

McLuhan speaks to packed room

Future view charges from fact to impressions

By AGNES KRUCHIO

If Marshall McLuhan did not exist, you would have to invent him.

McLuhan is our very own, very wealthy word magician. Yet you cannot dislike the man, because he is so good at it.

And that is McLuhan's secret. The medium is the message. The public deserves its idols.

The most striking thing about McLuhan is his tremendous ability to manipulate language. He came to the fore in an age when the proliferation of television, radio, film and super-sonic jet travel turned the world into a 'global village'—and the world was ripe to receive Marshal McLuhan.

"In the beginning was the word" — and the word was McLuhan's. By attaching a name to the burgeoning phenomenon in communications, it became his own for years to come: "media".

His magnificent verbal skills were on display at York last week when he gave a lecture for the John White Society, an Osgoode student association. The Moot Court room, which seats about 350, was filled to standing-room capacity.

Without spelling any of it out, and with many jokes ("all jokes are grievances") and digressions, McLuhan traced a model of the legal profession of the future. It is in a good position to face the future; the future belongs to the generalists, and lawyers, being the descendants of the encyclopedist tradition, are well-equipped to be the leaders of a future society.

The "Man from the D.E.W.-line" as McLuhan calls himself, began by setting up a series of polarities in terms of "media": the "old" journalism versus the "new"; the "old" politics versus the "new"; the "old" specialist tradition facing the "new" generalist tradition, with the legal profession as the cornerstone.

The "old" journalism was a concept that said journalists had to be fair by being objective and giving both sides of the story. The new journalism, on the other hand, will have none of that sentimental objectivity.

It will get down to the nitty-gritty by jumping into the action, presenting an impressionistic rather than factual report.

The "old" politics involved parties, politics and planks. The "new" politics, though, consists of images which involve everyone, and services, which gather information about Joe Citizen. The "new" governments have nothing to do with real politics, only with images and service.

McLuhan solved Richard Nixon's problem by pointing out that he does not have the right image—Richard Milhous Nixon looks too much like Richard Milhous Nixon. A public figure should look like anyone else, to allow the public to identify with him.

That is the reason for Prime Minister Trudeau's success, McLuhan said. It is not "charisma" (which is a catchall popular word-of-the-year.) Trudeau simply, plays his role well. Nixon is a bad actor, which, according to McLuhan, is his flaw.

The philosophic anthropologist, a professor in the University of Toronto's English department, next traced the evolution of the encyclopedist tradition from the sophists of Greece to the present day generalists.

The original sophists, such as Plato, promised wealth and power to those students who completed the "circle of knowledge." Cicero adopted the total education concept to train the superman. The leader.

The tradition then moved into the Christian Church, where it was embraced by such prominent seekers of wealth and power as Machiavelli. It became the basis of legal training both

in the renaissance and finally today.

"This is the age of Xerox," said McLuhan. Everyone can be an instant publisher. The instant replay of television and the "new" journalism enable one to gain the meaning of an experience without having the experience itself. Watergate is an instant replay of what went on in backrooms. Now everyone can vicariously become a corrupt politician through the medium of the instant replay.

According to McLuhan, the proliferation of public information and the loss of private individuality leads the public to demand an identity of its leaders, a "good image." As private morality declines, the public demands that its leaders have impeccable morality.

"The young no longer have any concept of 'private identity'. They don't know what you're talking about."

The lawyer, indeed, has to be totally encyclopedic in his approach—he has

to know all—the circle of history is thus completed.

Experts are outmoded. They only know the limitations of knowledge, and it is their vested interest to defend the ignorance of the public. Every time there is a new invention, vast new areas of ignorance are created. Only the non-experts can come up with solutions. ("A little child shall lead them?")

The electric world is a world of services. We are ahead of the Russians in creating communism — familiarity breeds consensus. In answer to a question, and in the true spirit of the occasion, McLuhan said he does not see himself in any role — classification is for the organizationally minded. (cf. the nineteenth century.) He also told the audience that what he says is not necessarily the truth. He, Marshall McLuhan, has no private opinions.

No one, obviously, can ever accuse him of being an expert.



Marshall McLuhan addressed a standing room-only crowd in the Moot Court room in Osgoode hall last Wednesday.

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