EDUCATOR'S GUIDE

This study guide was written for the National Film Board by Lance Strate, Associate Professor of Communication and Media Studies at Fordham University and President of the Media Ecology Association. Strate is co-editor of the anthology *The Legacy of McLuhan*.

INTRODUCTION

McLuhan's Wake takes us into the world of Marshall McLuhan's life and thought. This insightful documentary brings one of the most celebrated and controversial intellectual figures of the 20th century into the new millennium, demonstrating the relevance of McLuhan's ideas to our wired, multicultural global village. McLuhan viewed media as environments that shape human life and argued the need for a science of media ecology to escape their effects. McLuhan's new science took the form of four laws of media.

A. THE MEDIA MAELSTROM

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "A Descent into the Maelstrom" provided McLuhan with an important metaphor for describing contemporary culture and technology. How is culture like an inescapable vortex? In what sense are we swept away by the effects of technological innovations? How does the maelstrom metaphor relate to recent theories concerning chaos and complexity?

B. ESCAPING THE MAELSTROM

We often ignore our environments, allowing them to fade into the background and become invisible. How did McLuhan learn to pay attention to the invisible environment of communication, culture and technology? How successful was he in teaching others to be aware of their media environment? The sailor in Poe's story escapes from the maelstrom by using his powers of observation, recognizing an orderly pattern emerging from the turmoil of the whirlpool. Can we do the same? McLuhan developed his new science of media ecology to escape the maelstrom. His four Laws of Media are tools to recognize the pattern within the vortex. He argued that this tetrad could be used to analyze any technology or artifact, and could also be applied to ideas, institutions, social movements or any other product of the human mind. McLuhan's Laws of Media are the four questions that must be asked to understand the effects that will inevitably result from a new medium. They are:

1.   What human trait or experience does the medium enhance? What is the intended function of the medium or technology? What does it improve or make more efficient? Does it extend part of the human body? One or more of the senses? Does it extend an aspect of the human mind, such as memory? Does it amplify some human capability or augment some form of human action? Does it extend the individual, the group or society?

2.   What pre-existing technology, method, system, or medium does this medium obsolesce? What older technology does the new medium replace? What does it render unnecessary? What procedures does it short-circuit or bypass? What happens to the old medium that is rendered obsolescent? Does it disappear entirely, become an art object, or find a new niche?

3.   What technology, method, system or medium that was previously obsolesced or abandoned does this medium retrieve? What archaic elements are made relevant again? What previously marginalized or repressed ideas, practices or artifacts are brought to the fore? What aspects of the prehistoric, ancient, medieval or early modern world are revived?

4.   When fully utilized or pushed to its extreme, what will the medium reverse into? What effects will the medium create that are opposite to what was originally intended? What are the contradictions inherent in the technology? What is the ecological impact?

C. SOME EXAMPLES

a. Television enhances our ability to see and hear across time and space, obsolesces older media like radio (forcing them to reinvent themselves), retrieves the hearth and campfire as the centre for communal entertainment and reverses into new forms of individual and societal isolation.

b. The automobile enhances our mobility, makes the horse and buggy obsolescent, retrieves the knight in armor and reverses into the traffic jam.

c. Word processing enhances our ability to produce printed text, obsolesces the typewriter, retrieves the scroll and the manuscript as open, changeable text and reverses into oral communication through word recognition and speech synthesis software.

D. MEDIA HISTORY PROJECT

Research the history of a medium. If possible, determine what the inventor and/or early adopters expected the technology to be used for. Did they accurately anticipate the impact of the new medium? What other events or trends occurred? Are these events or trends related to the new technology in any way? Would they have been

possible, or would they have occurred differently without the new medium? Do the events or trends correspond to McLuhan's tetrad?

E. APPLYING THE LAWS OF MEDIA

Use the Laws Of Media to analyze an artifact or idea from the past or present. In your analysis, consider the different levels of technology. For example, you can examine electricity as a general innovation, or electrical power systems that wire the environment, or the light bulb as a specific electric technology, or the halogen light bulb as a new variation. Similarly, you can look at the computer in its entirety or break the study down into specific components such as calculation, videogames, hypertext, e-mail, the World Wide Web and virtual reality.

Remember that in addition to the intended effects of a new technology, there are always unintended effects, sometimes referred to as side effects or blowback. The automobile was intended to facilitate transportation, but its unintended effect was to become a medium of courtship for teenagers, a private space for romantic activity. Also, whatever the positive effects of an innovation, there will always be negative effects as well. The automobile vastly increased mobility and personal freedom but at the cost of significant loss of human life and damage to the environment. Moreover, a new medium will have indirect as well as direct effects. The automobile made it possible to travel from one point to another faster than was previously possible. This change allowed people to live farther away from their place of employment, resulting in the expansion of the suburbs contributing to the decay of inner cities.

Consider the different spheres in which the medium's impact is felt. What are the effects on the way we perceive and interact with our environment? How does it alter the way we communicate? Does it change our ability to send messages over time and space; does it affect the speed of sending information and the amount of data we can disseminate and store? Does it provide a new set of signs or symbols, a new language with its own unique grammar and vocabulary? Does it alter who has access to information, who has control over communication and whether communication tends to be one-way or interactive, or pointto- point or one-to-many? How does the medium affect the way we behave, think, feel and use our senses? Does it affect our sense of identity, the roles we play, the way we associate with and relate to others? What is the technology's impact on social organization, on politics, economics, religion, education, etc.? What are the effects on social institutions, values and culture?