

McLuhan and Work in the Global Art Form

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What if they are half right?

An increasing number of researchers are suggesting that digitally advanced countries may be headed towards greater inequality and massive unemployment. Carl Benedikt Frey and Michael Osborne suggest that almost half (47 per cent) of all current occupations are at risk of disappearing (Frey and Osborne, 2013). Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee contend that, unlike past experience, technological change is eliminating jobs faster than it is producing them (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014). A group of scholars including Jeffrey Sacks has created a model of the future which suggests smart machines will replace humans like the internal combustion engine replaced horses and “put the economy out of business” (Kotlikoff et al. 2015). Paul Mason agrees, arguing that our current capitalist system, grounded in scarcity, now confronts an economic system based on the unlimited resources of information technology (Mason, 2016). Meanwhile, Thomas Piketty points out that in the United States, the most digitally advanced nation in the world, wealth inequality has reached levels not seen since the 1930s (Piketty, 2014).

Applying Amara’s Law (“We tend to overestimate the effect of technology in the short term and underestimate the effect in the long run.”) to these predictions suggests that, even if they are half-right, we may be headed into troublesome times where millions of people are jobless and living in dangerously unequal societies. What can be done?

One thing we can do is build upon the work of a professor of English literature and poetry, Marshall McLuhan. Precisely because he studied literature and poetry McLuhan was able to predict, amongst other things, the rise of the internet. While technologists, economists and politicians were focused on computers as industrial products to be bought, sold, distributed and applied like other machines, such as typewriters, McLuhan understood that humankind would use computers and computer communications to build the biggest piece of art in its history. His greatest contribution was not the radically new media theory he developed (“the medium is the message”), as important as that is. His greatest contribution to understanding the effects of computers and computer communications was that humankind would use the new tools at its disposal to create an all-encompassing art form. People who work within this art form will act as artists. They will need democratic workplaces, artistic training, and life-long learning. Understanding how to work within the art form will help us confront

unemployment caused by automation and move to more equitable, sustainable, economies that are no longer based on scarcity.

McLuhan once told an interviewer : “We now have to accept the fact and responsibility that the entire human environment is an artifact, an art form, that can be staged and manipulated like show biz” (Wallace & McLuhan, 1967). When asked by another interviewer: “Is everything shaped by human intervention a work of art?” McLuhan responded: “Oh yes, the making process as applied to institutions turns them into art-forms” (van Santen, 1972). The result of this sort of art forming is that many of us are now, or will be, working within a world-wide, human-made, art form constructed of limitless information.

A consequence of this growth of a ubiquitous art form is that work no longer needs to be constrained by scarcity. Information can be duplicated, rearranged and shared at no incremental cost. This reliance on information is radically different than the manufacture, distribution and retailing of hard goods. McLuhan pointed out that: “As automation takes hold, it becomes obvious that information is the crucial commodity, and that solid products are merely incidental to information movement” (McLuhan, 1964a, p. 185). In fact, many solid objects these days can be considered information made concrete. They are likely products of a process that started with software. Certainly as additive manufacturing – which uses software to create objects in 3-D printers - becomes more prevalent, products will be seen simply as the customized end-products of a computer program. McLuhan wrote: “In the new electric Age of Information and programmed production, commodities themselves assume more the character of information...” (McLuhan, 1964a, p. 48). Reliance on information will increase even more dramatically as artificial intelligence (which is software) and robotics (which is driven by software) become more prevalent.

The huge, limitless, universal pool of information being constructed is a human creation and therefore the result of creative acts – which brings us into the realm of the artist. Our goal, as artistic workers, will be to creatively replace nature as the source of most of the work in the world. As McLuhan, and coauthor Barrington Nevitt, wrote:

...we have now to replace nature itself, remaking it as an art form perfectly accommodated to the totality of human needs and aspirations. Such an enterprise requires nothing less than inclusive awareness of human awareness and limitations. Man-made nature, fashioned according to life as art, may tax human creativity far beyond anything levied on pre-satellite man (McLuhan, Nevitt, 1972, pp. 294- 295).

What a goal! The creation of an entity which accommodates “the totality of human needs and aspirations”. Can we do it? Maybe, maybe not. But is it worth striving for? Absolutely.

McLuhan left us with ideas for better understanding the art form's major trajectories plus a kit of tools we can use to design it.

The trajectories of the art form include: visual space thinking over-ridden by acoustic space thinking; the elimination of margin-centre organization; decentralization; increased speed of activity; reversal of the consumer-producer division so that the consumer becomes the producer; the user as content; greater participation – or the demand for greater participation; incarnate people being sent and becoming involved in situations anywhere in the world; the replacement of goal-oriented practices with continual process; the translation of hardware into software so that the software which produced the product becomes paramount because it can be easily revised to produce other products; and the creation and storage of infinite amounts of information, maybe even knowledge.

The kit of tools which can be used to create the art form include: the *acoustic-space field approach* which builds awareness of the whole environment in order for discovery and learning to happen; *pattern recognition* because in a global art form constructed of vast amounts of information the only way of acting within it successfully is to search for patterns; *probes* which are questions, statements or preliminary conclusions which are injected into debates to see what new ideas are provoked; *figure / ground analysis* which sees the technology being studied as a figure embedded in an environment of services and disservices; *tetrads* which use four questions to creatively brainstorm about technologies; and finally *minding the intervals* between two, seemingly disparate, technologies to see how they can be brought together in different ways to create new technologies (because if everything is software then everything is related to everything).

The people thinking about the major trajectories of the art form, and the kit of tools McLuhan created to work within it, will be artists and learners. They will be learners because the world of information's constant need of renewal can only be provided by workers committed to life-long learning (Bélanger, 2004, pp. 493-496). They will be artists because they will be working within an art form conceived by human imagination. As McLuhan said: "Already it is becoming clear that the main 'work' of the future will be education, that people will not so much earn a living as learn a living" (Look, 1967, p. 24). The workers active in the art form can be considered artistic learners because they will be earning a living by learning and working artistically. Their goal will be to live life as art. Instead of jobs they will have roles.

Compensation for the work done will be the most contentious issue as the art form is constructed. There will be more than enough wealth created which, if distributed fairly, will allow people to live comfortably without paying jobs while enjoying work within the art form. Compensation, according to McLuhan, should include schemes such as a guaranteed annual income and payment for activities

such as rearing children and even just learning the society's languages (McLuhan, Nevitt, 1972, pp. 228- 229).

The most fascinating and significant question will be: What over-riding goal will engage artistic learners in the art form? The answer can be explored by considering McLuhan's theory that humans create technologies to extend their physical and mental attributes. The hammer extends the hand. Software extends the brain. The goal of work in the art form will be to create the final extension: human consciousness. McLuhan argued that "In electronic fact, automation deepens and enlarges work until it is almost co-extensive with consciousness" (McLuhan, 1964b). The final frontier may not be the physical universe but the realm of awareness the mind has of itself and of the world. McLuhan and coauthor Barrington Nevitt suggested that we may even use consciousness to begin programming, our global art form:

As we move our nervous system out to form a new environment of electric information and service via the computer, it inevitably follows that we are beginning to use consciousness itself as the pattern of programming the new electric environment. (McLuhan, Nevitt, 1970, p. 267)

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