

Guest Editorial

Many McLuhans or None at All

This is more than simply an inert collection of books. They were Marshall's collaborators. The library was his workshop, and he used his tools thoroughly and rarely did any gather dust, but rather were honed... A book is a journey. It starts with the author but it doesn't end with publication. The idea of the reader as co-author is manifest in Marshall's library. His books are filled with notes, marked passages. Much of his own work is built off the work of others, and that is quite plain as you take a look through his books.

—Andrew McLuhan at the Many McLuhans symposium
(September 21, 2018)

The Many McLuhans symposium took place at the University of Toronto on September 21, 2018, to honour and celebrate the designation of Marshall McLuhan: The Archives of the Future into the UNESCO Memory of the World Register. This vast collection is made up of roughly 50 metres of archive documents in multiple media forms and 6,000 published items, including books heavily annotated by Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan's archival collection is preserved and held at Library and Archives Canada, and his research library is held at the University of Toronto's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library. The archive is geographically divided but remains deeply connected.

The day-long event brought together an interdisciplinary set of McLuhan-inspired media and communication theorists, artists, and educators to discuss the significance of McLuhan and the UNESCO designation to their own scholarly work and creative practice. Many McLuhans were also literally featured at the symposium. It opened with brief remarks from Michael McLuhan, who delighted the audience with details of his father devouring books at accelerated rates. He painted a scene of encountering his father's habits and quirks during his at-home dictatorial sessions with various note takers and scribes. Andrew McLuhan gave a moving and insightful lecture about his own intellectual journey during the decade-long process of documenting his grandfather's collection. Andrew was not just in the audience for the day but rather very much on hand. A particular poignant moment occurred during John Durham Peters' keynote lecture, "Reading Over McLuhan's Shoulder." Peters paused mid-speech, second-guessing his own understanding of McLuhan's shorthand. He then called upon Andrew, who stood up to help Peters decipher the annotations, which Peters had encountered in the basement of the Fisher library the night before.

The occasion of the UNESCO designation is itself enough to warrant a special scholarly issue on McLuhan within the context of Canadian media and communication. But the true inspiration to bring together *this* particular set of articles for the *Canadian Journal of Communication* emerged because of an innocuous phrase that went viral the day of the symposium. More than half of the invited speakers began their presentation with the statement: “I am not a McLuhan scholar.” The phrase was not just a mumble into the microphone but stated jocularly and in jest. It was a means to distance, but also to disarm. One might wonder what would prompt such a statement from scholars who had been thinking with McLuhan for quite some time? Perhaps it is because these scholars do not have a particular known lineage to McLuhan, either by blood, friendship, or training. They are also not doing the work of disciples and asking WWMT (what would Marshall think)? Instead, they are simultaneously rethinking McLuhan’s media theory, his import, along with new and even older media forms, technological practices, and the cultural effects that comprise the object of their study. Taken together, their articles insist that there is no singular McLuhan.

The symposium was meant to inspire more attention to the McLuhan archive by showing what can be done with it, or how much there is to unpack? In order to do so, it was important to elevate the media and communication scholars who had long been thinking with McLuhan, but who had been largely unrecognized or overlooked due to the rather heavy hagiography that besets the legacy of McLuhan. In fact, like many academic legacies, the hagiography of McLuhan throws shade on where McLuhan’s theory has actually travelled, where it has become stuck, and where it might be off to next. These articles acknowledge more than one approach to McLuhan, and more than one insight or perspective. They reveal generations of study and scholarship comprised of myriad critical, technical, cultural, and historical approaches that are indebted to McLuhan, but they also reveal how one can travel with McLuhan without necessarily taking him along for the entire ride.

There is no doubt that McLuhan’s (1964) original theories of media are grand and universalizing captures with such infamous terms as “global village (p. 34),” “typographic man (p. 173),” and the “retribalization of man (p. 334).” Such terms espouse a worldview of the singular effects of media upon a universal subject—an attitude feminist media and critical race studies have long challenged. McLuhan’s texts often reflect essentializing and sexist commentary (Scott, 2016). In 2004, Leslie Shade and Barbara Crow (2004) powerfully argued that the scholarship dedicated to McLuhan “does not address, incorporate or attend to gender in its conceptualization nor engage with any of the insights and/or contributions in feminist scholarship on technology” (p. 161). In other words, the scholarly celebration of the man who predicted the internet has systematically and perpetually ignored an entire body of feminist technology studies and critical race and media studies—largely a whole body of work one might call the cultural approach to technology (see Slack & Wise 2005). This fundamental schism cannot be reconciled by merely pointing out the women who appeared in McLuhan’s margins or texts or in his personal life, it speaks to the intersections of this critical body of work with McLuhan’s media theory. In fact, Anthony Enns (2017) most re-

cently argued that the lack of political engagement within McLuhan's work has long been regarded as one of the main reasons his work is rejected and sometimes ridiculed as unserious scholarship. Continuing to apply McLuhan's concepts without also critically thinking through the different bodies, rhythms, and power dynamics tied up in our technologies will only continue to relegate him to the tired domain of a great male legacy at the expense of moving forward with the critical project he has inspired (Sharma, 2017).

This issue of the *Canadian Journal of Communication* became a chance for those symposium speakers to take back their defensive words at the microphone that day. They could take back their words and put into writing their McLuhan-inspired contributions in order to forge a pathway toward revitalizing McLuhan's most provocative and compelling methods of interdisciplinary and creative analysis. The articles collected here work to subvert the hagiographic tendency often associated with McLuhan by taking it on directly. They stand in dialogue with McLuhan and, perhaps most importantly, his library and archive. They also challenge the volumes of scholarship that continue to advance essentialist and "great man" interpretations of his writings. This point is reiterated in all contributions to the special issue, but as **John Durham Peters** astutely writes in "Reading Over McLuhan's Shoulder," "Just because McLuhan was worried about Dagwoods, effeminate men, and henpecked husbands does not mean we need to be. We can take his analysis without taking his attitude" (p. 496). **Armond Towns's** article, "The (Black) Elephant in the Room: McLuhan and the Racial," captures the shifting terrain of McLuhan's media studies legacy. It is well known that McLuhan turned to essentialist and racist categorizations of both African and Indigenous cultures, particularly in describing Western and non-Western literacy. It is not enough to let McLuhan off the hook by signalling the time period, as if overcoming racism is part of a linear development model of progress. In fact, this is something McLuhan might have argued only a "print man" would insist, the cultural character that arises with the medium of the printed page. Print man would have a fixed and individualistic point of view plagued by linear thinking (1964, p. 126). But McLuhan's treatment of race and difference, as Towns points out, can actually speak to the inexorable and enduring relationship between technology and the social experience of race. Towns argues that the Black body itself can be theorized as a medium or an extension of Western man. Towns brings McLuhan into contact with Frantz Fanon, the psychiatrist, political philosopher and revolutionary thinker, in order to challenge McLuhan's references to racist psychology and anthropology, and then reframes McLuhan's theorization of the "extensions of man" as the extensions of White/Western men. **Ganaele Langlois's** "Distributed Intelligence: Silk Weaving and the Jacquard Mechanism" and **Jody Berland's** "McLuhan and Posthumanism: Extending the Techno-Animal Embrace" also simultaneously exemplify how one might work with and against McLuhan's media theorization in order to engage and extend his theories while still heeding their limitations. Langlois pays homage to McLuhan in the object of her study but then extends his media theory as she revisits a non-dominant media system and the crafting techniques of the Jacquard mechanism. Berland considers the deeply enmeshed mediations of animals, nonhuman bodies, and natural environments. In

Rhonda McEwen's transdisciplinary approach, which includes cognitive sciences, psychology, and media theory, she engages with the provocation that the sensorium provides the lens through which we observe that communication is the expression of cognition via the combined potentiality of physiology (the anatomy of our senses) and technology (in the form of media). Berland, Towns, Langlois, and McEwen's articles collectively re-evaluate the relationship of the senses to media ecologies, but also provide insight into how the technological is key to repairing structural damages tied to shifting media environments. Their articles also speak to the need for an interdisciplinary study of media, between the sciences and the arts, that led McLuhan to establish his Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto in 1963.

The articles by Peters, Alan Galey, and Liam Cole Young are all based on research undertaken in McLuhan's library, which is now publicly available. Each article makes the point in its own way that the labour of reading and annotating is for McLuhan a media art form in and of itself. **Alan Galey's** highly inspired article "Reading McLuhan Reading Ulysses" takes this a step further by reminding the reader of the intense labour involved in producing and maintaining such a library and archive. He also visually captures the unsolved mysteries of the margins, which are left for speculation. Galey offers a reading of the annotations made in McLuhan's copies of *Ulysses* and offers an original way of looking at the traces left behind in books as a generative research process. **Liam Cole Young** asks us to consider McLuhan's archives as "zones of possibility and renewal rather than stasis." But Young's article, "The McLuhan-Innis Field: In Search of Media Theory," drives home another key point shared in all seven articles. It shows how McLuhan is often celebrated as the work of the individual genius when in fact what he wrote, as Andrew McLuhan's lecture also insisted, was the culmination of a range of dialogic methods and interlocutors. Young's exploration of the relationship between Innis and McLuhan is also a history of the roles Corinne McLuhan (Marshall's wife) and Margaret Stewart (his secretary) played in shaping his writing. It is important to pause here on Young's article so this point is not lost. It *does not* outline this gendered relationship or gendered labour in order to prove that there were in fact women in McLuhan's world. This is often a retort or challenge to charges of the lack of feminist engagement with the work of great academic men. It is common to hear of the women in their lives as if acknowledging the inclusion of women in the scene is an indication of feminist engagement. This is hardly what feminist media scholars mean when they suggest there should be more critical feminist engagement with the uptake of McLuhan's media theory. Rather, Young's article leaves the reader with a deeper understanding of gender and the conditions of possibility for the great male legacy in the first place. In other words, what should concern us today is not necessarily McLuhan's relationship with women. Again, that is the subject of hagiography. Rather, the question is what sorts of feminist engagements with McLuhan's thought have taken place and where might they be extended (see Marchessault, 2005; Shade & Crow, 2004; Sharma, 2017).

This editorial is bookended with Andrew McLuhan's words because they offer a way of reading the seven articles that follow. This special issue begins with a first set of articles that captures the very aliveness of the books in the UNESCO designated col-

lection. They reflect an original engagement with the library but also reveal McLuhan's ongoing and unacknowledged collaborations. The second set of articles signals the potential and adventure of where one might take McLuhan for a new ride. Readers of the special issue will find that some of the articles accomplish both at once. Andrew's words, however, offer the most useful way to make sense of something hanging in the air at the symposium. There should either be many McLuhans or none at all. And, if so far what we may have largely encountered in the uptake of McLuhan is a tendency toward a singular engagement with a singular scholar, his work can continue to flourish in multiple ways. As Jonathan Sterne (2011) has argued about other great male figures in the Toronto School tradition, one can take "the curiosity of scholars such as Harold Innis and Edmund Carpenter without taking their findings as timeless truths" (p. 207). This collection of scholars coupled with Andrew's words below point to the ever-expanding possibility of a refreshed engagement with McLuhan's thought, the archives, and the library. This collection also presents a small sampling of some of McLuhan's newest drivers.

Libraries are alive. They are living things. The potential in Marshall's library has barely had its surface scratched. There are a lot of things in there that Marshall left to be picked up and explored by the next adventurous reader.

Perhaps I am typical of my generation, a part and participant of the new social environment and that I am committed to sharing my family's work and history with friends and the world, much as the Fisher library is in having this collection as open to the public as any provincial park.

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