

***Laws of media – The four effects: A McLuhan contribution to social epistemology***  
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In 1988, Eric McLuhan published some of the final papers of his father's pioneering work, weaving together his own thoughts on language, media and communication in the form of a systematic approach to media studies, technology and culture. As a book with a method-as-starting-point, the McLuhans' left open the possibility for future scholars to continue their work on media effects, the so-called 'laws of media.' What was needed was to find a way for them to be further applied, to become *compatible* or to *resonate* with various scientific and research communities in the electronic-information era.

This article briefly presents the laws of media or 'Four Effects.' The purpose is to contribute to what people think and know (cf. epistemologically) about science and technology, as individuals and as members of various societies. The provocative McLuhan Media Model can be applied as a way of exploring the relationship between causes and effects, which is an interdisciplinary topic of great extension.

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was engaged in questioning and investigating the effects of print, electronic technology and various forms of 'new media' as they influence our lives. Together at the University of Toronto with Eric Havelock, Northrop Frye, Edmund Carpenter, Walter J. Ong and briefly with Harold Innis, from the early 1950's to late 1970s, McLuhan and their 'Toronto Communication School' delivered profound, if not always mainstream or quickly comprehensible insights into the history of language and speech (e.g. orality vs. literacy) and their impact on science, technology and culture. McLuhan believed that the essential message of human-made media is found when we realize that media are 'utterings' or 'utterings' (cf. 'extensions') of ourselves, and that by learning about them we thus also learn about ourselves.

This description may raise initial concerns from some readers. For example, should such topics as media and communications even count as 'scientific' (usually 'natural science' is the common meaning in Anglo-Saxon discourse) let alone suggest the possibility that they constitute the topical basis for a 'new science,' as indicated in *Laws of Media's* subtitle? Could an English professor ever possibly hope to solve long-standing theoretical and applied puzzles in or about science and human nature, through cross-disciplinary applications of literary theory to culture? To answer these concerns is yet another test for the McLuhan method, and may ultimately help to measure Marshall McLuhan's legacy in the increasingly wired 'global village' and explain his lasting success and influence as a so-called sage and visionary of the electronic-information age.<sup>1</sup>

In McLuhan's messages, the term 'media' is used quite broadly to include technologies, artefacts and even words and scientific theories of human discovery or invention. These

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Wolf called him "electronic culture's immortal saint." ("The Wisdom of Saint Marshall, the Holy Fool." *Wired Magazine*. [http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.01/saint.marshal\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/4.01/saint.marshal_pr.html))

may all be analyzed in his unique tetrad-form of Four Effects articulated in *Laws of Media*.

We found that everything man[kind] makes and does, every procedure, every style, every artefact, every poem, song, painting, gimmick, gadget, theory, technology – every product of human effort – manifested the same four dimensions.” (Eric [and Marshall] McLuhan, 1988: ix)

Though some people are taken aback by physicists, astronomers, cosmologists or biologists who make claims to having achieved (or even just proposed) a grand unified theory (GUT), for a very good reason the same charge does not apply to the McLuhans. This is largely due to the fact that the Four Effects method is limited to artefacts of human-making and not placed on natural(ly selected) things. In other words, it does not challenge naturalistic ideologies that depend on cosmological or biological speculations with a totalising super-human alternative.

McLuhan prescribed his so-called Four Effects (laws of media) as a complementary method to Aristotle’s well-known Four Causes: Material, Efficient, Formal, and Final. The Four Effects, which I will briefly elaborate on below, were named as follows: Retrieval, Reversal, Obsolescence and Amplification or Enhancement. These Four Effects are meant to apply simultaneously, and not linearly or sequentially, mirroring the method of Aristotle’s Four Causes. If applied properly and inventively, their perceptual impact on the reader will be one of aural/visual, discontinuous, resonant interplay, as they reveal already present or future features of media, culture and technology.

The combination of the four causes and the four effects is the most comprehensive and capable framework that has been developed so far whereby to evaluate the impacts and implications of new technologies. (Sheridan 1990)

In the book *Laws of Media*, Marshall McLuhan’s earlier work unites in a general anthropic method that brings all language, aural and visual culture, technology and theoretical relativising to bear in an inspiring mix of catholic genius and mystical allure. The medium *is* the message and the method *is* what matters in *Laws of Media*.

The Four Effects allow for a reflexive investigative approach to whatever artefact or theory the participant (reader/listener/observer) chooses to apply them, in other words, an epistemology that is both personal and at the same time inevitably social. The tetrad model and its implications for science, philosophy and life therefore are meant to shock us (sensibly) and to open new doors to further discovery, following the historic lead of G. Vico’s *Science Nuova* and F. Bacon’s *Novum Organum*.

Combined with McLuhan’s mosaic approach, the Four Effects in tetrad-form suggest a new way, a ‘new science’ to consider media, culture, technology and science. The potential perceptual reach of this simultaneous method of effects alone may open up fresh

communicative connections, which arouse reasons for excitement and exploration in new scientific and humanitarian areas.

The possibility of buried scientific treasure often prompts public and private curiosity. McLuhan's late-career contribution and oftentimes forgotten Four Effects count as just such an opportunity.

Though many voices were afterwards critical of *Laws of Media* as a belated public relations attempt to re-vitalize McLuhan's popularity of the 1960's, a small group of others has given Marshall and Eric praise for the clarity it offers to McLuhan's earlier writing.

*Laws of Media* is the metaphysical coda of McLuhan's career: a vision of history, language, metaphor, and technology compressed into the diamond-like facets of the amplify/obsolesce/retrieve/reverse tetrads ... a book that purports to present a method rather than an encyclopaedia of applications of it. (Guardiani, 1996)

We now know that McLuhan had been thinking about 'laws' since the time he was a student at the University of Manitoba in the 1930's. His writing and other intellectual activities in the middle of the 20th century on culture and technology reflected and re-sounded the rising influence of the electronic-information era reverberating on the human psyche. The so-called 'laws of media' came together after more than thirty years studying, researching and writing about media, information and communication technologies and their effects on humanity.

From his personal letters, at 19, having entered the University of Manitoba (Canada), McLuhan wrote:

When I have had a bit more philosophy and psychology ... I am going to work out some of the great [unexamined and universal] 'laws' that govern the affairs of men, temporal and spiritual ... What I should do would be to take this field of the 'laws' and show that in spheres of science, literature, history, tho[ugh]t, action, human and superhuman, everything is a mass of timeless truth and consistent order. I would take a number of concrete examples and work them out in detail ... I feel that if I am to make a contribution here, that it will be one of stimulating minds better fitted than mine to elaborate the theory. [That theory of the laws] possesses the advantage of simplicity and I am convinced that it is ever so close to the truth." (In Guardini 1996)

### **The Laws of Media: Four Effects**

Viewed in the form of a simultaneous tetrad, McLuhan poses the following questions about media:

- A. “What recurrence or RETRIEVAL of earlier actions and services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres in the new form?”
- B. “When pushed to the limits of its potential, the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. What is the REVERSAL potential of the new form?”
- C. “If some aspect of a situation is enlarged or enhanced, simultaneously the old condition or un-enhanced situation is displaced thereby. What is pushed aside or OBSOLESCEd by the new 'organ'?”
- D. “What does the artefact ENHANCE or intensify or make possible or accelerate? This can be asked concerning a wastebasket, a painting, a steamroller, or a zipper, as well as about a proposition in Euclid or a law of physics. It can be asked about any word or phrase in any language.”  
(1988)

As simple as it may initially seem or sound, that is the laws of media or Four Effects in brief; four categories applicable to any form and content of media, theory or human artefact. The invitation is to try them out on your own terms and topics and see what effects you can discover in the emergence of new (or old) media.

McLuhan’s method suggests that the reader should ask them-self the questions: what does the new artefact or theory retrieve? What does it reverse into? What does it obsolesce? And what things does it enhance or amplify?

Such a general methodological framework for inquiry into scientific research and experimentation could help scientists and scholars to reflect further upon the message(s) of their theories and technological achievements. By clarifying this, the general public may better understand the relevance and possible importance of science and technology and when we should potentially stop developing certain theories or technologies if they threaten our safety and security on a global scale.

It may be that McLuhan’s laws of media, his Four Effects will someday resonate more broadly with people and gain awareness in society and higher education. The verdict is still out, even as we have just celebrated 100 years from McLuhan’s birth in 1911. As we now face many environmental and ecological challenges during our era, the McLuhans’ method is one contribution that a social epistemology of media can potentially make use of in order to evaluate (without necessarily moralising) what we mean by science and technology. And if that happens, then perhaps Aristotle would be proud to have his Four Causes finally married in the global village with McLuhan’s Four Effects.

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<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-uc>

See below Image 1: “Laws of Media: The Internet”, Martin Soules, “McLuhan Light and Dark” <http://www.media-studies.ca/articles/mcluhan.htm>

See below Image 2: “Laws of Media: Mobile Phone”, Marshall McLuhan, from *Laws of Media*, 1988, page 153.

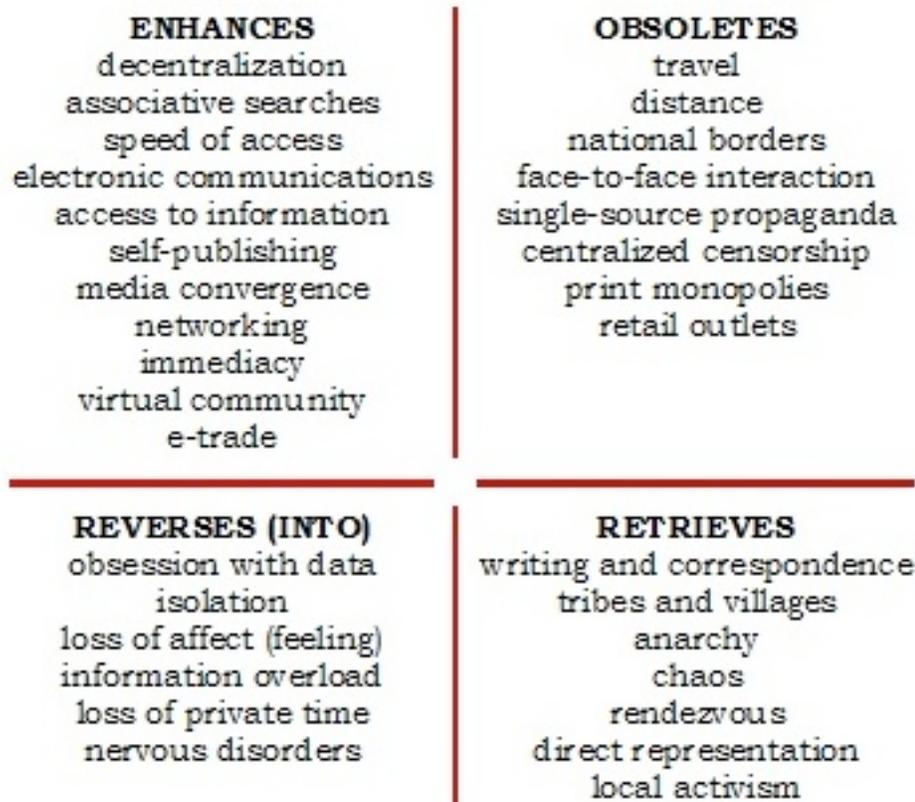
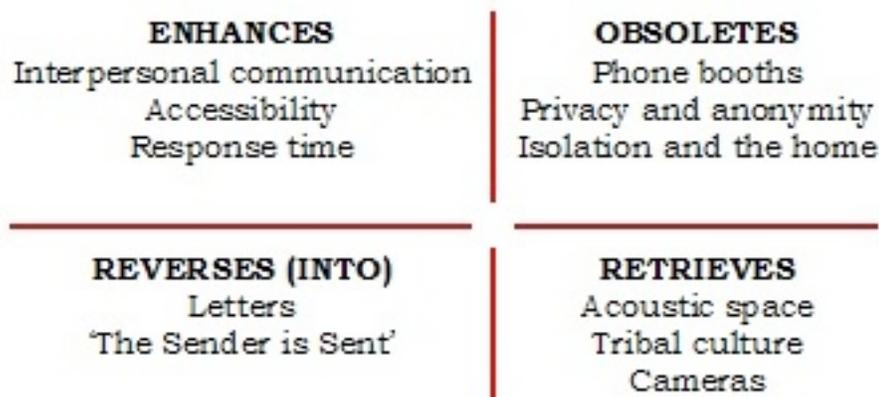


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Which media would you propose to add to the encyclopaedia of uses for the Four Effects?

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