

# Actually, it's the 'tetrad' that's the message

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Author: Buell, Timothy

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Laws Of Media - The New Science

by Marshall and Eric McLuhan

University of Toronto Press, 252 pages, \$27.50

At the time of his death in 1980, Marshall McLuhan's reputation as one of the most important thinkers on contemporary culture and communication had been established beyond question. Today, McLuhanisms such as "the medium is the message" and the "global village" have become common parlance.

McLuhan had intended *Laws Of Media* to be the culmination of his life's work. What began as a revision of *Understanding Media* had evolved into a distillation and codification of his unique way of perceiving media. It was left to his son Eric - with whom he had been collaborating - to complete sections that existed only in sketch form and prepare the book for publication.

The central tenet of McLuhan's thought is the idea that any artifact constructed by humans, whether it be the printing press, plough or digital watch, is a medium. In *Laws Of Media*, the McLuhans postulate four verifiable statements, a tetrad, which they believe can be applied to any human artifact, or medium. When expressed as questions, they are:

What does it enhance or intensify?

What does it render obsolete or displace?

What does it retrieve that was previously made obsolete?

What does it produce or become when pressed to an extreme?

When applied to money, for example, the McLuhans' tetrad postulates that money: enhances transactions and exchange; obsolesces barter; retrieves potlatch (conspicuous consumption as a status symbol); and, when pushed to its limit, flips into credit, or lack of money. It is important to note that these four laws do not operate in any sequential or chronological order, but rather take effect simultaneously.

The authors state that the four-part structure of the tetrad can be expressed as a kind of proportional ratio (A is to B as C is to D), which can also be expressed in its complementary form (A is to C as B is to D). The McLuhans further liken the structure of their tetrad to a metaphor. For when we say "the ship ploughed through the water," we are invoking a metaphoric ratio of motion: A ship is to water as a plough is to land.

The authors then draw the distinction between the four laws of their tetrad and Hegel's dialectic triad (consisting of a thesis, antithesis and a synthesis), which they suggest can now be supplanted by their triad; hence their subtitle *The New Science*.

A substantial portion of *Laws Of Media* is devoted to applications of the tetrad to an array of artifacts ranging from brothels to cigarettes to semiotics. These tetrads are elegantly presented, usually one per page in a diagrammatic, poetic fashion, and frequently include glosses which explain or expand. For example, when the McLuhans suggest, through application of the tetrad, that the stirrup "retrieves" the centaur, they include this gloss: "with the knight and chivalry, retrieves the fabulous and adventurous, the hieratic vs. the hierarchic."

As a continuation and culmination of Marshall McLuhan's previous work, *Laws Of Media* often presents ideas already found in such books as *Understanding Media* and *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. McLuhan's favorite references and influences, such as Innis, Canetti, Havelock, Pound, Joyce and Wyndham Lewis, all make their appearances, like revered actors playing cameo roles. This sometimes results in a rather loosely structured prelude to the main act, which is the tetrad.

The first chapter is a historical account of the supplanting of the cognitive orientation of "acoustic space" (predominant in oral or preliterate societies) by "visual space," ushered in by the development of alphabetic literacy in the ancient

Greek world. Our present postliterate age is then viewed in the context of the obsolescence of visual space by the retrieval of "post-Euclidian acoustic space," wrought by the electronic media.

IN THE second chapter, the McLuhans invoke the familiar left- brain right-brain nostrum in support of their claim that the emphasis on visual space is the result of left-hemisphere domination and the emphasis on acoustic space is caused by right-hemisphere domination. The left brain, of course, is supposedly responsible for our cognitive ability to think logically and sequentially and to read and write; and the right brain provides the facility to think holistically and to recognize spatial dimensions and to perceive abstract patterns.

While neurological and psychological research has demonstrated that there are differences in the cognitive processes of the brain's two hemispheres, these findings are tentative at best. The brain is made up of many interconnected parts - not just two - and the McLuhans' eagerness present the hemispheres of the brain as two opposed mental factions into pseudoscience.

The most significant aspect of Laws Of Media is the McLuhans' demonstration of the tetrad. The tetrad's eloquence and the universality of its application will surely have a profound effect on any further study of media.

Timothy Buell is a writer and professor of communications at the University of Calgary.

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