions and the like, something verging on the spiritual. Cyberspace had its visionaries, and they were telling everybody in the Valley that they were doing more than simply developing computers and creating a new wonder medium, the Internet. Far more. The Force was with them. They were spinning a seamless web over all the Earth that would forever render national boundaries and racial divisions meaningless, and change, literally transform, the nature of the human beast. And everybody in the Valley believed it and dressed the part. Faithful devotees of the Force didn't go about in dull suits and pale, blah shirts with "interesting" Hermès neckties and cap-toed black oxfords with shoelaces, the way the dreary, outmoded Wall Street workaday investment donkeys did back east.

The Web—the W was always capital-



Medium master McLuhan in his Toronto office in 1976.

ized—was the world of the future, namely, the Digital Universe, and the Force had its own evangelical journals. *Upside* magazine's editor, Richard L. Brandt, said (September 1998) he expected "to see the overthrow of the U.S. government in my lifetime," not by revolutionaries or foreign aggressors, however, but by Bill Gates's Microsoft. The software Gates and Microsoft provided for the World Wide Web "will gradually make the U.S. government obsolete." Compared with that, Gates himself was Modesty in sneakers when he wrote that he was part of "an epochal change" that "will affect the world seismically." *Seismically*

means like an earthquake. Evolution used to be measured in units of at least 100,000 years. But computer scientist Danny Hillis wrote in *Wired* magazine that thanks to "telephony, computers, and CD-ROMs," today "evolution takes place in microseconds. . . . We're taking off. . . . We are not evolution's ultimate product. There's something coming after us, and I imagine it is something wonderful. But we may never be able to comprehend it, any more than a caterpillar can imagine turning into a butterfly."

Euphoria, as I say, a Millennial vision—and all of it had been inspired by a Canadian lit-

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erary scholar who died years before the Internet existed. His name, unknown outside Canada until he published the book *Understanding Media* in 1964, was Marshall McLuhan. By 1996, the cyberfaithful were looking to McLuhan's work and prophecies as the new theory of evolution.

I can't think of another figure who so dominated an entire field of study in the second half of the 20th century. At the turn of the 19th century and in the early decades of the 20th, there was Darwin in biology, Marx in political science, Einstein in physics, and Freud in psychology. Since then, there has been only McLuhan in communications studies or, to be more accurate, McLuhan and a silent partner. It was the silent partner who made McLuhanism what it was: a scientific theory set upon an unseen, unspoken, taboo religious base.

McLuhan had been raised as a Baptist in, to all outward appearances, a family typical of the settlers of the vast Canadian West. They were Scotch-Irish Protestants who said *howse* and *about* for house and about. His father's forebears were farmers. His father himself was an insurance salesman. But his mother, Elsie Hall McLuhan, was another story. She was the cosmopolitan, the cultivated easterner from the Maritime Provinces, English in background, well educated, an elocutionist by training, a flamboyant figure in theater circles who toured Canada giving dramatic readings. Despite her many absences, it was she who ruled the family, and it was she who steered both Marshall and his younger brother, Maurice, who became a Presbyterian minister, toward intellectual careers. Since not even star elocutionists, much less so-so insurance salesmen in western Canada, made a lot of money, the McLuhans lived modestly, but Elsie McLuhan would make sure, in due course, that her son Marshall, the academic star, was educated abroad. In 1920, when he was nine, the family moved from Edmonton to Winnipeg, and he went to high school and college there, graduating from the University

of Manitoba, which was about a mile from his house, with a bachelor's degree in 1932 and a master's degree in English literature in 1933. His mother, however, had grander credentials in mind. At her prodding, he applied for and won a scholarship to Cambridge University in England.

At this point McLuhan was very much the traditional young scholar, "the literary man," a type he would later ridicule as smugly ignorant of the nature of the very medium he studied and labored in, namely, print. As it turned out, in the 1930s the literary life at Cambridge, at Oxford, and in London was anything but traditional. This was the trough of the Great Depression, and British intellectuals had begun to take an interest in the lower orders, "the masses," many as Marxists but others as students of what would later be called popular culture. McLuhan was drawn to the work of Wyndham Lewis and the Cambridge scholar F. R. Leavis, who were treating movies, radio, advertisements, and even comic strips as a new "language."

These were also the palmy days of Catholic writers such as Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton, whose wit and sophistication had suddenly made Catholicism exciting, even smart, in literary circles. One of the most brilliant and seemingly cynical of the London literati, Evelyn Waugh, embraced Catholicism in this period, and so too did Marshall McLuhan. He became a convert to the One Church—and to the study of popular culture. Although almost nothing in McLuhan's writing was to be overtly religious, these two passions eventually dovetailed to create McLuhanism.

After receiving a second bachelor's degree from Cambridge, he began his teaching career in 1936 in the United States, at the University of Wisconsin. He returned to Cambridge in 1939 and over the next three years received a master's degree and a doctorate in English literature. After Wisconsin, he taught only in Catholic institutions, first Saint Louis University, then Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario, and finally

> TOM WOLFE's most recent books are *Hooking Up* (2000) and *A Man in Full* (1998). This essay is excerpted from *Understanding Me: Marshall McLuhan Lectures and Interviews*, edited by Stephanie McLuhan and David Staines, and published in the United States by MIT Press. Reprinted by permission from McClelland & Stewart Ltd.

the Catholic college of the University of Toronto, St. Michael's, where he joined the faculty in 1946.

By this time, Marshall McLuhan was 35 years old and the very embodiment of Elsie McLuhan's appetite for things intellectual—and for the center of the stage. He was known both as a literary scholar, an expert in 16th- and 17th-century English literature and the work of James Joyce, and as a charismatic figure who captivated groups of students and faculty with his extracurricular Socratic gatherings devoted to “the folklore of industrial man,” as he called it, in which he decoded what he saw as the hidden language of advertisements, comic strips, and the press. He would show a slide of a Bayer Aspirin ad featuring a drum majorette wearing a military helmet and jackboots and carrying a baton the size of a mace. The caption reads, “In 13.9 seconds a drum majorette can twirl a baton twenty-five times . . . but in only two seconds Bayer Aspirin is ready to work!” What is the true language of such an ad, he would ask? What does it really convey? Why, a “goose-stepping combination of military mechanism and jackbooted eroticism,” the wedding of sex and technology, a recurring advertising theme he christened “the mechanical bride.”

That was the title of his first book, published in 1951, when he was 40 years old. *The Mechanical Bride* had the conventional antibusiness bias of the literary man, aimed, as it was, at liberating the public from the manipulations of the advertising industry; but it also led McLuhan into the orbit of his colleague at Toronto, the economic historian Harold Innis. As McLuhan himself was quick to point out, it was from two books published by Innis in 1950 and 1951, *Empire and Communications* and *The Bias of Communication*, that he drew the central concept of McLuhanism: namely, that any great new medium of communication alters the entire outlook of the people who use it. Innis insisted that it was print, introduced in the 15th century by Johann Gutenberg, that had caused the spread of nationalism, as opposed to tribalism, over the next 500 years. McLuhan published his first major theoretical work, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, in 1962, when he was 51. He called it “a footnote to the work of Harold Innis.”

His master stroke came two years later, when he brought the Innis approach forward into the 20th century and the age of television with *Understanding Media*. McLuhan theorized that print had stepped up the visual sense of Western man at the expense of his other senses, which in turn led to many forms of specialization and fragmentation, from bureaucracy, the modern army, and nationalistic wars to schizophrenia, peptic ulcers, the cult of childhood, which he regarded as fragmentation by age, and pornography, the fragmentation of sex from love. In the second half of the 20th century . . . enter television. Television, said McLuhan, reverses the process and returns man's five senses to their preprint, preliterate “tribal balance.” The auditory and tactile senses come back into play, and man begins to use all his senses again in a unified “seamless web” of experience. Television, McLuhan maintained, is not a visual medium but “audio-tactile.” This was the sort of contrary utterance he delighted in making, contradicting common sense without bothering to explain or debate. The world, he said, was fast becoming “a global village,” that being the end result of television's seamless web spreading over the Earth.

The immediate effects of television on the central nervous system, said McLuhan, may be seen among today's young, the first television generation. The so-called generation gap, as he diagnosed it, was not ideological but neurological, the disparity between a print-bred generation and its audio-tactile, neotribal offspring. McLuhan was observing the new generation up close. In the summer of 1939 he had been in California visiting his mother, who was teaching at the Pasadena Playhouse, when he met an American actress, Corinne Lewis, fell in love with her, proposed to her then and there, married her on the spot, and took her off to Cambridge, all in such a short order that she had to wire her parents to let them know she was now Mrs. McLuhan. Marshall and Corinne McLuhan had six children, four daughters and two sons. Personally, McLuhan had little patience with television or any other electronic medium, but he looked on with awe as his children seemed to study for

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school, watch television, talk on the telephone, listen to the radio, and play phonograph records all at the same time. The new generation, he was convinced, was bound to sit baffled and bored in classrooms run by print-bound teachers. This, he argued, meant the educational system must be totally changed.

But then the new sensory balance was going to bring about Total Change—he used a capital T and a capital C—in any case. Just as the wheel was an extension of the human foot, said McLuhan, and the ax was an extension of the arm, the electronic media were extensions of the human central nervous system, and these nervous systems would be brought together in an irresistible way. His predictions were not tentative. Human nature would now be different. Nationalism, the product of print, would become impossible. Instead: the global village. In the global village, he predicted, it would no longer be possible to insulate racial groups from one another. Instead, all would be “irrevocably involved with and responsible for” one another. McLuhan warned that the global village was not a prescription for utopia. In fact, it might just as easily turn out to be a bloodbath. After all, he asked, where do we find the most accomplished butchers? In villages. The global village could bring all humanity together for slaughter as easily as for anything else.

Yet he also believed the new age offered the possibility of something far more sublime than utopia, which is, after all, a secular concept. “The Christian concept of the mystical body,” McLuhan wrote in one of the few explicit references to his fondest dream, “of all men as members of the body of Christ—this becomes technologically a fact under electronic conditions.”

And here we see the shadow of the intriguing figure who influenced McLuhan every bit as much as Harold Innis but to whom he never referred: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Teilhard de Chardin was a French geologist and paleontologist who first made a name for himself through fossil-hunting expeditions in China and Central Asia. At the age of 30, in 1911 (the year, it so happens, McLuhan was born), he became a

Jesuit priest, and taught geology at the Catholic Institute in Paris. His mission in life, as he saw it, was to take Darwin’s theory of biological evolution, which had so severely shaken Christian belief, and show that it was merely the first step in God’s grander design for the evolution of man. God was directing, in this very moment, the 20th century, the evolution of man into a noosphere—that was Teilhard de Chardin’s coinage, a noosphere—a unification of all human nervous systems, all human souls, through technology. Teilhard (pronounced Tay-yar, as he was usually referred to) mentioned radio, television, and computers specifically and in considerable detail and talked about cybernetics. Regardless of what anybody thought of his theology, the man’s powers of prediction were astonishing. He died in 1955, when television had only recently come into widespread use and the microchip had not even been invented. Computers were huge machines, big as a suburban living room, that were not yet in assembly-line production. But he was already writing about “the extraordinary network of radio and television communication which already links us all in a sort of ‘etherised’ human consciousness,” and of “those astonishing electronic computers which enhance the ‘speed of thought’ and pave the way for a revolution in the sphere of research.” This technology was creating a “nervous system for humanity,” he wrote, “a single, organized, unbroken membrane over the earth,” a “stupendous thinking machine.” “The *age of civilization* has ended, and that of *one civilization*”—he underlined “one civilization”—“is beginning.” That unbroken membrane, that noosphere, was, of course, McLuhan’s “seamless web of experience.” And that “one civilization” was his “global village.”

We may think, wrote Teilhard, that these technologies are “artificial” and completely “external to our bodies,” but in fact they are part of the “natural, profound” evolution of our nervous systems. “We may think we are only amusing ourselves” by using them, “or only developing our commerce or only spreading ideas. In reality we are quite simply continuing on a higher plane, by other means, the unin-

errupted work of biological evolution.” Or to put it another way: “The medium is the message.”

Privately, McLuhan acknowledged his tremendous debt to Teilhard de Chardin. Publicly, he never did. Why? For fear it would undercut his own reputation for originality? That would have been very much out of character. After all, he acknowledged his debt to Harold Innis openly and on his knees in gratitude. The more likely reason is that within Catholic intellectual circles—and we must remember that McLuhan was on the faculty of the University of Toronto’s Catholic college, St. Michael’s—Teilhard de Chardin was under a cloud of heterodoxy. Decades earlier, the church had forbidden him to teach or publish his theory of evolution, since he accepted most of Darwinism as truth. None of his six books on the subject was published in his lifetime. But among intellectuals at St. Mike’s, as they called St. Michael’s College, there was a lively underground, a Jesuit samizdat in Teilhard de Chardin manuscripts, especially after he moved to the United States in 1951. McLuhan was fascinated by Teilhard, but he presented a problem. Even in death he remained out of the bounds of Catholic theology, and McLuhan took his faith very seriously, all the more so because he was a convert from Protestantism teaching in a major Catholic institution.

But Teilhard presented a secular problem as well. McLuhan was living in an age in which academic work with even a tinge of religion was not going to be taken seriously. Inside the church, Teilhard may have been considered too much of a Darwinian scientist, but outside the church he was considered too much of a Catholic mystic. When *Understanding Media* was published in 1964, it was loaded with Teilhard de Chardin, but it would have taken another Teilhard enthusiast to detect it, and a subtle one at that. Not a single theological note was struck.

Indeed, *Understanding Media* exploded upon the intellectual world in the mid-1960s with a distinctly earthly brilliance and immediately caught the attention of many of the most devoutly materialistic and practical minds in commerce and industry. In part it

was the deceptively simple title, *Understanding Media*, which came across as a challenge: “You people who use the media, who own the media, who invest millions in the media and depend on the media—you don’t begin to understand the media and how they actually affect human beings.” By late 1964, corporations such as General Electric and IBM were inviting McLuhan to the United States to talk to their executives. Their attitude was not so much “He’s right!” as “What if he is right? (We’d better find out.)” McLuhan informed General Electric that they might think they were in the business of making light bulbs, but in fact they were in the business of moving information, every bit as much as AT&T. Electric light was pure information, a medium without a message. IBM he somewhat condescendingly praised for having finally realized that it was not in the business of manufacturing equipment but of processing information. He excelled at telling powerful and supposedly knowledgeable people they didn’t have the foggiest comprehension of their own enterprises. He never adopted a tone of intentional shock, however. He was always the scholar, speaking with utter seriousness. He had a way of pulling his chin down into his neck and looking down the nose of his long, Scottish-lairdly face before he delivered his most Delphic pronouncements. He seemed to exist out beyond and above them all, surveying them from a seer’s cosmic plane.

But what turned Marshall McLuhan from a University of Toronto English professor with an interesting theory into McLuhan, a name known worldwide, was the curious intervention of a San Francisco advertising man, Howard Gossage. Fascinated by *Understanding Media*, Gossage took it upon himself, at his own expense, to become McLuhan’s herald, bringing him to the United States in 1965 and introducing him to the press and the advertising industry on the West Coast and in New York. It proved to be a brilliant campaign. Magazine articles, newspaper stories, and television appearances were generated at an astonishing rate. Late in 1965, both *Harper’s* and *New York Magazine* published major pieces about McLuhan. In the single year 1966 the num-



McLuhan drew some of his key ideas from a seemingly improbable source: the Jesuit geologist and paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, shown here on a dig in 1936.

ber grew to more than 120, in just about every important publication in the United States, Canada, and Great Britain. The excitement was over the possibility that here might be a man with an insight of Darwinian or Freudian proportions.

As his fame grew, so did the ranks of his detractors, particularly among literary people, whom he regularly wrote off as hidebound, reactionary, and oblivious of how even their own medium, print, actually worked. Scientists, meantime, didn't know what to make of him one way or the other. The heart of his theory, the concept of the human "sensory balance," falls within the field of cognitive psychology or, more broadly, neuroscience. Today, neuroscience is the hottest subject in the academic world, but even now there is no way of deter-

mining whether or not any such balance exists or whether or not a medium such as television can alter one individual's nervous system, let alone an entire society and the course of history. McLuhan treated any and all critics with a maddening aloofness. He was not trying to create a self-contained body of theory, he insisted—although in fact he probably was—he was a pioneer heading out into a vast terra incognita. So little was known, and there was so little time. His mission was to explore, to make the "probes," to use one of his favorite words, to open up the territory. Others, those who came after, could conduct the systematic investigations, run the clinical experiments, organize the data, and settle the disputes. He dismissed all opposition as what Freud called "resistance," a reluctance to let

go of the comfortable notions of the past in the face of brilliant new revelations about the nature of the human animal.

In the wake of all the excitement over *Understanding Media*, McLuhan established the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto. This was an imposing, laboratory-like name for what was, in fact, little more than a letterhead, a desk, the lined paper on which he wrote, by hand, and his amazingly fertile and facile mind. In this respect, McLuhan was like Sigmund Freud. Very little of what Freud had to say has survived the scientific scrutiny of the past half-century. In hindsight, we can see that he was a brilliant philosopher of the old school who happened to live in an age in which only science was accepted as gospel truth. So by night he led his philosophical speculations in through the back door of his clinic, and in the morning he marched them out the front door as scientific findings. Thus also McLuhan at the Centre for Culture and Technology. At bottom, McLuhan remained, through it all, a literary man in the grand tradition of Samuel Johnson, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold, and G. K. Chesterton, with the gift of brilliant flashes of insight into the era in which he lived.

He never endeared himself to literary people, however, because so many of his wittiest, Chesterton-like sayings were at their expense. Asked to comment on the headlong rush of writers and scholars into protest movements during the 1960s, he said: “Moral bitterness is a basic technique for endowing the idiot with dignity.”

In the mid- and late-1970s, the mocked had their revenge. McLuhan didn’t seem to realize that an academic celebrity, if he wants to maintain his worldly eminence, is compelled to act oblivious of, or at least utterly aloof from, the journalists, show biz folks, and publishers who so merrily magnify his reputation to star status. Freud and Einstein understood this very well. In 1922 the *Chicago Tribune* offered Freud \$25,000, the equivalent of \$300,000 today, to come to the United States and provide psychoanalytical commentary the *Tribune* could run during the trial of the “thrill-killers” Leopold and Loeb. The beard-

ed one wasn’t about to. He came to the United States only to give an abstruse lecture at city desk-proof little Clark University in Massachusetts. McLuhan, in contrast, published cowritten books with jokey titles such as *The Medium Is the Massage* and let Woody Allen put him in the movie comedy *Annie Hall* playing himself, in cameo, as a pun-cracking, recondite theorist. By the time he died, at the age of 69 in 1980 after a series of strokes, his critics, chiefly New York intellectuals, had successfully nailed him as “not serious” and therefore over and done with.

Yet McLuhan had introduced a notion that the fin-de-siècle’s fast-proliferating breed of young computer techies would not let die, namely, the idea that new media such as television have the power to alter the human mind and thereby history itself. In 1992 came—bango!—a new medium, computers linked up to telephone lines to create an Internet. The Internet lit McLuhanism up all over again, and the man himself was resurrected as something close to a patron saint. He was certainly that to the edgiest and most prominent of the new dot-com journals, *Wired*, which ran his picture near the masthead in every issue.

Dear God—if only Marshall had been alive during the 1990s! What heaven those 10 years would have been for him! How he would have loved the Web! What a shimmering Oz he would have turned his global village into! Behold! The fulfillment of prophecies made 30 years before! The dream of the mystical unity of all mankind—made real!

Of course, no sooner had the third millennium begun than the dot-com bubble burst and McLuhan’s young Silicon Valley apostles awoke with a shock. They shook their heads to clear them and tried to refocus their vision of the future. Many could not. But a Gideon’s army of the young could make out a tiny halogen bulb, no bigger than a traveling-size toothpaste cap, still burning . . . and its light shone ‘round about them . . . and they say it still does.

New communications theorists will arise, as if from straight out of the asphalt, the concrete, the vinyl tiles, or the PermaPour flooring. But one thing will not change. First they will have to contend with McLuhan. □