

# The Fall of Nations: The Fate of Social Systems in the New Media Environment

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## Abstract

Marshall McLuhan put forth a mediacentric view of the world, expressed in his famous maxim, the medium is the message. This view, and McLuhan's work as a scholar, were deliberately suppressed for many years, until the internet became a popular phenomenon during the 1990s. McLuhan's observations about electricity, electric technology, and electronic media, resulting in a change in media environment from the Gutenberg galaxy to the Marconi Milky Way are essential for understanding the new media that have appeared over the past two decades. Specifically examining the relationship between media and social organization, the rise of nationalism and the nation-state is traced back to the printing revolution in early modern Europe, while contemporary trends towards globalism on the one hand, and new forms of localism and tribalism on the other, are associated with electronic communications and the new media.

## Key Terms

McLuhan, media, media ecology, media environment, print media, electronic media, new media, nationalism, globalism.

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As we are celebrating the centenary of the birth of Canada's Marshall McLuhan, it seems only natural to begin by considering the career of Italy's Galileo Galilei. I understand that the connection may not be apparent at first, but I believe that a rough analogy can be made between the two. After all, Galileo is often considered the founder of modern physics, and McLuhan is frequently identified as the founder of modern media studies. Among his many achievements, Galileo is remembered for providing the conclusive arguments in favor of the heliocentric view of the world. As you know, this was terribly controversial in his time, because it meant that we human beings do not occupy the center of the universe, or galaxy, or solar system. Apart from the theological implications of this challenge, the heliocentric view represented an enormous blow to the self-image of a species that imagined itself to be the crown of creation. It is fitting then that if you take the English term *geocentric*, isolate the prefix that refers to the Earth, *geo*, and rearrange the letters, you get *ego*, indicating that the geocentric view is indeed an *egocentric* view.

It is not easy to let go of our egocentric view of the world. Even today, when almost everyone

accepts the heliocentric view, we still speak of sunrise and sundown. We still think of the sun as moving across the sky. We still see the earth as fixed and stable, with the rest of the universe arrayed all around us. Regardless of what we know with our heads, we remain geocentric in our hearts. We are also carbocentric, which is to say that we exhibit *carbon chauvinism*, the belief that the only form of life that is possible is carbon-based life. In contrast to this carbon-centric view, scientists and science fiction writers have speculated on the possibility of alien life forms evolving naturally based on silicon instead of carbon. And they have also speculated on the possibility that the silicon-based integrated circuits associated with computing might someday achieve the necessary complexity to be considered alive.

Of course, we remain anthropocentric as well, thinking of ourselves as the most significant of all forms of life. Even when accepting the English biologist Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, we commonly see ourselves as the end product of that process, and not as a result of random mutation and genetic recombination that has demonstrated a bit of survival value under particular environmental conditions for a relatively brief period of time. And I think we all know that no matter how progressive and cosmopolitan we may claim to be, we cannot help but be ethnocentric, each one of us a product of a particular cultural experience that deep down we believe to be true and proper. And

on a spectrum that extends from the geocentric to the carbocentric to the anthropocentric and ethnocentric, we arrive at the egocentric, which is especially powerful in cultures that have embraced individualism, as have modern western cultures.

Because we are egocentric, we say things like, *if you don't like what's on TV, change the channel, or better yet, turn it off*. And it is true, I can turn it off, I can throw it out of the window, I can choose not to own a television set in the first place. But I can't choose to live in a world without television. And I don't ever have to set foot on an airplane, but I can't choose to live in a world without airplanes flying overhead. I can't choose to live in a world without cars or highways. I can't choose to live in a world without cities or factories. I can't choose to live in a world without firearms and nuclear weapons. In computing there's a saying, *garbage in, garbage out*, which is abbreviated as GIGO. The idea is that the results you get from a program are directly related to whatever you put into the program in the first place. And this is true of simple computer programs that are created by a single individual. But the massive computer programs that run the world, that constitute our financial systems, air traffic control systems, missile systems, telecommunications, etc., are the products of massive collaboration, of many different programmers contributing bits and pieces of code in specialized areas. And they grow so large that they are beyond the comprehension

of any single individual, beyond the control of any single individual. That is why no one was entirely sure of what would happen to our computer systems when the last two digits of the year changed from 99 to 00. No one was absolutely certain of how the software patches added onto the massive programs would interact with the system as a whole. While nothing disastrous occurred, thankfully, that does not change the fact that we were not entirely in control of the situation.

Even when it comes to the words that we speak, and think, we are not in full control, because we speak and think in languages that are not of our own devising, using words and expressions and following rules of grammar and syntax that are not our own. Language, any language, be it English, Italian, Hebrew, or Japanese, is a kind of massive computer program, one that runs on the wetware of the human brain, one that cannot be fully controlled. So the phrase, garbage in, garbage out, does not apply to language anymore than to computing. And that sense of not being fully in control of what we say is why the ancients made reference to the muses as sources of inspiration, and to devils that make us say things that are best left unsaid.

In western cultures, individual freedom is a value of the highest order, and the suggestion that anything may impose limitations on our freedom of choice is met with great resistance, if not hostility. We therefore typically overestimate

our freedom of action as individuals, and we maintain the illusion of being in control through what Austria's Sigmund Freud referred to as rationalization. In saying this, I want to make it clear that neither extreme is correct. We are not fully in control, and neither are we fully out of control. We naturally gravitate towards the absolutes, when the truth lies somewhere in a grey area in between. I am not suggesting that we should absolve individuals of personal responsibility, but rather than it is only by accepting and acknowledging our limitations that we can understand where our responsibilities lie, and act upon them appropriately. As McLuhan put it, "there is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 25). This was McLuhan's wake up call to us.

And the answer to individual egocentrism is not collective egocentrism, I hasten to add. Without a doubt, groups are more powerful than individuals, and individuals are shaped by groups, and I do not mean to deny the importance of the political, the economic, and the cultural in human affairs. But societies are not free of constraints and limitations, groups are not free to create reality as they see fit, every type of construction is dependent upon the materials at hand, and the methods available for working with those materials. Germany's Karl Marx certainly understood this basic point, and so we have come to understand that there are differences between nomadic, hunter-gatherer societies

and agricultural societies, and yet again in comparison to industrial societies, and now once more in regard to information societies.

But McLuhan's perspective is one in which media play the leading role in human affairs. From this point of view, it is speech and our capacity for symbolic communication that distinguish our species from all others—that is what makes us human. And it is the introduction of systems of notation, and especially of writing, that goes hand-in-hand with the transition from tribal societies to complex settlements and social structure, to cities and empires—that is what makes us civilized in the traditional sense of the word. And it is that peculiar type of writing known as the alphabet that gives us first the culture of ancient Israel with monotheism, codified law and ethics, and historical narrative, and then the culture of ancient Greece with philosophy and science, theater, and democracy—that is what makes us western. And it is the invention of printing press with movable type attributed to Germany's Johann Gutenberg that gives us modern science, modern democracy, the Enlightenment, religious pluralism, the novel and modern literature, concepts of authorship and intellectual property, advertising and publicity, and so much more—that is what makes us modern. And now the introduction and proliferation of electronic media over the past two centuries have brought the modern era to a close, and left us in a terra nova that we don't quite understand, so that we can only define it by

what it leaves behind, as postmodern.

And in case you had any doubt, all this can be expressed much more economically in the form of McLuhan's (1964) famous maxim, *the medium is the message*. And what this represents is what we might call a *mediacentric* view. From a *mediacentric* point of view, print media are central to the modern world, to what McLuhan termed the *Gutenberg galaxy*. Everything else is distorted by the gravitational force of this galactic center, which results in some objects being drawn into the core, and others being ejected out into deep space, while most achieve relative stability revolving around the center of the galaxy. Everything in the galaxy is influenced by the galactic center, but some more strongly than others, and all objects are subject to many other influences as well, as they interact with one another. Galileo would have understood this mediacentric view, and he certainly would have been able to relate to the strong opposition and attacks that McLuhan suffered for challenging the prevailing egocentric view of his own time.

While McLuhan was never forced to recant his views and was never placed under house arrest like Galileo, he was the subject of a deliberate effort to suppress his work. I would not go so far as to call it a conspiracy, because the attacks came from different directions, and for different reasons, some of it was political and ideological, some of it was the result of religious prejudice, some of it was methodological, some

of it based on academic turf wars, some based on intellectual snobbery, some on jealousy of his popularity, and some of it was just personal. But the result was that serious consideration and discussion of McLuhan's work was effectively banned from academic discourse for a period of time beginning in the seventies, and leading up to the nineties. Scholars who understood McLuhan's significance were not able to break down these barriers until the internet became a popular phenomenon, bringing on a new realignment in our constellations, and requiring a perspective that could make sense of technological change.

Now that we are able to give McLuhan the attention he deserves, we also need to place his work in the context of the larger field of media ecology, which the American scholar Neil Postman (1970) defined as the study of media as environments (see Strate, 2006, 2011; Strate & Wachtel, 2005). McLuhan is one of the most central figures in this field, although some might place him just a bit off-center, but he is part of a pantheon that includes scholars such as Harold Innis (1951) from Canada, Eric Havelock (1963) originally from England, Jacques Ellul (1964) from France, Walter Benjamin (1968) from Germany, and the Americans Lewis Mumford (1934, 1967, 1970), Susanne Langer (1957), Dorothy Lee (1959), Walter Ong (1967, 1982), Edmund Carpenter (1973), Susan Sontag (1977), and Neil Postman (1985, 1988, 1992), to bring us up to the traditional number of twelve. But some trace the philosophical roots of the field back

to ancient Greece and Plato's *Phaedrus*, which discusses the negative effects of the written word, and its ethical foundation to ancient Israel and the Ten Commandments of Moses, which forbids the creation of any kind of visual representation.

However far back we wish to go, it was through McLuhan that the field of media ecology coalesced and came into recognizable existence, so in a sense McLuhan was the formal cause of media ecology (McLuhan & McLuhan, 2011). Here too we can see a parallel with Galileo who, in championing the heliocentric view, made possible the Copernican Revolution. So even though Galileo came after the Polish astronomer Copernicus, he was the cause that came after the effect. The American historian Elizabeth Eisenstein makes the same point about the Renaissance in her McLuhan-inspired history of printing in early modern Europe. The Italian Renaissance immediately preceded Gutenberg, and for that reason became the content of the new print media, and thereby became enshrined and fixed by the new print media. Moreover, the knowledge explosion that came as a result of printing insured that the Italian Renaissance would not fade away like previous revivals of learning, but instead become the basis of ongoing progress in the arts and sciences. The idea that effects can precede the causes, which reverses our familiar understanding of cause-and-effect, is associated with the Aristotelian notion of formal cause, the subject of the recent publication, *Media and Formal Cause*, co-authored by

Marshall and Eric McLuhan (2011).

I want to stress here that media ecology does not represent a closed theoretical or philosophical system, but rather an open approach to understanding who we are as human beings, how we shape our environments, and how our environments shape us. Like all living things, we adapt to our environments, and our environments act on us through a process of natural selection. And like all living things, we modify our environments, the very process of living alters the environment as organisms take in nutrients, give off waste products, and reproduce themselves. All living things seek to modify their environments in ways that enhance their own survival. But environments are complex, and the changes that are introduced do not always yield favorable results. We are not the masters of our environments, but rather exist in ecological relationships. In our mediacentric universe, we have the power to put in motion changes that alter the center of our galaxy, but how those changes will affect the rest of the galaxy, how they will affect us, will always be, to some extent, unpredictable.

McLuhan (1962) wrote about the *Gutenberg Galaxy* as a thing of the past, although at the time he wrote about it, much of the old media environment was still in place. Now, half a century later, the obsolescence of the old media environment is much more readily apparent, and we find that a new formation has come clearly

into view, one that we might call, following McLuhan's lead, the Marconi Milky Way. And while McLuhan is no longer available to offer insights to help us understand our new media environment, in his time he was able to catch a glimpse of the change that was occurring, and his approach provides us with an excellent starting point for further investigation. Simply stated, he correctly identified the fact that most of the characteristics of the evolving media environment that we live in today are grounded in electricity, electric technologies, and electronic media. For example, electricity restores a sense of the organic missing from mechanical-industrial technology, insofar as the nervous system relies on electrochemical impulses—hence McLuhan's (1964) observation that the electronic media are extensions of the nervous system. Electricity requires the completion of a circuit, and therefore introduces nonlinearity to societies built on the linearity of writing and print. Electric circuitry is also binary in nature, with its twin states of on and off, and the positive and negative polarities of electromagnetism. Electricity resembles a fluid more than a solid, and is energy rather than matter, introducing the dematerialization and etherealization that characterizes the information age. Electric current moves at the speed of light, and therefore introduces us to instantaneity. The electric circuit is fundamentally a two-way phenomena, and therefore potentially interactive. And electricity moves power from a central source to peripheral locations, and therefore is decentralizing, and

democratizing. And the combination of these characteristics creates a sense of connection and involvement that many found difficult to see in the broadcasting technology of the 1960s, but McLuhan's insights perfectly captured the participatory nature of the new media that evolved out of mid-20th century television and telecommunications. The current emphasis in new media on creating an immersive experience brings the concept of media as environments to an entirely new level.

With this understanding the electric nature of the new media environment, I would now like to turn to the preface McLuhan (1962) wrote to *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

There might be some advantage in substituting for the word "galaxy" the word environment." Any technology tends to create a new human environment. Script and papyrus created the social environment we think of in connection with the empires of the ancient world. The stirrup and the wheel created unique environments of enormous scope. Technological environments are not merely passive containers of people but are active processes that reshape people and other technologies alike. In our time the sudden shift from the mechanical technology of the wheel to the technology of electric circuitry represents one of the major shifts of all historical time. Printing from movable types created a quite unexpected new environment—it created the PUBLIC. Manuscript technology did not have the intensity or power of extension necessary to create publics on a national scale. What we have called "nations" in recent centuries did not, and could not, precede the advent of Gutenberg technology any more than they can survive the advent of electric circuitry with its power of totally involving all people in all other

people. (p. ii)

In *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan reiterates this point, stating, "today nationalism... has all the electronic media against it. In business, as in politics, the effect of even jet-plane speeds is to render the older national groupings of social organization quite unworkable" (p. 177). In other words, McLuhan argues that nationalism and modern nation-states could not exist before the creation of a typographic media environment, and that they cannot long survive its demise. Our new media environment, dominated by the electronic media, favors different kinds of cultural arrangements, different forms of social organization. In following McLuhan's lead, I have chosen the title, "The Fall of Nations: The Fate of Social Systems in the New Media Environment," and in equating nations with social systems here, I am also following the lead of the German sociologist, Niklas Luhmann (1982, 1989, 1995). Luhmann's approach is grounded in systems theory, and he therefore views all societies as systems, a system being a whole composed of interdependent parts. Whereas we typically think of societies as being made up of people, of populations, in Luhmann's view, social systems are composed of parts or units of social behavior, which are, in fact, acts of communication.

It follows that changes in the way that we communicate have the potential to change the very nature of a social system, so that, for example, the greater the amount of acts of

communication, the larger the society. In social systems where communication is limited to word of mouth and oral tradition, societies tend to remain simple and small, as is the case for tribal societies. Under such conditions, if the volume of information being communicated gets too large, which would be due to population growth, the society divides, and breaks into two separate groups. The introduction of systems of notation, and writing, give social systems the means to process larger amounts of information, and thereby grow without dividing. The result was not just bigger societies, but an increase in complexity, as greater volumes of information could be organized through a process of specialization. For example, the English anthropologist Jack Goody (1986) has detailed how the introduction of writing to oral societies was associated with the establishment of formal political, religious, economic, and legal institutions. From Luhmann's perspective, this growth is a matter of the differentiation of society, a kind of fractal growth in complexity as well as size and scope. This process continues as we move from script to print, resulting in the modern nation-state.

Luhmann's approach helps us to think about the nation as a form of social organization, but does not address the idea of nation as a form of cultural unity. In this regard, I would invoke the American anthropologist Edward T. Hall's (1959) incisive statement that "culture is communication, and communication is

culture." And I would draw on the Czech political scientist Karl Deutsch, who emphasized social communication as a determinant of national unity, viewing the emergence of a national culture as requiring the development of "complementary habits and facilities of communication" (p. 70). In Deutsch's view, factors such as geography, ethnicity, language, and religion are functionally equivalent, and may in any combination yield "enough complementarity to produce the overall result" (p. 71) of social cohesion. It follows that oral cultures are not able to maintain complementarity beyond a limited population, whether it is a nomadic tribe or a settled village community. In the ancient world, writing allowed for larger cultural unities such as city-states, and sometimes a broader sense of social cohesion emerged. For example, in ancient Israel, following the appearance of the first alphabet, a degree of complementarity was achieved through the shared writing system, sacred literature, and religion. But the unity of the twelve tribes was far from stable, achieved only briefly under the reigns of King David and King Solomon, before splitting apart again. Along similar lines, a trend known as Panhellenism emerged among the ancient Greek city-states following the adoption of the alphabet, which made possible the dissemination of a common literature in the form of the Homeric epics, the synthesis of a common religion through institutions such as the Oracle at Delphi, and through the establishment of the Olympic games (Nagy, 1979). But no political union was achieved, and only when faced with a



common threat such as the Persian Empire was a very loose military alliance formed.

By way of contrast, Rome, like other imperial cities, established a form of political and economic unity through the use of military force, utilizing communication for the function of command and control. As Harold Innis (1951) made clear, writing systems coupled with lightweight writing surfaces such as papyrus and paper, provided the extended communication capacity needed to send and receive messages over distances with fidelity and efficiency.

Administration over territory was also aided by the ability to keep written records of laws and edicts, contracts and treaties, accounts and inventories, and in the creation of chronicles and histories, as well as census-taking. Ancient empires excelled at exercising military, political, and economic control, but attempts to impose the language, religion, and customs of the ruling community were met with very limited success, and only among the elites of the subjugated territories. Cultural imperialism was all but impossible to achieve, and generally not worth the effort. In other words, writing provided enough complementarity of communication to achieve either political unity or cultural unity, but not both. In the scribal media environment of antiquity and middle ages, we find a varied mix of different kinds of social systems, from tribes and villages to city-states and loose cultural alliances, from imperial domination to the decentralized power structure of feudalism. And we also find

religious networks that transcend both local communities and empires, exhibiting elements of political and cultural unity, but falling considerably short of nationalism.

And so we return to the printed word as the “architect of nationalism” (p. 170) as McLuhan (1964) put it. To some degree, nation-building is not entirely different from empire-building, as it involves the governing of territory from a distance by a central capital city. In this sense, the extension of the biases of the written word through typography aided territorial expansion in the form of empires and nations alike, and of course sometimes both occurred simultaneously. Printing facilitated command and control communications, but with this unprecedented ability to communicate from one to many, print media could be used to achieve an unprecedented degree of political uniformity, through the wide distribution of identical copies of laws and constitutions, for example. Government, legal, and military procedures were homogenized through the production of handbooks, manuals, and forms (Eisenstein, 1979). Indeed, the blank form is easy to overlook as an innovation introduced by the printing revolution, and as a print medium. The blank form is as blank as a gasoline barrel that is emptied of gasoline is truly empty, a problem of language originally identified by the American linguist and insurance claims adjuster, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956). The printed form is the foundation of bureaucratic organization. And bureaucratic organization is a

technology of control, and a key example of the principle of differentiation that Luhmann (1982, 1995) discusses. Additionally, economic systems could be further integrated by the printing of paper money and other financial documents (Eisenstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1964).

Coercion and control could be supplemented by the production of printed propaganda. Rising literacy rates afforded by the availability of print media and the formation of schools meant that larger portions of a population would be susceptible to typographic persuasion and propaganda (Ellul, 1965). And the entire population could be influenced by the distribution of nationalistic symbols in the form of printed images, such as pictures of monarchs, statesmen, military leaders, and other national heroes (Braudy, 1986; Eisenstein, 1979). It is no wonder that as printing proliferated, central authorities tried to place the industry under their control. And even when control and censorship weakened, anti-governmental propaganda was accompanied by at worst national revolution, not national disintegration (see, for example, Coward, 1980).

Print media also helped to shift loyalties from the locality to the nation in subtle ways. Oral cultures are by their nature conservative and communal. Writing allows individuals to separate themselves from their traditions and critically evaluate them (Havelock, 1963; Ong, 1967, 1982). And it opens the door to individualism,

to the extent that reading and writing is an isolating, private activity (McLuhan, 1962; Ong, 1967, 1982). Breaking individuals away from the tribe and local community allows them to feel a connection with a larger, more abstract “imagined community,” to use the phrase made famous by the American political scientist Benedict Anderson (1983). Individuals freed from traditions and tribalism form what we refer to as a public, residing in the literate and urbane public sphere discussed at length by German sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1989). But ultimately these isolated individuals become part of a mass, members of a mass society (Ellul, 1965). Before the diffusion of print technology, local communities could exist in relative isolation; news of the outside world would arrive infrequently, and with considerable delay. Print media made it possible for news to be delivered with greater regularity and speed, thereby shifting attention away from the local to the national. When news was disseminated orally, it was mediated by local elites, such as a priest or pastor; print media bypassed local elites and delivered information directly to individuals (Eisenstein, 1979). Increased access to information about national affairs led to greater desire for participation in political decision-making, particularly within the class that was largely responsible for rising literacy rates, the middle class. In this way, nationalism was closely related to democratic revolutions, and democratization and centralization of government went hand in hand with national

unity and the creation of a uniform political culture (Steinberg, 1974).

The development of science and technology, which was sparked by the printing revolution (Eisenstein, 1979), made it possible to determine precise boundaries between nations, while enhanced political and military control made it easier to police those borders (Knelman, 1978). Printed maps gave visual expression to the idea that one's nation was separate from other nations, while also serving as symbols of internal unity within the nation's boundaries. And printing was related to the fixing of linguistic as well as geographical frontiers. The role of Latin as an international language was undermined in favor of vernacular tongues (Chaytor, 1945; Eisenstein, 1979; Innis, 1951; McLuhan, 1962, 1964; Steinberg, 1974). As the English historian of printing, S. H. Steinberg put it, "the printing press... preserved and codified, sometimes even created, the vernacular; with numerically small and economically weak peoples its absence has demonstrably led to its disappearance or, at least its exclusion from the realm of literature" (p. 120). For want of a printing press, dialects such as Cornish and Prussian never became languages of their own, while print media enabled the Dutch to differentiate their language from German, and made it possible to preserve and codify tongues such as Welsh, Gaelic, Catalan, and Basque. Printing "fortified the 'language walls' between one nation and another" (Steinberg, 1974, p. 123), and also homogenized language within each

nation. Since printers were generally located in a nation's political and economic center, they established the center's dialect as the nation's literary language, and used their editorial powers to eliminate other dialects in the texts they published. Through the publication of grammar books, and the establishment of grammar schools, regional variations in speech and writing were minimized. Even in counties that have more than one national language, homogenization of the official languages contributes to cultural unity within nations, and separation among them.

In many instances, the first text to be printed in the vernacular was the Bible, fostering the impression that God naturally spoke in the national language, and actually was a citizen of that country. Printing undermined the power of the church as a social system rivaling the state in this way. Moreover, the task of reproducing other religious texts and documents, such as prayerbooks, was shifted from scribes controlled by the church to printers controlled by the state (Eisenstein, 1979). Printing was associated with the Protestant Reformation, which was based in part on the fact that individuals now had easy access to the Bible and did not require the mediation of priests (Innis, 1951); Protestants also made liberal use of the press for propaganda purposes (Eisenstein, 1979). The result, at least at first, was the formation of national religions in countries that rejected the Church of Rome, further reinforcing nationalism. Nations that remained Roman Catholic still had national

identity strengthened by way of contrast with neighboring countries that went Protestant. And wherever religious homogeneity gave way to competing sects and faiths, pluralism and the need for tolerance further weakened the church in relation to the state, leaving patriotism as the only remaining national religion.

The printing of vernacular Bibles was often the first step in the establishment of a national literary language and the creation of a body of national literature (Eisenstein, 1979). The development of the novel coincided with the rise of nationalism, a point emphasized by many cultural theorists, including Benedict Anderson (1983). But it was also historical and biographical works that helped in constructing a common past and a sense of a shared culture. A nation's writers, philosophers, scientists, etc., were celebrated as national heroes, and their works constituted a national canon (Steinberg, 1974). To an extent, separate intellectual traditions were established, such as French rationalism and British empiricism. Thus, through the publication of national literature, printing facilitated cultural cohesiveness, and this unity was reinforced through school instruction "by the book."

Printing opened the door to nationalism by establishing enough complementary communication to allow local groupings to be bound together into a larger social system. Local groups would naturally resist this effort at some point, so nationalism comes into conflict with

localism, and it was necessary to undermine and break down local ties and loyalties in order to achieve a larger cultural cohesiveness. Put another way, the larger social system had to absorb, digest and metabolize the smaller ones, in order to create a homogenous national culture, and this was made possible by typography's homogenizing tendencies (Eisenstein, 1979; McLuhan, 1962, 1964; Steinberg, 1974). As a complex social system, the nation develops numerous specialized subsystems devoted to politics, justice, finance, religion, education, defense and war, etc. (Luhmann, 1982, 1989, 1995). All of these subsystems are organized by and subject to print's homogenizing tendencies, and as interdependent parts that make up a whole, they are linked together and coordinated by typographic communications. Printing is at the center of this galaxy, but its gravitational pull affects different parts of the galaxy differently, some move faster and some slower, some gradually and some with sudden violence. And other objects in the galaxy also exert some influence, including geography and history, technologies of transportation, and new inventions like the steam engine, photography, and the telegraph (Carey, 1989, 1997; Czitrom, 1983; Innis, 1951; Sontag, 1977). Industrialism extended the centralization of power and homogenizing tendencies of print, photography enhanced the production of symbols of cultural unity, and telegraphy served to bind together nations even tighter in political, economic, and cultural unity.

The American communication scholar James W. Carey (1989) argued that the invention of the telegraph was instrumental in setting the stage for the 19th century national unity movements here in Italy, in Germany, and elsewhere in Europe. It also extended to the United States, where the Civil War put an end to the idea that the individual states were true sovereign entities. We call that national unity, but it could also be seen as movement towards something more than a nation. Seeing ourselves as one nation, we in the US also saw the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a nation, as Russia writ large, and not as the international union that they themselves claimed to be. But the same media environment that gave rise to the Soviet Union also saw the amplification of nationalism associated with the rise of fascism and Nazism. While 19th century nationalism contradicted the Marxist predictions of the withering away of the state (Marx & Engels, 1965), and early 20th century ultranationalism prompted Italy's Antonio Gramsci (1972) to find a way to incorporate the concept of culture into Marxian theory, if we hold ideologies aside, there is a common thread that connects the nationalism of the past 150 years with 20th century Communism, the creation of the League of Nations and the United Nations, and other sorts of international institutions, including the European Union. Simply put, the revolution in communications technology that began in the 19th century supported the creation of increasingly larger political and cultural units.

Whether a given social system is seen as a single nation, a federation of states, or an international union, from one point of view it is only natural to look for a natural progression from nationalism to globalism. Our ability to communicate over distance has expanded via broadcasting, telecommunications, satellite transmissions, and the internet, so that we are in many ways one world united by instantaneous communications. This in turn facilitates administration on a global scale. While we are far from achieving worldwide political unity, we do have a global economy, and a limited number of international military, political, and legal institutions, and we are faced with a growing list of global concerns including the economy, the environment, nuclear proliferation, terrorism, and human rights. To deal with such problems, smaller social systems will need to join together to form larger ones, and a larger social system will need to develop subsystems on an international and a global scale. The good news is that our new media environment generates enough information to make such developments possible. It also generates sufficient complementary communication to support an emerging global culture. This includes the advent of world languages, such as English and Mandarin, and of world literature, global cinema and television, and world music. And it also includes the images of planet earth taken from space which, as McLuhan noted, show a world without borders. I think it is safe to say that there are many

in western liberal democracies who find the idea of global unity appealing, so that some form of cosmopolitanism is shared by both Communists and multinational capitalists, not to mention intellectual elites. And positive if not utopian visions of a future where there is a unified world government are quite common in popular culture. We also have less specific images of a future “brotherhood of man” when “the world will live as one” to use phrases from song “Imagine,” by England’s John Lennon, which is essentially *The Communist Manifesto* put to music. And while McLuhan was quite conservative and unsympathetic to Marx, his own views are not all that different when he writes in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) that “the new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village” (p. 31; see also McLuhan & Powers, 1989). On the surface, the phrase “global village” sounds like a poetic way to refer to international, intercultural, and global communications, and globalization in general. In certain ways, it has become interchangeable with the American futurist Buckminster Fuller’s (1971) evocative phrase, “spaceship earth” to refer to a new kind of perspective, one you might call *ecocentric* as it is based on an ecological view of the world. In addition to being poetic, the phrase *global village* can also be seen as prophetic, as it anticipates the internet and the World-Wide Web, and our new social media environment of Twitter feeds, Facebook status updates, and YouTube videos, along with the many innovations in wired, wireless,

and satellite telecommunications that have appeared over the years.

That globalism is a feature of our Marconi Milky Way, there is no doubt. But the popular view of steady progress towards world government, and of social systems happily merging into a single world system, is inadequate. Nations will not go gentle into that good night. As McLuhan argued, the western world is heavily invested in the institutions and arrangements developed from the old media environment, and will not easily give them up, hence Gramsci’s (1972) observation concerning cultural hegemony. What emerged out of the Gutenberg Galaxy was not just nationalism and the modern-nation state, but as the insightful Canadian political scientist Ronald Deibert (1997) has discussed in great detail, an international system predicated on relations among sovereign nations. Nations have a vested interest in the international system, and in the existence of other nation-states, not only for purposes of trade and alliance, but simply to reinforce the legitimacy of their own social systems. Thus, over the course of the first half of the 20th century, the nation-state emerged as the only legitimate form of social organization. As colonial empires were dismantled, existing nation-states have tried to turn former colonies into nations like themselves, with mixed results. The United Nations, while ostensibly a world government, has played a major role in promoting the international system of nation-states, and can be expected to be a conservative if not

regressive institution in the face of future efforts to create true global unity. From this perspective, nationalism and globalism are ultimately in conflict with each other, and true global unity will only be achieved by the surrender of the sovereignty of the nation-state, the end of national loyalties and patriotic allegiances, and the fall of nations. This will not be an easy process, there will be struggle, conflict, violence, and warfare. But in the end, nations will fall because the new media environment cannot support them.

It may seem like I have just described two competing and contradictory scenarios, one of peaceful transition, another of violent revolution, but both possibilities can and do co-exist among the complex interrelationships that form the Marconi Milky Way. And holding aside the inadequacies of Marx's early 19th century theorizing, we can see in his vision of the future both a move forward towards a unified world, and a move backwards towards the localism of the commune. There is also an oxymoronic quality to the phrase "global village" that is missed in most popular usages, as the village is the smallest unit of human settlement, while the globe is the largest. Like Marx, McLuhan indicates a return to localism, but a new kind of localism on a global scale. In *Understanding Media* McLuhan (1964) writes that "as electrically contracted, the globe is no more than a village" (p. 5) and he also writes that "the human family becomes one tribe again" (p. 172). The return to a

new kind of tribalism is a pervasive theme in *Understanding Media*, and it is clear that the village and the tribe, two social systems that are not exactly equivalent, are metaphors used as a means of trying to make sense of phenomena that are just beginning to unfold.

While the electronic media's ability to establish instantaneous communications over distance supports globalism, their decentralizing tendencies favor a renewed localism. These two characteristics may seem contradictory, but that is consistent with the nonlinearity of electric technology. And they are united by a common enemy, so to speak, as they both work against the nation, attacking from above and from below. In regard to localism, the last several decades have been distinguished by what a growing trend towards separatism and ethnic resurgence. While the term "nationalism" has been used in association with these movements, it is not the nationalism of the Gutenberg Galaxy, not drives to achieve national unity or efforts at nation-building, but a breaking up or breaking down of states and unions, not a cultural synthesis but a schismogenesis. The most dramatic example of this has been the break-up of the Soviet Union, the most violent example, at least in Europe, has been the break-up of Yugoslavia, and we have also witnessed the partitioning of Cyprus and the peaceful division of Czechoslovakia. Some of the better known separatist movements in Europe include those on the part of the Flemish and the Walloons in Belgium, on the part of the Basques

and Catalans in Spain, on the part of the Welsh and Scottish in Great Britain, on the part of the Bretons, Corsicans, and Basques again in France, and the Northern League in Italy.

Over in North America, Canada is arguably a failed state, with the Quebecois being the most visible of several secessionist movements, while Mexico has had to contend with the Zapatistas in their State of Chiapas. The United States, like many other countries in the western hemisphere, has had to deal with difficulties relating to the autonomy of native Americans, and we have had our own issues regarding Puerto Rican independence, concerns over Hispanic populations, and Black nationalism, as well as lingering secessionist movements in once-independent states such as Vermont, Texas, Hawaii, and the southern confederacy. There is even an intriguing proposal for the states of the Pacific Northwest to join together with Canada's province of British Columbia and form a Republic of Cascadia. Much more serious are the independence movements outside of the western world, notably among the Tibetans and Mongolians of China, and the Palestinians and Kurds of the Middle East. Our occupation of Iraq opened up the question of whether that state should be allowed to break up into three smaller ones, and the United States, as a product of print-based nationalism quite naturally favored the option of nation-building over nation-breaking.

In western liberal democracies, we support

the right of a people to self-determination, a principle included in the United Nations Charter. The problem, of course, is that there is no definition of what constitutes a people. It seems clear enough when we are dealing with breaking up an empire, in supporting the rights of conquered populations and colonies to autonomy and freedom. But within any group that obtains independent sovereignty, there emerges a minority that seeks an autonomy of its own, and should that subgroup mount a successful separatist movement, it will eventually find a subgroup within itself that seeks its own independent status. Self-determination is endlessly complicated by fractal logic. Moreover, as the American media theorist Joshua Meyrowitz (1985) has argued, in an electronic media environment, where everyone knows each others' business, every group wants what other groups have, everyone wants the equal right to be different, to claim their own independent group identity, which naturally leads to their right to sovereignty. Instead of building nations, we see a breaking of nations. Indeed, since nations are naturally resistant to globalism, the breaking of nations is a natural step towards the establishment of global unity. Nation-states were built to survive on their own, stand on their own two feet, but as they break apart, the parts will be less able to get by on their own, and more dependent on integration into a global social system. In this way, as Marx indicated, globalism and communitarianism are not incompatible with each other.



Apart from political considerations, in the United States and elsewhere, we have also seen the emergence of local economics, including local monetary units that are a modified form of barter system. Such phenomena, which are met with disapproval from the federal government, signal a return to the commune and village, but financial localism and the use of non-governmental currency has seen a rapid rise in recent years throughout the world, aided by computing and electronic data transmission (Rushkoff, 2009); in the economic sector as in the political sphere, localism can work hand-in-hand with globalism, as local and global currencies together challenge the reign of national monetary systems. Additionally, the internet has also provided support for local commerce, through sites where individuals can post local recommendations and evaluations of businesses, such as Yelp, or obtain coupons and discounts, such as Groupon, or buy and sell products, such as Craigslist, or post and search job wanted ads, such as Monster.com.

The recent trend in social media towards geolocation, brought into prominence by Foursquare, and subsequently incorporated into Twitter and Facebook, also bring a renewed emphasis on the local, as does the addition of gaming elements in activities such as geocaching and mobile phone directed scavenger hunts. The development of augmented reality technology and ubiquitous computing, and even the use of printed QR codes that can be read by mobile devices, all are providing an electronic overlay

onto localities, just as in the past, signs and numbers turned localities into texts that could be read and processed in typographic fashion. Electronic media have also helped to break the monopoly on military force held by the state, aiding in the organization of local militia and terrorist organizations; as the Austrian-born business management scholar Peter Drucker (1989) points out, “the terrorist has reinstated the private army” (p. 54), an institution that had been eliminated in the west by national governments during the 17th century. Electronically-mediated communications can just as easily serve the propaganda purposes of separatist movements as they can serve communities by promoting local business, or politics, or public service, or religious events. Certainly, the revival of minority dialects and languages made possible by the electronic media, beginning with radio, has supported the break down of national cultures just as the printing of vernaculars helped to build them up.

McLuhan (1964) noted that the electronic media eliminate center-margin distinctions, so that any location could serve as a center of communication. And electronic media bypass physical distance, linking individuals together in instantaneous communication. Print media can easily be confiscated at a border, but electromagnetic waves know no boundaries. Increased access to broadcast and satellite transmissions certainly played a role in the disintegration of the Soviet Union, and other

democratic revolutions of the late 20th century, and we now are seeing how search engines, social media, and mobile communications can facilitate political upheavals in the 21st. Our new media won't stop a bullet, but they can help individuals to organize themselves, and make it difficult to keep government and military activities hidden from their own people, and from a global audience. They can also provide governments with information about who is in the opposition movement, as increased access and transparency cuts both ways. The potential for disruption is quite clear, however, and we can look forward to continued waves of protest and revolution such as we have seen recently in the Middle East, which was sparked by a Tunisian rap song posted on Facebook.

We can also see now that immigrants and diaspora communities no longer feel the same pressure to assimilate that they did half a century ago, as they can now remain virtual citizens of their country of origin. In this sense, national and ethnic identities are less confined to physical location than ever before, and become more a matter of connection via communication media. The existence of unassimilated populations constitutes another blow to the nation, and represents the emergence of new forms of social systems that can be global in reach, but local or national in size and scope. This applies to business, as local businesses now deal with customers on a worldwide basis, while multinational corporations overshadow many of

the nations of the world, functioning as de facto sovereign entities; it is only a matter of time before they demand equal standing with the nations of the world. This same trend applies to organized religion, which has a long history of transcending national boundaries; loyalties that once shifted from church to state now shift back as the new media make it possible for religions to bind their followers together ever more tightly, and this is true for world religions like Roman Catholicism and Islam, and also for small cults that can gain a significant following that would otherwise be scattered over many different places. This same trend applies to criminal organizations such as the Medellin Cartel in Colombia and the Chinese Triads in Hong Kong, and to terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda that are dispersed across many different states. In a nonlinear, networked world, there are no borders or battle lines; terrorism is decentralized warfare.

The term *glocalization* points to the new reality where the local can operate on a global scale, although the scale is sometimes somewhat less than global, and the local is sometimes somewhat more like the national. More important than the specifics is the fact that the old notions of topography and typography alike no longer apply. McLuhan (1962, 1964) pointed to the alphabet and the printing press as homogenizing forces, stressing uniformity and repeatability, and yielding the homogenous space of Aristotle, Euclid, and Newton. Electric technology and the electronic media undo

print's homogenizing effects, giving rise to the relativistic spacetime of Einstein. And so we find ourselves in an increasingly heterogeneous landscape consisting of multiple and overlapping social systems, some local, some national, and some global. In place of a single cultural and political unity, we find ourselves subject to a number of different affiliations, some formal structures such as business corporations, organized religions, and government bureaucracies, some less formal divisions based on language, culture, demographics and psychographics, and some based on affinities and shared interests in arts, entertainment, and leisure activities. We are at once citizens of the world and citizens of a variety of different polities, cultures, and social systems. In the oral media environment, identity was group-centered, and there was no choice but to be a part of the tribe. In the print media environment, individual identity became the norm, requiring the individual to pledge allegiance to the nation. In the new electronic media environment, the individual becomes a multiplicity of selves, capable of multiple, overlapping, and even contradictory loyalties. We are entering upon a time of complexity unprecedented in human history, because it is not just a growth to a bigger social system with more specialized subsystems, but it is a shift akin to the shift from single-celled organisms to multicellular life. And if we want to understand the future structure of social systems, what we have to do is to look at the

present structure of communication systems, the present structure of the new media environment, the structure of decentralized networks and fractal geometry.

In the past, I have used the phrase *liquid tribalism* to try to capture a sense of this new form of tribalism that McLuhan called to our attention (Strate, 1996). Others have called it *glocalization*. McLuhan called it the *global village*. But in the end, these phrases are like thought experiments, like the apocryphal tale of Galileo dropping a cannon ball and a wooden ball from the Tower of Pisa. They are probes that ask us to think about our changing notions of gravity, and our changing center of gravity. As our constellations have shifted from the Gutenberg Galaxy to the Marconi Milky Way, we find ourselves situated within a new kind of Zodiac, trying desperately to cast horoscopes that can make sense of the forces that are affecting us. But to understand our new human environments, and gain even a small measure of control over them, we need a new kind of education that is adapted to our mediacentric universe, we need education based on a media ecology curriculum, and the modern media science of Marshall McLuhan.

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## **A Queda das Nações: O Destino dos Sistemas Sociais no Novo Ambiente Midiático**

### **Resumo**

Marshall McLuhan propôs uma visão midiacêntrica do mundo, expressa em seu famoso aforismo “o meio é a mensagem”. Este ponto de vista, e também o trabalho de McLuhan como acadêmico, foram deliberadamente sufocados por muitos anos, até a internet tornar-se um fenômeno popular na década de 1990. As observações de McLuhan a respeito de eletricidade, tecnologia elétrica e mídia eletrônica, que resultaram na mudança no ambiente mediático da galáxia de Gutenberg para a Via Láctea de Marconi, são essenciais para entender as novas mídias que apareceram nas duas últimas décadas. Ao examinar especificamente a relação entre mídias e organização social, a ascensão do nacionalismo e do Estado-nação é rastreada até a revolução da imprensa no início da Europa moderna, ao passo que, por um lado, as tendências contemporâneas ao globalismo e, por outro lado, a novas formas de localismo e tribalismo, estão associadas com as comunicações eletrônicas e com as novas mídias.

### **Palavras-chave**

McLuhan, mídia, ecologia midiática, ambiente midiático, mídia impressa, mídias eletrônicas, novas mídias, nacionalismo, globalismo

## **La caída de las naciones: el destino de los sistemas sociales en el nuevo entorno mediático**

### **Resumen**

Marshall McLuhan planteó una visión mediocéntrica del mundo, expresada en su famosa máxima, el medio es el mensaje. Este punto de vista, y la obra de McLuhan como académico, se suprimieron deliberadamente durante muchos años, hasta que el Internet se convirtió en un fenómeno popular durante la década de 1990. Las observaciones de McLuhan acerca de la electricidad, la tecnología eléctrica y los medios electrónicos, dando como resultado un cambio en el entorno de los medios de comunicación de la galaxia de Gutenberg a la Vía Láctea de Marconi son esenciales para la comprensión de los nuevos medios que han surgido en las dos últimas décadas. Específicamente examino la relación entre los medios de comunicación y la organización social: el auge del nacionalismo y el Estado-nación se remonta a la revolución de la imprenta en la Europa moderna, mientras que las tendencias actuales a la globalización por un lado, y las nuevas formas de localismo y el tribalismo por el otro, están asociados a las comunicaciones electrónicas y los nuevos medios.

### **Palabras clave**

McLuhan, medios, ecología mediática, medios impresos, medios electrónicos, nuevos medios, nacionalismo, globalización.

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