

I Think Mr. McLuhan Is Trying to Tell Us Something

By Sylvan Meyer

Mr. Meyer is editor of the Miami News.

MEMO

To: Publisher
From: Editor
Subj: McLuhan

Dear Boss:

I've been reading after Marshall McLuhan, the new prophet of the communicators, to see if he is trying to tell us something about newspapers.

McLuhan speaks for some sort of fresh dynamism in interpreting to us the forces of our time, the processes of value changes and all that sort of thing—the insights into the machinery of our environment that newspapers and newspapermen aren't supposed to be able to see, much less interpret to others.

If he is so instructive, as the experts tell us he is, there should be lessons in him. Not vague lessons, not intangible philosophies, but lessons that can be translated into type and print. McLuhan searches through our cultural and anthropological history to discover how ideas are transmitted, to see how people are motivated by attitudes absorbed through the pores, through their daddies' DNA molecules and through all the drumbeats that pound them from every side. It stands to reason we should be able to extract from

him worthwhile lessons in how to put out a newspaper that is more thoroughly read, believed and liked; more persuasive, more naturally indigenous, more educational than we are putting out now.

It has been an article of faith with us that we want to help our readers feel they are conscious participants in this society. To be participants, they must understand what is going on around them, what affects them and how. We have proceeded, also, since we are a community newspaper, on the belief that our reader's initial relationship with his environment is his family, his church and his local community. We can be content that no other medium is supplying him so fully with the stuff of home. In-depth reporting, aggressive coverage of his government, enterprise in seeking out stories on the groundswells and on the surface, all are there. Are we getting through to him or are we just spreading it on him? McLuhan raises this question again and again, even as we have in our interminable self-analyses and at those endless seminars where everybody usually gives up and gets drunk.

To the limit of our resources, then, we are supplying everything we can think of—and afford—to bring reader and community together. If through a feeling for what is close to him the reader can identify with the larger and more remote bodies politic that affect his life, then our content wins a high grade. If we can take him beyond politics to the philosophies, we can score ourselves a triumph. Un-

fortunately, what we really do is supply him with a marginal confidence that he is getting most of the word but not all of it. There is something he feels he is missing to be secure but he doesn't know what it is and I'm afraid we don't, either. All we can tell him is that subject to human frailty and the nature of the newspaper beast if he keeps up day in and day out, reading carefully and intelligently, he ought to be able to extract something approximating the truth from our efforts.

Yet, we know that he isn't extracting the truth. He isn't paying attention that closely. He is not going to attack his newspaper as though it were homework. He isn't going to take notes nor consciously cerebrate about today's news vis-à-vis yesterday's or last week's. We even make a special effort to crutch his connective interpretations by blending in background information in our reports so that he doesn't have to memorize today's stories to understand tomorrow's. This technique in itself is more confusing than mnemonic unless faultlessly performed. In short, we don't put enough in his mind.

One of McLuhan's purposes is to explain how impressions and information penetrate that mind. He explains that messages either seep in or are implanted in the mind through the whole culture the guy swims in. The message lodges through all the senses, singly and in combination, aware and subconscious. The audience, including us, controls some sources of sensation and information and operates others by instinct, as a tick jumps toward a warm dog. How we handle ideas and information results from the sum of our history, culminating in us.

This hardly tells us what to put in the paper tomorrow. It may explain why newspaper people haven't tried to figure out what it is McLuhan is trying to tell us. The literati, our critics, have known all along that we are venal and inept, not to say common. They seem to find a great deal in McLuhan's work that reinforces their understanding of society and that also helps them identify what is wrong with newspapers. I do not think McLuhan is speaking only to them and not to us because we *are* a medium, an orthodox, recognized one, not a mystic force as are some of his other media.

It should work out, then, that if McLuhan has the ungarbled skinny, as they used to say when newspapering was romantic, proper interpretation of his testaments should give us some clues to improvement. I do not mean clues in the sense of heightened understanding of the milieu or sharpened sensitivities to all human interrelationships as they are affected by electricity, LSD, or the evolution of the wheel. I mean hardware, such as more compelling ways to use pictures, better ideas for content, layouts that sock it to 'em, type displays that demand readership, and like that. I mean the stuff that will not only sell more newspapers

but get them read in the bargain, and that last is the tough part.

I'm not going to try to brief you on McLuhan. He goes from movable type to laser beams. He reads more into the invention of the spur than Pericles did into the campaign against Sicily. Everything is communications to him, yet he does not deal specifically with magazines, radio, TV, photos, the press—the forces we pre-McLuhan innocents thought were the only “media.” When McLuhan says, “the media is the message” he is referring, in part, to what we often call the nature of the beast, the newspaper's built-in feel, mechanical limitations, daily necessities, production speed, self-hypnosis and all the rest. Every media has a basic nature which, to McLuhan, is inseparable from content.

Whether that nature, in the newspaper's case, may be changed basically to improve reader attention is another question. Superficially, it can; fundamentally, we are stuck with a physical, technological form. We are irrevocably wedded to the fact that the newspaper is print, no matter how the hieroglyphs get on the paper. This means the reader has to bring something to it; at least, an ability to read and comprehend; at best, the wit to read purposefully and to relate what he reads to himself and to his prior knowledge.

It means also that the physical entity has to be delivered to the reader. He has to want it in advance and order it in the expectation it will fulfill a promise to him. He is involved in a product that will fill his kindling bin though it may not reach his mind, unless he wills it to do so. Television, however, brings a total involvement, according to McLuhan. Television is visual and auditory at the same time. Television is immediate, ostensibly. The newspaper does not grab all the senses at once as television does. Although the reader holds it in his hand and feels it, the newspaper isn't as “tactile,” as sensual, as TV. I take this to mean that in a screened newspaper photo the nubile gal peddling shaving cream does not generate the same degree of tumescence, nor commercial response, that she does on the color tube.

Total audience-media involvement McLuhan calls “cool.” He uses the word in the slang sense. TV is cool in that it permeates the very blood and bone of the public. It is the environment itself and as such is both breathed and ignored, like the water a fish lives in. As a newspaper we are “hot.” We do not evoke the total participation in our medium nor in the world we report as does a cool medium. As a matter of fact, you could almost say that we do not report the same world that TV reports. The audience seems sometimes to recognize no similarity at all.

TV gains this high involvement with relatively low viewer concentration. It is a medium that puts everybody in the frame, McLuhan says. One reason it does is that it is national. It portrays the same culture to everyone at the same

time and its base is ubiquitous. As you know, I think the national origin and sameness of television is one of the reasons that we are not competitive for audience, though we are for advertising. Neither McLuhan nor other critics seem to grasp the idea that the press is not a national medium. It is essentially local and regional. The newspaper has assumed the responsibility of local reporting, which is to say local involvement of the reader. For all its amalgamated sensual impact and its homogenizing influence, TV rarely involves the viewer in the events that are closest to him geographically. If TV is as pervasive as McLuhan says, and if all the other homogenizing influences in the land are at work, as I think they are, TV combines with them subtly to influence the alienation today's individual is supposed to suffer. These "involvements" may not truly involve; they may reject, tearing the root place from under the person.

The newspaper does claim its place in a long history of printed symbols. The development of our alphabet culture shaped our relationships with each other. Through all print history, though, print has been difficult. Print requires education and for wide effectiveness requires that a great many people have the same kind of education, formally and culturally. If our reporters will read McLuhan's breezy interpretations of print's interreaction with mankind, they may better understand their own role in the continuum.

We can see a little of what McLuhan is talking about in our own acceptance, even as gung ho newspaper loyalists, of TV's overwhelming deliverance of involvement to audiences in times of national crises and rituals, i.e., the John and Robert Kennedy funerals, the national political conventions, etc. The immediacy and confusion of TV at the 1968 Democratic convention, for example, brought viewers the ultimate reality, honest to God truth, concerning both the party's and the nation's bewilderment and leaderlessness. The newspapers said as much directly, but finally got through to readers by saying, in so many words, "what you saw on TV is the way it was."

Within the form of the newspaper medium we can print just about anything we can afford to gather and produce, if it occurs to us. With new offset printing and color capabilities, with new photographic techniques, we can achieve remarkable effects wherever in the paper we wish. We can use these effects for emphasis, to gain attention or to sell products for advertisers. Does McLuhan give us specific guidance in applying our new technologies? Do the technologies basically alter the medium itself, for if they do not we may not be able to alter our message, either? Whatever we do, are we still dealing with the reader at a low level of his involvement, reaching for him over the barrier of the alphabet with a vocabulary that we do not always share with him?

Maybe we are not newspapering half as well as we know

how; it will be a shock if we conclude from McLuhan's work that no matter how well we newspaper, we can't be as "cool" as he wants us to be.

One of the questions we often ask ourselves is how we can reach out of the printed page, grab the reader by the lapels and say, "Pay attention, this means YOU!" We've tried all manner of features, pointing fingers, white space, color blocks. Newspaper researchers have studied eyeball movements; they can trace the reader's orbs gliding over the page. We've studied assorted systems of placing stories and pictures, debated whether captions should go over or under, weighed the merits of headlines with kickers and headlines without kickers, increased the size of body type and the width of columns. We've lifted column rules, put too much stuff in bendy boxes and then turned around and removed the boxes to show more white space. More people are better educated now and so can bring an iota more to their newspaper reading. Aside from that, readership and retention studies don't indicate an appreciable difference in our penetration of audiences, especially the hard core that brings the least to the task of reading and submits the quickest to TV. Even the readers you would imagine to be pretty sharp miss articles of prime value to them, such as registration notices oft repeated, political changes that affect their lives and businesses. You know how often we are accused of missing a story, then check and find that we printed it and forgot it ourselves. Sometimes I think I would feel better having missed a story altogether than learning we had it but nobody read it.

The subtler code patterns newspapers use to help people understand them don't seem broadly effective, either. Readers pay little attention to datelines; the meaning to the news of a dateline from Tel Aviv as opposed to one from Cairo rolls past them. Bylines, in which we set less store than we once did, admittedly, do not tell the reader that the beneath story carries a special license in interpretation nor that the author may be considered an authority nor that the item may be a cutie, in which some liberty has been taken with the drab facts. Using quote marks to indicate a direct, word-by-word statement from a source seems obvious to us. To the reader, I doubt it means much. To him, "the paper says" about everything that's printed. I could go on in this vein but the point is made. McLuhan's visceral audience isn't participating with us sufficiently to figure out all these things. It is not going to make the effort to figure them out. I saw a research piece recently in which a cartoonist asked people to interpret his work. More than 63 per cent judged the cartoons to have precisely the opposite political bent he had intended when he drew them.

Our penetration, or call it our ability to involve the reader, may grow shallower instead of deeper despite education's advances. McLuhan claims that a child raised on TV is cul-

turally disadvantaged because the screen throws about him an environment that requires less conscious effort toward involvement in his world than that demanded of the pre-TV child. He is saying that the involvement muscles except those attuned to the tube are atrophying in the rising generation.

Though McLuhan doesn't specifically articulate the point, what this says to me is that writing—print—confronts a generation oriented to the obvious, perhaps to communications by osmosis. Youngsters with this "low visual orientation" induced by TV will not grow up to be "between the lines" readers. In addition to the code signals we use in reporting, we also leave a great deal unsaid. We suggest and imply. We expect the reader to put two and two together and to fill in around the core of our reporting. In opinion columns, particularly, we rifle ideas to the insider and expect the outsider to understand us. The TV-oriented person won't take the trouble. If we can't expect him to learn how to read our writing, with a minimum of effort, we will have to find a new way of writing.

McLuhan's definition of the "media" as any of the phenomena that bring us ideas and messages or "extend our senses" opens another area of concern. To him, electricity, the jet airplane, interstate highways and other all-pervasive influences on people are "media." They are tiles in the total mosaic that influences the directions of our culture. They are also homogenizing influences, nationwide and even worldwide, that tend to wipe out local and regional cultural characteristics and put everyone in the same picture with the same perspective.

John Popham of the Chattanooga Times has spoken of the billions of dollars worth of interstate highways slicing open the hills and the previously isolated communities of the South, for example. He sees this "medium" eventually obliterating regional accents, eliminating any such animal as the hillbilly or his counterpart in other sections, and opening the excitements and adventures of places heretofore inaccessible to people heretofore immobile.

Perhaps these McLuhan media augur a lessening of the regional and local *raison d'être* that now sustains most newspapers, even ours. Unless we can wade through the trivia and somehow reveal to the reader his involvement, his special involvement, in our exclusive, which is to say local, wares this augury may be accurate. Don't misunderstand me. Both McLuhan and I are inclined to contradict ourselves on this point. People will still be interested in where they are *at*: merchants will need to reach their immediate markets; local governments and civic clubs and planning commissions will still function. But the pressure will be on newspapers to provide more readable and at the same time more sophisticated coverage. Reportage will have to be

more reader-related. We will have to develop, and find ways to finance, smarter writers and writing specialists. We will have to discover more effective ways of using artists, map-makers and critics to show people what is going on around them and understood its good, bad and neutral import. We will have to get around more and deal with our community in its relationship to others; find out what's going on other places and relate those activities to our own.

You have noticed an anomaly, of course: I am talking here about specific items of content and McLuhan seems to be saying that content is of little significance, that the total medium is what counts and what you put into it is secondary. But McLuhan isn't always consistent on this point. He intermixes discussion of the media and what it contains and how it looks. Moreover, I am an editor. I think in content terms and must dispose of content before I can undertake anything so abstract as a medium, not devoid of content, but containing amorphous nothings. It goes without saying, also, that however newspapers survive or what form they evolve, they will have some kind of content. It follows, too, that if anyone is left in the future with the proper McLuhan degree of spatial organization and alphabet appreciation he will expect content in his newspaper.

Furthermore, the oracle himself deals with content most specifically. Often he considers sublime what we consider pedestrian. For instance, he finds comic strips highly participatory. Because it bespeaks the society we live in in a fashion that forces participation, "Mad Magazine" he regards as a genuine cultural achievement. Ads are becoming more entertaining and more credible. They are moving from ballyhoo to information. People are now inclined to believe them more quickly than they believe a news report. It is a fact that more young people are moving to advertising, public relations and promotion courses in college journalism schools because they think these fields offer a greater opportunity for creativity and freedom of expression than traditional journalism.

McLuhan describes the "ordinary newspaper as frantic as a surrealist art exhibition," but thinks we are so accustomed to the frenzy we don't notice it. To him, the comment is not adverse. It merely describes the newspaper's presentation of multiple items, unrelated to each other and presented in no meaningful juxtaposition. This mosaic, he avers, "gives the press its complex dimension of human interest."

Let's run this on the proof press and see how it reads. (Ha.) Do we attract more reader involvement through more comics? Should we translate the news into comic strips? The special strips we have published from time to time on historical events or on the space program are *eccch* as far as the readers are concerned. And what if he is right about the "juxtaposed mosaic" bit? If he is, the current

trends in newspaper design are certainly misdirected. Papers are moving rapidly toward simplification of layout; to wider columns and more white space; to neatness; toward fewer varieties of type in headlines and body copy. Papers are taking out superfluous lines, junking their ears, pulling cut-off rules. The better edited papers are even organizing content, almost in news magazine style, so that related content appears together instead of just flung haphazardly into whatever open space surrounds the ads. In short, we are becoming a less frenzied, less aimlessly juxtaposed medium.

Perhaps McLuhan is saying that we are headed the wrong way if we wish to be true to the form that gave us our media-message characteristics. Does he think we keep readers and heighten involvement by going to hodge-podge makeup, like the circusy newspapers of the 1920s and 1930s? Should we mix international copy with local, brides with the football scores?

We could do these things. We could use purple and green ink, change fonts for every word of a headline, print alternate lines in different colors, superimpose type across pictures, paste little flipbooks to our pages so people could thumb them rapidly and have animation, as in a Beatle movie.

We would certainly be more tactile if we did these things. We could then titillate the sensual ganglia of a TV-oriented generation. The underground press has no reluctance to deal in true impressionism and surrealism and call it journalism.

Newspaper research indicates such a paper would be harder to read, but harder for whom? In trying to find out what is easier to read we may be asking the wrong people the wrong questions. We may be satisfying part of the older generation and further alienating the younger one. Maybe to a participatory generation, by McLuhan's lights operating more on viscera than conscious purpose, disorganization more nearly matches the environment than does orderly and digestible content.

McLuhan deals fondly with such matters. To the untrained child's eye, he says, continuing with his theory that chaos encourages identification faster than organization, the psychedelic lettering used on hippie posters is easier to read than our neatly lined-up arrangements of letters. He offers no substantiation for this assertion but he boldly carries it a step further, anyway. Item: newspaper pictures are made up of thousands of little dots, requiring practice to interpret. The reader learns to merge these dots with his eye and receive an image. This putting together is vaguely related to accepting a TV picture made up, as we know, of one rapidly moving dot. The act of putting the little dots together is an act of participation. Involvement results. The screened engraving, then, is more on the cool side than the hot side. Ergo, we get more from the reader with a fuzzy picture

that forces him to figure out something for himself than from a clear one that indulges his natural sloth.

It is an easy leap for McLuhan from the "untrained" child's eye to the whole perceptive instinct of media audiences. The leap is justified if we buy his theory that people have become conditioned to present media and media content as part of their acculturation, but deep in their natures respond more to an all-senses participatory stimulus when it is available. We must accept, too, his thesis that the media are extensions of man's own natural senses. If we do, it follows that the more he participates the more his ego is involved. Nevertheless, I can hardly bring myself to the belief that a fuzzy picture somehow makes the newspaper more meaningful to the reader, consciously or subconsciously than a clear one.

Certainly content derives from the medium itself and its nature. Classified ads and stock market reports do, obviously. McLuhan says that classified ads and stock market reports are bedrocks of the press and "should an alternative source of easy access to such diverse information be found, the press will fold." Although he contradicts this statement in others about the press, which I shall get to in a minute, I find his thesis fascinating. As you know from my constant hounding of the ad department to broaden the base of our want ad service, I, too, regard the little ads as an essential monopoly only the daily newspaper can satisfactorily provide the reader. The want ads evoke an involvement in the newspaper unmatched by any other feature and if we couldn't sell them I would advocate giving them away because of the readership and rapport they promote.

But if classifieds and market reports are so critical to our existence, what about related content? We can identify a number of services akin to these that would fall in the exclusive province of newspaper publication. Perhaps he is trying to alert us to opportunities of comparable value to the reader. These might include any number of simple lists: vital statistics, birth announcements, cases filed at the courthouse, land transfers, ship arrivals and departures, persons arrested, zoning change applications, building permits issued, school honor rolls and the like.

To expand these lists would reverse another trend, as newspapers are getting away from such minutiae. Yet, these tidbits deliver the essential stuff of community life. They are used regularly by funeral directors, book stores, florists, insurance men, contractors, door to door salesmen, dairies and even the Welcome Wagon lady to plan and project their daily activities.

Journalists no longer consider printing all these lists to be "journalistic." They are not "creative," merely informative. Yet, they can be a special source of news to a reporter alert enough to spot an omission by an official trying to

keep something off a list. If classifieds and market lists stimulate involvement, as McLuhan suggests, why wouldn't additional detail reinforce that effect?

While many newspapermen have their doubts as to the reliability of academic and professional newspaper research, McLuhan simply ignores it. Item: He says, "The editorial has been ignored for years." That agrees neither with current, respected research nor our own experience. I should not think that a man with McLuhan's long view of civilization judges the effectiveness of an editorial on its power to change minds like a light switch. Research shows that though the impact and persuasion of an editorial may not be immediate, an accumulative and secondary impression is felt. The content and the nature of the medium must here again be separated because the pertinent editorials are read and the dull, irrelevant ones aren't, the nature of the beast notwithstanding. McLuhan does separate from mass readership the "literary" or "book-oriented reader," as he calls him. While I do not regard such folk as a part of the audience to be despised, McLuhan might answer my argument by excluding them from his reactive, sensual mass. If he should, let's carry it to still another dimension, to wit, that the editorial remains among the daily press' few exclusive features and is therefore very much a key to the identification of the medium as a daily paper and, further, that it involves the reader by challenging his responses. The reader's senses may react against the message of the editorial but this is still involvement. Indeed, the editorial is a part of the nature of the beast and according to the broader McLuhan theory would represent, as a consequence, the very media-message marriage propounded by his basic proposition.

Although in dealing with the specific content of the press McLuhan concludes it would fold if some other medium learned to handle want ads and markets, he nevertheless grants us a pertinent, if temporary, role in Western civilization.

In explaining that role, he delves into the broad social influences of the press which he attempts to substantiate with petty and subjective illustrations. He calls the press "confessional in character" because its very form, he maintains, creates the effect on the reader that he is getting the inside story of the community "in action and interaction." Parenthetically, if he is right we should print more "exposes" and inside revelations in aiming to readership increases. McLuhan goes on to say that the newspaper best performs its inherent function when it reveals the seamy side of life, the "bad" news. In the business, we have yet to be able to define "bad" vs. "good" news, because the "bad" may arouse a "good" reaction, but be that as it may. We aren't talking about Aristotelian virtue, anyway.

To prove our function as society's doomsayer, McLuhan

quotes a Minneapolis police chief as saying that when newspapers were on strike in his town there was less crime around because there were no newspapers to "pass out ideas."

It is not seemly for a great social scientist to fall victim to, or to base a sweeping interpretation on, one police chief's irritated quote in the face of ample research data on the causal relation of press reports to crime. Indeed, I could run out and find in five minutes two police chiefs who would say just the opposite. Their names are right here in this pamphlet on how newspaper reports discourage juvenile delinquency.

McLuhan pursues the idea that newspapers "make" news simply through the process of identifying it. He asserts that reports cause happenings, not vice versa. The making of news results, he goes on, because the press has a natural affinity for disaster, affliction, misfortune and skulduggery. He does not say that this is "bad," merely that it "is." He professes, condescendingly, to understand us and so scolds the literary, book-oriented individuals for even supposing that the press should deal in "good" news rather than "bad" news or that we should operate at their exalted level of general intelligence.

That most newspapers print more "good" or upbeat news than "bad" is too well documented to belabor. Nevertheless, the constant criticism we receive for concentrating on "bad" news may help prove McLuhan's central point—that people aren't reading the "good." The churchmen, for example, who complain we print more bad stuff about youngsters than good stuff about nice kids doing nice things are skipping the Baptist Training Union reports and eating up the spicier offerings. McLuhan is telling us how much circulation we would have if we became simply a house organ for the goody-two-shoes of the community.

McLuhan sees the popular press in America as a vital part of democracy. Despite his opinion, which I agree with to an extent, that masters of public relations and expert politicians can manipulate the press to their ends, he sees the press as inseparable from the democratic process. In the press, especially in our ads, he finds "the mass experience of the community . . . the richest, best prepared review of our lives and times . . ." Now this does not sit on the same table with his pronouncement that radio, TV and magazines can do everything we do in reporting news and showing photos. Rather, it seems to imply that the newspapers can project more detail in a more retainable and pertinent form than the other media, and in far greater simultaneous variety, which may be the key to our continued existence. The conflicting ideas, however, do not help us interpret McLuhan.

It is to the mass that the press is indispensable, he is careful to emphasize. The literateur, who thinks the typical

European journalist is what a reporter should be, is "book-oriented" to McLuhan. This intellect has the illusion, McLuhan says, that newspapers would be better off without ads, as ads are commercial and as they expose us to advertiser pressure. McLuhan states what we have long known, that readers desire ads since ads are a form of news and information. But McLuhan does not concede another point that newspapermen make, that advertiser pressure, subtle or overt, simply is not a publishing consideration to an economically sound newspaper. The significant pressures on us, of course, are personal and not the least bit as obvious as either McLuhan or his esoteric literati seem to think. He does not provide us with enlarged understanding of our medium in this area.

McLuhan's analysis of the differences in the role of the U.S. press and that of other countries is interesting, but not especially relevant to our search of his wisdom for ideas for self-improvement or greater reader impact. We reflect the nature of our own society, not that of Asia, Africa or Europe. We are indigenous. We are even anti-intellectual, in a way, not in our single newspapers, but as a medium. Editors are notably reluctant to hire an intellectually oriented reporter: he may be queer, or a revolutionary. He may have a fixation about overthrowing any establishment he can identify, even ours. He may be abrasive before he masters the information that entitles him to be abrasive. He may not fit the community. Editors usually seek to be of and not above their audiences. The editor's first editing decision, on any publication, is to identify the level of his proposed audience.

The intellectual will have to find his philosophy in special purpose magazines and books, not in the popular press. McLuhan, I hasten to add, does not denigrate the press because it is a mass medium. He is not a snob. Indeed, he agrees that our very role and purpose is to be a peoples' medium. McLuhan calls America a "do it yourself" kind of world and thus sees as one of our press' functions the pulling together and the relating of a welter of fragmented, separated activities. Our existence may rest on market reports in one McLuhan chapter but in another he finds us the "clarifier of the national ideology."

As what he calls the "electric" world becomes more and more interdependent, the press plays a key part in the "ingenious adaptation of Western man . . . nowhere is this transforming process more visible than in the press . . . (it is) an individualistic technology dedicated to shaping and revealing group attitudes." I can only interpret this as assigning us a mundane role and a sublime one at the same time.

In view of the duality he ascribes, perhaps when we relate McLuhan to specific content objectives and reportorial as-

signments we are not amiss in concentrating on those factors in the community that tell us how much we are changing, that portend further changes and that help people understand the changes going on around them. Again, McLuhan minimizes the editorial page function while contradictorily knighting us as the interpreters of society. I think his point would be that we do not interpret as a conscious manager of content, nor through the writing of what we label as interpretative matter. We interpret through the beast's very nature, through the kaleidoscope of the medium itself.

His "group image of communal life," for instance, is what we report every day. We do not report it as a mosaic, but through the incidents and personalities that are living it. Our view of the medium and its content, moreover, is that we and the reader are really dealing with one thing at a time. We just print a lot of different one things in one package.

McLuhan's views of what the reader takes away from the paper, either in the mosaic or in individual items, does not conform with university nor industry research into reader attitudes. Either McLuhan has been highly selective in choosing his evidence to support certain points or he has neglected his homework. Note my own objectivity, however: I am not at all sure that he needs to prove his tangential points to support his central thesis.

As a case in point, some of his assertions are truly naive. He reports a discovery from a "friend who tried to teach something about the forms of media in secondary school." His friend found among students the almost unanimous concept that no newspaper or other public media could be used by its managers "with base intent." McLuhan then launched a brief essay on the assumption that young people possess such a blind faith in the media's good motives that no corruption of news is conceivable to them. Would that this were true! Recent American Newspaper Publishers Association research reports inform us, lamentably, that exactly the opposite response from high school youngsters can be expected. These reports indicate low credulity indeed and reflect the students' opinions that we juggle news for our own commercial and private gain and submit habitually to advertiser influences. In other words, they think like McLuhan, but don't reflect his conclusion on this point.

From our own point of view, we do not want to be totally and innocently believed. We know very well we don't deserve that degree of trust and that the reader should include mild suspicion in what he brings to the newspaper. Neither do we appreciate being thought crooked or prostituted. We may fall in error but we consider ourselves disinterested.

McLuhan examines briefly our ethical attempts to be dispassionate about the news. It is possible that efforts at objectivity, or disinterest, tend to separate newspapers from genu-

ine involvement. We consider the editorial function as involvement for us and our readers. McLuhan considers it meaningless. We consider the news reporting function disinterested, or at least non-partisan and non-involved. Perhaps the inability of the news report to breathe indignation or approbation stiff-arms the reader's desire to be involved. The news magazines certainly have broken down this dichotomy in combining opinion with news and thus in involving their impersonal corporate selves, and perhaps their readers, in the action.

I may not be fully adjusted to the iconographic vagaries of the book world myself, nor may I be totally trained in interpreting the symbols that represent today's level in the evolution of the alphabet, but all the McLuhanisms did not hang together in my mind. His premises did not always fit nor were they as consistent as his conclusions.

Nevertheless, McLuhan may provide us with a springboard for some ideas. We keep evolving an editing process and a philosophy; we confront new technologies; we bring in young reporters who are the products of an environment that, at the very least, has accumulated more impressions on their senses than our upbringing did on us. Nothing we are doing is necessarily sacred. We can implement change if we can decide what to change.

On less definitive issues than content raised by McLuhan, I am so far unable to conjure up substantive editing decisions. The whole question of content versus the medium itself, for whatever truth it poses, suggests an editorial helplessness making us victims of the beast, not its master.

Again and again McLuhan seems to say that content doesn't matter, that the individual stories, the individual pictures and essays, are of little significance to our total impact on the reader. He seems to be saying that the reader's response (in the newspaper's case, not the reader's involvement because we are too "hot" for that) is to the form, shape, feel, smell, crazy quilt of the product itself; to its place in the culture and to its historicity, not to what the print says. It is somewhat beyond my reach as an involved editor to resolve that McLuhan is saying, even in the abstract, that whether we print good or bad, well-written material or illiterate, sloppily inked or clear and sharp as a tack makes no difference whatever. Yet he says emphatically that content has little to do with the "power" of the medium on the mass mind; that the medium itself is the power, not what the medium contains. Can he be saying that any newspaper, "good" or "bad," has the same power as any other to involve its readers in their community, to evoke reaction

from them or to help them understand the changes around them?

I find no generalities here that I am able to distill into editing particulars.

The medium does tend to shape the content and the content the medium. McLuhan arouses the question of whether it is up to the newspaper to glorify the *gestalt* perspective of the people. He would place the newspaper in the role of sustaining our mass rituals, religious and patriotic. Indeed, he puts us in the business of "programming an environment" for our readers although he questions our ability to read the language of our present environment.

If the medium is the message, or the "massage," or the nature of the beast in its environment, as I suggested earlier in this memo, the only way we know how to change it is in content. We are forced to make the inseparable separation because we can only affect the message itself, not the medium.

This doesn't mean that we are compelled by our past nature to cling always to stilted writing methods nor to six column or eight column pages, nor to right hand margins. We don't have to put the biggest headline on the biggest story of the day. We could go psychedelic and overprint red exclamation points on top of important stories. We could circle vital notices with red and blue arrows and write "Hey, Look!" over them in purple letters, each of a different size. We could add tactility and, presumably, greater reader sensual involvement by gluing dead leaves to reports of outdoor life or stapling plastic bags of water to features on river pollution. Impermeating perfume ads with aromatic essences has been tried, but we haven't tried bad smells for stories exposing hankypanky at city hall. We could even drop a graph in every story addressed to the reader and stating, "Now, friend, this is how this particular bit of information relates to your total environment and the magnitudes of the cultural transition about you . . ."

So, think about it. I shall continue to read after Professor McLuhan. If you think I should pursue this project in more detail, I'd like to have some expense money to go and talk with him if he is willing. He may not talk free. A newsletter he is publishing costs \$50 a year, an indication that he may care less about programming a mass environment.

Out of several major books and a host of articles and lectures, he ought to have some suggestions, not about the media in general, but about what I ought to do when I get to the office of a morning.

Once I program the environment, what do you reckon he thinks I ought to do next?