

"It Will Probably End the Motor Car"

an interview with
Marshall McLuhan

by Kirwan Cox and S.M. Crean



What do you think the content of Pay TV should be?

Content has damn all to do with what you are really talking about. You're talking about a new service and that has nothing to do with content. The motor car has nothing to do with content. The motor car has to do with a service that gets you out of your home and out on the road and it doesn't matter who's in the car. The car is a new kind of service and it creates a new kind of person. So, why don't we talk about the new kind of service represented by Pay TV, and the new kinds of people it will create (...) It certainly will not be a private person, nor will it be a nationalist person. It's a new type of group person. The TV generation gives you a sort of a foretaste of it. They couldn't care less about nationalism...

The nationalist bunch in Canada are not TV generation people. The TV generation is say 22 years old and under. That's their age group. The older boys belong to the 19th Century. (...) Nationalism is far too late, it's a 19th Century thing. (...)

The Olympics are an obsolete form, of course. They're finished. This is the last one. You are seeing a 19th Century form go under right now. It's not 20th Century.

Then what is 20th Century?

20th Century is much more dialogue and less competition. The whole 19th Century was devoted to competition and the Olympics is the supreme form of it. No, it's kaput. Nationalism is an old form of activity based on hardware and hardware production/industrial production. We're moving over to a world of software. (...)

The thing I was concerned about was the content of the channels when they do come on. You have of course most Canadians watching American programming either on their own channels or on American channels through cable. Do you feel that this is affecting the country in terms of its culture, in terms of its ability to identify...?

Now, this of course raises lots of strange problems. But the user is always the content of any program. Doesn't matter if it's a Chinese or a Hindu. If a Hindu is watching a Canadian program, it's a Hindu program. He translates it into himself, that's all.

What makes a person a Hindu but a series of cultural biases?

Well, I mean to say if you are an American Indian watching an Eng-

lish program, it is an American Indian program if it is watched by an American Indian. Remember, this is a very profound problem but the user is always the content of any program. (...)

Why don't we talk about what is the new kind of service represented by Pay TV; what does it promise in the way of altogether new possibilities? (...) Well, let's think about it because I haven't any positive information on the subject. For example, Pay TV depends upon taped or packaged programs available just as old recordings are available.

Not necessarily. In the case of sports they found that live is necessary.

But whether you broadcast a live symphony or one that was played the day before yesterday, there is not much difference. The instant replay is a very powerful and important new development in our time. And I think (...) you might say that Pay TV really depends on the instant replay. There is a new service very closely tied to the instant replay. (...) The computer terminal should be closely tied to Pay TV. You should be able to dial your computer terminal and get any show you want at any time of the day or night. This is quite feasible with a computer terminal. You don't have to wait for the channel to go into action.

So, as you see Pay TV, it's something where the consumer is the producer.

Very much so. This is the meaning of Pay TV. As it is the meaning of recorded programs in the ground-floor medium. (...) The TV form is completely producer oriented. A non-consumer oriented form. And so the kind of show that makes good video programming is one that's concerned with processes, not products. The ideal show on Pay TV would be a great composer rehearsing a symphony, not playing his symphony.

Why would that be?

Because that's the nature of the medium. The old medium, the ground-floor medium, is fond of products, but the new medium is fond of processes. (...)

You mean television is fond of processes?

Much more than it is of products.

And what would Pay TV...?

Pay TV is TV. Programming should be slanted toward processes.

Wouldn't that be frustrating if you always saw the rehearsal and never the end result?

No. But if you saw the end result it would be in a form that would be like a replay of a football game. If you see a replay, it is very different from seeing the play. The replay shows you how the play was made. (...) This is changing the nature of sports completely. The instant replay is drawing more and more attention to the actual process of how the game is played... how the play is put together. (...) Now, this in terms of the arts is much more attention to creativity, much less to consumerism. Much more concerned with the creative process and less and less with the product. (...) An almost inevitable thing is whenever a new service is available you do the old thing with the new thing. And so it doesn't matter what the new thing is, you try to do the old thing with it. And so, the whole temptation then will be with Pay TV to make it merely a cheaper or quicker way of doing the old job of broadcasting or service. This in the long run, of course, doesn't work. (...)

Apart from pay or commercial it's simply that the TV form itself is so different from the movie form, so incredibly different, that any attempt to put movies on TV is really a kind of frustrating experience for everybody.

So you don't feel Pay TV would make movie theatres disappear?

Well, I don't know about movie theatres but it certainly won't threaten movies because they're two absolutely different activities. And this I think is tending to appear. What is more to the point is that the audience of movies has disappeared and the audience of television is very different from them. The TV audience is multiple and the old movie audience was a monolith. Everybody went to see a Bogart or a Hitchcock. There was only one public for these shows. Today there are 50 publics, or 150 publics, for any movie. You don't get people to go to the same movie. Now that's TV, that's not movies at all. The TV public is multiple. That's why Pay TV makes sense because it can cater to a multiplicity of publics and tastes. (...) We have to get rid of the idea of "a public"... 1949 was the first year of network television. Network television destroyed completely and for good the monolithic unified audience - literate people who had watched the old theatre. And in its place came 50 or 1,000 or I don't know how many publics who

are not any longer interested in going to see the same play or the same show. Now, this may or may not be a good thing. (...) The fact is that electric services do not create monolithic forms or homogenous forms. They create very diversified forms of people. This is contrary to the ordinary popular conception of popular culture. What we are saying is that electric services create elites. Multiple elites, not single elites. And the kids today are elite bunches, and they are no longer a great big popular audience. (...)

I keep going back to the question... the national question or the national cultural question...

I just finished a monolithic essay on the subject of the Canadian identity after months of work and it's called "**Canada: The Borderline Case.**" My theme is quite simple that Canada has no identity because it has too many borderlines. Diversity does not create identity. It creates a very low-profile thing, whatever it is. If you want a real identity then you have to close off most of the borderlines and most of the cultural situations have to be thrown away to concentrate on a few strong positions and then you get a national identity. That's why you need a war and a great big bloodbath to create a national identity. (...) We have hundreds of borderlines including the Dew Line which is the one with Russia, one of our big hidden borderlines, which has a tremendous effect. Canada has hundreds of borderlines. The U.S. doesn't have a fraction as many as we do. (...)

What happens to a people who are a borderline case?

That means low profile. A borderline people is a people who don't have an identity. They have hundreds of identities. (...) We have multiple schizophrenia. It's not single, it's not a simple one, it's multiple. It is a very complex culture. Too complex for the size of the population. That's why we can't afford that much complexity.

Of course there is a great Canadian experience of not being American. Yeh. It is a huge one. But it's negative; it's not positive. But the Canadian is a much more complicated person than the American. So complicated that he's weak. He's too diversified. You don't get any strength until you get more unity and concentration. (...) The Americans have shed a lot of blood in the interests of unity. We haven't... if you want unity all you have to do is have a big bloodbath. Murder a few

million French Canadians or something like that and by gosh, you get a great Canadian identity. Who cares? Who wants a national identity on those terms? Identity incidentally is not compatible with electric technology. The TV generation kids don't have any identity. They have no personal identity. It's been completely scrubbed off, thanks to involvement. They're so close to each other, and to the rest of the world, that they don't have any private identity left. When you are at a ball game you are a nobody. And these kids are at only one ball game around the world. They have no private identity at all and no goals. (...)

It's a new situation caused by electric involvement in each other, and it's never happened before so we can't judge on anything historically at present. (...)

Then what will Pay TV do to the scrubbed person? I mean will it begin to replace the privacy?

If you have a public which has no private identity - I'm talking about the young crowd - they couldn't care less. That's why they don't want their parents around. The parents still have private identities which these kids never had and never will have. They don't want it. You see, a private identity creates all sorts of responsibilities and the need for goals and directions and morals and all sorts of things that they don't want to have anything to do with. (...)

Group identities are not private. A peer group is not a private identity. It's tribal, of course, and tribal identity is what they've got. (...) They don't want anything in the way of programming that lasts from one day to the next. They don't want stereotypes. No, that's alien to them.

Isn't there a conflict or contradiction between seeing Pay TV as something which allows greater choice, greater breaking down of the consumer market on the one hand, and the scrubbed homogenous, de-personalized generation which is going to be inheriting this?

There is a huge contradiction. And out of that contradiction they're going to have to make something new. No, there are no simple solutions coming out of this business. We are living in an absolute anarchy. The state of affairs right now is complete anarchy, mental and moral. There is no order at all in our world. (...)

Do you see that any technology is ever permanent?

Absolutely not. The book you can see is a great technology, a tremendous thing which is now phasing out... phasing itself out as the spoken word comes back.

Does that mean that people have stopped reading?

They had stopped reading long ago. They began to sample books

ten or fifteen years ago; they stopped reading them. But the unread book is the normal thing of our world. Look around here. I have only a few minutes in which to look at any of the books I have around here. I have to sample quickly and take them back to the library. Every day five or six new books come in that I can only sample, I can't read. But that's normal. The book is no longer something for reading. (...) Now books - here is an area where you might be able to get books by Pay TV. It is conceivable that you could have a book on the monitor and you could sample it. After all people don't read books, they sample them. They read three or four pages in any book and say, "Gee, it's great. Someday I'm going to read this book." Now, you can have that on Pay TV. You can have a quick sampling service on all the books that there are and it would be a heck of a lot better than anything they've got in the bookstores. (...) I would be very tempted to sample current movies on a 20 minute basis instead of having to watch them. I don't like paying \$3.50 to watch a movie for ten minutes. But ten minutes is enough. (...) Because very few of us want to see it all the way through. I don't do it by content. I study these things by structure and once I see what is being done, and how it's being structured and managed, I don't have to watch very far. (...)

How do you get your information?

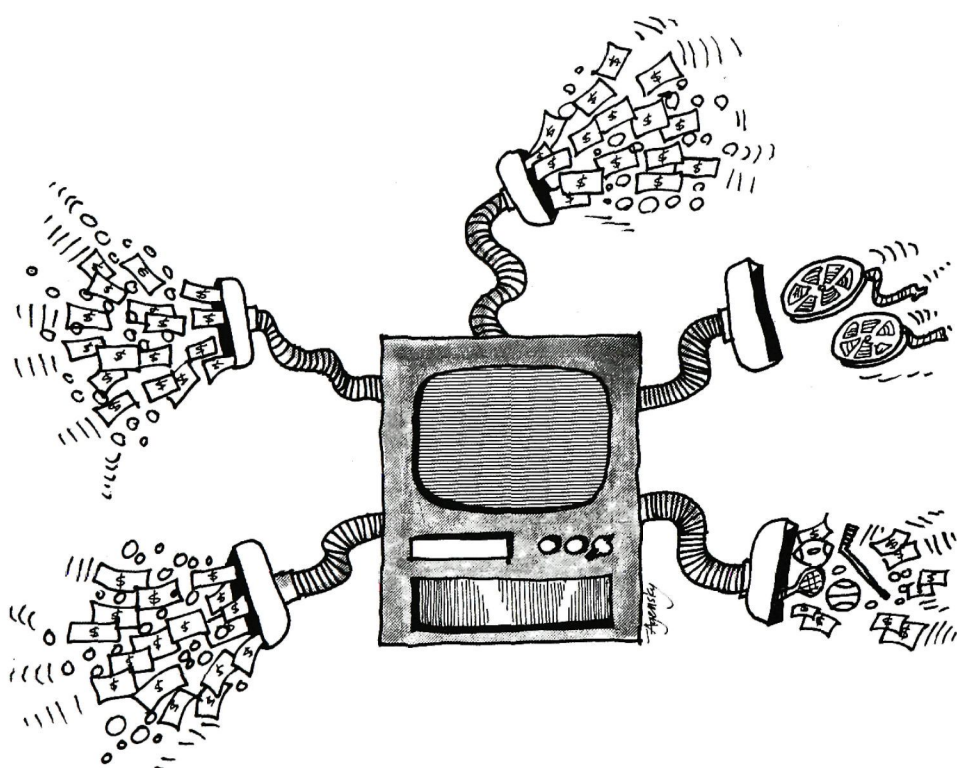
Mainly through friends who have had time to read the book. I read with a specific context in mind and that means I go through it very quickly. The only kind of book I can read for relaxing would be a detective story and I can only do that on airplanes. As long as I'm on the lam I don't get enough leisure to read anything. Once I'm in the air, no distractions, nobody can interrupt me. Thank heavens they don't have telephones on the planes yet, and nobody can get at you. (...)

How does that idea jibe with the description you have given us of young people as tribal?

They don't read. They are peer group people. They don't have any private identity or private interests. Only peer groups.

How is the tribe different from a nation?

Oh, a tribe does not have any objectives or goals. It is like a poem or a piece of music. It has its own way of just being in harmony together.



er. Nations have goals, objectives. They have perspectives, they see... they are visually oriented people. That's the big difference between the U.S. and Canada. The U.S. had goals. Of course they are dried up. The U.S. has no more goals, it's finished. Canada never had a goal because it has too much territory. There's no sense in which Canada can have goals... it's too big. (...)

How do you define culture?

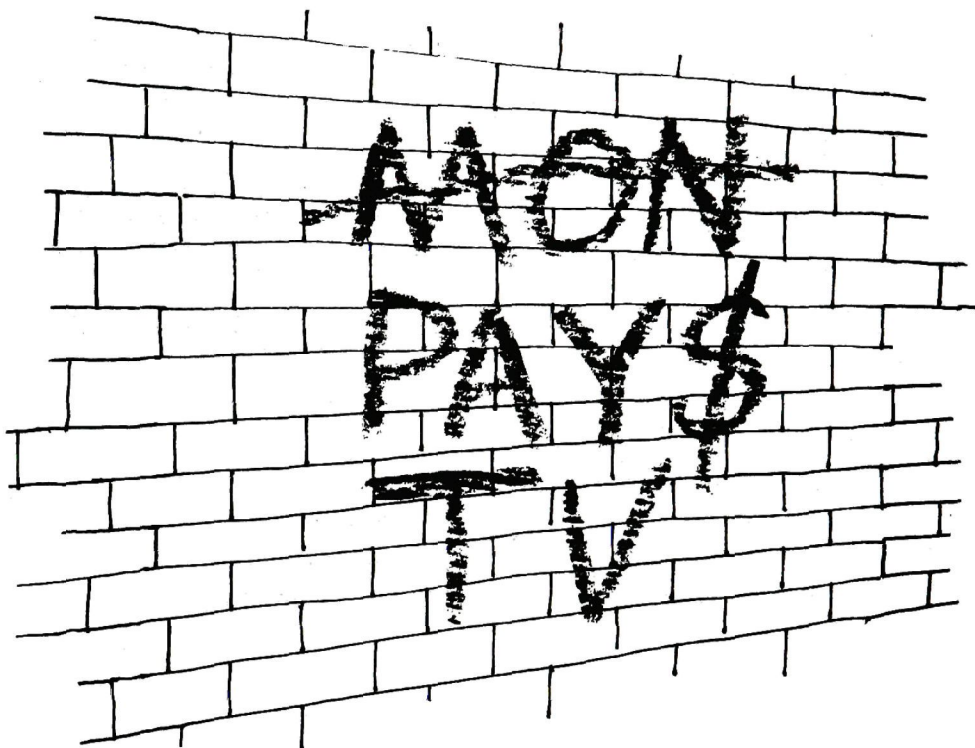
I don't bother. We are culture. It's what you are and it means just about anything and everything, doesn't it? (...) I think the only way in which any country ever gets culture is by giving proper mythic treatment to its own vulgar activities. Hockey's a natural spontaneous world for us, or has been. It's obviously pretty well finished, thanks to jet planes and big promoters. But anything like that - football, or anything spontaneous enough, if you look at it intensively enough, will turn into a great big large myth. (...) Xerox, incidentally, should be very closely linked to Pay TV. It's a service that has a lot in common. Xerox thinks everybody's a publisher. Pay TV in a sense makes everybody a producer and it's really producer-oriented not consumer-oriented. (...)

Do you feel that there is anything that hasn't been covered on the question of Pay TV?

Oh yeh. There's lots that we haven't covered. It's a great big subject. You see, if you are talking about it as a figure you are missing all that it means to the existing realm because if you introduce a new figure it bumps against all the existing grounds in different ways. What will the effect of Pay TV be on the motor car? It will probably end the motor car. Why? Well, it takes a little time to figure it out, but the motor car is already being undermined by television because television brings the outside inside the home. The motor car is the supreme form of privacy. It's the only way Americans know how to be alone and if they are in trouble, they get in the car and they go out to be alone and think. Well now, television ends that. It brings the outside inside. You can't be alone anymore that way. (...)

Are there any ideas you have on the potential programming of Pay TV?

It ought to be mostly concerned with the creative process. With showing people how to learn, how



to study, how to do umpteen different things. How to do this, this and this; how to learn language; how to learn psychology; how to learn anthropology; everything. Not to swallow the package but to learn how to do it. It's entirely a kind of concern with process. (...)

Well, then you're really looking at it as a form of education?

It is. Alright, let's be quite clear about that. It will tend to be an educational service.

It's going to be a revolution for the school, of course. The entire educational system will come tumbling down under the impact of Pay TV.

But by that you can name anything...

Any kind of establishment is going to be undermined by a great new technology. Politically what will be the effect... It will be huge.

Just ask yourself what the political establishment is made of, how it at present depends upon TV services. It is almost entirely dependent on TV services. (...) Politics will be profoundly changed by Pay TV. Equal time will take on a new meaning.

You could have instantaneous referendums on any subject. Instead of elections you have politics by referendum. No more policies, no more parties.

That would be a catastrophe.

Well, Neilson could do it for you for free. (...) Keep in mind that you are dealing with a new service which does not have very much to

do with anything that happened before. That is automatically decentralist. No centralizing possible under this condition anymore than a telephone is centralized. You can go and dial anybody, anywhere in the world. I think Pay TV should be put on that basis as soon as possible... you dial your program. It's quite easy to do. You can dial a book, you can dial anything. And this simultaneous or instantaneous access to a wide diversity is the character of the new pattern. So, all the older networking and stereotyping and Neilson research, and so on, is for the birds. As a matter of fact this goes down the drain. All the old demographics just go down the drain because the assumptions they were working on no longer hold. (...) To use my principle the figure-ground, you just name the figures you are dealing with in Pay TV, then name some other ground that it's going to bump up against. (...) That's the technique I use. Take any figure you're dealing with, see how it will bump into the grounds of other situations. This service will revolutionize all the main services of the community. It won't leave anything the way it was. Think of any ground... □

Marshall McLuhan has been on sabbatical from his post as Director of the Centre for Culture and Technology (University of Toronto). He is currently writing six books, including a high school students' guide to the media; and two articles to be published this fall are: "The Spaced-Out American" (in The Journal of Communication) and "Canada: The Borderline Case."