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Position Paper: Marshall McLuhan

Some Call Him the 'Village' Idiot!

Marshall McLuhan can certainly be described as fascinating, confusing, opinionated, and futuristic. His ideas are often presented as deep, thought-provoking statements that seem to be meant to either stimulate discussion, or more often to promote controversy and debate. Either way, McLuhan's messages and predictions seem to be kept alive decades after their inception, whether it be by believers or by critics.   One such critic equated McLuhan's writings with that of Shakespeare, not for its profound cultural content, but for its confusing, poetic nature. After reading excerpts from two of McLuhan's most famous writings*, The Medium is the Message* and *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man*, I am not so sure I disagree with this critic. While his predictions are very interesting, I get lost in his "frilly" language and find myself becoming aggravated with his writing. When this happens, I have to reread his thoughts several times … perhaps this was an intentional ploy he used?

In *The Medium is the Message,* he writes: '"Time" has ceased, 'space' has vanished. We now live in a global village … a simultaneous happening'. I strongly agree with this statement, both educationally and recreationally. Computing technology has brought us from smoke signals and messages in bottles to instant messaging and satellite images from around the world. This first *village* was a 'local village'. In this society, time moved slowly and the transmission of information to outside societies moved even slower. In terms of education, current events were those events that happened within miles of the schoolhouse. Entertainment technology was virtually non-

existent. In the second *village*, or the present 'global village' McLuhan spoke of, time can hardly keep up with the facts. Almost before one piece of information can arrive, thousands of people have heard the information, made their on interpretations of the data, and passed it along to the next village, usually giving it his or her own slanted view which often skews the data. In terms of education, current events are those events happening locally, regionally, and globally with no one form being easier to obtain than the other.

I think computing technology has had a huge impact on our educational society. In my own classroom, the use of graphing calculators that link to a computer and enable students to download 'real' and 'current' data that can be used for instant and extremely relevant computations is amazing. An example would be teaching mean, median, and mode in my Algebra classes. When I first started teaching fifteen years ago and this technology was unavailable, I would create a set of data and have students compute these deviations by hand. Not only could this become tedious and time-consuming, but it could also be very boring and meaningless to students. In today's classroom, however, downloading information from the internet and other sources straight to the calculator can speed this process up, as well as give students relevant data on topics of interest to them, thus causing them to find more relevance in the concepts of mean, median, and mode.

In another of McLuhan's writings, *Understanding Media: Extensions of Man,* he writes: 'Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.' This is another example of Marshall McLuhan's round-about

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way of making a persuasive point of view. Perhaps, more simply put, McLuhan was trying to say that through today's advancing media, such as telephones, radios, and the Internet, we are all more closely connected and our limitations of distance and time have been eliminated both educationally and in our private lives. A personal example of this would be the use of my school website in my classroom. Through this medium, students who are absent are able to view lecture notes, diagrams and homework assignments online while they are out of school for various reasons. Instead of losing a full day of instruction, these students are able to create their own classroom environment at home and, with a little motivation, they are able to teach themselves concepts that were presented in a classroom that may be thirty miles away from them. McLuhan viewed this as an extension of one's self. In this case, the website is an extension of the student's brain. The information is stored in electronic format on the computer instead of being housed as memory in the brain.

Although Marshall McLuhan's thoughts can be hard to interpret or vague at times, I feel that he was right on the money with his concept of 'the global village' and 'the extensions of man'. Technology has truly created both of these concepts over the last twenty to thirty years, and I am sure that there are technological concepts out there that our minds cannot even comprehend yet. Can it be that these technological concepts will bring us full circle and back to the early concept of individual societies? McLuhan thinks this will be the case. One day we may again see the likes of communication through smoke signals and messages in bottles. And who knows … our grandchildren may think these are the greatest thing since 'sliced bread'. Whatever the case, it is easy to see that McLuhan was certainly not the 'village idiot'. His message is

clear…technology moves us. It can cause us to make advancements that otherwise would have been impossible to make. And in education, it can enable us to teach concepts that would have otherwise been impossible to convey to students.