

Seeing the Invisible — Reflections on E. T. Hall and M. McLuhan

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Abstract

Marshal McLuhan, the Canadian medium guru and Edward T. Hall, the distinguished American anthropologist, are two intellectual giants of the 20th century. Each of them has, in his own way, set up a completely new outlook on our life and a new way of experiencing the world around us. Though working in different fields of study, these two great masters think very much alike. Both of them seem to have profound insight and penetrating perception in unveiling the true relationship between man and his environment. They both regard man's technological creations as extensions of man and recognize the immense power of media in shaping and reorganizing human life; they have been searching for basic rules and patterns in media forms rather than in the content; they both recognized the psychic and social consequences of media or extensions of man. But each of them deals with human extensions from different perspectives and focuses on different aspects of human life. McLuhan seems to be more interested in the life of forms and their surprising modalities, while Hall concerns more about cultural forms or how environment variations bring about different life patterns in different cultures. Together they have led us to see both the forest and the tree in the multicultural global village. By comparing these two geniuses, we can better understand their epoch-making ideologies and thus better understand ourselves and the world around us. What we can benefit from this comparison is, besides the enlightening ideas and discoveries, a rethinking of our own research approach and way of perceiving the world. It is time for us to stop being distracted by the superficial content of things and begin to look for the truth in the things themselves and in their own cultural contexts. Only in this way can we find true nature of human man communication and human relationships.

Introduction

In literature about communication and cultural studies E. T. Hall and Marshal McLuhan are often acclaimed as masterminds in the 20th century. Their contribution has exerted far-reaching influence in the more sophisticated understanding of and innovative exploration

into man and his environment.

E.T. Hall, the American anthropologist, who pioneered in uncovering the hidden dimensions of culture and ways of life in foreign lands and Native Americans, is commonly credited as the founder of the scholarly field of intercultural communication. Hall's research has not only opened new windows for the world but also set up the major paradigms for later intercultural communication studies inside and outside the U.S. (Rogers et al, 2002).

Marshal McLuhan, a contemporary of E. T. Hall, is a towering figure in the development of communication theory and he is remembered as a "media guru", an "oracle of the electric age" in Canada. McLuhan's aphorism "the medium is the message" has inspired ever-increasing interests in probing into various forms of life and his prophecy of the "global village" and the "global theatre" is no longer a myth. McLuhan believes that the medium in which information is recorded and transmitted is decisive in determining the character of that culture. Although McLuhan is often criticized for subscribing to such technological determinism, the opposition has never overshadowed his influence on communication studies (Wasser, 1998).

Edward T. Hall and Marshal McLuhan are two intellectual giants of the 20th century. Each of them has, in their own way, set up a completely new outlook on our life and a new way of experiencing the world around us. However, these two names are seldom seen together in the literature in spite of the fact that these two great men think very much alike though working in different fields of study. Both of them seem to have profound insight and penetrating perception in unveiling the true relationship between man and his environments. They both regard man's technological creations as extensions of man and recognize the immense power of media in shaping and reorganizing human life; they have been searching for basic rules and patterns in media forms rather than in the extrinsic content; they both recognized the psychic and social consequences of media or extensions of man.

While being fascinated by what these two great minds have accomplished in their lifetime, the present author strongly feels that beyond their apparently different research interests and achievements they do have some common characteristics. Such observation is evidenced by the author's recent reading of Roger's paper on the correspondence of McLuhan and Hall (Rogers, 2000). In the paper, a brief comparison of the two great minds will be made to examine how McLuhan and Hall share and differ in their approaches to communication and human behavior in general. The purpose of such comparison, however, is not to present a comprehensive summary of the two scholars or to make any evaluation or judgment about who is greater than the other. Rather it is hoped that inquiries into similarities and differences between Hall and McLuhan will evoke more reflections and shed new light on our own research in communication and culture.

Similarities in understanding man and his environments

Great minds think alike. This is particularly true for Hall and McLuhan. In spite of their differences in educational backgrounds, types of commitment at work and academic interests, a shared understanding of man and man's relationships with his environments and creations can be observed between Hall and McLuhan. They seem to have similarly profound insight and penetrating perception in unveiling the true relationship between man and his environment, which has stimulated a completely new outlook on our life and a new way of experiencing the world around us.

Recognition of technology as extension of man

First of all, both of them regard technology as extensions of man's organism. McLuhan's researches or "probes" center around various media, all of which are considered as the extensions of man: the printing words, the motor cars, the TV set, the clothing and housing, and the computer, etc. It is from this point of view that McLuhan starts probing into the effects of media: how each kind of media alters the ratios among our senses and accordingly alters the patterns of interdependence among people as well as the relationship between people and their environment.

Hall shares the same innovative perception. Actually Hall was the first to make this metaphor. Erich McLuhan and Frank Zingrone (1995) even quote Hall's words to illustrate to the reader what McLuhan means by "extensions of man":

Today man has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body. The evolution of weapons begins with the teeth and the fist and ends with the atom bomb. Clothes and houses are extensions for man's biological temperature-control mechanisms. Furniture takes the place of squatting and sitting on the ground. Power tools, glasses, TV, telephones, and books which carry the voice across both time and space are examples of material extensions. Money is a way of extending and storing labor. Our transformation networks now do what we used to do with our feet and backs. In fact, all man-made material things can be treated as extensions of what man once did with his body or some specialized part of his body.

Hall made this remark in his book *The Silent Language* (1959:79). And in another book *The Hidden Dimension*, which was published in 1966, two years after the publication of McLuhan's *Understanding Medium—The Extensions of Man*, Hall restated this idea; "He (man) is distinguished from the other animals by virtue of the fact that he has elaborated what I have termed extensions of his organism. By developing his extensions, man has been able to improve or specialize various functions. The computer is an extension of part of the brain, the telephone extends the voice, the wheel extends the legs and feet. Language extends experience in time and space while writing extends language" (1966:3-4).

Human civilization develops along with the extensions of man. McLuhan believes that "any new technology is an evolutionary and biological mutation opening new doors of perception and new spheres of action to mankind" (McLuhan and Zingrone, 1995:282). Hall expresses the same idea by quoting from Weston La Barre as saying that "man has shifted evolution from his body to his extensions and in so doing has tremendously accelerated the evolutionary process" (Hall, 1966:3).

In the discussion about correspondence between McLuhan and Hall, Rogers et al. (2002) also claims that McLuhan owed the idea of extension of man to Hall though McLuhan was unaware or reluctant to acknowledge this. What can be inferred from their discrepancies over the origin of the idea is that both Hall and McLuhan shared the same understanding of the power of technology in human life and the communication between them has sharpened their understanding as such.

Unique approach to exploration of meaning beyond form

The shared yet extraordinary understanding of man and technology set McLuhan and Hall

upon unconventional approaches of exploration, which could be considered as another similarity between the two great minds. Both of them are more interested in the forms and structures of man's extensions rather than in the "content" as most people have been accustomed to.

McLuhan is very exceptional in this aspect. He believes the perception of reality depends upon the structure of information rather than what is built within that structure. "The form of each medium is associated with a different arrangement, or ratio, among the senses, which creates new forces of awareness. These perceptual transformations, the new ways of experiencing that medium creates, occur in the user regardless of the program content. This is what the paradox, 'medium is the message' means" (McLuhan, and Zingrone, 1995:3). While common people indulge themselves in searching truth among the kaleidoscopic content of books, TV programs, computer software, etc., McLuhan is not distracted by such content. Instead, he sees right through it and penetrates into the "hidden grounds" and the "out-of-awareness" aspects of culture. McLuhan starts with the impact of printing—typographical man and the ways in which the printed book is a powerful means of spreading ideas and knowledge in early modern Europe. From there he goes on to contrast what he called print cultures of modern media especially radio and television. He is believed to be the first real analyst of the impact of new media of communication (radio, TV, photograph, film). And his prediction of a "global village" in the electronic age makes him a great futurist or prophet.

With equally powerful perceptivity, Hall, too, realizes that men are not aware of the ground rules of their environmental systems or cultures. Just as McLuhan has dedicated himself to the discovery of the ground rules, Hall has been trying to unveil the "hidden dimensions" of the environment. In the preface to his book *The Hidden Dimension* (1966) Hall claims that all his books "deal with the structure of experience as it is molded by culture, those deep, common, unstated experiences which members of a given culture share".

Though searching in different fields of study, Hall and McLuhan both deal with the forms or structures of man's extensions and environment. As Hall himself says that in general, in the courses of his research he has "been more concerned with structure than content and more interested in the question of "how?" than "why?" Whatever comes under his investigation, Hall would try to look for the underlying patterns of organization, structures of formation, be it time, be it space, be it silence (Hall, 1959, 1966, 1977). Throughout his books, Hall has been working on the framework of human communication in different aspects, especially the often-neglected nonverbal dimension.

In what has been usually taken for granted or neglected, McLuhan and Hall have discovered the real mechanism that keeps the world running. McLuhan points out that such structure lies in the "ground" other than the "figure" which we can easily observe. While illustrating the figure/ground method in the study of media, McLuhan remarks that "the ground or underlying structure, of a situation provides the conditions for experiencing any part that presents itself as figure". In fact it is "the underlying structure, or ground, of a situation changes our experience of everything within it." (McLuhan et al., 1977:14-15).

Undoubtedly the two intellectual giants have been trying to convince the world that it is the patterns and structures that make sense of things and understanding them enables us to assess problems more realistically and accurately. The wide application of Hall's theoretical frameworks (Rogers et al, 2002, Hart, 1996) and the prognostics proclaims of McLuhan in the 1960s and the revival of McLuhanism in the 1990s is sufficient enough to evidence the

far-reaching influence of their approaches in culture and communication studies.

Profundity in the perception on the effects of man's creations

A third similarity between McLuhan and Hall lies in the fact that they both see through the effects and functions of various forms and structures—their impact on the senses or their psychic and social consequences. McLuhan perceives that “a new extension sets up a new equilibrium among all of the senses and faculties leading to a ‘new outlook’—new attitudes and preferences in many areas”(1964:119). And he expresses the same idea in another book:

All media are extensions of some human faculty—psychic or physical. The wheel ... is an extension of the foot ... the book is an extension of the eye ... clothing, an extension of the skin ... electric circuitry, an extension of the central nervous system.

Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act, the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change. (1969:26-41)

According to McLuhan, any culture is an order of sensory preferences. In the tribal world, all the senses were balanced and simultaneous, characterized by the harmonious, oral-acoustic culture. Then with the invention of the phonetic alphabet, literacy propelled man from the tribe and gave him an eye for an ear, which means the phonetic alphabet diminished the role of the senses of hearing and touch and taste and smell, and brought about the norm of ‘rational’, ‘fragment’ and “specialized” existence of the West. New technology is “a revolutionizing agent”, and such revolution is realized through the change of the equilibrium of the senses by the sheer change of media forms.

Hall shares with McLuhan the same alertness to the impact of environmental change on human senses. He holds that “everyone receives all information about the environment through his or her senses. If one wants to understand the impact of the environment on human beings, it is necessary to know a great deal about the senses and how sensory inputs are handled in the brain” (1966:x).

One typical form Hall has dealt with is Spatial Language. By examining the responses of man's visual, auditory, olfactory, thermal and tactile receptors, Hall argues that certain underlying patterns exist in the spatial language in interpersonal communication as well as in the environment around us and these patterns shape and reorganize human activities and way of life.

The power to perceive the often out-of-awareness impact of media and the environment enabled Hall and McLuhan to exchange their understandings and conceptualizations of human behavior in their 133 letters of personal correspondence, which in return has rendered more strength to the innovative exploration of both masters (Rogers et al., 2002). Rogers cited the following from Hall-McLuhan letters to illustrate their sharing of observations about human senses.

(Hall wrote to McLuhan)

Arabs do not judge distance from other people usually the way we do, but kinesthetically and olfactorily [such as by smelling garlic on a conversation partner's breath]. They use their eyes as true distance receptors for taking in a view. As a consequence they suffer horribly from claustrophobia.

(McLuhan replied to Hall)

What you say about the unique sense-mix in the Arab perception of space
must equally apply to the sense-mix of any given language.
(Rogers et al., 2002:117-135)

From many such exchanges in their personal letters during 1960s' and 1970s' as discussed in Rogers' essay, we can see Hall and McLuhan showed great admiration for each other and in fact they have worked out some of their brilliant ideas through writing these letters.

Differences between McLuhan and Hall

Despite their many shared insights into the nature of human interaction as defined by all kinds of media or technology and human environment, Hall and McLuhan are distinguished themselves in their special perspectives. A glimpse of their differences in their scholarly work will also lend illumination to any future inquiries in communication studies.

Hall, as an outstanding cultural anthropologist, and McLuhan, as a most influential medium theorist, have dealt with different specific subject matters and written in very different styles. They study human extensions from different perspectives and focus on different aspects of human communication. McLuhan's interests had been the effects of media; everything ranging from the phonetic alphabet to the electronic computer falls into his observation. His work is kaleidoscopic or encyclopedic. McLuhan once said to the *Playboy* reporter that he considered himself as a generalist, not a specialist. As a scholar of English literature, McLuhan perceives the world from an artist's point of view. He treats all media as art forms. Artists, McLuhan believes, have "the power and courage of the seer to read the language of the outer world and relate it to the inner world" (McLuhan and Zingrone, 1995:237). Art is about everything in human life, so is McLuhan's work. McLuhan also considers himself an investigator, making explorations about the technology environment and its psychic and social consequences, by employing miscellaneous facts as tentative probes, as means of insight and of pattern recognition. He claims that "only by standing aside from any phenomenon and taking an overview can you discover its operative principles and lines of force" (McLuhan and Zingrone, 1995:236). So McLuhan has no fixed point of view, no commitment to any particular theory—both his own and that of anyone else's. This break-through from the conventional Western approach of specialization and categorization is possibly one of the important reasons that make McLuhan such a brilliant and yet controversial genius who has been able to perceive what most people fail to see in their own environment and in themselves. His books have no disciplinary orientation. They are not limited to any particular field. Actually McLuhan has been addressing all men about everything, especially things that are taken for granted. Anyone who really understands McLuhan will find enlightenment in his books.

Although Hall claims to be the same in his book (1966), he seems to be more specialized, having cultural anthropology as his main focus in his communication research. McLuhan's own remark well distinguishes the two of them: "I am not a 'culture critic', because I am not in any way interested in classifying cultural forms. I am a metaphysician, interested in the life of the forms and their modalities" (McLuhan and Zingrone, 1995:1). But Hall has been a 'culture critic' all his life. Whatever he studies, he puts it into a cultural framework. While being aware of the shaping force of the environment, Hall finds out that superficially people "may all look alike and sound somewhat alike, but beneath the surface are manifold unstated and unformulated differences in their structuring of time, space, material and relationships. It is these very differences that often result in the distortion of meaning, regardless of good intentions, when

peoples of different cultures interact”(1966:x).

McLuhan believes that each new medium creates a new environment and a new culture. Hall goes even further at this point. To him, “culture is man’s medium; there is not one aspect of human life that is not touched and altered by culture” (McLuhan et al., 1977:16). More importantly, as he points out earlier in another book that culture functions as a highly selective screen between man and the outside world and designates in various forms what man pays attention to and what he ignores. Since cultures differ, what is selected through this screen or medium will certainly vary from culture to culture (1966:88). Hall’s in-depth investigation shows that people in different cultures not only speak different languages, but also use time and space differently. They organize their life activities in different ways.

Comparatively speaking, McLuhan has dealt with culture as medium and human civilization in very general terms, though he did mention some differences in media and their effects, for example, the phonetic alphabet and Chinese ideogrammatic characters. His intentions seem to be arousing people’s consciousness of how their lives have been affected by media rather than to call their attention to the differences created by media in different cultural environment. However, Hall has made deliberate efforts to uncover the different cultural patterns underlying media forms, which he believes to have caused all the confusions and conflicts in human communication. His research actually set the foundation for cross-cultural communication study and he is crowned with being the forefather of this interdisciplinary.

Implications

The above comparison is only based on personal observation and understanding and it is by no means inclusive and exclusive. The purpose of the comparison, as it is stated at the beginning of this article, is not to make any evaluation or to find out which is greater between the two masters, but to reflect on the contributions made by Hall and McLuhan and what can be learned from their unique achievements. The author believes that such reflections may not only bring about better comprehension of McLuhan and Hall’s ideologies, but more importantly it will shed light on future explorations into human communication. What can we learn from these two great men apart from their brilliant and groundbreaking ideas? How can we penetrate into the true nature of human communication? How can we not be blocked by the superficiality of various forms and content? How can we see the invisible and become aware of the out-of-awareness of the world we live in? Reflecting on the success of Hall and McLuhan will undoubtedly help us to find the answers to these big questions.

Searching beyond superficiality

One greatness about Hall and McLuhan is that they set foot upon very different approaches in their scientific exploration, i.e. searching beyond superficiality. Compared with what they have achieved, their approach to investigate and probe is equally, if not more, beneficial to us. We should begin to reconsider and adjust our own ways to deal with various problems in academic research and our everyday life as well. Despite of all their differences, both McLuhan and Hall have cast their attention on what is usually taken for granted by the ordinary people. Not being blurred by the miscellaneous and superfluous forms and content, they have been able to get hold of the most hidden yet ground rules governing human relations and life patterns, in the past, the present and the future. The reason most of us have failed to do so is that we are so constantly distracted by what things appear to be that we seldom manage to go beyond their superficial forms. This doesn’t mean that we should neglect ‘content’, what we must realize is

that we should not stop at “content”. Because it is, as McLuhan and Hall have demonstrated, usually the “hidden dimension” that bears the true nature of everything around us and influences us most. The theme of all McLuhan’s works is “the medium is the message” because “it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human associations and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium (1964:24). In the same manner, Hall points out that “the study of man is a study of his extensions” (1977:38). It is crucial for us to realize the shaping force of the medium independent of its content and how all extensions of man impact man and his world. If we are truly to understand man, we must understand his extensions—the media forms.

Realization of the importance of media or the extensions of man is beneficial for both scientific research and everyday life. In scientific inquiries, exploration of truth will not be successful if the relationship between form and content is unrevealed. In our everyday life and work, we can make good use of technology or media of various kinds to assure the fulfillment of our goals. Man will benefit most from his extensions when he studies the extensions and their effects before he decides what uses he could make of them. Take the situation of teaching software in China for example. Quite a number of educational software here are created simply by removing the textbook onto the screen regardless of the effects of book medium and the adaptive and interactive nature of the computer. The removal of walls surrounding government office buildings can be used as an example of successful application of media study, particularly in the exploitation of the shaping force of architecture. To establish a more intimate image of an open government and enhance relationships between the government and the general public, Chinese government officials at the provincial and municipal levels have, in recent years, stopped to prison themselves in their office buildings behind high walls and opened their gates to the public. Such nearly nationwide removal of high fencing walls has been well received by the ordinary people and the great effect in shortening social distance between government and ordinary people has been reported in many local papers.

Working within the cultural framework

On the other hand, the study of any medium and its effects should be conducted within its specific cultural context. This is especially important in that culture is actually man’s medium. There is not one aspect of human life that is not touched by culture. Hall tells us that “man cannot shed culture. ... No matter how hard man tries to it is impossible for him to divert himself of his own culture, for it has penetrated to the roots of his nervous system and determines how he perceives the world. ... People cannot act or interact at all in any meaningful way except through the medium of culture (1966:188).

If McLuhan has guided us to walk out of the forest of human civilization and bring us to see the whole picture, Hall has directed us to the tree where we actually stand in the forest. Together they have led us to discover our true position in relation to the global environment. The shrinking of the world at the magic of the electronic age doesn’t cause our traditional cultural features to disappear, but rather creates new cultural environment out of the old one. So the pervasive influences of our culture still exist in the global village. And globalization will continue to develop side by side with multiculturalization and diversification. What we should bear in mind is that when we pay attention to the effects of media in our life we should always put them in the cultural matrix. Hall has been trying to show us in all his books how culture determines our patterns of life and how cultures differ in the shaping process and patterns of life.

The successors of McLuhan in the Toronto University have developed McLuhanism and called upon us to study media in their own specific cultural and historical context. Eric McLuhan, son and successor of Marshal McLuhan, spoke during the International Conference on the Effect of Media in Harbin, China in May 1998, that “man lives through the effects of media,” and “the effects of the same media vary in different cultural contexts”(personal communication).

Realizing this is especially important in the electronic age when McLuhan and his medium theory are given increasing recognition and where multimedia and multiculture hybridize everywhere in the globe. For the millions of us who live and work in close relation with the multimedia we have, we should never forget the biggest medium that shapes and transforms all other media: our culture and cultures of others.

Drawing rich resources

The extraordinary perception of Hall and McLuhan is also the result of their absorption of resourceful ideas from many different disciplines. Hall has worked and researches mainly in the field of anthropology, but his paradigms for intercultural communication are believed to have derived from other disciplines too. Apart from cultural anthropology, Hall has particularly nurtured his ideas from studies in linguistics, ethology or the study of animal behavior and Freudian psychology (Rogers et al, 2002). Hall's multi-perspectives of communication set up the foundation for the interdisciplinary study of intercultural communication. McLuhan, as is mentioned earlier, is a generalist and his kaleidoscopic views enabled him to see the common nature of all media that ordinary people fail to catch as a result of their confinement to one special or fixed standpoint.

Collaboration and communication between scholars are also crucial for development of new ideas. The extensive communication between Hall and McLuhan is but one good model to show “how important intellectual ideas often grow out of communication between scholars, allowing them to test and extend their thinking in a collaborative mode” (Rogers, 2000: 117). Exchanges and collaboration will create chances for scholars to expand their resources and bring greater potential for success.

Concluding remarks

McLuhan and Hall started the study of media as human extensions and culture as communication in the late 50s' and early 60s'. By comparing these two geniuses, we can better understand their epoch-making ideologies and thus better understand ourselves and the world around us. Reflections on their work will enable us to gain better understanding of their enlightening ideas and discoveries and help us to rethink our own research approach and way of perceiving the world. It is time for us to stop being distracted by the superficial content of things and begin to look for the truth in the things themselves and in their own cultural contexts. Only in this way can we find true nature of the world and our relationship with it. The ground-breaking theories of Hall and McLuhan as well as the processes and approaches by which they have worked out their theories have proved and will continue to have enduring relevance in human life.

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