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EDITORIAL

THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

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Twentieth century visionary Marshall McLuhan is remembered today not only for his probative and creative thinking about modern life, but also for his ability to coin pithy word images that aptly summed up matters of social import. Examples still in use today include the phrase "global village" and the now ubiquitous words "the media," which rapidly supplanted the "the press" as proper usage in the increasingly TV-driven world of the late twentieth century.

Another McLuhan phrase that is less remembered today is this: "The Medium is the Message" (being the title of a book he coauthored in 1967). But while the phrase has faded, the observations he presented in that work remain of profound relevance today. In explaining the title, the authors observed that "societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication."

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Although McLuhan died in 1980, he would have found the Web to be of profound importance. One reason is this: unlike television and radio, which allow commercial interests to unilaterally push their views at the populace, the Internet and the Web permit unmediated peer to peer interactions responsive to the desires and creativity of those at the ends of the network connections. How different than the commercial reality of radio and television, which McLuhan observed permitted "the media [to] work us over completely...so pervasive are they in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, or unaltered."

In a very different way, the phrase "the medium is the message" is even more meaningful when applied to the Web than it was applicable to the media of the 1960s. While television and radio permit a more vivid form of communication than newspapers, the dynamics are otherwise much the same. True, the potential for influence and manipulation are augmented by the power of the television medium, but the power relationships among those involved remain the same.

In contrast, the Web fundamentally changes the relationships of those that choose to take advantage of its potential. More importantly, it also allows relationships to emerge that were impossible to create in a pre-networked world. Not surprisingly, new practices and aspirations have found expression using this radically different enabling medium than existed before.

How radical are these new practices? Witness projects as varied as the Open Source movement, the Wikipedia, and the Project Gutenberg electronic publishing project, each of which is the work of many uncompensated individuals that are unknown one to another, and often publicly unacknowledged as well. What motivates them to contribute their time and energy to such novel endeavors?

What indeed? People are still people, and therefore it must be the medium that makes the difference. Somehow, the speed, power and democracy of the Web allow a reordering of relationships and enable outcomes that motivates those involved to build virtual pyramids that would never have been erected any other way.

As these projects grow and proliferate, it appears that this is no transitory phase in the evolution of the Web. While experimentation is certain to continue (with ever more interesting results), something fundamentally new has been introduced to the human condition. Unlike so many other modern innovations that have enabled violence, degradation and other adverse consequences, this new medium promises to give expression to what is best about humankind, rather than what is worst.

And that is a fine message indeed.