

## Homage to Marshall McLuhan. The World at Twitter Rhythm

By Horacio C. Reggini

One hundred years after the birth of Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), Canadian philosopher and sociologist, and fifty years after the publication of his visionary books on communication, these references oblige us to think about the relationship between the human being and technology, and it therefore seems appropriate to pay tribute to, and to review his ideas, especially considering that his predictions of future communications, - the connected world, and what we know today as Internet, - has been transformed into reality.

But first, it is noteworthy to remember two authors who also anticipated future events with their writings. One was, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, (1811-1888) an Argentine, who spoke these words at his inaugural speech of the inter-oceanic telegraph cable that connected Argentina to Europe (October 5, 1874): *“I send cordial greetings to all people who, by means of the cable, shall become one single family and one single neighbourhood”*. He then correctly predicted, with his lovable phrase *“one single family and one single neighbourhood”*, the scope that the present phenomenon of communications would lead us on a planetary level, and so he anticipated by nearly a century, the expression of “a global village” coined by McLuhan.

Another author was the extraordinary British poet and essayist, born in the United States of America, T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), who in section I of his poem “Burnt Norton”, the first poem of his “Four Quartets”, wrote: *“Time present and time past / Are both perhaps present in time future, / And time future contained in time past”*.

Further on, in his poem, after his previous expressions dedicated to “time past, time present and time future”, he wrote the following line in Section III: *“Not here the darkness, in this twittering world”*. We hereby note with surprise that he used the word “twittering”, which in English refers to the nervous chirping sounds of birds communicating with each other, in the bushes of a garden, which in Spanish we call “gorjear”. It is remarkable how Eliot’s metaphorical thought about the twittering of birds at the beginning of the past century, has become the reality of millions of persons who nowadays use the Twitter network, even saying that they “twitter”.

Jack Dorsey, Evan Williams and Biz Stone founded the Twitter network in 2006. At an interview by the *Los Angeles Times*, Jack mentions how the idea of the name arose. “We were trying to search for a name that would capture the essence of mobile phones, of the SMS, and of how one could be updated anywhere, and receive updates from anyone. We wished to capture the physical sensation of being present, close to friends, telling them little things, and to be able to do this with the whole world. After quite a few rounds, we found the word ‘*twitter*’, which was just perfect. The definitions from the dictionary were: *a short burst of*

*inconsequential information and the chirping sounds made by birds.* And that is exactly what the product was. Birds twitter, and these sounds have no meaning for us, but yes, for other birds. Exactly the same happens with Twitter: many messages exist which may seem useless, and meaningless, but that depends entirely on the receivers. We could use it as a verb or as a noun; we could also say that we “twitter”. The name Twitter has been a big part of our success. “To name something and generate the brand around that name, is something really important”.

Prior to all this, we should not forget that T. S. Eliot, both in his poem of “Four Quartets”, as well as in “The Waste Land”, refers to the terrible disorder that according to his outlook, governed the cosmos. He thought that there was too much superficiality in communications between human beings, and therefore these lacked depth.

McLuhan, on the other hand, explained in his texts that we were beginning to realize that new media ways were not always simply mechanical exercises to create worlds of illusion, but new languages with new and unique powers of expression. Historically, language resources have been configured and used in new and constantly changing ways. The printing press changed not only the volume of writing, but also the character of a language and the relationship between the author and the public. Radio, films, and television, led written languages towards the spontaneity and freedom of spoken languages. They helped to assess social awareness of language and bodily gestures. McLuhan adds: “if new media would serve to weaken or corrupt previously

achieved levels of verbal culture or of image, it would not be because they are inherently wrong or bad. If today, some of these are not advisable or convenient, this is due to the fact that we have not been able to master them as new languages, and adequately integrate them into a global cultural heritage”.

It is amazing how McLuhan could intensively study, years ago, a phenomenon of the characteristics presently represented by Twitter or Facebook.

For McLuhan, the intense broadcasting of social communications, affected, and shall affect to a greater degree, the everyday education, leading it to what he named as “the school without walls”, or “the classroom without walls”.

Already during his time, it was usual to talk about auxiliary audio-visual means for teaching, thinking that books constituted the standard, and that other means were merely accidental. It was also considered that any new media, to those known at that time (press, radio and television), were for mass communication, and that the book was something of individual characteristics, as the general opinion was that it isolated the reader, contributing to believing in the western “self”. However, the book was the first mass-produced communications product.

By means of this product, the whole world could have the same books. During the Middle Ages, this was impossible. Manuscripts and comments were dictated, and teaching was almost entirely verbal, and in groups. Solitary studies were reserved for the advanced scholar.

Prior to the appearance of the press, youngsters learnt by listening, observing and acting. And until a few years ago, in this same manner, the children living far away from cities, learnt the language, and picked up the knowledge from their elders. Only those who could afford a professional career went to schools.

The amount of information communicated by the press, magazines, movies, and/or television have greatly exceeded for quite some time, to that communicated by way of a formal education and books. This challenge, according to McLuhan, destroyed the monopoly of books, and tore down the very walls of the classrooms. In this profoundly disturbed social situation, it was natural that many educators perceived the new media, more as an entertainment, than as an authentic educational method. McLuhan argued, that this was not convincing for those who would seriously study the problem, and recalled that all the great classics were originally considered light entertainment; almost all vernacular works were so judged, until the XIX century. McLuhan mentioned as an example, the films of "Henry V" and "Richard III", of the famous English director Lawrence Olivier, which gather a cultural and artistic richness that reveal William Shakespeare at an outstanding level, and without doubt, offer enjoyment. The same happens today, with many works that one may find on the Internet. The secret of success consists in walking forwards, opening unknown doors, and doing new things. Today, we face the immense scope of magnitude available on the website, which impels a

mixture of creative imagination with technological know-how.

McLuhan clarified that films were for theatrical representations, what books were for manuscripts. This provided entertainment for many, on many occasions, which in another way would have remained restricted to very few, in few moments, and places. Videos, the same as books, are a product of duplication, and television is simultaneously watched by millions of spectators. It is noteworthy to mention that no historical powerful being, not even King Midas, who converted everything that he touched into gold, had the power in his hands of the possibility of duplicating something infinitely, as a regular person can do digitally, today. The phrases “mass communication media” or “mass entertainment” are not useful, and do not consider the fact that the Spanish or the English language, equally constitute a mass communication means.

McLuhan said: “in the name of progress, the established culture always battles to force new methods to perform the tasks of the former one”. Frequently, complaints arise as to the nature and the effects of films or television; however, their positive or negative characteristics of format and contents, carefully harmonized with other types of art and techniques, can become great educational tools.

To be able to express oneself, and to have the capability of identifying in everyday matters and in matters of information, is without doubt, the hallmark of the educated man. It is erroneous to assume that a basic difference exists between education and entertainment,

even though we should be less optimistic about educating through entertainment, and the instructive powers of the media. This distinction only frees people of their responsibility of seeking deeper into the matter. It is like making a distinction between didactic poetry and lyric poetry, based on the grounds that one teaches, and the other entertains, whereas it has never ceased to be true, that what pleases, teaches in a much more effective way.

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