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The New Languages

Author(s): Edmund Carpenter and Marshall McLuhan

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THE NEW LANGUAGES

English is a mass medium. All languages are mass media. The new mass media—film, radio, television—are new languages, their grammars as yet unknown. Each codifies reality differently; each conceals a unique metaphysics. Linguists tell us it's possible to say anything in any language if you use enough words or images, but there's rarely time, and the natural course is for a culture to exploit its media biases.

Writing, for example, didn't record oral language; it was a new language, which the spoken word came to imitate. Writing encouraged an analytical mode of thinking with an emphasis upon lineality. Oral language tended to be polysynthetic, composed of great, tight conglomerates, like twisted cables, within which images were juxtaposed and inseparably fused; written communications consisted of little words chronologically ordered. Subject became distinct from verb, adjective from noun, separating actor from action, essence from form. Where the preliterate man imposed form diffidently and temporarily—for such transitory forms lived but temporarily on the tip of his tongue, in the living situation—the printed word was inflexible, permanent, in touch with eternity: it embalmed truth for posterity.

Mr. Carpenter, a professor of Anthropology, University of Toronto, is the author of two forthcoming books, *Time-Space Orientation of the Aivilik Eskimos* and *Anerca* (translations of Eskimo poetry). Mr. McLuhan is a professor of English, St. Michael's College, University of Toronto and the author of *The Mechanical Bride*. He is now at work on *The End of the Gutenberg Era*.

This embalming process froze language, eliminated the art of ambiguity, made puns “the lowest form of wit,” destroyed word-linkages. The word became a static symbol, applicable to and separable from that which it symbolized. It now belonged to the objective world; it could be seen. Now came the distinction between being and meaning, the dispute as to whether the Eucharist *was* or only *signified* the body of the Sacrifice. The word became a neutral symbol, no longer an inextricable part of a creative process.

Gutenberg completed the process. The manuscript page with pictures, colors, and correlation between symbol and space, gave way to uniform type, the black-and-white page, read silently, alone. The format of the book favored lineal expression, for the argument ran like a thread from cover to cover: subject to verb to object, sentence to sentence, paragraph to paragraph, chapter to chapter, carefully structured from beginning to end, with value embedded in the climax. This was not true of great literature, which retained multi-perspective, but it was true of most books, particularly texts, histories, autobiographies, novels. Events were arranged chronologically and hence, it was assumed, causally; relationship, not being, was valued. The author became an *authority*; his data were serious, that is, *serially* organized. Such data if sequentially ordered and printed conveyed value and truth; arranged any other way, they were suspect.

The newspaper format brought an end to book culture. It offers short, discrete articles which give important facts first and then taper off to incidental details which may, and often are, eliminated by the make-up man. The fact that reporters cannot control the length of their articles means that in writing them, emphasis can't be placed on structure, at least in the traditional sense, with climax or conclusion at the end. Everything has to be captured in the headline; from there it goes down the pyramid to incidentals.

The position and size of articles on the front page is determined by interest and importance, not content. Unrelated reports from

Moscow, Sarawak, London, and Ittipik are juxtaposed; time and space are destroyed and the *here* and *now* are presented as a single Gestalt. Subway readers consume everything on the front page, then turn the page to read the continuations in incidental order. The mind concentrates on particulars, not relationships. A Toronto banner headline ran: TOWNSEND TO MARRY PRINCESS and directly beneath this, as a second headline: *Fabian Says This May Not Be Sex Crime*. This went unnoticed by eyes and minds conditioned to consider each newspaper item in isolation.

Such a format lends itself to simultaneity, not chronology or lineality. Items abstracted from a total situation are not arranged in causal sequence, but presented in association, as raw experience. The front page is a cosmic *Finnegans Wake*.

In magazines, where a writer more frequently controls the length of his article, he can, if he wishes, organize it in the traditional style, but the majority do not. For the format as a whole opposes lineality. In *Life*, extremes are juxtaposed: space ships and prehistoric monsters, Flemish monasteries and dope addicts. It creates a sense of urgency and uncertainty: the next page is unpredictable. One encounters, rapidly, a riot in Teheran, a Hollywood marriage, the wonders of the Eisenhower administration, a two-headed calf, a party on Jones beach, all sandwiched between advertisements. The eye takes in the page as a whole (readers may pretend this isn't so, but the success of advertising suggests it is), and the page—indeed, the whole magazine—becomes a single Gestalt where association, though not causal, is often like-like.

The same is true of the other new languages. Both radio and television offer short, unrelated programs, interrupted between and within by commercials (though children do not regard them as “interruptions,” as breaking continuity; rather, they regard them as parts of a whole, and their reaction is neither one of annoyance nor indifference). The ideal news broadcast has half a dozen speakers from as many parts of the world on as many subjects. The London correspondent doesn't comment on what the Washington correspondent has just said; he hasn't even heard him.

Of the new languages, television comes closest to drama and

ritual. It combines music and art, language and gesture, rhetoric and color. It favors simultaneity of visual and auditory images. Cameras do not focus on speakers, but on persons spoken to or about; the audience hears the accuser but watches the accused. In a single impression they hear the prosecutor, watch the trembling hands of the big-town crook, and see the look of moral indignation on Senator Tobey's face. This is real drama, in process, with the outcome uncertain. Print cannot do this; it has a quite different bias.

Thus each communication channel codifies reality differently and thereby influences, to a surprising degree, the content of the message communicated. A study of such biases was begun at the University of Toronto in 1953 under a grant from the Ford Foundation. Faculty members from Anthropology, Economics, English, Psychology, and Town Planning met weekly for two years with graduate students from various fields. We found, first, that the methods used in our different fields were easily translatable and could be employed by one another. We began with the later works of Harold Innis, an economist who shifted his attention from the trade-routes of the external world to the trade-routes of the mind. Technology, he saw, had solved the problem of production of commodities and had already turned to the packaging of information. And the penetrative powers of the pricing system were as nothing beside the power of the new media of communication to penetrate and transform all existing institutions and patterns of thought.

This is especially true of television. We say, "We have a radio set" but "We have television"—as if something had happened to us. It's no longer "The skin you love to touch," but "The Nylon that loves to touch you." We don't watch television; it watches us: it guides us. Magazines and newspapers no longer convey "information," but offer ways of seeing things. They have abandoned realism as too easy: they substitute themselves for realism. *Life* is totally advertisements: its articles package and sell emotions and ideas just as its paid ads sell commodities.

In studying changes in communication media Innis found the

key to his analysis of the problems of competition and monopoly, change and order, growth and decay. These changes came about as each technological advance destroyed an existing communication monopoly; it came tumbling down like the walls of Jericho. Innis had an intense dislike of monopolies of knowledge. They appeared to him to be productive of bias in communication that was fatal to mutual understanding among peoples and nations. He urged that we harness and subordinate the new languages to human ends.

Our interest in this shift from production and distribution of commodities to packaging and distributing ideas and feelings led us to the writings of Sigfried Giedion, Dorothy Lee, Edward Sapir, Gyorgy Kepes, H. J. Chaytor, Béla Balász, Sergei Eisenstein.

It also led us to undertake the following experiment: One hundred and thirty-six students were divided, on the basis of their over-all academic standing of the previous year, into four equal groups who either (1) heard and saw a lecture delivered in a television studio, (2) heard and saw this same lecture on a television screen, (3) heard it over the radio, or (4) read it in manuscript. Thus there were, in the CBC studios, four controlled groups who simultaneously received a single lecture and then immediately wrote an identical examination to test both understanding and retention of content. Later the experiment was repeated, using three similar groups; this time the same lecture was (1) delivered in a classroom, (2) presented as a film (using the kine-scope) in a small theater, and (3) again read in print.

Announcement of the results (television won, followed by lecture, film, radio, and finally print) evoked considerable interest. Advertising agencies circulated the results with the comment that here, at last, was scientific proof of the superiority of television. This was unfortunate and missed the main point, for the results did not indicate the superiority of one medium over others. They merely directed attention toward differences between them, differences so great as to be of kind rather than degree.

Some CBC officials were furious, not because television won, but because print lost. Scratch most and you find Student Christian-types who understand little of literature and contribute less, but, like publishers, have a vested interest in book culture. At heart they hate radio and television, which they employ merely to disseminate the values of book culture.

Official culture still strives to force the new languages to do the work of the old. But the horseless carriage did not do the work of the horse; it abolished the horse and did what the horse could never do. Horses are fine. So are books.

Nobody yet knows the languages inherent in the new technological culture; we are all deaf-blind mutes in terms of the new situation. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us by referring to the previously existent, not to the present.

The problem has been falsely seen as democracy *vs.* the mass media. But the mass media *are* democracy. The book itself was the first mechanical mass medium. What is really being asked, of course, is: can books' monopoly of knowledge survive the challenge of the new languages? The answer is, no. What should be asked is: What can print do better than any other medium and is that worth doing? If Johnny has the same experience, more fully, at the corner cinema, that he gets by reading Sir Walter Scott, then it's senseless to insist he read Scott.

T. S. Eliot has said he would prefer an illiterate audience, for the ways of official literacy do not equip the young to know themselves, the past, or the present. In the schoolroom officialdom suppresses all their natural experience; children of technological man are divorced from their culture, they cease to respond with untaught delight to the poetry of trains, ships, planes, and to the beauty of machine products. They are not permitted to approach the traditional heritage of mankind through the door of technological awareness; this only possible door for them is slammed in their faces. The only other door is that of the high-brow. Few find it, and fewer find their way back to popular culture, and to the classrooms without walls that the new languages have created.

(*Editor's Note*: To reach beyond their own classroom walls the members of this Toronto seminar decided to publish a journal, *Explorations*, devoted to a study of media biases. Financed by a small amount of surplus secretarial funds, limited to no more than 2,000 copies per issue by the difficulty of handling, and not intended for permanent reference, the first numbers of the magazine have already become collector's items. Published three times a year for two years in a handsome format that should have merited a colophon, *Explorations* is an attempt to treat the humanities and the social sciences as a continuum with anthropology and communications as "approaches, not bodies of data.")

Faced with a shortage of relevant material the editors were required to pad with extraneous but often stimulating articles. Such items as "Letter File" and "Idea File" are penetrating comments on popular culture that merit reprinting. A gem of parody is "Meat Packing and Processing" which exhumes some quirks of the embalming profession.

Of the outstanding covers two should be mentioned. The second issue gave us, on both sides of both covers, the satire of a newspaper called *Feenicht's Playhouse*, each news item and feature contributing to the cumulative effect: that we had not really read and understood a newspaper before. The fifth issue superimposed on the front page of the *Toronto Daily Star* (edition of April 8, 1954, headlined H-BOMB IN MASS PRODUCTION US) a color photograph of the golden-girdled Mother Goddess, Our Lady of the Sports and Muse of Unofficial Poetry (Cretan, 16th Century B.C.) arms upraised in blessing of the arena.

In these the tone of the editors' approach was made clear; among the articles the most successful were: Sigfried Giedion on the metaphysics of Paleolithic art; Dorothy Lee on language; Northrop Frye on archetypes in literature; D. C. Williams on acoustic space; Stephen Gilman on time and tense in Spanish epic poetry; David Riesman on oral and written traditions; Lawrence Frank on tactile communication; and Edmund Carpenter on Eskimo concepts of space and of eternal life.

A major result of the publication venture is that the seminar has gained acceptance at Toronto as an apparent result of the praise directed toward the University and *Explorations* from elsewhere. With the sixth and final number now being published it is good news to learn that Anchor Books may shortly publish an anthology of *Explorations*. There is, also, the encouraging possibility that the Toronto group will launch another series within the next two years, what is described as "really an experimental effort"—with changes of policy and format in each issue. Perhaps they will thus begin to answer their own question: "What can print do better than any other medium and is that worth doing?"—Lachlan MacDonald)