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## Book Reviews: Understanding Media

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**Understanding Media: Extensions of Man.** Marshall McLuhan. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2002 [1964]. 392 pp.

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Coming out swinging, on the first page of the first chapter of *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan makes his case: “The medium is the message.” In the decades since, most media scholars who have come across McLuhan’s work, even tangentially, have pretty well settled on whether or not they agree. This makes it an interesting challenge to look back at *Understanding Media* for what it still offers us, and whether we should revisit work that is not only widely referenced, but anchored around a pronouncement that borders on cliché.

There’s an alarming certainty that McLuhan brings to each of his discussions of media and their power in our societies, a brashness that can be quite grating. This is what Jean Baudrillard (1981) might refer to as McLuhan’s “usual Canadian-Texan brutality” (p. 171). Neil Postman separately described McLuhan’s style as “a series of dramatic propositions and generalizations. He didn’t pause to defend any of them, or even to explain them that much” (Postman, 1996, n.p.). These takes on McLuhan certainly resonate on the page, as McLuhan works through 33 chapters, making his case at once more brutally (look to his chapter “Weapons”), and without pausing for explanation (e.g., the breakneck pace with which we shift from discussing “The Press” to “the Motorcar”).

Now, Baudrillard’s work does not lack brutality (e.g., *Symbolic Exchange and Death*), and Postman can list toward dramatic propositions (e.g., *Amusing Ourselves*

to Death). But their framing offers an important context for seeing *Understanding Media* as a book born “of an era.” By this I do not mean outdated (though, at times, also that; e.g., McLuhan’s use of “primitive tribes” as crude exemplars for many ideas). Indeed, there’s little intellectual traction in picking apart McLuhan’s inaccuracies, and I do not find it helpful to bask in any sense of the rightness or wrongness of his nearly 60-year-old predictions (I am underwhelmed by debates over his prediction of the internet). Rather, McLuhan’s certainty and the probative nature of his writing reflect the tensions, amid uncertainty, surrounding developments in mid-20th-century media technologies. In his sweeping, sometimes off-target, probes we are availed of opportunities to rethink how we perceive media and their power.

In re-reading and thinking through *Understanding Media*, I found myself taking this as an opportunity to read *against* McLuhan, engaging with his work through the eyes of those who followed. My references to Baudrillard and Postman here are not incidental, and chosen not because they are described as descendants of his work; it is in the steps they took from McLuhan where we can trace the social and intellectual processes of understanding media and its potential for affecting society that *Understanding Media* seemingly instigated.

This is particularly apparent in Postman’s reflections on the moral quandaries of technologies for the hierarchy-building that media introduce. There is a message inbuilt into this medium, as he argued in *Technopoly*. In reference to text, he notes “writing is not a neutral technology whose good or harm depends on the uses made of it,” levying caution against “one-eyed prophets who see only what new technologies can do and are incapable of imagining what they will *undo*” (Postman, 1993, p. 5). Certainly, the intellectual lineage started by an aphoristic tying together of “the medium” and “the message” that traces through Postman remains productive as we consider the doing and undoing of digital technologies, as once-solutions like social media which could “unite” people have developed into persistent problems for politics, journalism, and society.

But our reflections need not be tied to our digital age, and much of McLuhan’s work can be treated absent the media technologies he explores. This potential is often clouded by his unyielding media-centricity, obscuring social processes surrounding media. In *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, Baudrillard makes this case. He argues we can find “analytic value” in McLuhan’s “medium is the message,” so long as we avoid seeing it as “a critical proposition” (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 172). Challenging the change-potential of media, Baudrillard explicates how a media’s very form reinforces political structures; ideology, built into modern media. More political than media-centric, he argues that the ideologies tied into the media form mean technologies like television cannot, in fact, be responded to. There is no reciprocity, as McLuhan would have it, “unless one destroys the object, or turns its function inside out” (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 180). To Baudrillard, the medium may indeed be the message, but its far less idealistic than McLuhan would suggest, and far more controlling. Parallels to our current circumstances can be easily drawn as we consider inbuilt power and seemingly interactive digital media, within which corporations have inbuilt capitalist ideologies around data and advertising.

This is how I found myself re-engaging with *Understanding Media*, pulling these threads of postmodern theory as a process of reading *against* McLuhan and finding in the time-bound limits of his work inspiration to consider newer arguments. This was particularly productive when reflecting on McLuhan's discussion of hot and cool media. Hot media, following McLuhan, leave the audience with little left to do, so complete with sensory input as they are (the "high definition" of television). Cool media give greater space for engagement, even requiring it (telephones call for this level of input). McLuhan can be forgiven for not anticipating our current heights of "definition," yet from our contemporary vantage, it is harder to square his view that hot and cool media have different effects within hotter or cooler cultures (again, adopting a "tribal" narrative to describe media as tools of societal programming; p. 30). But they can promote thinking about the role of media in heating up or cooling down tensions, around politics and culture, readily on display when we consider mediated incitement toward violence and harm online, through media that invite and even insist upon our participation.

Even the practice of reading *against Understanding Media* opened a door to seeing text-based media as far cooler than McLuhan might have considered in the analogue context. At a surface level, digital forms of texts in which we engage are mere touches and taps away from modes of further sensory engagement (cooler, by association?). But analogue reading is also, often, a far less linear process than what McLuhan describes as "unify[ing] spaces horizontally" (p. 25). As we flip backward and forward through a physical book, text allows us to fill in when definition is low, moving across perspectives and accounts to engage deeply and even nonlinearly, despite the linear path the written word otherwise takes. This might not refute McLuhan, it's not meant to, but it does demonstrate where thinking through his analysis and aphorisms can provoke new reflection.

Where we benefit from reengaging with *Understanding Media*, it is in seeing McLuhan's attempts at situating media within society, inchoate as they often are, as an invitation to think further. It offers an opening salvo, from which scholars have added and refined to McLuhan's ideas in an ongoing narrative. Reading *against* McLuhan certainly rewards you for taking such an opportunity to do so as well.

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