

Media as Translators

Important working definitions to be developed in later chapters are established: all technologies as techniques for transfer of knowledge from one mode to another (an expansion of the title phrase), automation as organic patterns, words as information retrieval. In the definition of prayer, cited from George Herbert, language is the thread linking it to the theme of the chapter and the first inkling that McLuhan's media analysis can accommodate a spiritual dimension. Even phrased as a question, the closing paragraph of this chapter was enough for commentators to brand McLuhan from the outset as a technological utopian. Rephrased as a statement, McLuhan's question compels no optimism but issues an implicit warning in anticipation of the following chapter: meet the challenge or face collapse.

— (Editor)

The tendency of neurotic children to lose neurotic traits when telephoning has been a puzzle to psychiatrists. Some stutterers lose their stutter when they switch to a foreign language. That technologies are ways of translating one kind of knowledge into another mode has been expressed by Lyman Bryson in the phrase "technology is explicitness." Translation is thus a "spelling-out" of forms of knowledge. What we call "mechanization" is a translation of nature, and of our own natures, into amplified and specialized forms. Thus the quip in *Finnegans Wake*, "What bird has done yesterday man may do next year," is a strictly literal observation of the courses of technology. The power of technology as dependent on alternately grasping and letting go in order to enlarge the scope of action has been observed as the power of the higher arboreal apes as compared with those that are on the ground. Elias Canetti made the proper association of this power of the higher apes to grasp and let go, with the strategy of the stock market speculators. It is all capsulated in the popular variant on Robert Browning: "A man's reach must exceed his grasp or what's a metaphor." All media are active metaphors in their power to translate experience into new forms. The spoken word was the first technology by which man was able to let go of his environment in order to grasp it in a new way. Words are a kind of information retrieval that can range over the total environment and experience at high speed. Words are complex systems of metaphors and symbols that translate experience into our uttered or outered senses. They are a technology of explicitness. By means of translation of immediate sense experience into vocal symbols the entire world can be evoked and retrieved at any instant.

In this electric age we see ourselves being translated more and more into the form of information, moving toward the technological extension of consciousness. That is what is

meant when we say that we daily know more and more about man. We mean that we can translate more and more of ourselves into other forms of expression that exceed ourselves. Man is a form of expression who is traditionally expected to repeat himself and to echo the praise of his Creator. "Prayer," said George Herbert, "is reversed thunder." Man has the power to reverberate the Divine thunder, by verbal translation.

By putting our physical bodies inside our extended nervous systems, by means of electric media, we set up a dynamic by which all previous technologies that are mere extensions of hands and feet and teeth and bodily heat-controls—all such extensions of our bodies, including cities—will be translated into information systems. Electromagnetic technology requires utter human docility and quiescence of meditation such as befits an organism that now wears its brain outside its skull and its nerves outside its hide. Man must serve his electric technology with the same servo-mechanistic fidelity with which he served his coracle, his canoe, his typography, and all other extensions of his physical organs. But there is this difference, that previous technologies were partial and fragmentary, and the electric is total and inclusive. An external consensus or conscience is now as necessary as private consciousness. With the new media, however, it is also possible to store and to translate everything; and, as for speed, that is no problem. No further acceleration is possible this side of the light barrier.

Just as when information levels rise in physics and chemistry, it is possible to use anything for fuel or fabric or building material, so with electric technology all solid goods can be summoned to appear as solid commodities by means of information circuits set up in the organic patterns that we call "automation" and information retrieval. Under electric technology the entire business of man becomes learning and knowing. In terms of what we still consider an "economy"

(the Greek word for a household), this means that all forms of employment become "paid learning," and all forms of wealth result from the movement of information. The problem of discovering occupations or employment may prove as difficult as wealth is easy.

The long revolution by which men have sought to translate nature into art we have long referred to as "applied knowledge." "Applied" means translated or carried across from one kind of material form into another. For those who care to consider this amazing process of applied knowledge in Western civilization, Shakespeare's *As You Like It* provides a good deal to think about. His Forest of Arden is just such a golden world of translated benefits and joblessness as we are now entering via the gate of electric automation.

It is no more than one would expect that Shakespeare should have understood the Forest of Arden as an advance model of the age of automation when all things are translatable into anything else that is desired:

And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in every thing.
I would not change it.

AMIENS: Happy is your Grace,
That can translate the stubbornness of fortune
Into so quiet and so sweet a style.

(*As You Like It*, II, i. 15–21)

Shakespeare speaks of a world into which, by programming, as it were, one can play back the materials of the natural world in a variety of levels and intensities of style. We are close to doing just this on a massive scale at the present time electronically. Here is the image of the golden age as one of complete metamorphoses or translations of nature into human art, that stands ready of access to our electric age. The poet Stéphane Mallarmé thought "the world exists to end in a

book." We are now in a position to go beyond that and to transfer the entire show to the memory of a computer. For man, as Julian Huxley observes, unlike merely biological creatures, possesses an apparatus of transmission and transformation based on his power to store experience. And his power to store, as in a language itself, is also a means of transformation of experience:

Those pearls that were his eyes.

Our dilemma may become like that of the listener who phoned the radio station: "Are you the station that gives twice as much weather? Well, turn it off. I'm drowning."

Or we might return to the state of tribal man, for whom magic rituals are his means of "applied knowledge." Instead of translating nature into art, the native nonliterate attempts to invest nature with spiritual energy.

Perhaps there is a key to some of these problems in the Freudian idea that when we fail to translate some natural event or experience into conscious art we "repress" it. It is this mechanism that also serves to numb us in the presence of those extensions of ourselves that are the media studied in this book. For just as a metaphor transforms and transmits experience, so do the media. When we say, "I'll take a rain check on that," we translate a social invitation into a sporting event, stepping up the conventional regret to an image of spontaneous disappointment: "Your invitation is not just one of those casual gestures that I must brush off. It makes me feel all the frustration of an interrupted ball game that I can't get with it." As in all metaphors, there are complex ratios among four parts: "Your invitation is to ordinary invitations as ball games are to conventional social life." It is in this way that by seeing one set of relations through another set that we store and amplify experience in such forms as money. For money is also a metaphor. And all media as extensions of ourselves serve to provide new transforming vision and

awareness. "It is an excellent invention," Bacon says, "that Pan or the world is said to make choice of Echo only (above all other speeches or voices) for his wife, for that alone is true philosophy which doth faithfully render the very words of the world ..."

Today Mark II stands by to render the masterpieces of literature from any language into any other language, giving as follows, the words of a Russian critic of Tolstoy about "War and World (peace ... But nonetheless culture not stands) costs on place. Something translate. Something print." (Boorstin, 141)

Our very word "grasp" or "apprehension" points to the process of getting at one thing through another, of handling and sensing many facets at a time through more than one sense at a time. It begins to be evident that "touch" is not skin but the interplay of the senses, and "keeping in touch" or "getting in touch" is a matter of a fruitful meeting of the senses, of sight translated into sound and sound into movement, and taste and smell. The "common sense" was for many centuries held to be the peculiar human power of translating one kind of experience of one sense into all the senses, and presenting the result continuously as a unified image to the mind. In fact, this image of a unified ratio among the senses was long held to be the mark of our *ratio*-nality, and may in the computer age easily become so again. For it is now possible to program ratios among the senses that approach the condition of consciousness. Yet such a condition would necessarily be an extension of our own consciousness as much as wheel is an extension of feet in rotation. Having extended or translated our central nervous system into the electromagnetic technology, it is but a further stage to transfer our consciousness to the computer world as well. Then, at least, we shall be able to program consciousness in such wise that it cannot be numbed nor distracted by the Narcissus illusions of the entertainment world that beset

mankind when he encounters himself extended in his own gimmickry.

If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?

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Challenge and Collapse: The Nemesis of Creativity