

## McLuhan/Trump: When the *Medium* becomes the *Messenger*

Why have many of us who aren't professional philosophers suddenly started to question the nature of "reality?"

Is it because the real world's truths and facts seem to have taken on different forms --"Fake News," "alternative facts," formally "normal" people saying ridiculous things ... or is that at the same time, a new medium - "*Reality TV*" seemingly is coming to life before our eyes.

For an answer -- and not having been a follower of "*Reality TV*" -- I reverted to two trusted information sources: Google, for "Reality" and Marshall McLuhan, for "TV."

**Google:** A quick check (75,600,000 results (in 0.88 seconds) told me this relatively new *Reality TV* world included TV programs (designed to be entertaining rather than informative) in which real people encounter supposedly unscripted real-life situations and actual occurrences. And which critics say makes stars out of either untalented people unworthy of fame, and glamorize vulgarity and materialism.

That's when I became more concerned, for this new reality had become accessible to us through a new "medium," and this new and different medium seemed to be the one my early mentor, Marshall McLuhan<sup>1</sup>, warned us about when he famously told the world that the "*Medium is the Message*" --that the nature of our means of communication (heretofore "out there" and controlled by others) impacts the messages they carry.

**Marshall McLuhan:** What then would he say about this *Reality TV* whose messages we initially viewed on TV sets "out there" and as just "entertainment" -- but today have moved much closer to home -- now accessible just a foot or so from our heads, and under our direct control -- through a unique new "medium" -- smart phones?

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<sup>1</sup> In the interest of full disclosure: early in my career, at the time McLuhan wrote that statement, he and I met, shared views over beer in a Detroit bar, and then continued to correspond for several years.

In our hands for only 10 years, three-fourths of Americans of all ages today find they can't let go. They've embedded themselves throughout the 24/7 of public and private life as we eat, walk, wait...and in the case of a *Tweeter-in-Chief* -- govern.

I wonder, though, if McLuhan would notice that the reason for this medium's overwhelming takeover of our consciousness is not because the *phones* got "smarter," but *we* essentially did.

Our hands now directly controlled access to constant connectivity that could compress time and distance as we met our mind's psychological needs for what it offered access to – *information*. But now packaged in a way that can meet the need for immediate, satisfying *feedback* and supportive social *connections*.

Would he be astonished by how the immediacy and interactivity of this *hand/mind* connection now seems to be transforming the "*messengers*" into the *medium*?

Is this why we increasingly seem to have become actors on *Reality TV*... in a show currently directed by one of its former stars? Like *Improv* actors performing without scripts, we're figuratively and sometimes literally, flopping around like "*fish-out-of-water*" trying to figure out on-the-run what's happening and why...

...**"Fish?"...(But wait there's more ... from McLuhan... )**

Suddenly another of McLuhan's prescient insights returned to contribute to my sense-making search:

*"One thing about which fish know exactly nothing is water... the element they live in."*

Looking at this new medium, McLuhan might notice how much we seem to be acting like his "fish" who have no reason to notice the "water" they swim in even though they depend upon it for their daily survival.

I've always liked this metaphor, but never stopped to consider just what it was that the fish "didn't know." It wasn't necessarily that water keeps them afloat but, more significantly, that what they mindlessly draw from it carries vital nutrients needed for their growth and survival -- (much as our own bodies do as they process air.)

- Could it be that our ability to play effective roles on this *Reality TV* “program” will require that we “fish” have a better understanding of the nature of the “water” in the fishbowl, and the comparable nutrient we exchange through this medium (which turns out to be *information*). I believe so, and since the one person who apparently intuitively understands this is the former *Reality TV* star who is the show’s director, it’s important that we catch up.

So, here are some non-McLuhanish thoughts at a “simple” level of what Oliver Wendell Holmes called the “*simplicity on the other side of complexity.*”

- They focus on the nature of this smart-phone-facilitated *Reality TV* world that has made us the “message” by the ways it has tapped into the information needs of our *Heads* and *Hands*... and created a new relationship between them.

- Then suggests how those attributes seem to have morphed into the “perfect storm” of Donald Trump as the “Medium” and “Messenger” ...

- ...And what this might mean for the future.

### **The nature of this new *Medium* and its *Messages***

Today, *Reality TV*’s attention-grabbing power -- that we initially experienced as external observers -- has now taken control of our immediate, internal experience and understanding.

It has accomplished this by leveraging the nature of a new “medium” whose essential quality transforms us into the “message” from the inside out. Unfortunately, the place where that transformation is happening is in the relationship between our *message-writing* “heads” and our *message-exchanging* “hands.”

This creates a real communication problem because we can’t see relationships. Mostly just feel their effects, and their sometimes-entangled nature.

That’s why I’m staying at this simple level to describe what our heads and hands require in fulfilling their natural roles, and how the instrument now in our hands both empowers and complicates that “simple” job by offering new ways to address those needs. Yet, at the same time, potentially can limit our capacity to continue doing it.

### **What our “Heads” want...**

We all come with the same “battery included” -- a brain that is wired to take in information and then feed it to a mind that is “wired” to ensure we learn from our actions. (Metaphorically, think of a computer’s OS (Operating System), embedded in its hardware, that continually generates information the computer’s software needs to perform its assigned work.) That’s why, after each action we seek automatically seek feedback about its effects and send it to the mind for “processing” to determine whether or not we “made-a-difference.”

What the *Head* seeks, therefore, is continual Interaction that generates information to feed the mind’s basic work of creating *meaning* and *learning* to survive.

### **What our “Hands” want...**

This is simpler:

(1) To close the time loop between action and response ... and collect the prize of *Immediate gratification*. By eliminating the cushions of time and space, we can “act” and have the satisfaction of knowing its results right away. *Did we "make-a-difference?"*

(2) Social *connections* that can serve as channels to satisfy those core psychological needs for *feedback*.

### **The resulting *Head – Hand* “problem” ...**

This creates a seductive and dangerous condition. The satisfying *immediate gratification* created by immediate feedback about one’s effects is hard to let go of. (Even for “older” generations who learned the sometimes benefits of *delayed gratification*.)

And it can become *addictive*. Part of what defines *narcissists* is the sense that they are at the center of the universe with everything connecting to them. This new medium only adds to that belief by making those connections tangible.

Especially when it offers a way to take actions and get a quick response that can seem to validate not just the act, but the person who did it. As we already can see, the “*Tweeter-in-Chief*” won’t (most likely psychologically “can’t”) put it down.

A more serious problem, however, is that this addictive satisfaction comes *without the discomfort of thought*. There’s no time for it. While the information we have access to increases exponentially, the time to think about it doesn’t. With *24/7* as a finite time limit, many feel like they’re pressing it already.

As a result, the beneficial contributions of advance thought to our understanding often can’t compete in real time with the attractive opportunities for immediately satisfying interaction.

The “good news” is that “Thinking” doesn’t have to be a lost commodity. One consequence of having immediate access to a tool whose nature directly responds to both the human mind’s needs for interactive feedback, and at the same time, offers through its social connectivity access to a wider, deeper window on present “reality” is that it creates two “thinking” opportunities.

We can use the incoming information to feed:

- (1) a *Virtuous Cycle* that enriches thinking by accessing others’ views; or
- (2) a *Vicious Cycle* -- a closed loop echo chamber for one’s own thoughts.

And it’s possible that what we’re currently experiencing may be the product of a “thinking-free” *Vicious Cycle*.

**What does this suggest about the present director of this *Reality TV* show?**

- He is living in a “reality” that only he “sees” as he keeps his head focused on a world that his hands connect him to. What we’re experiencing as a fictional TV show is “reality” for him.

- He became a *Reality TV* “star,” not by playing a “role,” but by being who he is. The message of his seemingly-impulsive actions is driven by his core beliefs about himself and others. His tweets are not quite “without thought.” Much as boiling down a sauce until the true essence of its flavor emerges, distilling “thought” to 140 characters crystallizes the beliefs and values at its core. That may be why one current observer noted – “What shows up as his ‘character’ and ‘temperament’ are ‘visceral instincts unbounded by a world view.’” (Actually, he has one, but he appears trapped within the “wall” he’s constructed around it.)
- The fundamental flaw in his real-time “Tweets” -- offering the illusion of action without the discomfort of thought -- isn’t noticed when aimed into closed loop echo chambers of supporters. They communicate through simple “facts,” metaphors, and examples that offer immediate understanding... also without the discomfort of thought.

**If this is what’s happening, what can we do about it? Many of us are “newbies” to this new “reality fishbowl” ....**

### **The new Reality Fishbowl**

At this point, my early-mentor McLuhan might suggest I take another look in the bowl and note that we are not alone. it also contains another addictive message-delivering *medium*, and two types of fish with different *messages*.

**The other “medium”:** The other message-delivering medium in play -- *24/7 Cable TV news*. And I am forced to admit it’s engaged me in an *Escher-like Reality TV* show that hooks me -- not just psychologically, but socially and politically. There I can find satisfying “cocoon” within which I can hear occasional “good news” from “right thinkers” (like me.)

Nevertheless, its views of a disconnected reality leave me increasingly haunted by the frightening “surreal” possibility that what we’re experiencing as a fictional TV show might be reality from now on since, at present, that “disconnected reality” lacks the relationships necessary to feed the development of trust and the support of common interests. From the “unfriending” of personal relationships at one end to, at the other, a

Congress that currently governs through its powers to “check,” but has lost its power to “balance” through effective processes of trust-generating “thought” exchange.

**The other “Fish”...**

(1) First, there’s a newer generation of fish that better match McLuhan’s description of “*not having a reason to notice the ‘water’ they swim in even though they depend upon it for their daily survival.*” They don’t need a reason because *Smartphones* have been part of the water that nurtured them from early childhood, and these have almost become natural extensions of their minds and hands.

Moreover, these “fish” seem more *values* and *belief*-driven, and include those drawn to the “Revolutionary” visions of Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren. During the past election, they were promised a “revolution” that resonated with their core beliefs, and played roles that met pre-election needs for support.

Now, however, they require ways for direct engagement as *medium* and *message* that can have meaning for both their present and the future. The current “immediate gratification” generated by marches and petitions is not sufficient. Their actions must have a natural fit within a longer-term *vision* in which they can, and must, play meaningful roles.

(2) And “Vision” is where the other class of “Fish” offer a new reality “stage” for thinking and acting.

- These “Fish” include a new order of world class leaders that fit Fortune magazine’s definition of a “Leader” (in their recent selection of the Top 5 Leaders) as: “*someone who does the right thing no matter what.*”

Their visions encompass America’s larger political, social, economic context; and their actions reflect their core *beliefs* about people and the organizations that respond to their needs.

- As well as observers such as journalist Tom Friedman and CEO Jamie Dimon who have each offered practical visions of how to reweave connections through

community-level collaborative partnerships and processes driven by common values and beliefs.

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If this “simple” view offers a possible post-*McLuhan* lesson for the rest of us in the “Fishbowl,” it might be this:

**The *Medium* may be the *Message*, but the *Messenger* " is *Us***

We, addicted or not to *Smartphones*, are becoming a medium whose message must *engage thought*, must be *understood in real time* and must reflect the core *values and beliefs* that shape and control the fingertips that create the message.

The shrinking buffers of time and distance between thought and action that once gave us time and space “to think,” have magnified the importance of who and what, at the core, is “writing” the message.

Is the “message” that we express in words and actions driven by just reactive impulse, or by what’s already stored inside us as deep-set *beliefs* that we *value* because they define who we are and what the world is like in which we want to “make-a-difference?”

**...And do we now have a “*Medium*” that can enable us to be our “*Message*.”**

**Lewis A. Rhodes  
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