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## Remembering Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980): The Medium and the Message

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## Remembering Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980): The Medium and the Message

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"A few years back Diane Lucas, then the campus archivist as well as a member of the Lavery Library staff, mentioned to me in passing that Marshall McLuhan's daughter Stephanie had been doing research in our archives on her father's work. Marshall McLuhan?! I was astonished to hear that name mentioned, as it had been years since I'd thought about the communications guru who had coined the phrases "the Global Village" and "the Medium is the Message." But more to the point, what possible connection did he have with St. John Fisher College? To my astonishment, Diane told me that McLuhan, who had been a faculty member at the Basilian-run St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto, was closely connected with Father Charles Lavery, the former president of St. John Fisher College, for whom the library is named. McLuhan was also active in helping to found our Department of Communication and Journalism, and often came to campus to give talks and meet with the faculty and students. Stephanie McLuhan was here, in fact, to do research on a book she later edited of her father's unpublished lectures, some of which were first delivered here."



*Tim Madigan*

## REMEMBERING MARSHALL McLUHAN (1911-1980):

### THE MEDIUM AND THE MESSAGE

“It’s inevitable that the whirlpool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens . . . we can get through.” –

Marshall McLuhan, *Playboy* Interview, 1969

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Father Charles Lavery, the former president of St. John Fisher College, for whom the library is named. McLuhan was also active in helping to found our Department of Communication and Journalism, and often came to campus to give talks and meet with the faculty and students. Stephanie McLuhan was here, in fact, to do research on a book she later edited of her father's unpublished lectures, some of which were first delivered here.

McLuhan is often considered to be a prophet of the Information Age. While he died just before the computer revolution really took off, his theories on communication and mass media remain both provocative and relevant. Yet McLuhan was no starry-eyed advocate for innovation in the means of communication. Indeed, much of his writing can be considered to be a strategy for maintaining human dignity in a time of rapid change, by making us aware of the forces shaping our perceptions. As he often said, “fish don't know water exists until they are beached.” His was an *ethics of awareness*. McLuhan offered strategies for making us more aware of the various ways that media shapes our sense of reality, and how one can use such knowledge to escape being subsumed by such onslaughts. One of his favorite metaphors, as seen in the quote above, came from Edgar Allan Poe's short story “A Descent into the Maelström,” in which a sailor caught within a whirlpool is able to survive by ascertaining the actions of the destructive force and adapting himself to it. “By studying the patterns of the effects of this huge vortex of energy in which we are involved,” McLuhan notes, “it may be possible to program a strategy of evasion and survival.” As he was also quick to point out to anyone who thought he was an advocate of the “Death of the Book,” he was a professor of literature with a deep love for the printed page. But the Age of Guttenberg was coming to a close, and McLuhan was one of the first to begin to speculate about what new Beast was slouching towards Bethlehem to replace it. And, ironically enough, he managed to become a media darling himself, often interviewed by

television reporters who never quite understood his cryptic remarks but who knew a good sound bite when they heard it. He even appeared, as himself, in a famous scene in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall*, thereby achieving a kind of cinematic immortality. One suspects that his theories on communication are even more pertinent to the era of Facebook and YouTube than to the era of ATT and network-programmed television in which he initially wrote his "probes" on communication.

After learning from Diane about this previously unknown - at least to me - campus connection with one of the 20th Century's leading public intellectuals and gadflies, I organized, in 2008, a panel discussion on McLuhan's life and continuing influence with Diane, Father Leo Hetzler, CSB (an emeritus professor of English at St. John Fisher College who had taken courses with McLuhan at St. Michael's College and remembered him fondly) and Tom Proietti, the long-time member of the C/J Department who worked closely with McLuhan and knew him well enough to call him "Mac." Several Fisher alums attended the meeting and gave their recollections of this colorful and controversial character. To top it all off, Diane found a wonderful photo in the archives of McLuhan giving the commencement address to the graduating class of 1969 (the same year, by the way, in which his *Playboy* magazine interview appeared - I wonder if *that's* in the archives?). And who should be sitting behind him on the stage but none other than Fulton J. Sheen, then the Bishop of Rochester, looking magisterial in his bright red robes. In my office I now proudly display a copy of this photo of the Messenger of the Media and the Television Priest, together at last - two proud and idiosyncratic Catholics who truly understood the power of public communications.

July 11, 2011 marks the 100th anniversary of Marshall McLuhan's birth, and Tom and I, together with Kyle Reinson in the C/J Department, are planning a centennial commemoration on

campus. It's important for people here at St. John Fisher College to know about the origins of the school, and to note that our connections to the global village of today were helped along by such a fascinating figure. Or, as Henry Gibson so aptly put it in the poem he delivered on the television show "Laugh-In" during McLuhan heyday in the late 1960s:

Marshall McLuhan

What're Ya Doin'?

