Language, Technology and the “They Self”: How Linguistic Manipulation of Mass and Social Media Distract from the Authentic Self

Edith M. Talley

University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.uno.edu/honors_theses

Recommended Citation
LANGUAGE, TECHNOLOGY AND THE “THEY SELF”:
HOW LINGUISTIC MANIPULATION OF MASS AND SOCIAL MEDIA DISTRACT
FROM THE AUTHENTIC SELF

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies

of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Interdisciplinary Studies with Honors

By

Edith M. Talley

April 2014
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No other professor at the University of New Orleans has had a greater impact on the course of my studies and the development of this thesis than Dr. Frank Schalow. When I stepped into his classroom three years ago, I had no idea I was crossing the threshold into an entirely new way of viewing the world. I owe my love of philosophy to him and his tireless enthusiasm, not only for teaching, but for learning from his students. Thank you, Dr. Schalow, for aiding me in my quest for authenticity.

To the director and advisers of the Division of Interdisciplinary Studies, Dr. Elaine Brooks, Mr. Dan Harper, and Mr. Gerard Williams, respectively, I offer my gratitude for the support, guidance, and friendship you provided as I made my way through the undergraduate process. I arrived late to the game, but you helped me catch up. Your unfailing support helped me scale enormous mountains.

To my three sons, Andrew, Brandon, and Justin, no mother could be more proud or more blessed than I. You thought it was “cool” when Mom decided to go to college, and never once flagged in your support. From school supplies, to transportation, to being there on big occasions and small ones, you contributed financially and emotionally to making my dream come true. I am inspired by you.

Most of all, I wish to thank my husband, Andrew. No one stood beside me more willingly as I pursued my dream. No one lifted me up more lovingly when I stumbled and fell. And no one believed in me more completely when I doubted myself. We laughed, we cried, we debated philosophy, and we persevered. You are the rock upon which I am grounded, the wind in my sails, and the gentle hand that restrains me when I threaten to fly too close to the sun. I know you have sacrificed, and I love you for it.
CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ iv

ABSTRACT...................................................................................................................... v

INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1

PART I. THE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN HEIDEGGER.............................................. 4

  On Being and Time ...................................................................................................... 4

  On Being and Language ............................................................................................. 9

  Idle Talk Goes Viral .................................................................................................... 12

PART II. THE MEDIA ECOSYSTEM OF MARSHALL McLuhan ...................... 15

  The End of the World as We Know It ....................................................................... 15

  Tribal, Typographical, and Electronic Man ............................................................... 17

  Is Seeing Really Believing? ....................................................................................... 25

PART III. PHILOSOPHY IN THE INFORMATION AGE ...................................... 29

  Social Media: Where the Global Village Meets ..................................................... 29

  What about the Harmony? ....................................................................................... 38

PART IV. CONCLUSIONS .......................................................................................... 43

  A Retrieval of McLuhan’s Vision ........................................................................... 43

  A Retrieval of the Question of the Meaning of Being ...................................... 43

WORKS CITED .............................................................................................................. 46

iii
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Master/Slave Relationship with Technology</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Master/Slave Relationship with Technology</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Pro-gun Meme</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Anti-Boehner Meme</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Sharia Law Satirical Hoax</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Response to Sharia Law Hoax</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>1937 Political Cartoon</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Facebook Behavior Shaping Meme</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Reliance on Mobile Apps in Disasters</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Facebook Post about Missing UNO Student</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>UNO Tweets about Missing Student</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

This thesis examines German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s concepts of being and time, the role of language in being, and ways of authentic being through the lens of modern media practices in the Information Age. It relates Heidegger’s philosophy to the media ecology theory introduced by Marshall McLuhan in the 1960s by exploring McLuhan’s themes of tribal, typographical and electronic man. In addition, this thesis considers the role of mass media in information dissemination.

The goal of this report is to explicate the shaping effects of mass media, especially social media, on individual perceptions and societal culture and identify ways in which such shaping affects authentic ways of being.

Keywords: authenticity, social media, Information Age, language, media ecology
INTRODUCTION

In his landmark work, Being in Time, twentieth century German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889 – 1976) concerned himself with the phenomenology of “Being.” Heidegger is often described as an existentialist, though he refused to be classified as such. To Heidegger, “Being” is about more than existing; it’s about becoming one’s authentic self, “the person you always were,” and avoiding, to the extent possible, becoming mired in the “they self.” Heidegger, much like Hegel before him, saw language as the medium for self-exploration and self-expression, a medium through which one achieves authenticity. However, he viewed rapid twentieth century technological advances with a distrustful eye. He anticipated technology’s ability to distract us from achieving authenticity while entrapping us in the “they self.”

Though Heidegger was a brilliant philosopher, his concepts are among the most difficult to understand. Fortunately, many scholars, like Dr. Michael Zimmerman (University of Colorado at Boulder), have delved deeply into his philosophy and discussed it extensively. Zimmerman’s work, as well as that of many others, concentrates on Heidegger’s overall understanding of what it means to “Be.” Though Heidegger wrote and lectured about language and technology, researchers have explored those concepts mostly through the lens of their relation to Heidegger’s ways of authentic being, or authenticity. In this thesis, I will also view language and technology through the lens of authenticity and apply it to modern media practices. To do that, I will incorporate the thought of another twentieth century visionary, Marshall McLuhan.

In the 1960s McLuhan (1911 – 1980), began blazing a trail into the relationship between media and message and their historical impact on culture. He is famous for the
aphorism, “The medium is the message,” and he coined the expression “global village” long before digital media became the juggernaut it is today. Like Heidegger, he saw very clear connections between technology and how we view ourselves and the world. He extended the concept that communication media are environments in which human cultures are subtly “massaged” into shape, an idea that has come to be known as media ecology. The “message” of the media, is the media itself, the influence it exerts on human behavior.

Interest in McLuhan’s theories waned after about ten years. However, in recent years, McLuhan’s concepts have regained popularity. In light of advances in digital communication technology, media scholars have begun to reassess McLuhan’s visionary ideas prompting *New York Times* reporter, Alexander Stille, to write in October 2000:

> [I]n the last several years McLuhan has emerged from the dustbin of history to become a pop icon of the Internet age. *Wired* magazine lists him as its patron saint, a flurry of books with titles like "Digital McLuhan" present him in a new light, and a generation grappling with the transforming effects of cyberspace, cell phones and virtual reality has begun to see him not as out of date but ahead of his time (Stille).

In this paper, I will begin with an introduction to Martin Heidegger’s concepts of being and time, the role of language in being, and ways of authentic being. Next, I will introduce Marshall McLuhan’s concepts of media as the message, tribal, typographic, and electric man, and cultural shaping by media environments. Finally, I will marry McLuhan’s media ecology to Heidegger’s phenomenology by exploring how linguistic devices such as memes and sound bites used in mass and social media have morphed into
manipulative forms of cultural expression and how they distract us from achieving authenticity.
On Being and Time

Anyone attempting to read Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, or any of his writings for that matter, quickly realizes that this philosopher has a unique relationship with language. Introductions to English translations of his books often begin with discussions on the difficulty in translating them. Gilbert Shaver, in his review of Albert Hofstadter's translation, *Martin Heidegger: Poetry, Language, Thought*, says the problems faced by translators are "not merely formidable, they are outright Herculean...Heidegger forges language in a primal way" (Shaver 742). Unraveling and adequately communicating the meanings of Heidegger's forged neologisms, like ownedness and thrownness, or odd word combinations, like being-with, being-in, being–toward and being-there, make translation even more daunting than the straightforward task of translating German into English. Yet, Heidegger’s interest in language goes well beyond forging original and often perplexing idioms.

Heidegger characterizes language as the “house of being,” an abode where being is disclosed and mysteries are protected. Through his exploration of discourse, the basis upon which language is founded, Heidegger uncovers the difference between authentic and inauthentic language. By virtue of this contrast, he suggests extremes of language. Despite his forward-thinking and somewhat prophetic distrust for rapidly developing technology, it is unlikely even Heidegger could have anticipated how extreme, perhaps to the point of perversion, contemporary discourse and language would become. The advent of mass media, especially social media, opened avenues of discourse which have served to amplify inauthentic idle chatter and gossip, thus making it even more difficult
for Dasein to hear the silent call of conscience Heidegger says is necessary if Dasein is to
turn from the inauthentic "they-self" toward a unique, individual, and authentic way of
behind.

However, before we can address the relationship between language and being, we
must first explore the fundamentals of Martin Heidegger's thinking. Heidegger
revolutionized Western philosophy when he introduced his method of phenomenological
ontology in the early twentieth century. In his seminal work, Being and Time, he argues
that philosophy has historically, since the time of Plato and Aristotle, abandoned,
forgotten, and, finally, trivialized and dismissed the most important question it should be
asking: the question of the meaning of being (Being and Time 1-3). He does not
concern himself with questioning the meaning of being in an abstract or metaphysical
sense. This, he claims, is the historical, traditional, and erroneous path upon which his
predecessors strayed. Instead, he focuses on concrete ways in which Dasein, the being of
human being, could manifestly be.

Unlike Hegel, who devised an abstract dialectic method of subject-object conflict
and resolution to achieve spiritual elevation toward the absolute, Heidegger espouses
hermeneutics as a method of fundamental ontological analysis. Lived-experience, being-
with others in the present, and the projection of future possibilities form an endless spiral
of temporality by which Dasein gains concrete insights into the meaning of its own being
and ways of being. To put it another way, Heidegger's focus is not on passive existence
as such. It is on actively existing. “Being-there,” which is the literal translation of Dasein,
is a concrete, owned, active mode of existence which situates the self in a world, its own
unique locus in place and time, and, thus, links being and time (Being and Time 14-17).
Because time is ecstatic, being is ecstatic. But being is not just a series of nows. Temporal being, like hermeneutics, is recursive. It involves a circling back from the pursuit of possibilities projected onto the horizon of the future to draw on lived experience upon which being is grounded, in order to understand and adapt to the situation in which Dasein finds itself in the present. In this way, Dasein discloses itself to itself as itself and, in turn, illuminates new possibilities of being against the horizon of time. "Hermeneutics," says Heidegger, "works out the conditions of the possibility of every ontological investigation" (Being and Time 33). By virtue of this hermeneutic circle of temporality, Dasein is always running ahead of itself or anticipating itself in its possibilities. An analogy of this behavior can be seen in baseball when a runner on base leads off a few feet toward the next base in anticipation of the batter hitting a soon-to-be-pitched ball. It is important to understand, however, that Heidegger does not provide us with a "how-to" book in Being and Time, or, indeed, in any of his philosophical works. Instead, he prompts us to question the meaning of our own unique being so that we, in being, disclose to ourselves, as beings, individualized "ways" of being.

Hence, being is experienced in a very personal way. As Heidegger says, "The being [Dasein] which this being is concerned about in its being is always my own...When we speak of Da-sein, we must always use the personal (his italics) pronoun along with whatever we say: 'I am,' 'You are.'" Mineness and ownedness, then, become important components of being. Both imply choosing. Being is "mine" and, as such, I can choose ways to be. As a result, I "own" the choices I make. Of course, the existence of choices implies the existence of possibilities from which to choose. Among those is the possibility of choosing one's self. "Da-sein is always essentially its possibility," says
Heidegger. "It can (his italics) choose itself in its being..." Or not. Heidegger identifies two kinds of existing: authentic and inauthentic. When Dasein chooses itself, or "belongs to itself," it is authentic (*Being and Time* 40). Thus, authenticity occurs when Dasein chooses itself, when it chooses its own unique possibilities.

Most of the time, however, we are not concerned with choosing to be our authentic selves, though it does not necessarily follow that in not choosing authenticity we are defaulting to inauthenticity. In fact, most of us have no conscious notion of the meaning of authentic or inauthentic existence, which pertain to Dasein's way of being. We are aware of our existence on what Heidegger refers to as a pre-philosophical level, but we rarely question the meaning of our existence in a concrete philosophical manner. Most of the time we are caught up in a mode of existence Heidegger calls "everydayness." In everydayness, we attend to our personal needs and the needs of other entities and beings with which and with whom we interact. We do the shopping, mow the lawn, have dinner with friends, feed the cat, and so on. In this pre-philosophical everydayness, we are not usually attuned to being, as such. We are most often attuned to what Heidegger calls the "they-self."

It might be said that we are born into the "they" in the sense that we are thrown into a world of being-with-one-another from birth. But what is this nebulous "they" of which Heidegger speaks? He labels it "the others" when he says:

One belongs to the others oneself, and entrenches their power. "The others," whom one designates as such in order to cover over one's own essential belonging to them, are those who *are there* (his italics) initially and for the most part in everyday being-with-one-another. The who is not
this and not that one, not oneself and not some and not the sum of them all.

The "who" is the neuter, the they (his italics) (Being and Time 118-19).

The "they" has power over us, as Dasein, in that we become subservient to it. We relinquish our own authentic ways of existing and choose ways that conform to standards set forth by the "they." We fail to consider the identity of the "they" of which we are not only members but also slaves. Heidegger argues that the "they" is constituted by no one in particular and everyone in general. This is what he means by "neuter." When we say "they say...," we cannot name a particular individual. When we say, "Everyone is doing or saying it," we cannot attribute what is done or said to anyone in particular. Often, we hide within the anonymity of the "they." In this way, we, as individuals, or as Dasein, take no responsibility for our choices; we become no one in particular and lose our individuality. We assume the "they-self" and abandon ways of authentic existence.

Thus, the individual, as Dasein, becomes entangled in the "they," and manifests concern in maintaining that entanglement, even against its own interests. This is evidenced by the way many individuals strive to achieve societal standards of wealth, power, or influence. But even these standards are "leveled" or limited by the possibilities that anyone can achieve. For example, "they" say, "Anyone can become rich in America." This implies that the societal standard of wealth is achievable by anyone, everyone, and no one in particular. Yet, societal standards do not include the ecstatic and dynamic possibilities of being that exist for an individual. As part of the "they," Dasein's possibilities are limited to those which anyone, everyone, and no one in particular can accomplish. Heidegger calls this "averageness," and describes it as "what is proper, what is allowed, and what is not...what is granted success and what is not" (Being and Time
Oddly, Dasein finds refuge in receding into the "they." If "they" always do it, then Dasein is disburdened from the responsibility of what is done. The "they" caters to Dasein's "tendency to take things easily or make things easy" (*Being and Time* 120). Of course, the very "easiness" of the "they" makes Dasein's task of disentanglement from it even more challenging. Yet, only by turning from the "they," or by setting ourselves apart from it, can one begin the philosophical process of asking oneself what the meaning of being is *for me*. Only then can one's own unique possibilities be cleared or opened up against the horizon of time. Only then can the truth of being be uncovered. And only then can Dasein choose its own unique, authentic self over the "they-self." According to Heidegger, this turn from the "they-self" toward authenticity is accomplished through and by language.

**On Being and Language**

Discourse is how we, in being-with-one-another, share meaning. As humans, we do this with language, particularly speech. Language lets beings be seen in themselves as themselves. Thus, language reveals the truth of being. In his *Letter on Humanism*, Heidegger says “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells” (217). Paradoxically, language also preserves the mystery of that which cannot be said. Heidegger posits that without a word to say it, a thing cannot be disclosed as itself in itself, and the would-be speaker is resigned to silence (*The Nature of Language* 62). Who has not groped for the right word or words to give expression to a thought only to give up in frustration? But silence is not negative in itself because, for Heidegger, ordinary speaking can never fully accomplish the saying of truth. Only poetry comes close - not because it says more, but because it says more while saying less. In his
analysis of language, Heidegger is not as much concerned with poetic subject matter as he is with the way poets say, particularly through the use of metaphor, what cannot be put adequately into words. He is not alone in understanding this paradox. The British author Aldous Huxley once wrote:

What a gulf between impression and expression! That’s our ironic fate—to have Shakespearean feelings and (unless by some billion-to-one chance we happen to be Shakespeare) to talk about them like automobile salesmen or teen-agers or college professors. We practice alchemy in reverse—touch gold and it turns into lead; touch the pure lyrics of experience, and they turn into the verbal equivalents of tripe and hogwash (Huxley 35-36).

Here, in his own way, Huxley acknowledges the power of poetry to distinguish between saying and merely speaking. Saying articulates meaning. Speaking, on the other hand, may articulate meaning or it may merely produce the noise of gossip or idle chatter. For this reason, Heidegger gives priority, instead, to hearing, to actively listening to that which is not said.

Listening proves more important to Heidegger because it makes possible the hearing of a voice within each of us that silently beckons us, as Dasein, to ourselves. He refers to this voice as the "call of conscience," and characterizes it in this way: "The call is lacking any kind of utterance. It does not even come to words, and yet it is not at all obscure and indefinite. Conscience speaks constantly and solely in the mode of silence" (Being and Time 263). Conversely, idle chatter and gossip are distracting and insidious constituents of language used by the "they" whereby:
...everyone keeps track of the other, initially and first of all, watching how he will behave, what he will say to something. Being-with-one-another in the they is not at all a self-contained, indifferent side-by-sideness, but a tense, ambiguous keeping track of each other, a secretive, reciprocal listening-in. Under the mask of the for-one-another, the against-one-another is at play (Being and Time 163).

As already discussed, the anonymity of the "they" makes it easy for Dasein to avoid taking responsibility for its own choices. In doing so, Dasein "falls prey" to or is taken in by the world and falls away from itself (Being and Time 176). Idle chatter, or gossip, contributes to falling prey by disclosing to Dasein a groundless way of being. It is a way marked by a shallow curiosity for novelty rather than meaning or understanding and an ambiguity which makes it impossible "to decide what is disclosed in genuine understanding and what is not" (Being and Time 162). Such ambiguity extends even to Dasein itself. Hence, the noise of idle talk may distract Dasein from itself and its own authentic way of being. In its distraction, Dasein may be lured into falling prey to the world and becoming entangled in it. Over the din, the "call of conscience," in its silence, summons Dasein to choose itself.

In our culture, the word "conscience" often carries a connotation of guilt for some perceived wrong-doing. For example, a contrite writer might say, "My conscience is bothering me," if she had plagiarized the work of another. However, Heidegger does not connect "conscience" to guilt associated with wrong-doing. Instead, he contends that our guilt is that of being thrown into the world, of having choices to make as a result of our throwness, and of having to accept responsibility for those choices. Conscience, in this
sense, calls to us to take responsibility for our actions, to turn away from the concealing, anonymous refuge of the "they," and choose to be our own authentic selves (Schalow and Denker 85-86). Conscience also calls us to attest to our ownmost possibility: death. With this attestation, we no longer live as if death happens to others and not to us. We are released from fear and the fleeing from death that makes taking refuge in the "they" seem attractive. Instead, we enjoy the freedom that comes with understanding and accepting that all our possibilities are limited by death. We are free to choose individual ways of being that are informed by acknowledging our finitude (Being and Time 243-44). Therefore, language, spoken and unspoken, discloses to Dasein possible authentic and inauthentic ways of being. We may choose to listen to the idle talk of the "they" and risk falling prey to the "they-self." Or we may turn, instead, to the silent call of conscience and partake of the well-spring of self-disclosure that reveals the individual truth of being that is our own.

Idle Talk Goes Viral

Martin Heidegger was born in Germany in 1889. Over the course of his 86-year life, he witnessed enormous technological changes and social upheavals. To a greater or lesser extent, he participated in both world wars. His involvement with Nazism in the years preceding World War II embroiled him in a controversy which continues to color the way he is viewed, both as an individual and a philosopher. Though he officially joined the Nazi Party on May 1, 1933, within a year he had resigned his politically connected position as Rector of the University of Freiburg and stopped attending party meetings. The debate over his role in the party is fueled by his failure to submit a formal resignation from the Nazi Party and the conflicting interpretations of lectures he gave
before and after resigning his rectorate (Zimmerman 36-45). But regardless of which side one takes, it seems clear that Heidegger, at least for a time, fell prey to the idle chatter and gossip of an era which produced Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime.

Perhaps one of the reasons Hitler's disastrous and maniacal message so effectively seduced his countrymen into the Nazi "they," possibly even Heidegger himself, was his inspired use of radio and a recent technological innovation - television. As early as 1935, Hitler, the gifted rhetorician, saw the potential in television and used it to his advantage (Spiegel TV). Heidegger, however, in his writings and lectures, views rapid technological advances with a wary eye. The processes involved in technology, such as mass production, reduce humans to no more than cogs in the machine. Furthermore, the products of technology are often only poor substitutes for what they replace. Quantity is often given priority over quality. And, in many cases, humans become slaves to the machines they create. We see that today in our mobile phone culture, as Figure 1, taken from a Facebook newsfeed, depicts:
It is worth noting that the cartoon in Figure 1 received more than 49,000 likes and 1,400 comments. By definition, as discussed later in this paper, it had gone viral by the time the screen shot of it was made. More to the point, however, is that in our entanglement with what Heidegger calls “machination” we indulge in “extreme…forgottenness of being” (Schalow and Denker 180). Through machination, we fall prey to the “they.”

Yet, despite Heidegger's anticipation of a society enslaved by its own technology, it is unlikely he foresaw the coming of the Information Age and the exaggeration of idle chatter and gossip that came with it.
PART II. THE MEDIA ECOLOGY OF MARSHALL MCLUHAN

The End of the World as We Know It

About the time Martin Heidegger began dealing with the fallout of his ill-fated decision to join the Nazi party, Herbert Marshall McLuhan began studying English at Cambridge University in England. Born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada in 1911, McLuhan rose to fame in the 1960s with his highly-publicized, if not entirely original, theories about the connections between media and culture (Stahlman 5-6). His books, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, published in 1962, and *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964 quickly transported him from relative obscurity to stardom.

Like Heidegger, McLuhan held prophetic views of the future. His anticipated revolutions in communication technology and how they would shape our culture led him to coin the terms “the age of information” and “global village.” These may be terms we carelessly toss about today, but in the mid-1960s, they were visionary, leading many today to see him as “the oracle of the digital era” (Fishman 567). Another uniquely McLuhan term that is more familiar to students of communication theory and, perhaps, most relevant to this discussion, is “the medium is the message.” In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan argues that the machine itself (or medium in a whatever form it assumes) is important, not what man does with it, when he writes, “In terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs” (7-8). To McLuhan, a product delivered by means of a mechanical process and the content of a digitally delivered message are equally irrelevant. What matters is the mode of delivery because the mode shapes the product or the message, and in doing so, shapes our culture. Therefore, it is
the medium to which we should be paying attention, not the message the medium delivers.

One of McLuhan’s favorite rhetorical devices is the pun, and he uses it in the title of his 1967 book, *The Medium is the Massage*. In it, he expands on his medium as message theme by demonstrating the almost imperceptible “massaging” of culture into various shapes accomplished by media. He likens that massaging or shaping effect to parental influence when he says, “Character is no longer shaped by only two earnest, fumbling experts. Now all the world’s a sage” (*Massage* 14). In most cases, McLuhan puts a positive spin on the movement from a linear, typographical culture to an electric, graphical one. However, he did see some drawbacks as will be discussed further on.

Perhaps the most influential scholar to affect McLuhan’s thinking was his colleague at the University of Toronto and fellow Canadian, Harold Innis. In fact, in his introduction to Innis’s book, *The Bias of Communication*, McLuhan referred to his own book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, as but “a footnote to the observations of Innis” (ix). Innis preceded McLuhan in focusing attention on the relationship between media and culture with the publication of his books, *The Bias of Communication* and *Empire and Communications*, in the early 1950s. He organized media/cultural connections along the lines of “orality, modes of inscription, and electronic means of relaying messages” (Babe, *Innis, Environment* 314). McLuhan, similarly, identified three dominant modes of communication media, but he expanded his theory in a significantly different direction. While Innis concentrated on how society’s elite use media, particularly in the form of opinion, as a means of social control, McLuhan concentrated on sensory perception. Innis saw media as extensions of message *senders*. McLuhan saw media as extensions
of message receivers. The gist of his theory is that media “modify both individuals and cultures by reshaping ideas and perceptions, that media ‘massage’ users imperceptibly, and that culture has become a product or commodity” (Babe, McLuhan 247, 271-72). Culture, then, is the product of the media environment within which it is framed. This particular view of McLuhan’s gave rise to the discipline known today as media ecology, the study of environments created by media and their relationships with the cultures cast within them. McLuhan’s vision of a new electric or electronic (in today’s vernacular – digital) media environment included an upheaval in culture that would effectively end the world as it was known at the time. Looking back on the advances in digital technology since the height of his popularity in the 1960s, it is easy to see why many now see him as almost clairvoyant. But to understand how McLuhan’s theory relates to Heidegger’s, we must first examine it more closely.

Tribal, Typographical, and Electronic Man

Marshall McLuhan, like Heidegger, had a unique relationship with language. He employed a “mosaic” approach to writing that involved the use of metaphors, symbols, archetype, cliché, and even myths, which he equates to pattern recognition in pre-literate man (Babe, McLuhan 251-55). He challenges his readers to probe for layers of meaning and, especially, patterns. The mosaic, or pattern recognition theme, figures predominantly in McLuhan’s theories about the past and the digital age in which we now live.

Functionally, McLuhan viewed spoken language not only as an amplification of mental processes, but as a transportation medium, much like feet or wheels. Language permits us to go from one thing to another with greater ease and much less involvement
(Babe, *McLuhan* 260-61). As an extension of one’s feet and hands, language, as a medium, creates environments and shapes cultures. For instance, in a pre-linguistic culture, communication might involve walking up to a person with whom one wishes to communicate and then indicating, by means of hand and body signals, the message one hopes to convey. Language simplifies that process tremendously, creates a new environment, one that allows more physical distance between the subjects (as far as the voice will carry) and even eliminates the need for a direct line of sight between communicators. Suddenly, a culture that relies entirely on face-to-face interaction, is turned upside down. There is a brief period of confusion, but, eventually, a transcendent link is found between the old means of communication and the new one - perhaps the combination of facial expression with speech. That transcendent link alleviates the anxiety associated with change. For those affected, a new, more distant and less involved communication environment reshapes their culture. It is still one of physical closeness, but not quite as close as before. And, as ideas are more quickly and easily exchanged, the behaviors they promote are more quickly and easily adopted. Consider the simplicity of describing a hunting strategy and discussing its pros and cons rather than acting it out in a hunter-gatherer version of charades. Simply being able to yell “Help!” when one is in danger and have someone else hear, understand, and respond is life-changing. Curiously, after the initial confusion subsides and change responses become cultural routines, media (in this case, speech) is rarely perceived as the cultural shaper (McLuhan, *Massage* 84). The new medium, as an environment, is invisible to all but the most discerning.

The introduction of spoken language, then, marks the first of the three major communication periods or environments identified by McLuhan, all achieved in a pattern
similar to the one described above. “Speech,” writes McLuhan, “acts to separate man from man and mankind from the cosmic unconscious” (Understanding Media 79-80). The upside of this, of course, is expediency. But the downside, according to McLuhan is the loss of connection with the collective unconscious. Like Heidegger, McLuhan appreciated silence and understood that much could be gleaned from what is not said. He rhapsodizes about a “speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace” (Understanding Media 80)” Yet, for better or worse, consciousness and speech, which gives consciousness voice, are what distinguish us from lower animals. By speech, mankind is shaped into what McLuhan refers to as a tribal culture that is linked, in terms of human senses, to the ear.

Sound is indiscriminate and unyielding. It comes from all directions at once. “We can’t shut out sound automatically,” writes McLuhan. “We simply are not equipped with earlids” (Massage 111). Tribal man, overwhelmed by the constant onslaught of sounds, is forced to mythologize. In The Gutenberg Galaxy, McLuhan describes myth as “a succinct statement of a complex social process” (25). Later, in The Medium is the Massage, he defines myth as “the mode of simultaneous awareness of a complex group of causes and effects” (114). In both descriptions, he infers the need for pattern recognition. Though speech “separates man from mankind,” it also creates interdependencies. Spoken communication depends on individuals hearing each other. Thus, speech is space-binding, it brings people together. Speech does not bind time, however, because as soon as a word is uttered, it flies through space and is gone. Spoken words, says McLuhan, are “resonant, live, active, natural forces” (Gutenberg 19). The only way to bind them to time is by rote memorization and ritual repetition. Gregorian
chants and modern-day advertising jingles are good examples of speech bound to time. Song lyrics that run through one’s head for hours on end are another. In fact, many ritual recitations are sung. Who in the United States did not learn their ABCs by singing the alphabet song? In medieval times, monks delivered a great deal of the Catholic liturgy in plainsong.

Tribal man’s world, then, is presented to him in a non-linear, multi-directional sensual bombardment. His overloaded sensorium responds by seeking patterns rather than specific meanings. He interacts with the world in a holistic, non-fragmented way. Time is less important to him than space, though the ability to bind words to time, to remember and repeat them, makes him a repository of knowledge and empowers him. His culture is communal and interdependent, and he who harnesses the magic of speech wields the power. For pre-literate man, the speech-as-power brokers are tribal chieftains, shamans, or storytellers. Priests and scribes supplant them as various forms of non-typographical writing develop. But communal tribal culture is overthrown with the arrival of independent typographic man.

McLuhan traces the origins of typographic man to the development of the phonetic alphabet. Before then, written communication took the form of hieroglyphs or ideograms that, like the myths of tribal man, synthesized several things at once into a recognizable pattern. McLuhan points to a modern example of this when he writes:

Suppose that, instead of displaying the Stars and Stripes, we were to write the words “American flag” across a piece of cloth and display that. While the symbols would convey the same meaning, the effect would be quite different. To translate the rich visual mosaic of the Stars and Stripes into
written form would to deprive it of most of its qualities of corporate image and of experience, yet the abstract literal bond would remain much the same. Perhaps this illustration will serve to suggest the change the tribal man experiences when he becomes literate (Understanding Media 82).

Hieroglyphics, ideograms, and other symbolic writing forms do not impact the culture of tribal man the way the phonetic alphabet does. Glyphs carved into stone, like rote memorization, are time-binding. But they are also space-binding in that are heavy and cumbersome, and, generally, one must be within proximity of them to see them. Furthermore, since symbolic writing is difficult to understand, it must be read aloud to an assembly of listeners by priests or scribes who can decipher them. Thus, pre-literate man remains tribal in culture, though his information-as-power-brokers shift from the tribal chieftain, shaman, or story-teller to the priestly or scribal classes.

The phonetic alphabet, on the other hand, is a completely fragmented and fragmenting medium. The Chinese ideogram is constructed of several symbols, each representing a simple object or concept, strategically assembled to convey a complex concept. Taken alone, each component of the ideogram has meaning. The phonetic alphabet has none of those characteristics. Letters are simply meaningless components that, when arranged in particular linear configurations, form words. Words, arranged linearly, form sentences, and so on. Compared to hieroglyphs and ideograms, letters are virtual gymnasts capable of fluid movement and stunning linguistic contortions. They are easily learned, easily stored and reproduced, and easily portable. But, as demonstrated with the example of the American flag, what we gain in simplicity, portability and longevity, we lose in the synthesis of multiple sensory stimulation. Linear
writing is a time-binding, visual medium. It takes away tribal man’s ear and the temporary, multi-directional, space-binding mosaic of sound. In place of an ear, tribal man receives an eye and the time-binding, portable, retrievable, fragmentary, and unidirectional linearity of writing. The change in medium, which speeds up exponentially with the invention of the Gutenberg press, reshares tribal man’s culture. Suddenly, the masses no longer need to depend on others to read aloud to them. Tribal man now reads independently and develops an independent mindset. The priests and scribes who regulated manuscript media before the invention of the printing press lose control of tribal man’s opinion, and, as Innis theorized, of tribal man himself. He abandons tribal living and tribal thinking. Tribal man becomes typographic man.

McLuhan sees wins and losses for tribal man as he becomes typographic man in this new media environment. “If Western literate man undergoes much dissociation of inner sensibility from his use of the alphabet, he also wins his personal freedom to dissociate himself from clan and family” (*Understanding Media* 88). As typographic man’s culture conforms to this new fragmented and linear medium, his thinking is transformed from the mythic or mosaic to the linear or sequential. Books become the first mass-produced commodity. Soon, other assembly lines form. Euclidean space and linear time form the Kantian a priori grounds for rational categories of knowledge. Sequential, cause and effect, one-thing-at-a-time thinking and acting – a way of being McLuhan relates to Aristotle’s efficient cause (the production process) - takes hold of typographic man’s culture. It contrasts sharply with tribal man’s culture of pattern recognition and holistic interpretation, which McLuhan relates to Aristotle’s formal cause (the form a thing takes) (*Stahlman 10*) *(Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).*
Typographic man may have obtained freedom of individual thought and expression, but McLuhan found it disappointing that typographic man also became so desensitized by linearity that he failed to see how it shaped his culture.

Again, pattern recognition played a role in McLuhan’s thinking. In a letter to his mother in 1935, he wrote, “You may know a thing by its fruits if you are silly enough or ignorant enough to wait that long” (Letters 75). In other words, he believed by recognizing historical patterns, we may reasonably predict the outcome of current events, and he had little patience for those waiting around for empirical evidence. This may account for the oracle-like predictions McLuhan made about electronic man. It certainly accounts for much of the criticism lodged against him.

Yet, despite his very unscientific, non-linear, mosaic mythologizing, McLuhan was clearly on to something. These days, it is not uncommon to hear people say that we live in the Information Age. A good case could be made that the information age began as soon as man had the ability to synthesize and communicate sensory input and thought. But McLuhan draws a distinction between the mechanized age, made possible by moveable type, and the information age, made possible by electronic information processing. Books, representing “the first uniformly repeatable commodity, the first assembly-line, and the first mass-production” (Massage 124), were also among the first threatened with obsolescence by a new commodity that snubbed its nose at both space and time – digitized information. As with books, all other products shaped or influenced by typography faced a similar possibility of outmodedness.

Curiously, it was the telegraph that started what McLuhan calls a cultural implosion by which individuals and media “merge into an interdependent, simultaneous
system,” or a “global village” (Babe, *McLuhan* 263-64). Consider the example of settlers spreading across the American west who no longer had to send letters by Pony Express or mail train. Emergency messages, at least, could be sent via telegraph. Soon, telephone, radio, television, and computers followed. People became linked in ways similar to that of tribal man. Messages could be “heard” instantly from around the globe.

McLuhan provides an early example of electronic media shaping culture (in this case, military culture) in *Understanding Media* when he recalls a statement given during the Nuremberg trials after World War II. Albert Speer, the German Armaments minister, credited electric media, such as the telephone, teleprinter, and wireless radio, with making it possible for “orders from the highest levels to be given direct to the lowest levels, where, on account of the absolute authority behind them, they were carried out uncritically…” (247). The speed up of information via electronic media, predictably, upset the culture of typographic man. As Speer’s testimony demonstrates, orders now go straight from the top to the bottom, circumscribing an obsolete linear sequence that involves carrying written or verbal orders by hand or mouth from headquarters through a series of intermediaries to the front lines. Extrapolate that to manufacturing assembly lines where humans were soon replaced by robots, and the panic caused by digital media becomes easier to understand. Typographic man lived in a culture of clock-watchers who measured productivity in discrete, sequential units of time. Space became boundless as he extended himself further and further from the tribal core. But when the explosively mechanized environment created by typography imploded on itself, space and time disintegrated. The information age arrived bringing with it the end of life as typographical man had known it. Electronic man was born.
Electronic man exists in a culture of what McLuhan calls “allatonceness.” If life for typographic man was one of action (inventing, manufacturing, and marketing), life for electronic man is one of reaction to a constant, overwhelming barrage of information. “At the high speeds of electric communication,” McLuhan writes, “purely visual means of apprehending the world are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective…Our electrically-configured world has forced us to move from the habit of data classification to the mode of pattern recognition” *(Massage* 63). Media ecologist and fellow Canadian Robert Babe interpreted McLuhan’s theory this way: “With information overload, old strategies for attaining knowledge and making sense of the world – isolating a structure or institution, studying it in detail, and making logical or causal connections among its parts – no longer suffice…the receiver must…adopt once more mythic modes of understanding and…creat[e] mosaics from unrelated bits” *(McLuhan* 264). This makes electronic man more akin to tribal man than typographic man. Once again, man is plugged into the collective unconscious. But what has he given up in return? And, if the medium is the message, what message is this medium sending?

**Is Seeing Really Believing?**

Forty years have passed since Marshall McLuhan’s star rose and thirty have passed since it sunk once more into oblivion. In that time, much of what he predicted has come to pass. We now live in a global village shaped by digital media in a time known as the Information Age. We can communicate instantly with almost anyone almost anywhere at almost any time. And we are constantly bombarded with information via numerous electronic sources – television, radio, and most pervasively, the internet. Not only are we receivers of information, we are senders. Digital media, as McLuhan
expected, “demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being” (Massage 125). Yet, despite being an aural media which enables us to “hear” each other from across the globe, digital media is mostly graphic or visual. McLuhan explains this by saying, “Most people find it difficult to understand purely verbal concepts. They suspect the ear; they don’t trust it. In general we feel more secure when things are visible, when we can ‘see for ourselves.’ We admonish children, for instance, to believe only half of what they see, and nothing of what they hear” (italics his) (Massage 117). But the question, when it comes to digital media, is can we even believe what we see?

Information, like cars, televisions, computers, and smart phones, is a commodity to be bought and sold. Innis warned that “any medium that predominates in a society at a given time is controlled by that society’s elite...who frame and enforce...laws, who engage in and control markets and the price system, who advertise, and who educate for the exigencies of ever-changing job markets.” And how do they do this? Not by force, but by exercising control over people’s thoughts and perceptions through promoting various opinions. (Babe, Innis, Environment 315). Even McLuhan admitted that the power of media is not in the content, but in its ability to control people’s behavior. In fact, he likened media content to a juicy piece of meat carried by a burglar to distract a watchdog. He felt most people are oblivious to the way media “massages” their opinions and perceptions because they are so easily distracted by inflammatory or gratuitous content (Babe, McLuhan 264-65). About the global village, he warned in an interview, “The global village absolutely insure maximal disagreement on all points. It never occurred to me that uniformity and tranquility were the properties of the global village. It has more spite and envy” (Babe, McLuhan 256). Most damning was his admonition to
his son to limit the amount of time his granddaughter spent watching television, which he called a “vile drug” (Babe, McLuhan 270). Clearly, he saw dangers in electronic media.

The paradox of Marshall McLuhan is that he also envisioned great things for the Information Age. He described it as a “time to use not a single, but multiple methods of exploration” (Massage 69). He imagined it as a time of re-tribalization, hearkening back to the days when priests and scribes read manuscripts aloud to parishioners and all the human senses were in balance (Babe, McLuhan 255). He hoped for harmony and peace.

How can this apparent equivocation on his part be explained? If there is one unifying statement of McLuhan’s view of the future it’s this: “We shape our tools,” he said, “and thereafter our tools shape us” (Understanding Media xi). For better or worse, according to McLuhan, we are the servomotors of whatever we invent. In this regard, he and Heidegger shared the same view.

*Figure 2: Master/Slave Relationship with Technology*
PART III. PHILOSOPHY IN THE INFORMATION AGE

Social Media: Where the Global Village Meets

McLuhan foresaw a global village, but social media, as it now exists, was not part of his explicit vision. Yet, social media has become the gathering place of the global village, and it exhibits characteristics anticipated by Innis, McLuhan, and Heidegger. There are “maximal disagreement on all points,” and precious little “uniformity or tranquility.” Cyberbullying carries “spite and envy” to the extreme. Those opinions Innis wrote about are everywhere, and Heidegger’s idle talk and gossip are rampant. They can be seen in “mean tweets” that proliferate on Twitter and in Instagrams that can be instantly erased and yet still remain in memory. But perhaps no other social networking site represents this media ecology better than Facebook.

In a review of its results for the second quarter of 2013, Facebook reports 728 million active daily users and 1.19 billion active monthly users as of September 30, 2013. Further, the company reports that when it introduced the ability to upload images from Instagram, 5 million videos were uploaded in the first 24 hours (Facebook). The implications of these numbers are staggering. One article, video, meme, event, or other item posted on Facebook has the potential to reach 728 million people in one day. When any of these posts results in thousands, tens of thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of likes, shares, and comments, it is said to have "gone viral." The website, Urban Dictionary, defines viral as "a website or video that has become instantly famous overnight via YouTube or other popular media." However, it is worth noting that viral, in this sense, derives from the term "viral marketing," which Urban Dictionary further defines as "an online marketing strategy that encourages people to pass on a marketing
message" (Urban Dictionary). So, in the Information Age, we are playing a global internet version of the children's game "pass it on," often at the bidding of marketers or others with their own agendas, just as Innis warned. Messages, often shaped by their originators to elicit certain behaviors from those who receive them, are "whispered" into the ears of those nearest them, who in turn "whisper" it to those nearest them, and so on. And like the children's game, the resultant message may or may not bear any resemblance to the original. The content of these messages is often inflammatory, extreme, or obscene as evidenced by Figures 3 and 4 below, both of which are memes taken directly from a Facebook newsfeed:

*Figure 3: Pro-gun Meme*
Figure 4: Anti-Boehner Meme
Often the content is blatantly false, as in this article, linked to a Facebook newsfeed, which "satirically" suggests Dearborn, Michigan has adopted Sharia Law (National Report):

*Figure 5: Sharia Law Satirical Hoax*

---

*National Report* in a surprise weekend vote, the city council of Dearborn, Michigan voted 4-3 to become the first US city to officially implement all aspects of Sharia Law. The tough new law, slated to go into effect January 1st, addresses secular law including crime, politics and economics as well as personal matters such as sexual intercourse, fasting, prayer, diet and hygiene.

The new law could see citizens stoned for adultery or having a limb amputated for theft. Lesser offenses, such as drinking alcohol or abortion, could result in flogging and/or caning. In addition, the law imposes harsh laws with regards to women and allows for child marriage.

Some in town seem to welcome the new legislation while others have denounced the move as "abhorrent", a threat to
Sooner or later, many readers realized this was a hoax. However, many others did not, as evidenced by their responses seen in Figure 6 (National Report).

*Figure 6: Response to Sharia Law Hoax*

McLuhan would argue that the messages contained in these memes, and indeed in television and radio sound bites, or any form of mass media is of lesser importance than the overall affects they produce. Innis, who was more politically oriented than McLuhan, believed those who control the dominant media also control society. Though power and control was not one of McLuhan’s central themes, it can be inferred from his culture
shaping motif. Occasionally, though, he was explicit in the controlling factors of media as in this passage from *Understanding Media*: “Ads seem to work on the very advanced principle that a small pellet or pattern in a noisy, redundant barrage of repetition will gradually assert itself. Ads push the principle of noise all the way to the plateau of persuasion. They are quite in accord with the procedures of brain-washing” (227). The examples above are all advertisements of a sort. They clearly promote agendas, though exactly what those agendas may be is far from clear. On the surface each seems to be touting some political or ideological opinion. But, since the originators of these messages are unknown, it is impossible to know their aim in launching the messages into cyberspace. For example, is the purpose of the meme involving House Speaker John Boehner meant simply to attack him politically, or did the originator send it to perpetuate the friction between members of the various political parties? If so, why? These are questions many fail to ask before simply hitting the like button, commenting, or sharing the message with others.

Some may argue that "political cartoons" and similar satire have been around for years. This is true. However, the possible reach of a political cartoon, like the example in Figure 7 below from 1937, was limited to the number of people who read the newspaper. Furthermore, the identity of the cartoonist and the publisher's agenda in printing it were easier to ascertain (American Studies @ University of Virginia).
This contrasts greatly with the ambiguity and the secrecy (two elements identified by Heidegger as constituent of idle talk and gossip) that underlie messages promulgated by modern social media, not to mention the potential such messages have of "going viral."

But attention-grabbing messages like those above may actually be less distracting because of their obviousness than others which seem relatively benign but have built-in social conformity triggers. Consider the screenshot taken from Facebook shown in Figure 8 below.
Language like this exemplifies McLuhan’s notion that “all people are involved in all others at all times” (Understanding Media 173) and Heidegger's definition of idle talk when he says, "everyone keeps track of the other, initially and first of all, watching how he will behave, what he will say to something... Under the mask of the for-one-another, the against-one-another is at play" (Being and Time 163) Posts of this nature are public and others, the "they," see whether or not the receiver conforms. Therefore, the receiver of this message feels pressured to perform the "suggested" action. Such pressure results in the leveling or "averageness" Heidegger describes as doing "what is proper, what is allowed, and what is not...what is granted success and what is not" (Being and Time 119).
Though less obvious, these subtle messages are deceptively adroit at drawing individuals into the fold of the "they." Some may argue, however, that all the examples above represent only a portion of the information shared on Facebook and other social networking sites, and that most of the items posted are innocuous bits of personal information shared among "friends."

It is true we live in a world with others and we regularly interact with them, either by necessity or choice. In our being-with others, they disclose themselves to us as themselves. We, likewise, disclose ourselves. Verbal and non-verbal language makes such disclosure possible. Yet, Heidegger tells us language also safeguards mysteries, that which is not said. And for all the trivial things posted on Facebook and other social networking sites, much is not said. This phenomenon takes the form of self-presentation, in which "some users may be more inclined to present themselves in a selective manner, highlighting the ‘favorable and appropriate images’ of themselves..." (Kim and Lee 360)

In other words, we show people our best, happiest sides on Facebook and conceal the less favorable aspects of our lives. While there is nothing wrong or new in this, per se, it is significant that social networking removes the subtle cues of voice inflection and body language often possible in face-to-face communication, cues that contribute to disclosure. In addition, self-presentation activities may contribute to envy and low self-esteem in others. A study conducted at Utah Valley University found that "looking at happy pictures of others on Facebook gives people an impression that others are ‘always’ happy and having good lives...in contrast to their own experiences of life events, which are not always positive, [and that] people are very likely to conclude that others have better lives than themselves and that life is not fair” (Chou and Edge 149). Conversely, some people
derive happiness and increased subjective self-worth by comparing the number of "friends" they have with the number of "friends" others have (Kim and Lee 365). Thus, Dasein becomes entangled in the "they" by seeking social validation. Ironically, these simple, everyday self-presentation interactions, in which we share vacation photos, birth announcements, or what we ate for dinner, are possibly the most treacherous. Facebook, and similar social networking sites, provide global platforms to engage in exactly the “ambiguous keeping track of each other” and the “secretive, reciprocal listening-in” Heidegger associates with inauthenticity.

What about the Harmony?

McLuhan, despite his misgivings, dreamed of good things coming out of the Information Age – like sharing useful information and new ideas, and tapping into the silence of the collective unconscious where pattern recognition involves using all the senses. He envisioned balance. And, indeed, there are some great things about our electronic world. For example, many of the sources used to write this paper were not locally available and were accessed remotely and relatively quickly via internet technology.

On a grander scale, over the past few years social media and mobile applications (commonly called “apps”) installed on telephones and other mobile devices have become increasingly useful in relaying information during times of disaster. A 2012 study conducted by the American Red Cross found that social media and mobile apps are tied for fourth place behind television, radio, and internet news outlets for disaster information sending and receiving. All five forms of media, incidentally, are electronic or digital. Print media is conspicuous by its absence in this list.
The study also revealed that:

- Emergency social users are also most likely to seek and share information during emergencies. While they look for the hard facts—road closures, damage reports and weather conditions—they share personal information about their safety statuses and how they are feeling.

- Three out of four Americans (76 percent) expect help in less than three hours of posting a request on social media, up from 68 percent last year.

- Forty percent of those surveyed said they would use social tools to tell others they are safe, up from 24 percent last year (American Red Cross).
Digital media is also gaining popularity in the search for missing persons. When a University of New Orleans student went missing recently, Facebook and Twitter went viral with photos and pleas posted by friends, family, fellow students, the university, and local news media asking for help in locating her.

Figure 10: Facebook Post about Missing UNO Student

Search continues for missing UNO student

A cell phone tower in Irish Bayou is the center point for the search for 19-year-old Hayley Howard, which included efforts on foot Wednesday.

WWLTV

about an hour ago 🌒
Figure 11: UNO Tweets about Missing Student

U. of New Orleans @UofNO - 1h
An update on the search for missing @UofNO undergrad student Hayley Howard. bit.ly/2v3QV1

U. of New Orleans @UofNO - 17h
Friends of missing @UofNO undergraduate student Hayley Howard have planned a search at 10 am tom. near Irish Bayou. on.fb.me/11xJKV

U. of New Orleans @UofNO - 18h
Family, friends of @UofNO undergrad student start facebook page: Help Find Hayley Howard. on.fb.me/1f4l5wb pic.twitter.com/eCfTHbpxXV

U. of New Orleans @UofNO - 21h
New Orleans! St. Tammany! Help us find @UofNO undergraduate student Hayley Howard! #NOLAnews bit.ly/1f5zbBZ pic.twitter.com/X7GWsSnFmX

U. of New Orleans @UofNO - Mar 4
We continue to await the safe return of @UofNO undergrad student Hayley Howard. on.fb.me/1dYsdf5 pic.twitter.com/0XiQJCxw5

Unfortunately, she was found in her submerged car four days after she disappeared, the apparent victim of a driving accident. Yet, she may not have been located so quickly or at all without the aid of social media, online news media, television, and radio. A report on a local television station’s website highlights the role played by social media in the search:

More than a hundred people met Wednesday in Slidell to organize the foot portion of the search, which went five miles in every direction from the cell tower. NOPD and St. Tammany Parish Sheriff’s Office detectives were in the area of Highway 11. Boats and a helicopter from St.
Tammany Parish were also in the water and air, as they have been since Sunday. Family and friends said the turnout to search and spread the word on social media had been encouraging. The hashtag “#FindHaley” was created to foster help in the search via Twitter (Rodrigue).

Yet, there are downsides even to these uses of high speed communication.

A 2011 study performed on behalf of the United States Congress acknowledged potential and already realized benefits of using digital media in disaster situations. The study also identified some troubling drawbacks. For instance, social media was used heavily in efforts to locate missing persons just after a massive earthquake off the coast of Japan in March 2011 sent a devastating tsunami ashore there. However, the study showed that tweets about many missing persons continued to be retweeted even after those individuals had been rescued. Confusion caused by misinformation such as this can tie up valuable resources and put the lives of first responders at risk. An even greater risk to first responders is the possibility of malicious use of social media by terrorists who might circulate fictitious reports of a secondary attack after an initial attack. “Social media could be used as a tool for such purposes by issuing calls for assistance to an area, or notifying officials of a false hazard or threat that requires a response” (Lindsay 9-10). The anonymous, tribal, “pass the word” social media environment makes such possibility a distinct threat.
PART IV. CONCLUSIONS

A Retrieval of McLuhan’s Vision

Clearly, digital media has changed our world. Time and space have shattered as images and sound bites pour into our senses from our phones, televisions, computers, and radios in an overwhelming flood from around the world all day, every day. Past and future are awash in a sea of “nows.” If McLuhan was right, we are at risk of being diverted by this inundation of meaningless information - the juicy piece of meat that distracts the watchdogs of our minds - from media’s real message: Mass media are subtly “massaging” our culture and reshaping the way we view ourselves and the world. If Innis was right, we are at risk of blithely ignoring how the media elite, modern-day power brokers, use opinion to coerce us into desired behaviors. And, perhaps worst of all, we are at risk, as Heidegger warns, of becoming so caught up in the idle chatter - the gossip, rumor, opinion, and noise - of the “they” self that we cannot hear the silent call of conscience.

A Retrieval of the Question of the Meaning of Being

As stated previously, Heidegger does not provide us with a “how-to book” in Being and Time. Throughout that book, and, indeed, throughout his entire oeuvre, he prompts us to question the meaning of being in terms of our own unique possibilities. Yet, he admonishes this is not an easy task. “Truth (discoveredness),” he says, must always first be wrested from beings. Beings are torn from concealment.” Further, he warns, “Da-sein must explicitly and essentially appropriate what has also already been discovered, defend it against (his italics) illusion and distortion, and ensure itself of its discoveredness again and again” (Being and Time 204). Thus, questioning the meaning
of being is not a “one and done” proposition. It is a hard-fought battle that requires us to repeatedly defend against illusion, distortion, and reconcealment of the truth of being.

As being-in-the-world, we desire and need social interactions with others, and in the Information Age, this often means exposure to questionable digital media. But must Dasein be overwhelmed by the viral nature of social networking? Must it be drowned out by voices that spew extremes in illusory or distorting language? Must it be cleverly induced to listen-in to the chatter of others, contribute with self-promoting chatter of its own, or be pressured into actions of conformity with the “they”? Can Dasein turn away from so much “noise” and toward the silent call of conscience? As we have seen, even Heidegger fell prey to the “they” for a least a short time in his life. And McLuhan demonstrated a love/hate relationship with his vision of the future.

Heidegger responded to uncertainty by applying hermeneutics to his own life, by re-asking the question of the meaning of being for himself, time and again, as when he undertook thinking about technology and art, particularly poetry. He acknowledged the possible benefits of technology, but he also anticipated its possible drawbacks. In poetry, however, he may have identified the impetus for continued self-questioning: mystery. In his poem, The Thinker as Poet, he writes:

Thinking’s saying would be stilled in
its being only by becoming unable
to say that which must remain
unspoken.
Such inability would bring thinking
face to face with its matter. (The Floating Library)
What is not said, what is silent, is a mystery that brings us face to face with Dasein. In the end, curiosity that goes beyond the superficial and the desire to overcome Dasein’s own ambiguity may call louder than any carefully crafted message transmitted via modern communication technology.
WORKS CITED


Stahlman, Mark D. "The Place of Marshall McLuhan in the Learning of His Times."


This is to certify that Edith McKinney Talley has successfully completed her Senior Honors Thesis, entitled:

Language, Technology and the "They Self":
How Linguistic Manipulation of Mass and Social Media Distract from the Authentic Self

Frank H. Schalow
Director of Thesis

Elaine S. Brooks
for the Department

Abu Kabir Mostofa Sarwar
for the University

Honors Program

April 4, 2014
Date