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# 'Digital Engagement: America's Use (and Misuse) of Marshall McLuhan'

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## ***Digital Engagement: America's (and Misuse) of Marshall McLuhan***

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**Abstract.** *In recent years the United States has turned to digital technologies to buoy its response to anti-Americanism in the so-called 'Muslim world.' At least three concepts appear to be shaping this effort. The first is a marketing-based strategy called 'engagement.' The other two are derivations of Marshall McLuhan's 'global village' and his aphorism that 'the medium is the message.' This paper focuses on the uses and misuses of McLuhan's work by foreign policy officials in Washington. It argues that their stated purpose – to empower people and further inter-cultural understanding through dialogue – is dubious. Indeed, pronouncements regarding these potentials now sit uncomfortably alongside Washington's use of these same technologies to manage dissent. By assessing digital engagement and a more general initiative called 'internet freedom' (both in the light of what McLuhan, in fact, says), American aspirations involving digital communications are shown to be more than just contradictory; they are dangerously misguided.*

What if the way we perceive a problem is part of the problem? What if the way we spontaneously formulate a problem mystifies the problem?

-- Slavoj Žižek<sup>1</sup>

An enthusiasm for almost everything 'digital' has crept into the formulations of American foreign policy officials.<sup>2</sup> Beyond post-Cold War allusions to the rising

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Lecture at the London School of Economics, 3 July 2011, available online at <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cW1zUh94uMY>>

importance of “soft power,”<sup>3</sup> a more recent interest in digitalized communications is being expressed through a Department of State initiative called ‘internet freedom.’ According to Anne-Marie Slaughter, “the world of MySpace is creating a global world of ‘OurSpace,’ linking hundreds of millions of individuals across continents.”<sup>4</sup> In a “networked world,” she writes, “the U.S. has the potential to be the most connected country ... [T]he U.S.’s exceptional capacity for connection ... will renew its power and restore its global purpose.”<sup>5</sup>

A core concept informing such assertions is Marshall McLuhan’s prophesy, first articulated more than fifty years ago, that the world is becoming a global village. For McLuhan, this ‘village’ is the outcome of the speeding up of social relations through the use of electronic media and how this acceleration affects both the material and perceived integration of space. It is, he says, communicative speed that breaks down barriers between the local and the global, private and public, proximity and distance. Thus, for McLuhan, the global village constitutes an *experiential* reality – one that *mimics* a sense of universal immediacy.

In this paper, I argue that a *prima facie* case can be made demonstrating McLuhan’s influence on contemporary thinking in relation to an ascendant global

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<sup>2</sup> An example of this borderline Utopianism is James Lull’s “The Open Spaces of Global Communication,” *Revista Fronteiras – Estudos Midiáticos* 11:2 (May-August 2009), pp. 148-58; for another that is more germane to students of foreign policy, see Clay Shirky, “The Political Power of Social Media,” *Foreign Affairs* 90:1 (January-February 2011), pp. 28-41.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Nye and William A. Owens, “America’s Information Edge,” *Foreign Affairs* 75:2 (March-April 1996), pp. 20-36.

<sup>4</sup> Anne-Marie Slaughter, “America’s Edge, Power in the Networked Century,” *Foreign Affairs* 88:1 (January-February 2009), pp. 98.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p. 113.

village.<sup>6</sup> Herein I assess the use and misuse of McLuhan's work by the Obama administration and the United States Department of State in the context of two policy initiatives – digital engagement and 'internet freedom.' To do this I *first* contextualize both in terms of Washington's response to anti-Americanism after 9/11 as it initially was expressed through efforts by the Bush administration to 're-brand' America and, more recently, in terms of the Obama administration's embrace of social media as a means of engaging foreign Muslims directly. This section constitutes a necessary (largely descriptive) overview of policy developments since 2001 and, as such, readers already familiar with this recent history may want to skip these pages. *Second*, I start relating what is addressed in the first section to McLuhan's work, stressing the predominance of simplistic or inaccurate interpretations. And *third*, I use writings by and interviews with McLuhan to critique these policy applications, concluding that the misguided (or perhaps disingenuous) use of his work may yield contradictory (if not dark) outcomes.

As implied by the questions posed by Slavoj Žižek quoted above, there appears to be an inability (or unwillingness) among foreign policy officials to recognize the complexities and ambiguities of the global village, the medium is the message, and some of McLuhan's other key ideas. Indeed, perhaps Washington's very understanding of the

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<sup>6</sup> This thinking or 'reality' constitutes a largely constructed, inter-subjective way of understanding the world. Although in this paper the space needed to specify how this has taken place is limited, there are several possible explanations as to why the global village concept (or metaphor) resonated in the context of perceived and experiential changes. For one thing, in the 1960s McLuhan's writings became widely known (but not well understood) through his participation in innumerable mass media interviews, references to him on primetime television shows such as *Laugh In*, and by appearing as himself in the academy award winning film *Annie Hall*. For another, a renewed interest in his prognostications, especially among Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, emerged when he was named *Wired Magazine's* "patron saint" in 1996. See Gary Wolf, "The Wisdom of Saint Marshall, the Holy Fool," *Wired Magazine* Iss. 4.01 (January 1996), available online at <[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive//4.01/saint.marshal.html?topic=&topic\\_set](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive//4.01/saint.marshal.html?topic=&topic_set)>

nature of anti-American extremism itself is delusional – delusional in ways that McLuhan, I think, would not find surprising.<sup>7</sup>

### **America's Embrace of Digital Communications**

Over the past twenty years foreign policy analysts and officials in Washington generally have come to embrace digital communications. In the 1990s the Clinton administration promoted what it called a global information infrastructure – an integrated transnational system involving trade-based information flow guarantees and intellectual property rights promoted as means of realizing the competitive advantages of particular American firms (such as Microsoft) and, more generally, production process efficiencies for an array of corporations.<sup>8</sup> After the attacks of September 11, 2001, such an infrastructure came to be regarded as essential for monitoring potential enemies (through surveillance), waging rapidly deployed multi-front military campaigns and, eventually, developing more sophisticated means of modifying anti-Americanism through new techniques using what the State Department calls public diplomacy and the Pentagon refers to as strategic communications.<sup>9</sup>

Among the agencies involved in these activities, a new approach, inspired in part

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<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, I address other aspects of delusional thinking in American foreign policy. See Edward A. Comor, *Consumption and the Globalization Project* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), esp. ch. 6. Also see Edward Comor and Hamilton Bean, "America's 'Engagement' Delusion: Critiquing a Public Diplomacy Consensus," *International Communication Gazette* 74:3 (April 2012), pp. 203-220.

<sup>8</sup> Edward A. Comor, *Communication, Commerce and Power* (London: Macmillan, 1998).

<sup>9</sup> Public diplomacy is a term used to describe the efforts by state officials to win support and a favorable image among the publics of other countries whereas strategic communications refer to efforts, mostly by military and intelligence officials, to modify an opponent's opinions and actions in light of particular military or strategic interests.

at least by developments in marketing, has become dominant. For marketers, ‘engagement’ involves the use digital technologies in the process of impelling potential customers to take part in producing elements of their own consumption (including their participation in developing brands). “Every consumer,” wrote management consultant Don Tapscott in 1996, “on the information highway becomes a producer by creating and sending a message to a colleague, contributing to a ... discussion group, ... test driving a virtual car.”<sup>10</sup>

A turning point in conceptualizing the foreign policy applications of engagement came one month after 9/11 when advertising executive Charlotte Beers was asked to ‘re-brand’ the United States. In 2002 Beers instituted what she called America’s “shared values” campaign. It sought to demonstrate to Muslims in other countries that they have the same values as Americans – values, it was emphasized, shared by all “civilized” peoples: a respect for democracy, liberty, and private property.<sup>11</sup> Secretary of State Colin Powell, in explaining Beers’s appointment to Congress, argued that “[t]here is nothing wrong with getting somebody who knows how to sell something. We are selling a product. We need someone who can re-brand American foreign policy.”<sup>12</sup>

Soon after the campaign began, however, according to the Pew Global Attitudes Project and other public opinion studies, it became clear that Beers had failed.<sup>13</sup> Among

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<sup>10</sup> Don Tapscott, *The Digital Economy: Promise and Peril in the Age of Networked Intelligence* (New York: McGraw-Hill 1996), p. 63.

<sup>11</sup> White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: National Security Council, 2002), available online at <<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nssall.html>>

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Naomi Klein, “America is Not a Hamburger,” *The Guardian*, 14 March 2002, available online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2002/mar/14/marketingandpr.comment>>

<sup>13</sup> Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, “Pew Global Attitudes Project:

other problems, what “shared values” implied – a mutual set of beliefs on which to pursue some kind of inter-cultural dialogue – in practice involved a mostly one-way monologue about America’s tolerance. More problematic was the disconnect between the campaign’s assertions and continuing support for regimes that had little interest in human rights, civil liberties, or economic justice. Such miscalculations continued for most of the Bush years, improving only in the latter months of the President’s second term when the administration began to promote the use of digital technologies by ‘moderate’ voices in the Muslim world. This shift was an attempt to empower ‘tolerant’ people, enabling them to sidestep the ‘radical’ views being exchanged (it was assumed) in mosques, coffee shops, and on ‘the Muslim street.’<sup>14</sup> According to the United States Government Accountability Office, over its two terms, the Bush administration spent \$10 billion on public diplomacy but had little to show for it.<sup>15</sup>

The Obama White House and Department of State under Hillary Clinton subsequently solicited the expertise of the largest internet and social media corporations in the United States, including Google and Facebook. By early-2010, digital engagement and a more general policy called ‘internet freedom’ had become pillars of President Obama’s foreign policy. This embrace of digital communications also was influenced by corporations who sought help from Washington to combat censorship and other costly interventions by foreign states. Arguably, President Clinton’s promotion of a global

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Views of a Changing World,” June 2003, available online at <<http://people-press.org/>>

<sup>14</sup> James Glassman, “Winning the War of Ideas,” speech before the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 8 July 2008, available online at <<http://newcentrist.wordpress.com/2008/07/23/james-k-glassman-winning-the-war-of-ideas/>>

<sup>15</sup> United States Government Accountability Office, *U.S. Public Diplomacy: Key Issues for Congressional Oversight* (Washington, DC: G.A.O., 2009), p. 2.

information infrastructure in the 1990s (and, before this, America's post-1945 efforts to institutionalize, in international law, what was called 'the free flow of information') has come full circle with Hillary Clinton's similarly corporate-influenced support for 'internet freedom.' Here it is helpful to quote her at length on what kinds of freedom this entails:

... we believe it's critical that ... Users [of the internet] are assured certain basic freedoms. Freedom of expression is first among them...

The freedom of worship Usually involves the rights of individuals to commune or not commune with their Creator... The internet can help bridge divides between people of different faiths... And as we look for ways to expand dialogue, the internet holds out such tremendous promise...

A connection to global information networks is like an on-ramp to modernity... Information networks have become a great leveler, and we should use them together to help lift people out of poverty and give them a freedom from want...

The freedom to connect is like the freedom of assembly, only in cyberspace. It allows individuals to get online, come together, and hopefully cooperate...<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Hillary Clinton, "Remarks on Internet Freedom," United States Department of State, 21 January 2010, available online at <<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>>



As implied, this initiative constitutes a sweeping effort to forge the international norms needed to allow individuals ready access to the internet.<sup>17</sup> “Internet freedom,” says Clinton, “supports the peace and security that provides a foundation for global progress.”<sup>18</sup>

‘Internet freedom’ appears to flow directly out of engagement. After all, dialogue and the open exchange of information seem to go hand in hand while both are fundamentally important if people are to feel respected, listened to, and directly involved in at least some aspects of United States foreign policy.<sup>19</sup> However, beyond the rhetoric, rather than promoting an endless multiplicity of conversations and hoping these will yield positive outcomes, ‘internet freedom’ is more concerned with defending the private property of Google, Facebook, and other United States-based companies.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, its

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<sup>17</sup> Of course corporations whose businesses facilitate ‘internet freedom’ systemically and consciously restrict or frame such freedoms. To use a Habermasian example, their entrenched commercial priorities structurally limit the qualitative dimensions of the discourses that are enabled. A specific example of a corporation’s political orientations and interdependencies in relation to the American state is Apple’s rejection of an iPhone app that tracks United States drone strikes. According to Apple, the app was refused because “many people were likely to find the content objectionable.” UAV News, “Apple Shoots Down Drone Strike Tracking iPhone App,” SpaceWar.com, 30 August 2012, available online at

<[http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Apple\\_shoots\\_down\\_drone\\_strike\\_tracking\\_iPhone\\_app\\_999.html](http://www.spacewar.com/reports/Apple_shoots_down_drone_strike_tracking_iPhone_app_999.html)>

<sup>18</sup> Clinton, “Remarks on Internet Freedom”

<<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>>

<sup>19</sup> Contradicting this push for free speech and openness are United States efforts to shut down perhaps the world’s best known online ‘whistle blowing’ organization – WikiLeaks.

<sup>20</sup> Although ‘internet freedom’ has been couched in ways that champion freedom of speech and civil liberties, its institutionalization coincided with China’s interference with Google’s private property in the form of state agencies hacking into Google computers in 2009. Prior to this, at least four United States-based transnational corporations co-operated with Chinese censorship requirements – Cisco, Microsoft, Yahoo, and Google. See Jonathan Fenby, “Google blazes a trail with China rift,” *The Guardian*, 13 January 2010, available online at

implied opening up of a dialogue with and among oppressed people worldwide is meant to be more strategic than free flowing; more a foreign policy calculation than an open-ended exploration.<sup>21</sup> According to foreign policy analysts Kristin Lord and Mark Lynch, engagement itself entails

... a *planned process*, based on a carefully researched understanding of the audience and of its interests, couched in language calibrated to engage the audience *in the intended manner*, using the best one- or two-way method of engagement ... as part of a larger strategy, and evaluated to determine if it is successful in advancing ... intended goals” [emphases added].<sup>22</sup>

The official who introduced digital engagement was Bush’s last Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, James Glassman. “The U.S. need not be Miss Congeniality to win the war of ideas,” said Glassman; “We just need to make moderates hate extremists more than they dislike us.”<sup>23</sup> With this in mind, Glassman recognized the internet to be an under-utilized means of interacting with audiences,

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<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2010/jan/13/google-china-politics-censorship?INTCMP=SRCH>>

<sup>21</sup> Comor and Bean, “America’s ‘Engagement’ Delusion,” p. 204.

<sup>22</sup> Kristin Lord, and Mark Lynch, *America’s Extended Hand: Assessing the Obama Administration’s Global Engagement Policy* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, 2010), p. 11. As Obama’s first Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, Judith McHale, told Congress, “We must create an institutional framework that can take full advantage of new media, with an understanding that these new tools must be carefully tailored to particular circumstances and always used in the service of a larger strategy.” Judith McHale, “Testimony at Senate Foreign Relations Committee Confirmation Hearing,” 13 May 2009, available online at <<http://www.state.gov/r/remarks/124155.htm>>

<sup>23</sup> James Glassman, “It’s not about Us,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 September 2009, available online at <[http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/01/its\\_not\\_about\\_Us.>](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/09/01/its_not_about_Us.>)

linking *selected* organizations from around the world in order to support those elements of civil society that have ‘moderate’ political agendas.

The State Department launched its primary public diplomacy website, called *America.gov*, in January 2008. In early-2011, however, it was shut down and State Department efforts to reach foreign publics have since been decentralized to United States embassies, consulates, and missions which now sponsor over four hundred social media sites using Facebook and Twitter.<sup>24</sup> Beginning in 2009, the Department launched its X-Life cell phone games (whose slogan is “bridging cultures one pixel at a time”) that, according to their creators, allow users to “experience the dynamism and vitality of American life” by “projecting the fundamental values that Americans cherish: tolerance, freedom, and respect for cultural and religious differences.”<sup>25</sup> Also active is the Department’s Bureau of International Information Programs. It hosts training “webinars” on social media best practices.<sup>26</sup>

These and other efforts to promote digital engagement entail two significant themes. *First*, they signal a paring back of earlier goals – moving foreign communications policy away from converting almost everyone harboring anti-American

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<sup>24</sup> As of the end of 2011, the State Department says it has thirteen million followers on Facebook and another two million on Twitter. Lizzy Tomei, “Anti-US protests and the challenges of ‘21st century statecraft’,” *Global Post*, 25 September 2012, available online at < <http://www.globalpost.com/dispatch/news/regions/americas/united-states/120921/anti-us-protests-test-21st-century-statecraft>>

<sup>25</sup> Helle Dale, “Public Diplomacy 2.0: Where the United States Government Meets ‘New Media’,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* #2346, 8 December 2009, available online at <<http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2009/12/public-diplomacy-2-0-where-the-US-government-meets-new-media>>

<sup>26</sup> Alicia M. Cohn, “State Department shifts digital resources to social media,” *The Hill*, 27 December 2011, available online at <<http://thehill.com/blogs/hillicon-valley/technology/157501-state-dept-shifts-digital-resources-to-social-media?page=2#comments>>

views toward, instead, a more targeted (marketing) effort. Rather than communicating to a mass audience, Glassman's brief tenure sparked a shift to engaging those already inclined to reject anti-American violence; at least those who have access to digital media (especially the young and literate). Successful marketing strategies almost always direct their communications at a limited number of prospective customers, particularly those with whom one's message likely will resonate. Glassman – himself a former business journalist – also espoused a technique called “diversion” – “the channeling of potential recruits away from violence with the attractions of entertainment, culture, ... [and] sports...”<sup>27</sup> (Glassman 2008).

A *second* theme involves the promotion of what Hillary Clinton calls ‘Civil Society 2.0’ – a virtual civil society that reflects and constructs a functioning public sphere within and among Muslim communities. In addition to being a vague analogy to discourses concerning an (interactive) ‘Web 2.0’, Clinton also (and, again, vaguely) implies that, above all else, that the ‘Muslim world’ yearns to develop ‘moderate’ associations and communities, that digital technologies can be used to respond to this yearning, and that such communicative capacities will enable people to transcend the persistent political-cultural influence of anti-Western extremism.<sup>28</sup>

### **Engagement, ‘Truth’ and McLuhan’s Medium Theory**

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<sup>27</sup> James Glassman, “Winning the War of Ideas,” *The Sun*, 23 July 2008, accessed at <<http://www.nysun.com/opinion/winning-the-war-of-ideas/82438/>>

<sup>28</sup> Readers interested in pursuing a critique of such policies may be interested in Evgeny Morozov's *The Net Delusion* (New York : Public Affairs, 2011). For a thoughtful analysis of the internet's role in the development of a transnational public sphere, see Elisabeth Chaves, “The Internet as Global Platform? Grounding the Magically Levitating Public Sphere,” *New Political Science*, 32:1 (March 2010), pp. 23-41.

McLuhan's nuanced definition of the global village, presented at the outset, has not been used by either the Bush or Obama administrations (at least not publicly). For them, the global village instead constitutes a straightforward metaphor – describing a world characterized by the ubiquity of instantaneous electronic communications. This village is more a fact than an ambiguous or contradictory process, and it is in this one-dimensional context that officials have situated their policy initiatives. Before we critique this position in light of McLuhan's own work, let us more directly link engagement and 'internet freedom' to official Washington's understanding of the global village.

Glassman's successor, Judith McHale – the former Chief Executive Officer of the Discovery Channel – emphasized two tasks. The first was what she referred to as “a critical component of ... effective mass communication” – “market research.”<sup>29</sup> The second involves the need to apply digital communications in ways that “engage people directly.”<sup>30</sup> Just as social media platforms have been developed in response to the needs of marketers and advertisers,<sup>31</sup> such technological applications can be, according to McHale, “a game changer ... [as they provide] the opportunity to move from an old paradigm, in which our government speaks as one to many, to a new model of engaging

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<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Ed Feulner, “The battle for public opinion,” *The Gaffney Ledger*, 31 December 2009, available online at <[http://www.gaffneyledger.com/news/2009-12-31/Columns/GUEST\\_COLUMNIST.html](http://www.gaffneyledger.com/news/2009-12-31/Columns/GUEST_COLUMNIST.html)>

<sup>30</sup> Judith McHale, “Testimony at Senate Foreign Relations Committee Confirmation Hearing,” 13 May 2009, available online at <<http://www.state.gov/r/remarks/124155.htm>>

<sup>31</sup> Detlev Zwick, Samuel Bonsu and Aaron Darmodt, “Putting Consumers to Work,” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8:2 (July 2008), pp. 163-196; Vincent Manzerolle, “Mobilizing the Audience Commodity,” *Ephemera*, 10:3/4 (2010), pp. 455-69.

interactively and collaboratively across lines that might otherwise divide...”<sup>32</sup>

To repeat, the antecedent of this ‘game changing’ strategy stemmed from a different set of problems – problems faced by private sector interests. Among these was a growing cynicism among consumers who had become increasingly distrustful of commercial promotions and their (often dubious) promises. Another was the outcome of an ever more cluttered promotional environment, making it more difficult for marketers and advertisers to reach targeted audiences. A third hurdle (one more directly facing public relations firms) involved a paradox: in an emerging information-rich society, the circulation, mostly through the internet, of harmful facts, costly rumors and, occasionally, outright fabrications had become almost commonplace.<sup>33</sup> A prospective solution to these problems was to apply digital technologies in ways that would engage people directly – engaging them through inter-active, participatory, and ego-enhancing activities crafted to encourage positive associations with products and brands.<sup>34</sup>

This use of technology resonated with post-9/11 concerns about legitimizing American policies overseas. To quote one of the State Department’s consultants, Facebook executive Elliot Schrage,

... the question is how do you build an audience? How do you establish a community of interests? That’s as true for the maker of laundry detergent as it is for someone who has a stimulus package for economic growth. ... [I]t’s about

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<sup>32</sup> McHale, “Testimony at Senate Foreign Relations Committee”  
<<http://www.state.gov/r/remarks/124155.htm>>

<sup>33</sup> Carl H. Botan and Maureen Taylor, “Public Relations: State of the Field,” *Journal of Communication*, 54:4 (December 2004), pp. 645-661.

<sup>34</sup> Zwick et al., “Putting Consumers to Work,” pp. 168-71.

communicating a message, finding a community, and building that community, engaging that community. So, do I see Facebook as being an incredibly valuable tool for public diplomacy? Absolutely.<sup>35</sup>

“21st-century statecraft,” reports *The New York Times*, “is not mere corporate re-branding – swapping tweets for broadcasts. It [constitutes] ... a way to amplify traditional diplomatic efforts, develop tech-based policy solutions and encourage cyberactivism.”<sup>36</sup> Applications include following Barack Obama on Twitter, participating in a virtual town hall meeting with Hillary Clinton, or debating a particular policy in a chat room hosted by the State Department. Another example is the annual “Democracy Challenge” video competition. Visitors to [www.videochallenge.america.gov](http://www.videochallenge.america.gov) are asked to create a short video that completes the phrase “Democracy is...” Winners receive a trip to Washington, New York, and Hollywood “to attend gala screenings” of their videos that, it promises, will give successful contestants “exposure to the U.S. film and television industry and [the opportunity to] meet with creative talent, democracy advocates and government leaders.”

There are also covert applications for digital engagement. For example, the Obama administration has been constructing a “shadow internet” engineered to enable dissidents in *selected* countries to circumvent state monitoring and censorship, particularly through the use of cell phone networks that only American officials can

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<sup>35</sup> Elliot Schrage, Interview, *CFR.org*, 11 May 2009, available online at <[www.cfr.org/publication/19300/new\\_media\\_tools\\_and\\_public\\_diplomacy.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/19300/new_media_tools_and_public_diplomacy.html)>

<sup>36</sup> Jesse Lichtenstein, “Digital Diplomacy,” *The New York Times*, 16 July 2010, available online at <[http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/magazine/18web2-0-t.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=3&ref=state\\_department](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/18/magazine/18web2-0-t.html?pagewanted=1&_r=3&ref=state_department)>

activate.<sup>37</sup> Another involves the utilization of Facebook, Twitter, and other sites using fake online identities – applying what is called “sock puppet” software – to influence seemingly frank and open deliberations in Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, and Pashto. Virtual private servers located in other countries are used to further the impression that the false personas are genuine.<sup>38</sup> More generally, by encouraging people to network with ‘friends’ through monitored websites, precise data also can be generated on the views and associations of participants.

Just as marketers are not engaging audiences primarily to act on their preferences, the use of digital engagement by American officials is not about conversing with others before constructing policies (the hesitant and inconsistent responses by the United States to popular uprisings in the Middle East underlines this point). Having said this, however, even if we take Obama administration claims about its efforts to promote a digital dialogue at face value, these entail a number of dubious assumptions. One is the notion that a relatively open exchange of information will lead to inter-cultural understanding; at least the kind of understanding that will complement United States interests. In the words of Judith McHale, “a key part of what we're trying to do, [is] to really have people engage with each other, to learn about each other.”<sup>39</sup> However, as former United States

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<sup>37</sup> James Glanz and John Markoff, “US Underwrites Internet Detour Around Censors,” *The New York Times*, 12 June 2011, available online at

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/world/12internet.html?\\_r=4&pagewanted=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/12/world/12internet.html?_r=4&pagewanted=1)>

<sup>38</sup> Nick Fielding and Ian Cobain, “Revealed: U.S. spy operation that manipulates social media” *The Guardian*, 17 March 2011, available online at

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/mar/17/Us-spy-operation-social-networks?INTCMP=SRCH>>

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Alice Johnson, “Public diplomacy critical in information age, Interview with Judith McHale,” *gulfnews.com*, 11 November 2011, available online at

<<http://gulfnews.com/news/world/Usa/public-diplomacy-critical-in-information-age-1.710512>>



Information Agency official Bruce Gregory points out, “Shared understandings may not overcome deep disagreement on interests and issues. Exchanges [and more contemporary modes of engagement] may reinforce hostilities and competing values, particularly if others experience an America that is myopic, hubristic, and uninformed about the world.”<sup>40</sup>

Secretary Clinton, of course, recognizes the many deleterious implications of some digital technology applications such as those used by organized crime or, from her perspective, the security threats stemming from the activities of WikiLeaks. The hypocrisy of this view becomes apparent, however, in light of the debatable legality of the American state’s parallel use of the internet to strengthen its surveillance and ‘cyber-war’ capabilities. Indeed, while digital engagement aims to leverage social media and other internet-mediated communications in ways that impel audiences *to persuade themselves* to reject anti-Western extremism, ultimately Washington’s embrace of engagement is misplaced and contradictory – misplaced and contradictory because the political-cultural capacities that officials seek to develop (in accordance with a surface-level reading of McLuhan) are (when a more precise reading is applied) more likely to yield opposite results.

Glassman, testifying to Congress in March 2010, stressed the futility of preaching or “telling the world how wonderful we are.” A more effective means of communicating, he explained, “is through the generation of a wide and deep conversation. Our role in that conversation is as facilitator and convener.” He went on to stress that

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<sup>40</sup> Bruce Gregory, “Public diplomacy and strategic communication,” Paper presented at the *American Political Science Association Conference on International Communication and Conflict*, 31 AugUst 2005, pp. 10-11, available online at <[www8.georgetown.edu/cct/apsa/papers/gregory.pdf](http://www8.georgetown.edu/cct/apsa/papers/gregory.pdf)>

... *the method of communication is itself a reflection of American values*

[emphases in original]. The medium, as Marshall McLuhan said, is the message.

We, as Americans, do not dictate. Rather, we believe that, in a free and open discussion, the best ideas will prevail, and we want to encourage the free expression of views... [O]ur mission then ... is to use the tools of ideological engagement – words, deeds, and images – to create an *environment* hostile to violent extremism [latter emphasis added].<sup>41</sup>

What various modes of digital engagement share is an emphasis on audience participation; people actively taking part in constructing their own truths *but in contexts or environments crafted to promote particular kinds of truth*. This emphasis on experiential involvement and relationships echoes what has been called a medium theory approach generally and McLuhan's version of it more specifically. "At the heart of medium theory," explains Ronald Deibert, "is the argument that changes in the mode of communication ... have an important effect on the trajectory of social evolution... Medium theory traces these effects to the properties of the medium itself regardless of the content or the message being transmitted."<sup>42</sup> In other words, how human beings relate to one another and how we do things – constituting the contexts of how we think and act – are just as important (if not more important) than what we say (that is, the articulated

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<sup>41</sup> James Glassman, "Strategic Public Diplomacy," Testimony Before the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations Hearing on *The Future of U.S. Public Diplomacy*, 10 March 2010, available online at

<[http://mountainrunner.Us/2010/03/jim\\_glassmans\\_testimony\\_before/](http://mountainrunner.Us/2010/03/jim_glassmans_testimony_before/)>

<sup>42</sup> Ronald Deibert, *Parchment, Printing, and Hypermedia* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 6.

content of our communications). “It is the medium,” writes McLuhan, “that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”<sup>43</sup>

There were two foundational theorists of medium theory – the early twentieth century political economist Harold Innis and, after his death in 1952, McLuhan. For both, media – broadly defined to include a range of technologies, organizations and institutions – are assessed as the environments through which people engage in all kinds of cultural, political, and economic interactions. How these environments are structured facilitate some ways of thinking and acting over others. It is McLuhan’s version of medium theory that has become the better known of the two. In fact, much of what now constitutes ‘common sense’ for many American proponents of digital communications tends to parrot a generally optimistic interpretation of McLuhan’s work. For example, in interviews and statements, Obama appointee Judith McHale reiterates Bush appointee Glassman’s ‘medium is the message’ approach to public diplomacy claiming, repeatedly, that the United States wants to “create an *environment* in which people can debate...”<sup>44</sup> Sarah Labowitz, the Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, similarly argues that America’s ‘internet freedom’ agenda rests on one core premise: the internet should be “an open public space” – a space to be protected and promoted rather than used as a tool for specific objectives.<sup>45</sup> This approach, particularly

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<sup>43</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan* (Concord: House of Anansi, 1995), p. 152.

<sup>44</sup> Emphasis in original. McHale, “US Undersecretary Of State for Public Diplomacy talks about America’s image,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, 30 November 2010, available online at

<[http://www.rferl.org/content/US\\_Under\\_Secretary\\_Of\\_State\\_For\\_Public\\_Diplomacy\\_Talk\\_About\\_Americas\\_Image/2217717.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/US_Under_Secretary_Of_State_For_Public_Diplomacy_Talk_About_Americas_Image/2217717.html)>

<sup>45</sup> Quoted in Roy Revie, “The Tangled Web of ‘Internet Freedom,’” *World Policy Blog*, 11 July 2012, available online at <<http://www.worldpolicy.org/blog/2012/07/11/tangled-web-internet-freedom>>

in light of McLuhan's original work (elaborated below), reveals a naive or disingenuous view that the internet constitutes a neutral mediator of inherently progressive and cooperative human relations.<sup>46</sup>

Arguably, McLuhan's status as an (in)famous 1960s public intellectual and, paradoxically, the ambiguities that surround his writings help to explain such imprecise interpretations. Although it seems unlikely that many officials have read McLuhan directly, his work resonates in part because his analysis of electronic communications appears to be more relevant today than it was fifty years ago. The first speech on 'internet freedom,' delivered by Secretary Clinton in January 2010, for instance, is full of allusions to McLuhan. When she states that "[t]he spread of information networks is forming a new nervous system for our planet" one is reminded of McLuhan's claim that electronic communication constitutes "the extension of our central nervous system."<sup>47</sup>

### **McLuhan's Sensorium, His Global Village, and United States Foreign Policy**

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<sup>46</sup> As Roy Revie puts it, divorcing 'internet freedom' from its strategic mandate is "akin to asserting the freedom of outer space while simultaneously developing programs to militarize or otherwise strategically exploit it." *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 110. Direct or indirect references to McLuhan can be found in various United States public diplomacy texts. One of the earliest appears in an article published in 1970 by senior American diplomat Alan Carter. In it, Carter references McLuhan when he conceptualizes foreign audiences in an affecting "environmental shell" involving a "combination" of media, inter-personal, and inter-organizational communications. Carter, in sum, conveys a McLuhanesque understanding of media *environments* and their influence. Alan Carter, "The State of the Art: Communications and Foreign Affairs," *Foreign Service Journal*, 47:8 (August 1970), pp. 31-2 & 46-7. Thanks to Bruce Gregory for bringing this piece to my attention.

For McLuhan the history of media (broadly defined) is a history of human beings *extending* themselves physically and mentally. Mechanical innovations, he says, empower humanity's control over space (through, for example, railways) and time (for example, the mechanical clock) yet, in so doing, our sense of community and balance is fractured. As media extend what we do they modify how we think. This is less an intellectual process than it is sensual. For him, media modify people by reshaping their *perceptive* capacities. What he referred to as the golden age of manuscript culture, for instance, was characterized by a state of (relative) balance among our senses. This, for McLuhan, was a time and place (in parts of medieval Europe) where inter-personal dialogue *and* independent abstract thinking through literacy co-existed, at least for a small minority. The result was a mediating environment in which a deep sense of understanding was accommodated through orality while logical reasoning also was facilitated through writing. However, with the emergence of the printing press (whose products flourished through the dynamic of capitalism), this balance was disrupted.

McLuhan proposed the *sensorium* to denote the interaction of our senses.<sup>48</sup> At any given place and time, it is characterized by a ratio among them. The eye (or sight) perceives space in mostly linear, connected, and serial ways; visual space tends to be continuous and controllable, impelling people to think about things (including other people and nature) as manageable objects detached from the viewer. This capacity to distance oneself – to objectify and manage – is, of course, essential for scientific and rational thinking. In McLuhan's mind, the most important contribution made by the printing press was not its use in promoting literacy and the sharing of information.

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<sup>48</sup> Robert E. Babe, *Media, Structures, and Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), p. 257.

Instead, the importance of print lay in its impact on the sensorium. Together, printing and the alphabet constituted the environment through which individualization, specialization, and rationalism became cultural norms in Europe.

The ear by contrast is attuned to (or accommodates) an acoustic space – a space that is hard to control and objectify. In addition to its relatively unmanageable and continuous characteristics, the auditory tends to be simultaneous and everywhere; it is both outside and inside our heads and, as such, it undermines the use of sight to order things. “We shape our tools,” said McLuhan, “and thereafter our tools shape us.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Robert Babe, McLuhan’s approach “stems in large part from his analysis of perception and his concern for effects. Media ... may extend or amplify one or other of the senses, increasing thereby the relative importance of that perceptor in the sensorium.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, such sensory extensions interact bi-directionally with media environments. The media we create, once in use, influence us, impelling people to favor some extensions and senses over others. Usually these effects are not perceived precisely because they are integral in shaping how people think. On this point, McLuhan references the Greek myth of Narcissus to emphasize that humanity tends to be mesmerized by its own capabilities. We are, he says, generally unable to recognize our extensions and, thus, our sensory orientations. In his interview in *Playboy* magazine, McLuhan explained this observation as follows:

It's a process rather like that which occurs to the body under shock or stress conditions, or to the mind in line with the Freudian concept of repression. I call

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<sup>49</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. xi.

<sup>50</sup> Babe, *Media, Structures, and Power*, p. 259.

this peculiar form of self-hypnosis Narcissus narcosis, a syndrome whereby man remains unaware of the psychic and social effects of his new technology. ... As a result, precisely at the point where a new media-induced environment becomes all pervasive and transmogrifies our sensory balance, it also becomes invisible.<sup>51</sup>

Given how fundamental the sensorium is in McLuhan's work, it is doubtful, despite his sometimes outlandish and contradictory statements, that he believed humanity could build a truly harmonious transnational society, at least not one preceded by the peaceful evolution of inter-cultural understanding. While it is true that McLuhan anticipates the eventual formulation of a "cosmic consciousness" (as discussed below), this almost metaphysical state arguably can only emerge after the reactionary and violent global village runs its course. Having said this, such prognostications were meant to provoke more than inform. For the most part, rather than presenting some kind of analytical roadmap, McLuhan insisted that such assertions – which he called "probes" – constitute intellectual challenges crafted to compel his contemporaries to awaken from their Narcissistic tendencies.

With the telegraph, McLuhan said that human relations were liberated from mechanized forms of organization involving the dominance of the eye. For example, a multiplicity of times emerged within various spatial configurations as new electronic extensions facilitated the resurgence of listening and the ear. To illustrate this, McLuhan used the example of modern travel. What he refers to as the "railway medium"

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<sup>51</sup> Marshall McLuhan, "Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan," *Playboy*, March 1969, available online at <<http://www.nextnature.net/2009/12/the-playboy-interview-marshall-mcluhan/>>

accelerated and expanded human capacities, enabling large cities, new economic patterns, and unprecedented social formations – transformations of space and time seemingly “independent of the freight or content” being carried.<sup>52</sup> Rail travel also, he said, accommodated sociality and dialogue among passengers. The airplane further opened up non-linear space-time capabilities. When sitting on an airplane, McLuhan argued, people are “suspended in a kind of time zone” in which spatial references – such as where you are in relation to other places and times – are more open to various interpretations.<sup>53</sup>

Air travel anticipated still more complex space-time dynamics in the electrical age. The implications of new media – from the telegraph to the telephone, from radio to television, and now, decades after McLuhan’s death, the internet – go well beyond the impact of the information transmitted. The electric galaxy, he proclaimed, mediates new freedoms of movement, association, and thought. Relatively ordered interactions will be eclipsed by multifaceted relationships and realities. Spaces and times in this global village will become ever more heterogeneous and overlapping.

For McLuhan, however, the media themselves are “constitutive of both the idiom and the character of citizenship and debate.”<sup>54</sup> The medium is the message, and media – the institutions, organizations and technologies we construct and use – have implications as environments. These environments are affecting, particularly in relation to humanity’s sense of space and time, and, to repeat, their influence is profound largely because we are unaware of these effects. Most analysts of media focus on content and use. McLuhan,

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<sup>52</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 8.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted in Janine Marchessault, *Marshall McLuhan: Cosmic Media*. London: Sage, 2005), p. 206.

<sup>54</sup> Marchessault, *Ibid*, p. 212.



however, warns that such foci are like “the juicy piece of meat that the burglar carries to distract the watchdog of the mind.”<sup>55</sup>

To quote Elliot Schrage once more, Facebook and other such platforms interconnect people in ways that imply “a whole new level of accountability.” Just as his company “creates a real premium on authenticity,”<sup>56</sup> online participatory relationships mediate, it is assumed, new or modified truths – truths that are relatively powerful precisely because they are communicated through a dialogue with trusted associates (often involving images that reaffirm the axiom ‘seeing is believing’). But what of McLuhan’s more abstract assertion – that content and information exchange are secondary to the impact of the media environment on the sensorium?

Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization... The computer, in short, promises by technology a ... universal understanding and unity. ... The condition of ‘weightlessness,’ that biologists say promises a physical immortality, may be paralleled by the condition of speechlessness that could confer a perpetuity of collective harmony and peace.<sup>57</sup>

This and similar statements may appear to be wholly optimistic. A more careful reading, however, reveals a more ambiguous – if not dystopian – vision. In fact, the more one delves into McLuhan the clearer it becomes that the global village is *not* an ideal

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<sup>55</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 18.

<sup>56</sup> Schrage, Interview

<[www.cfr.org/publication/19300/new\\_media\\_tools\\_and\\_public\\_diplomacy.html](http://www.cfr.org/publication/19300/new_media_tools_and_public_diplomacy.html)>

<sup>57</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 80.

place to live. For one thing, it is a world of accelerating discontinuities inducing what McLuhan called “the Age of Anxiety.”<sup>58</sup> Electric technologies, he says, reassert aspects of pre-modern acoustic culture. Like these pre-literate (and pre-individualistic) societies, the interdependencies of humanity will become increasingly apparent.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, the causal relationships and sense of individual responsibility that were norms during the industrial age – through the dominance of the eye – will become elusive.<sup>60</sup>

With digital technologies and, with them, an increasing volume of information being disseminated in ways seemingly divorced from cost, the pre-modern ability to listen *with care* is eclipsed. This, primarily, is the outcome of mounting time pressures and, of course, information overload. In this environment, neither the balancing of the senses idealized by McLuhan (for example, the medieval person’s use of both eye and ear to intimately inter-connect *and* objectively reason), nor relatively modern strategies for making sense of things (isolating a problem, studying it in detail, and coming up with logically coherent solutions) are probable. In the electric age, to make timely decisions, McLuhan recognizes that people are *required to make sense* of the world by *reacting* rather than analyzing as “action and reaction [now] occur [virtually] at the same time.”<sup>61</sup>

When media are understood to be ‘the message’ rather than merely the conveyors of messages, the public sphere ideal – as implied in Clinton’s references to a ‘Civil Society 2.0’ – is rendered infeasible. Unlike the world envisioned in the Obama

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<sup>58</sup> McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, p. 150.

<sup>59</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy, The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962), p. 63.

<sup>60</sup> In pre-literate society, for example, McLuhan argued that one’s failure to strike a prey for an ear-oriented person is a sign of a god’s displeasure, not personal failure. Babe, *Media, Structures, and Power*, p. 261.

<sup>61</sup> McLuhan, *Essential McLuhan*, p. 149.

administration's calls for 'internet freedom,' in McLuhan's global village people relate and act more through emotion, intuition, and a reactionary mindset rather than discussion, deliberation, and reflection.

### **McLuhan's Dark Vision**

McLuhan sometimes described the global village as more machine than community. This is because of its impersonal scale, ever-accelerating norms and, increasingly, the absence of reflexive human agency. More directly, and antithetical to what Hillary Clinton implies when she refers to "information networks" as "a new nervous system for our planet," McLuhan views this emerging transnational society to be a profoundly alienating place, paradoxically *because* of humanity's extensions.<sup>62</sup> To reiterate, not only do our media creations extend us, they change us. Often, says McLuhan, the price we pay to amplify is the numbing of relevant senses. The automobile, for example, dramatically extends our spatial reach but we pay a price in that our intimate connection with the land is eradicated (a connection we possessed when we only walked). The mechanical clock frees us from the natural flow of time but also it severs us from the earth's ecological rhythms. Ultimately, he says, the reach or power enabled by our extensions entails a cost.

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<sup>62</sup> More paradoxically still (and in keeping with his dialectical but sometimes self-contradictory thinking), McLuhan postulated that this alienation and mechanization of social relations contain the seeds for a relatively harmonious (but mechanistic) future. "The computer," he says, "holds out the promise of a technologically engendered state of universal understanding and unity, a state of absorption in [a] ... collective harmony and peace. ... By such orchestrated interplay of all media, whole cultures could now be programmed in order to improve and stabilize their emotional climate." McLuhan, "Playboy Interview."

The aloof and dissociated role of the literate man of the Western world is succumbing to the new, intense depth participation engendered by the electronic media and bringing us back in touch with ourselves as well as with one another. But the instant nature of electric-information movement is decentralizing – rather than enlarging – the family of man into a new state of multitudinous tribal existences. Particularly in countries where literate values are deeply institutionalized, this is a highly traumatic process, since the clash of the old segmented visual culture and the new integral electronic culture creates a crisis of identity, a vacuum of the self, which generates tremendous violence.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, when McLuhan refers to a “process of consciousness” without “verbalization” (and one in which “speechlessness” becomes essential to humanity’s “harmony”), he is not anticipating a world in which truths are formulated in thoughtful or reflexive ways. Instead, people are interlinked inside an electronic membrane that compels an accelerating universalization of shared immediacies.<sup>64</sup>

Whether United States officials view digital technologies as tools or mediating spaces, there is little opposition to the assertion that ‘internet freedom’ is “a major foreign policy priority”<sup>65</sup> despite McLuhan’s view that the planet is becoming interlinked more through sensations than thoughtful connections (in fact, McLuhan originally called the global village a global *theater*). Because these sensations are multi-planed and anxiety-

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Witness Twitter’s slogan: “Discover what’s happening *right now*.”

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Ross, “Interview, Internet Freedom and U.S. State Department,” *National Public Radio*, 17 February 2011, available online at <http://www.npr.org/2011/02/17/133847146/Internet-Freedom-And-U-S-State-Department>

ridden, more than just cultures remain divided – individuals will “create their own spaces.”<sup>66</sup> For McLuhan, the sensual implications of electronic forms of engagement generate an altogether contradictory outcome: *disengagement*.

McLuhan likely would have assessed both digital engagement and ‘internet freedom’ as components of a more general media ecology that itself (at least during the transition from the removed-and-rational to the interconnected-and-sensual) undermines understanding. Through speed, information overload, and intellectual fragmentation, the *capacity* to converse and reflect are subjected to a traumatic transformation – a transformation from institutions that reflect visual and literate industrial society (one pole of McLuhan’s visual-auditory dialectic) to a global culture characterized by moment-to-moment sensory intimacies. McLuhan, however, is not entirely pessimistic. As he told *Playboy*, “We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth.”<sup>67</sup>

To comprehend these seemingly inconsistent prognostications arguably McLuhan’s Catholic faith emboldened him to predict that through the maelstrom of change and destruction the human race could be re-born and the world re-formed. Thus at least some of the simplifications and contradictions found in McLuhan’s work make sense, at least in his own mind. “Psychic communal integration” he proclaimed, becomes “possible at last by the electronic media... In a Christian sense, this is merely a new interpretation of the mystical body of Christ; and Christ, after all, is the ultimate extension of man.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, p. 17.

<sup>67</sup> McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”

<sup>68</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *A Matter of Faith*. Television interview by Fr. Patrick Peyton, 14

Faith (or mysticism) aside, medium theory itself illuminates our understanding of why American officials find it so difficult to recognize the contradictory nature of their policy responses to anti-Americanism. Following McLuhan, the marketing ontology now informing public diplomacy itself constitutes an affecting medium – one that normalizes the notion that anti-American extremism is a problem best managed through the lens of measurable indices and opinions rather than historically-generated power asymmetries and sensual-intellectual capacities.<sup>69</sup>

The questions posed by Žižek at the beginning of this paper have still further resonance in the context of McLuhan’s sensorium. The irony of Washington foreign policy officials utilizing aurally-biased technologies to achieve visually-oriented ‘realist’ goals surely would not have escaped him.<sup>70</sup> We thus might well consider it to be absurd

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November 1971, available online at

<http://www.catholicv.com/shows/default.aspx?seriesID=113&videoID=85>

In this interview, McLuhan explains that electronic communications are similar to “the mystical body of Christ” in that both are pervasive and invisible, both resonate deeply by hearing “The Word,” and both eradicate the center and margins of human relations. In recognizing this possibility we can better comprehend McLuhan when he says “the global village makes maximum disagreement *and* creative dialogue inevitable. Uniformity and tranquility are not hallmarks of the global village; far more likely are *conflict and discord as well as love and harmony*” [emphases added]. McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”

<sup>69</sup> To again demonstrate this disconnect, a report commissioned by the Pentagon recommends that United States officials draw on brand management strategies, stressing that Muslim populations can be treated as prospective customers. “We Will Help You,” its authors argue, would be an “elegant” slogan for American foreign policy as “[i]t serves as a message of inspiration for indigenous audiences, one that encompasses – and thus would not conflict with – a wide variety of potential end states.” Todd C. Helmus, Christopher Paul, and Russel W. Glenn, *Enlisting Madison Avenue: The Marketing Approach to Earning Popular Support in Theaters of Operation* (RAND National Defence Research Institute, Santa Monica: 2007), p. 77.

<sup>70</sup>United States ‘realist’ (or, more accurately, ‘neo-realist’) decision-making norms approach the world as if it is a chessboard on which to make moves concerning, among other things, the management of polities, the maintenance of energy supplies, and the containment of other (rival or oppositional) states. See Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

that a linear, rationally calculated foreign policy now is embracing the very tools that McLuhan believed would mediate a global village dominated by reactionary irrationalities. Despite the “new extensions of man and the environment they generate, ... we still cannot free ourselves of the delusion that it is how a medium is used that counts, rather than what it does to us and with us. This,” McLuhan argued, “is the zombie stance of the technological idiot.”<sup>71</sup>

## Conclusion

Now, ultimately, this issue isn't just about information freedom; it is about what kind of world we want and what kind of world we will inhabit. It's about whether we live on a planet with one internet, one global community, and a common body of knowledge that benefits and unites us all, or a fragmented planet in which access to information and opportunity is dependent on where you live and the whims of censors.<sup>72</sup>

This excerpt from Secretary Clinton's first 'internet freedom' speech raises a number of concerns. For careful readers of McLuhan, references to the emergence of “a common body of knowledge that benefits and unites” are difficult to comprehend.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”

<sup>72</sup> Clinton, “Remarks on Internet Freedom,”

<<http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2010/01/135519.htm>>

<sup>73</sup> Again, I recognize that McLuhan can be read as an optimist, particularly in light of his anticipation of some kind of cosmic consciousness. It is, however, *his dystopian outlook that compelled his reflexive analysis*. “No one could be less enthusiastic about these radical changes than myself,” he said. “The extensions of man's consciousness induced

If, as many State Department officials argue, digital technologies can empower citizens, surely our review of McLuhan compels us to seek more specificity. For one thing, what kind of empowerment is this – the power to receive and disseminate information any place, any time, *or* is it the power to probe, discuss, and reflect through intellectually engaged forms of decision-making? Of course another question triggered by Washington’s enthusiasm for its own ‘21<sup>st</sup> Century Statecraft’ involves ‘realist’ concerns about this empowerment and its implied implosion of international power; shifting power away from state regimes into the hands of citizens. If the populations of Egypt, Libya, Syria (or, one day, Saudi Arabia) truly are transformed into autonomous, reflexive citizens, how might they act on these sovereign capabilities? Answering such questions has not been a priority for American officials probably because implicit and explicit references to McLuhan’s concepts have been under-theorized (or perhaps disingenuously applied).

If there is even a kernel of plausibility in McLuhan’s dark vision, we should ask what stabilizing, consensus-building mechanisms feasibly can counter-balance a global civil society in which a nervous system-integrated (yet alienated) world faces two dystopian futures: one in which governance becomes little more than a state of perpetual action-and-reaction *or* one in which the extensions that link us together are, in effect, amputated? The former raises problems concerning continuity and stability while the latter suggests a future dominated by various forms of chauvinism and extremism.

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by the electric media could conceivably usher in the millennium, but it also holds the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ... Cataclysmic environmental changes such as these are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences. *If we refuse to see them at all, we will become their servants* [emphases added]. McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”



Despite the ambiguities and leaps of logic that pervade McLuhan's writings, by probing the complexities of his foundational concepts, we are empowered to critique the assumptions underlying current American policies; globally influential policies informed, it appears, by misinformed applications and delusional simplifications.