art libraries journal

McLuhan in the Library

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'A means or method of perceiving'[1] the library through a series of McLuhanite 'probes' presenting ideas reflecting current library practice supported by the theories of Marshall McLuhan. Often quoted and misunderstood, McLuhan during the 1960's was criticized by many librarians for predicting the end of the book, however, deeper analysis of his theories and the writings of his supporters prove that he was somebody 'who has, perhaps, a greater perception of the value of books and libraries for civilization, than many librarians.'[2] The theories of McLuhan provide a blueprint for libraries into the future and beyond, from library instruction and teaching, professional development, media ecologies and future technologies. Being McLuhanite in nature the sections of this article can be read in any sequence.

McLuhan the Librarian

'Unlike most academics McLuhan was more interested in discovery than in being correct every time.'[3]

The description of McLuhan by his long term colleague R. K. Logan describes McLuhan characteristically like a librarian, while also addressing the popular perception of librarians providing the ultimate truth, a continuing misconception. Alongside Secker[4], I have to disagree with Neil Gaiman, a valued supporter of libraries, who is often quoted as saying 'Google can bring you back 100,000 answers. A librarian can bring you back the right one'[5]

Librarians epitomize lifelong learning, they want their users to be able to do it for themselves, and no longer preside over knowledge. Libraries are the antithesis of corporations who try to control access to information.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan emphasizes the importance of not losing control of our own self as it extends into other media forms. 'Once we have surrendered our sense and nervous systems to the private manipulation of those that would try to benefit from taking a lease on our eyes and ears and nerves, we don't really have any rights left.'[6]

Figure/ground

'Figure and ground are usually associated with visual experience, but they are equally useful for noting and analysing other kinds of situations.'[7]

Many students I meet on a daily basis have a very narrow focus on their research and I encourage them to look at ideas and concepts more broadly to see how they link to others, opening up potential for further research and the discovery of relevant information. My experience of this is supported by recent research into graduate information literacy skills showing that many graduates 'were eager to find the one "right" answer'[8]

In *City as Classroom*[9] optical illusions of images representing two objects are used to show how quickly our perception can be focused on one particular view while excluding everything else around it. Students introduced to the concept of figure/ground become less focused on a single interpretation of what they are looking for, or indeed what they are looking at, which is an excellent attribute for an information literate researcher.

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Information literacy – life skill

'The educational task is not only to provide basic tools of perception, but to develop judgement & discrimination with ordinary social experience. Few students ever acquire skill in analysis of newspapers. Fewer have any ability to discuss a movie intelligently. To be articulate & discriminating about ordinary affairs & information is the mark of an educated man.'[10]

Information Literacy was central to many of McLuhan's ideas, across all mediums, covering the range of literacies from visual to digital. All literacies involve media in McLuhan's sense of the word and all of the mediums contain information, placing information literacy at the pinnacle of learning.

'If all the information ever taught in school can be got instead from libraries, recordings, films, centers of instruction for every kind of skills, in service training programs, adult programs for intensive language training, data banks of computerized information – if all these resources and many more are everywhere around us, then why should schools exist at all?'[11]

The concept of lifelong learning which librarians feel passionate about is also shown through McLuhan's questioning of the relevance of schools in a society where information can be found everywhere. These ideas were taken further by Logan in *The Sixth Language*[12] that posits that universities should teach general skills of learning, in my view including information literacy. Although the discussion of dis-intermediation for education goes way beyond the focus of this article, it is important to note that information literacy empowers individuals to learn for themselves and would significantly contribute to the theories of McLuhan.

Technology – society – technology – society

'There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.'[13]

McLuhan wanted to make us aware of the effect that technologies (media) have on us. For this he has often been accused of being a technological determinist, which is difficult to understand, especially as much of the literature suggests that humanity has control, or that the relationship is a complex ecology.

Technology certainly has positive effects on the development of humanity and society and the positive effects outweigh the negative considerably, however that is no reason to ignore the negative effects.

The effects of Google have been recently criticized in the work of Nicholas Carr[14], and also considered with a more balanced view in the works of Hayles[15], Brockman[16] and Rhiengold.[17] There is quite clear evidence that Google (and other technologies) is having an effect on users. A report from Demos[18] specifically looks at the effects on children.

Librarians play a significant role in allowing students to contemplate the media around them and the impact that various media forms have on society. A core element of information literacy is to evaluate sources, as shown in various models such as SCONUL's 7 pillars[19] and ANCIL[20]. McLuhan wanted everyone to be aware of not only the content but the actual sources themselves, the medium as much as the message.

After a recent teaching session, I was approached by a student and asked, "why, up to this point in my life has nobody showed me how useless Google can be?"

The student had begun to 'contemplate what is happening'[21] which is exactly what McLuhan was trying to initiate through his theories. Libraries should continue to provide a space that gives its users the opportunity to question different mediums.

Remediated

'This fact, characteristic of all media, means that the "content" of any medium is always another medium.'[22]

The history of libraries stretches back through different media types as they continuously evolve and become part of their newer media forms.

The media theories of McLuhan play an important role in helping to understand the evolution of libraries over time and will continue to do so as long as libraries maintain a relationship with media, by either providing access to users or educating them about the media. It is important to understand that McLuhan's definition of media is anything that technologically extends humans either physically (tools) or through consciousness (speech, text).

Libraries have always facilitated extensions of their users in the form of media, allowing free access and training, from the first books, to the modern computer and more recently into maker spaces and learning environments.

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Tetrad of Media Effects

'A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve individual encyclopeadic function and flip into private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind'[23]

McLuhan's tetrad of media effects can be applied to all media and is a tool designed by McLuhan to give insights into how different media impact on each other and society. The tetrad asks what does each medium 'enhance', 'obsolesce', 'retrieve' and 'flip into at its most extreme'. Kuskis[24] provides a very good example of the tetrad for ebooks; claiming that they enhance access, obsolesce print, retrieve peer to peer oral culture and flip into the end of publishers. The beauty of the tetrad is to open discussion, so different views can be considered and multiple answers to the questions can be found.

When all four questions are considered in depth, McLuhan claims we have a better understanding of the medium and can address its negative effects. The tetrad is a critical tool for libraries to discuss the impact of new media. Research by Patkar on e-learning suggests 'that libraries should continue to assess the impacts of technology on different stakeholders by using McLuhan's tetrad'[25]

Patkar's addition of 'different stakeholders' is interesting as it continues the idea that users are central to the ethos of libraries, and highlights the usefulness of tetrads for analysing negative effects on different elements of society. McLuhan's tetrads would often highlight the obsolescence of the library as facilitator of access, but from the perspective of a different stakeholder, such as somebody without access to the internet, or training and relevant literacies, the obsolescence of the library would have critical social impacts.

By using McLuhan's tetrad, libraries and library professionals can debate and consider the impacts of new media forms in depth and raise awareness of these within their communities and society as a whole. The tetrad is a tool that could be utilized more effectively, assisting policy decisions made by libraries for the benefit of their communities.

Librarians / Media-ecologists

'in short the library is becoming a centre for media ecology instead of remaining tied to the more culture of the book'[26]

In the as yet unpublished book[27] by McLuhan and Logan they write about libraries becoming media ecologies, does this mean that librarians should be defined as media ecologists? Librarians are interested not only with the collection and access of media and how these change and mutate over time, but also in allowing users to extend themselves into the media they use to their fullest potential, through education and teaching; propagating an ecosystem. It is interesting that librarians 'weed' books that are no longer essential to their ecosystem, knowledge has been represented as a tree and information/ media literacies can be 'mapped' across 'landscapes'. Recently deleting the last VHS tapes from my library's collection added another extinct media species to the growing list. But new forms of video, such as 'vine' take their place.

McLuhan's theories on media ecology are further developed by Postman, Ong and Carey and more recently by scholars such as Scolari who represents the evolution of media, not as a 'linear succession of technologies'[28] but as integrated complex systems that evolve together through time. Libraries play a key role in helping to understand and navigate these ever changing complex systems.

Ethnography

'I don't have a theory of communication. I don't use theories. I just watch what people do, what you do.'[29]

Ethnography as a field of research is focused on the everyday actions of the people within a particular culture. By adopting McLuhan's idea of watching 'what people do' libraries naturally move into ethnographic research to develop the library experience. If 'the user is content'[30] as McLuhan stated himself, users become central to the media ecology of the library. If the user is content and all media exist within other forms of media, does the user become media? Libraries should consider users as part of the overall media ecology.

Recent developments in library user experience, such as the creation of *Weave, the journal of library user experience*,[31] moves beyond the traditional definition of user experience being solely focused on software interfaces and into definitions of traditional ethnography, studying people and communities in the physical library space. Instead of assuming how students and our users 'use' libraries by relying on statistics, libraries should emulate the ideas of McLuhan and adopt ethnographic research techniques, such as shadowing, giving them deeper insight into users integration and engagement within the ecology of the library.

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The Artist

'The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs.'[32]

McLuhan had very positive views of the role of the arts within society as 'the antennae of new awareness and discovery'[33], noticing the effects of new technologies and media and providing an early indicator of subtle changes. McLuhan's use of the terms 'artist' is broad in that it covers anyone who 'creates'.

McLuhan talks at length about how artists combine media forms with ease and contemplate the effects they may have. 'Chaplin hit upon the wonderful media mix of ballet and film ...'[34] showing how sensitive artists are to both positive and negative media effects.

Electronic media has enabled everyone to be creative, to effectively become an 'artist', everyone now has the ability to create and disseminate their work, 'art is now integrated into everyday life'[35] through media forms, which McLuhan suggested was a good thing. 'If artists are indeed the antennae of our species ... then electronic media surely seem to be providing everyone with a multiplicity of more powerful antennae.'[36]

It is important that artists are sufficiently aware of the media ecology around them and the effects that media has on society and vice versa. Information/digital/media literacies are critically important for artists as they work across numerous senses and are not restricted to a single medium of written text, or speech.

Directly linked to ideas of media ecology and technology's impact on society is the work of artist Jakob Jakobsen, described in Fuller's book *Media ecologies : Materialist Energies in Art and Technoculture*[37]. Jakobsen's *The Switch*, is an installation consisting of an on/off switch controlling street lights in a cul-de-sac of a Danish community. The impact of a simple media form such as light and the ability to control the light with a single switch had multiple impacts on the local community. As Jakobsen explains: 'it wasn't just a functional intervention but demanded a renewed social organization around the new variable introduced into the local environment'[38]

Not all insights by artists are as obvious, but the importance of their insights no matter how large or small, should not be underestimated.

Software

'Software has emerged as the main new media form of our time'[39]

Lev Manovich suggests that software itself is the new medium[40], especially as software and programming is becoming democratized through websites like Github,[41] where open source software development is shared in a global community and is open and free to anyone who wishes to learn. Software is no longer the domain of a computer programmer or professional, but as all previous media forms before it, software is becoming accessible to all. Libraries are adopting software as the new media form but alongside this librarians need to develop the necessary skills that are needed to support them.

What does this mean for libraries? They should continue to do what they have been doing since the first medium, by keeping aware of the new emerging technology and mediums, but more importantly, educating users about different media and their relevant literacies. Transfer knowledge and skills across the media ecology and adopt software for use in research and learning. Think about new developments in technology and use McLuhan's tetrads to consider positive and negative impacts. Library professionals should also broaden their own knowledge into related disciplines of communications, media and ethnography. In the long term library professionals should broaden their skills into software development with the potential to develop new media forms themselves. Most importantly, library professionals should not forget the work of McLuhan, but instead embrace his theories and ideas and use them to develop the libraries of the future.

I offer you Eric McLuhan's final thoughts, 'Marshall McLuhan's work is far from over: it has just begun.'[42]

Conclusion

Re-reading McLuhan has developed my own personal practice most significantly by completely changing my view on the importance of new technologies. I am a very recent adopter of Twitter, due in part to my readings of McLuhan. If you had asked me a year ago if libraries should be involved with twitter, facebook or any other emergent software technology, I would have probably passed it off as a fad, or being less relevant to libraries than traditional media. I have always been technologically aware, but until studying McLuhan from a librarian's

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perspective, I had not connected libraries with his conception of 'media' and 'media-ecologies' and applied these to 'new' media forms.

I was surprised by how well McLuhan's theories supported my teaching of information literacy and reinforced my belief in the importance of information literacy to all learners, across all disciplines.

Through my research it was clear that McLuhan had been misunderstood and overlooked by many librarians at a cost to libraries during an important time in their development. My hope is that the eventual publication of McLuhan's book on libraries will reawaken interest in his theories and spark a broader adoption of them by the library profession.

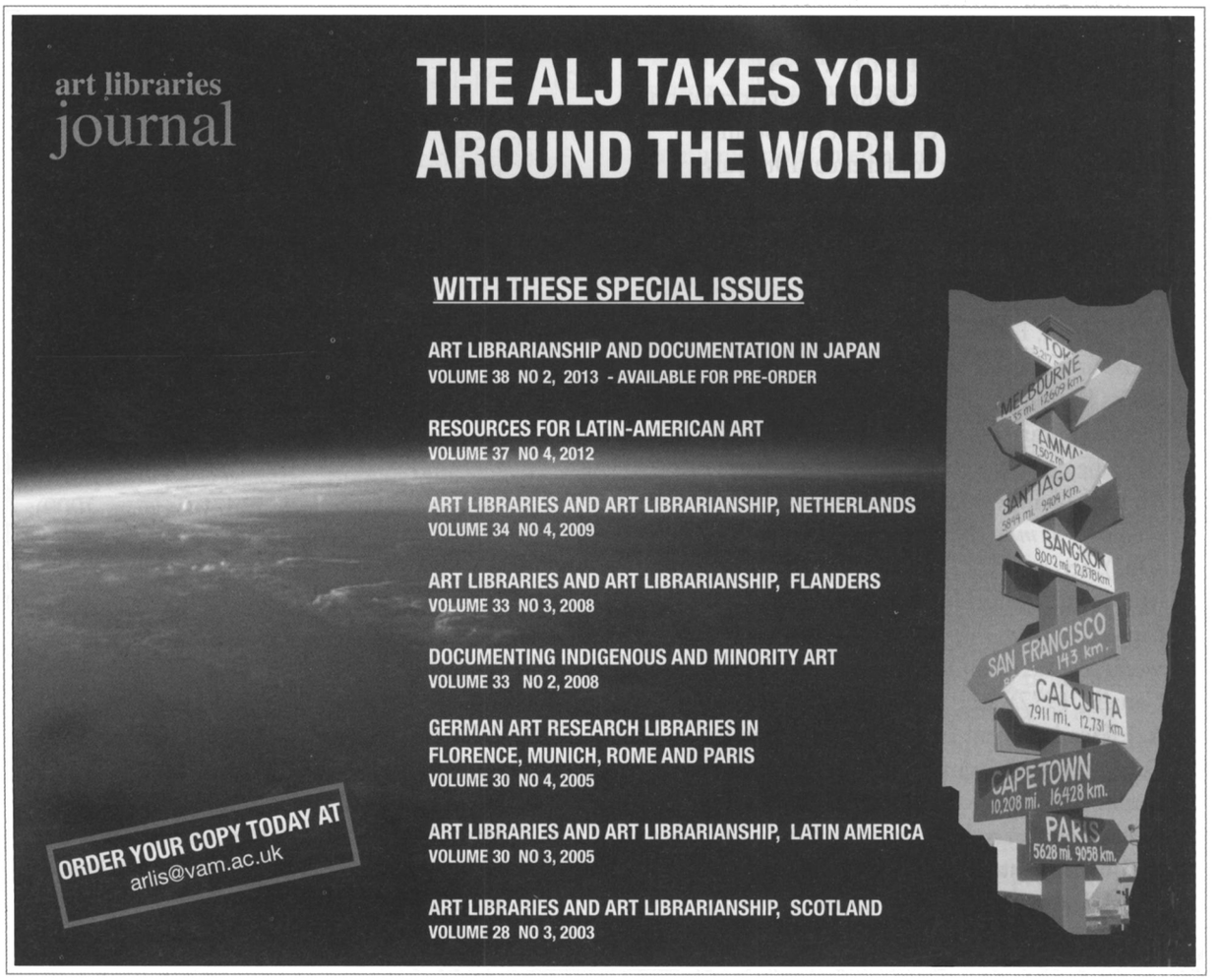
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