Marshall McLuhan: The Medium and the Messenger.
MIT Press. 1998. By Philip Marchand

For an erratic comet who burned his way through the intellectual firmament 30 years ago riding a wave of pop culture, Marshall McLuhan and his ideas are showing surprising staying power. Philip Marchand's fascinating and insightful biography helped stimulate a resurgence of interest a decade ago, along with two new books co-authored by McLuhan (almost a decade after his death). McLuhan has been adopted as the patron saint of *Wired,* magazine of the electronic age. During the last few years at least a half dozen books on McLuhan and his ideas have been published, and the Marchand biography has been republished, with a new forward by Neil Postman. To Tom Wolfe's question from 1965, "What if he's right?", we can confidently answer, no, McLuhan isn't right; but it seems he isn't all wrong either, and at least a portion of his work is worthy of more serious attention by critical scholars of communication than it has received.

The Marchand biography is distinctive by the manner in which he develops McLuhan's life around the man's thinking and his restless consuming desire to obtain a deeper understanding of the subjects of his professional interest – English literature and language as a medium of expression as a prelude to media and communication – and the world. McLuhan was not so much a man who had ideas, as a search engine for ideas embodied in a man. The evolution and shaping of his ideas were influenced by those around him and those he sought out; but mostly they were influenced by his voracious consumption of literature. A renaissance scholar, he read widely across many disciplines. An irrepressible talker and entertaining speaker and lecturer with a brilliant command of English expression, his forte was monologues rather than dialogues. He was too impatient and self-centered to listen very long to anyone. He was a non-stop producer of ideas - some brilliant, many counter-intuitive, some ludicrous, others pathetic, and all contestable. He seemed incapable of differentiating among his ideas, or wishing to try. That task was for lesser mortals. He was engaged in developing "probes" which people could accept or reject as they liked.

McLuhan's main thesis, articulated most completely in *Understanding Media*: *The Extensions of Man* (1964) is "the medium is the message", i.e., the technology of communication (not the content) governs the nature of human communication, and thereby human affairs. Prior to the invention of the phonetic alphabet, mankind lived in oral cultures with balanced acoustic/visual sensory development. Writing, and especially print, stimulated a massive overstimulation of the visual sense, and most of what has happened since Guttenberg can be related to this. The introduction of new forms of communication with "electric speed", beginning with the telegraph, reversed a 3,000 year trend and began the process of rebalancing the acoustic and visual senses. The telephone, television and computer are bringing a very rapid transformation back to the balanced senses of the tribal village and a predominance of oral communication. This has

enormous implications for human development, including risks of misunderstanding and conflict between those trapped in the environment of the now traditional visually biased print medium and the more sensory balanced electronic oral communicators of the future.

The idea that communication technologies have a major influence on the course of human development was not original with McLuhan. He often acknowledged his debt to his University of Toronto colleague Harold Innis, whose books, *Empire and Communication* (1950) and *The Bias of Communication* (1952) were published more than a decade before *Understanding Media.* Innis was an economic historian who examined the influence of communication technologies on economic, social and political institutions, the expansion of trade and conquest, and the acquisition and application of power. McLuhan pursued the same thesis, but focused on the individual and interpersonal communication. He built on his own lifetime study of language and literature as media of personal expression to examine the electronic media and its implications.

Innis argued that in any society the media of communication greatly influence the forms of social organization and thereby the patterns of individual association. New competing communication media alter the forms of social organization, create new patterns of association, develop new forms of knowledge, and often shift the centers of power. Any medium of communication is biased in its tendency to permit control over extended periods of time (e.g., clay tablets), or over extended geographical space (e.g., telecommunication). Innis recognized a high degree of interdependence between economic, social and political institutions, and communication systems. The processes of institutionalization of new communication media were central to Innis' analysis. Thus, for example, what was distinctive about the space bias of press and radio was that they provided an institutional form for broadcasting to the world and did not address the individual or facilitate dialogue, thus tending to justify the growth of monopolies and the entrenchment of biased viewpoints. (1)

In contrast to Innis' analysis of the time and space bias of communication technologies, McLuhan's analysis focuses entirely on individual sensory biases created by communication technologies. His analysis is idealist and quite innocent of matters relating to institutions and power relations. Apparently the foundations of Innis' analysis never registered with McLuhan. Nevertheless, this didn't stop him from leaping to conclusions about institutions, the direction of human development, or anything else. This got McLuhan into serious trouble with visually oriented, rational scholars looking for evidence and rigorous analysis as a foundation for his remarkable claims. Indeed it is unfortunate that Innis died during the early 1950s, before McLuhan developed the main body of his work. Innis might have provided a levening and strengthening effect on McLuhan's work, and together they may have generated a richer body of work than either did individually.

Marchand has assembled an enormous amount of rich detail linking McLuhan's personal development and his ideas at each major stage of his life, giving the reader insight into the shaping of the thinking and the man, including his hopes, fears, foibles and prejudices. This is particularly remarkable considering the McLuhan Estate refused to

cooperate in the project. For those of us with an overdeveloped visual sense, still stuck in the age of literacy, rationality and sequential logic, Marchand makes more sense of McLuhan's ideas than McLuhan ever made, and provides a delightful read. However, Marchand notes that McLuhan made much more sense speaking than writing, demonstrating that at least in this respect, McLuhan may have been ahead of the rest of us in the transition to the oral culture of electronic tribal society.

Now that McLuhan has been dead for nearly 20 years and can't divert us with his dazzling elliptical metaphors and bad puns, his work can be examined without raising the passions the deliberately provocative oral communicator managed to inflame in his prime. Adopting a stance of arrogant superiority, he considered clarifying his ideas an unworthy menial task for intellectual plodders, and dismissed challenging questions with comments like, "You don't like those ideas. I got other ones", and the infamous, "You think my fallacy is all wrong?". He paid scant attention to facts and never conceded a point. His ultimate put down was a benign explanation that the question revealed the person was locked into the unidimensional visual bias of the age of print and couldn't really be expected to understand. McLuhan refused to justify his assertions or abide by the established canons of scholarship or debate. Thus, many scholars, and particularly social scientists, dismissed him as a charlatan.

Perhaps enough time has passed that McLuhan's work can be assessed dispassionately. Now we can bring his ideas to account on the basis of a generation of experience and new evidence, and reassess their contribution to understanding the new forms of electronic communication being fostered in 21st century information societies. McLuhan generated so many ideas that a very small survival rate would still yield significant contributions. Marchand's biography demonstrates that amidst all that chaff, there are some kernels worth pursuing. McLuhan's ideas will be with us for quite a while. For the long term, scholars still have to decide what to make of them.

(1) Melody, W.H., Salter, L. and Heyer, P. (1981). *Culture, Communication and Dependency: The Tradition of H.A. Innis*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.