The Catholic Church in the modern age and the works of Marshall McLuhan: An investigation into the dialogue between the church teachings on social communication and secular communication and media studies

Joyce L. Arriola

Abstract

The Second Vatican Council is generally considered as the Church's serious effort to engage the modern world, which at the turn of the twentieth century confronted the crisis brought by the two world wars, the Cold War, the increasing secularization of culture, and the challenges posed by the late industrial age and the new information society.

One of the documents of Vatican II, the Decree on Social Communication, laid down the principles and means by which the Church will utilize the mass media in its work and in guiding the laity in its proper use. Behind the scenes, Marshall McLuhan, a Catholic communication and media theorist, was seen to have a huge influence on the shaping of the details of *Inter Mirifica* and subsequent documents on social media. This paper is an investigation into the interaction between the Vatican and McLuhan, and how the Church sought his ideas in subsequent development of the decree on social communication, and how McLuhan represented, interpreted and invoked the Catholic faith in his various writings.

Keywords: *Catholic Church, modern age, Marshall McLuhan, secular communication and media theory, social communication, secular-dialogical model of church communication, SDG#4 - quality education; SDG#16 - Peace, justice and strong institutions*

Plaridel Open Access Policy Statement

How to cite this article in APA

Arriola, J. L. (2024). The Catholic Church in the modern age and the works of Marshall McLuhan: An investigation into the dialogue between the church teachings on social communication and secular communication and media studies. *Plaridel, 21*(2), 93-114. https://doi.org/10.52518/2024.21.2-03jarrl

Introduction

The rise of electronic media—cinema, radio, and television—led to massive shifts in human sensibility. The world passed from symbolic communication (writing and print) to participative (auditory and visual). This also became an important meeting point between the scholarship of Marshall McLuhan, a Catholic convert, and the Catholic Church's formalization of its teachings and doctrinalization of the concept of social communication. The age of social communication converges with McLuhan's conversion into Catholicism and the flourishing of his idiosyncratic yet revolutionary theorizing on a new media age. This is a rare occasion where both ecclesiastical and secular views about the changing world seem to reflect and refract each other.

As a researching academic, I have always been into critical research, particularly in the areas of literary criticism, cultural studies, media history and adaptation studies. Ever since I entered the academe in the 1990s, I have developed a fascination with the works of Marshall McLuhan. His beginnings in literary studies and his later interest in communication and media studies parallel my own journey as a double major in Literature and Communication. McLuhan's understanding of the ecology of technology and the elements and properties of media have been guided by literary theory and the ancient understanding of *ground*. For me, these require deep immersion in literary theory and criticism as they were first conceptualized and applied in literary thought before they found applications in twentieth century electronic media forms.

Additionally, I have had a long interest in the Doctrine of the Catholic Church on Social Communication being a professor of Communication at the *Pontifical and Royal University of Santo Tomas (UST), the Catholic University of the Philippines*. I had the chance to assist in establishing the Master of Arts in Theology, major in Social/Pastoral Communication in the late 1990s through the collaboration between Fr. Franz-Josef Eilers, then Director of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference – Office of Social Communication, Fr. Melchor Saria, O.P., then Director of the UST Educational Technology Center, and Fr. Jose Antonio Aureada, O.P., then Dean of the UST Graduate School. This degree program has since produced quite a number of graduates who are now practitioners in social/pastoral communication.

The connection between McLuhan and the post-Vatican development of the Doctrine of Social Communication may be considered as an interesting one. Many of his interlocutors have always sensed the influence of McLuhan's Catholic faith in his media theory, particularly his understanding of literary formalism, New Criticism, pattern recognition and the idea of ground (rather than the figure) in media ecology. Likewise, the Holy See has been

generally perceived to have a high regard for the writings of McLuhan that he has been appointed as a consultant on Church's doctrine on social communication.

This intertwining of interests and advocacies has interested me ever since I have read the subtle Catholicity in McLuhan's writings and as I take into account the massive impact of the Second Vatican Council, the *Inter Mirifica* and other subsequent documents on social communication on evolving views of the Church on the role of media in carrying out its mission of evangelization and keeping the deposit of faith onto the modern age.

In line with the aforementioned discussion, this article seeks to answer the following questions: "How did the Catholic Church draw from the works of Marshall McLuhan in order to respond to the mediated environment of the modern world? Within this connection, how did Marshall McLuhan channel his Catholic faith into his medium theory and into his other engagements with the Catholic Church during his lifetime? This paper hopefully serves as a springboard in understanding this unique relationship between the Catholic Chruch's Doctrine on Social Communication and the secular communication and media studies through which McLuhan gave his intellectual contribution.

Catholicism and McLuhan

It can be said that the doctrine of social communication had been anticipated long before it was formalized into a Church teaching. The transition took place from the 19th to the 20th centuries, during which the ecclesiastical realm had been fraught by a number of major upheavals. The rise of electronic media rapidly changed the way people perceive reality and the mediating role of technology. The telegraph, representing "the first practical use of electricity, uncoupled communication from transportation" (Fang, 1997, p. 77). Through the speed of electric light, a message could be carried to another place without the benefit of the wheel or of movement technology. The seeds of electronic media were planted just as the modern century developed technologies of mobility and mechanisms. Succeeding communication media that would use electricity—film, radio, television— would also be expanding their reach and reproducibility. Soon after, the Church would be deeply acknowledging the cultural implications of the spread and applications of media technology by spearheading a series of actions that will institutionalize its concern for said latest inventions.

Christianity has seen all ages of media— the age of oral tradition, of writing, of print, of electronic media and entertainment, and of the most recent digital age. For two thousand years, the Catholic faith has carried its

mission of evangelization by tapping into the instruments of each media age.

Ronald Anthony Sarno, in his thesis titled "Modern Communication Theory and Catholic Religious, 1950-1980" (1983) named the means by which communication theory advised the three types of communication in the Catholic Church. The said types, it is apt to say, refer to three ages of church media, namely: oral Catholicism or catechetics, literate Catholicism or theology, and contemporary Catholicism of the mass media or religious education (Sarno, 1983). No one media age did ever die, so to speak. The arrival of a new one did not really terminate the preceding one; much like the arrival of print technology did not really render writing obsolete. Print updated writing by exploring the mechanical advantages of the movable type. Oral Catholicism, Literate Catholicism and Electronic Catholicism co-existed but it was the latter type of communication that provided the context for the modern age of the faith.

While the first encyclical letter on media was issued only in 1936, the Catholic Church had already wrestled with the possible influence of anti-Christian writings on the faithful by the second half of the 1700s (Eilers, 2014). Referred to as *Christianae Reipublical*, then Pope Clement XII cautioned the faithful about consuming "bad books, presumptuous theologians…immoral literature" (Eilers, 2014, p. 12). Said publications were considered inimical to Christian teaching.

The earliest concerns of the church about electronic media like cinema had to do with their possible pernicious content and not exactly on their properties as a medium of communication. The church initially approached these media by treating them as innovations that have become synonymous with modernity. As Pope Paul VI said in his message for the First World Communication Day on May 7, 1967 that "the Church…wishes by means of [this] initiative, proposed by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, to draw the attention of her children and of all men of good will to the vast and complex phenomenon of the modern means of social communication, such as the press, motion pictures, radio and television, which form one of the most characteristic notes of modern civilization" (Eilers, 2014, p. 365).

The electronic media, described as "wonderful techniques" in Pope Paul VI's message, are perceived to have shaped "man's social life" through their "new dimensions" (Eilers, 2014, p. 365). One of said dimensions points to the media's transportability and ubiquity. The Pope's message avers, in effect, that through the media of social communication, "time and space have been conquered" (p. 365), Such idea refers to the ability of the press, motion pictures, radio and television to occupy both the temporal and the spatial mode. The press occupies a space through its use of symbolic

communication. The motion pictures, radio and television can be enjoyed at various time zones and temporalities that allow them to be ubiquitous and mobile at the same time. Writing three years earlier than the Pope's message at the First World Communication Day, McLuhan prophesized this time-space boundlessness in his Introduction to *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964): "Today, after more than a century of electronic technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time itself as far as our planet is concerned" (p. 19).

McLuhan: Early upbringing

McLuhan is considered as one of the most significant communication and media theorists whose work contributed to understanding and defining the role of media technology in modernity. Born on July 21, 1911 into a Canadian family, McLuhan was a true creature of the 20th century. His father, Herbert McLuhan, was an insurance salesman who reared him into the teachings of his Baptist religion. His mother, Elsie McLuhan, was a teacher and a great influence in elocution. His only brother, the younger Maurice, became a minister for the United Church congregation (Edan, 2003; Manohar, 2021).

Although brought up to regularly attend the Nassau Baptist Church in the town called Winnipeg, McLuhan's parents imparted contrasting lessons of faith resulting from their very different understanding of their sliver of Protestant Christianity. McLuhan would be referring to this mixed religious upbringing as a kind of "loose Protestantism" (Edan, 2003, p. 8; Ripatrazone, 2022a, https://catholicherald.co.uk/the material-and-spiritual-vision of-marshall-mcluhan, para 3). Despite this, the young McLuhan carried on with his own study of the Scriptures and attendance to Bible classes (Edan, 2003).

In 1928, McLuhan entered the University of Manitoba and enrolled in an English program. While in college, McLuhan fell away from the faith of his father, particularly his father's fundamentalist Baptist beliefs, which he always finds to be in conflict with his mother's Christian Science and Rosicrucian ideas. During this period, McLuhan admitted to being an agnostic (Edan, 2003; Manohar, 2021).

In 1932, McLuhan and his friend Tom Easterbrook went to England to study at Cambridge. Easterbrook is an indirect instrument to a major intellectual upheaval that McLuhan will encounter. As his book exchange partner, Easterbrook once shared with him the book titled *What's Wrong With the World?* (1910/2007) by G.K. Chesterton. The works of Chesterton will eventually be one of the most important influences in McLuhan's life—both in his religious convictions and in his future explorations of media

theory. Chesterton's preference for analogical thinking greatly influenced McLuhan's latter conversion into Catholicism (Roy, 2020). Analogical thought is carried through percepts—not concepts—which allowed him to appreciate an idea of the divine that is recreated in all things good in the physical world. Through Chesterton, he also discovered the works of St. Thomas Aquinas whose idea of formal causality is influential to McLuhan's explanation of things "hidden and environmental" that "exert their structural pressure by interval and interface with whatever is in their environmental territory" (Edan, 2003, p.16). McLuhan appropriated the same concept of formal causality to explain the television medium and its environment; the way the medium gathers disparate individuals in a singular, total experience of community (Edan, 2003; Kappeler, 2006).

Later on, McLuhan will be meeting the stalwarts of New Criticism led by I.A. Richards and his students, F.R. Leavis and William Empson. The formalist approach of Richard's practical criticism would shape McLuhan's understanding of form and its more important role [over content] (Edan, 2003; The Toronto School Initiative, 2022).

This brush with the New Critics, their connection to his evolving idea of "the medium is the message," and his disdain for communists at Cambridge have constituted his university life when he decided to embrace Catholicism in 1937. Soon after, he became a daily mass-goer and a strong believer in the mystery of the Eucharist or the Catholic's sacramental and liturgical doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Jesus Christ at the moment of consecration during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass (Manohar, 2021).

After finishing his doctoral dissertation at Cambridge, McLuhan taught at the University of Wisconsin and there he began to develop his ideas on media studies, particularly advertising and print technology. Later, he taught at St. Louis University and at Assumption College in Ontario. At the University of Toronto, he continued working on his theories about media technologies and their impact on the cultural environment of man. He founded there the Center for Culture and Technology. As he gained prominence for his theories, particularly the ideas he wrote in *Understanding Media*, he caught the attention of the Vatican. He was appointed to the Papal Commission of Communications in 1974 and was occasionally consulted by Rome on matters of social communication (Edan 2003; Kappeler, 2006; The Toronto School Initiative, 2022). While the world of scholarship has remained divided as to the soundness of his theories, McLuhan's contribution to an understanding of media cultures was tremendous; particularly in the current age when his "prophecies" in the 1960s are now guiding the current generation's interpretation of the

virtual technology and social media. McLuhan died on December 30, 1980, before the internet technology took the world by storm but his theories have remained to be a compelling reference point in understanding the contour of the new media age (Edan, 2003; Ripatrazone, 2022b).

The Catholic background of McLuhan's theories

Quite a number of commentaries on McLuhan's work point to his Catholicism as an important key to understanding his media theory. Yet, in his lifetime, McLuhan was careful not to present his studies on media in so-called Catholic terms (Manohar, 2021). For him, his religious beliefs are a private matter and although these have shaped his understanding of the world—via philosophy and literature—he chose to be careful in associating his theorizing with his Catholic beliefs. He would have what one would put it—for lack of a better phrase—a Catholic attitude toward life and scholarship. Edan (2003) reports that in the 1940s, he received an offer to teach at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. but he was advised by a friend that accepting it might put limitations on people's reception of his work.

Corollary to the information discussed above, McLuhan approached his scholarly work not as a Catholic convert but through it. For example, he was introduced to Catholicism through the backdoor— via the reflective essays of G.K. Chesterton, another Catholic convert. Through him, he learned to appreciate the works of St. Thomas Aquinas and through this encounter he began his early theorizing on the trivium and formalism that somehow connect massively with Thomistic concept of formal causality. Eventually, his personal correspondences would bear his reverence for the mass, the Eucharist, and Catholic sacramentality in general, which are an elaboration, in a different kind of genre, of his thoughts on the complementarity between the image and word, the medium and the message (Edan 2003; Ripatrazone, 2022a).

McLuhan's theory as expressed in *Understanding Media*

McLuhan (1964) made extensive commentaries on the difference between the mechanical age and the electronic age. He said: "After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding. During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 19). McLuhan notes the massive change in the twentieth century – the passing of the mechanical age, which in itself ushered many transformations in human life. The mechanical man has made possible repetition and regularity of work and means of production. The "bodies in space" made possible mobility,

transport, mechanization of labor; in other words, the industrial concept of living powered by capital and labor.

The electronic age is different because its reach is bigger: "[W]e have extended our central nervous system in a global embrace ..." (McLuhan, 1964, p. 19). The reason behind this is that it is not only a defiance of space limitations, it is more than that—an "abolishing [of] both space and time" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 19). The electronic age re-calibrates experience by its ability to repeat experience via electronic recording or through sending of communication signals through the speed of light.

This understanding of the electronic age and the media it constructs are key to unlocking his basic assumptions of the adage "medium is the message." McLuhan himself explains this in the "Introduction to the Second Edition of *Understanding Media*" (1964): "The section on "the medium is the message" can perhaps be clarified by pointing out that any technology gradually creates a totally new environment. Environments are not passive wrappings but active process" (p. viii).

In order to demonstrate the role of medium change in altering the environments of humans, McLuhan compared oral and written cultures. He notes the transformation that happens in a particular society as a result of the introduction of a new technology. This change is not superficial but massive. McLuhan's favorite point of illustration was the ebbing of oral culture in Plato's time and the coming of the writing age. He calls the oral culture operational or the beneficiary of a "tribal encyclopedia" (McLuhan, 1964, p. vii). However, the beginning of writing led to the idea of classifying knowledge, which was a massive shift in Greek antiquity. Thus: "With the phonetic alphabet, classified wisdom took over from the operational wisdom of Homer and Hesiod and the tribal encyclopedia. Education by classified data has been the Western program ever since" (McLuhan, 1964, p. viii).

Reviewers of McLuhan have always pointed out the subtle Catholicism in his media theory (Kappeler, 2006; Ripatrazone, 2018: Ripatrazone, 2022c). Not only did McLuhan sound prophetic in his views, he was always acknowledging the importance of analogy that he learned from his early encounters with Chesterton (Edan, 2003; Kappeler, 2006; Manohar, 2021; Roy, 2020).

His proposition that a whole environment is introduced by a new technology is seen as an analogy to his religious views. The medium that led to a change in perception and experience becomes the same message of that society. This parallels his view of Christ being both the medium and the message through the Eucharist; through the notion that every Catholic is being a member of the mystical body of Christ; and, through the whole

sacramental economy in the Catholic faith (De Souza, 2022; Kappeler, 2006; Manohar 2021).

Many of his reviewers concede that McLuhan's Catholicism may not be discernible immediately in his works; yet, his writings are deeply imbued with Catholic ideas. McLuhan is aware of how the Catholic mind is ordered toward sacramentality; the role played by instruments of grace in leading the faithful toward a sanctified existence. The Catholic worldview is a consciousness-altering environment that order the physical world to come into close union with the metaphysical. This is quite similar to the concept of media ecology wherein a whole environment adjusts to shifts in man's sensory skills (Edan, 2003; Kappeler, 2006; Logan, 2016; Manohar, 2021).

And yet, beyond the figure of Christ, quite a number of critics see a parallel between the phrase "the medium is the message" with the efforts of the Catholic Church to model a secular-dialogical church rather than the older models of institutional and hierarchical church models. The medium is the Church itself which is not only making use of communication channels but is rather communication itself. This has been the view of Avery Dulles (Eilers, 2014; Vu Ta, 2015): "The Church is communication…a vast communication network designed to bring men out of their isolation and estrangement and to bring them individually and corporately into communion with God in Christ" (p. 39).

In previous ages, scholars identified the differences between medium and message through the examination of the structural and functional components of the communication process (e.g., Harold Lasswell, David Berlo). Whether it be through Harold Lasswell's (1998) model stating "Who says what in which channel through which effect" (p. 23) or David Berlo's cybernetic model emphasizing communication as a system, communication and media theories describe the flow of communication from source to destination. However, some theories hardly address the consequences of communication to the environment and the transformation that takes place. McLuhan may be considered as the first scholar to instigate an understanding of how technology causes a massive change in human consciousness. A number of efforts to understand communication and social and cultural change have been focused on infrastructural and social process. The impact on cultural consciousness could be a fertile ground just the same. McLuhan's broad conception of culture, although perceived to be controversial by many, remains a compelling argument. Some of its influence may be traced in the rise of McLuhan scholars and the interest paid by the Vatican in his propositions.

Although the beginning passages of the Introduction to *Inter Mirifica* acknowledges the possible use of the media in the work of the Church, it

cautions the laity on the threat that they could bring; thus: "The Church recognizes, too, that men can employ these media contrary to the plan of the Creator and to their own loss" (Kroeger, 2011, p. 385). While McLuhan does not outrightly brand media technology as either bad or good, any medium shift could have serious consequences for mankind. The Church decree on communication is replete with advices to the laity particularly on the utilization of the media for more beneficial ends: "For the proper use of these media it is most necessary that all who employ them be acquainted with the norms of morality and conscientiously put them into practice in this area" (Kroeger, 2011, p. 387).

While the Church is concerned over the impact of media technology on the moral life of the laity, she also affirms McLuhan's view that the nature and characteristics of the medium are key to taking full control over them: "They must look, then, to the nature of what is communicated, given the special character of each of these media" (Kroeger, 2011, p. 387). While "what is communicated" or the message is separate from "the special character of each of these media" as far as Vatican II is concerned, McLuhan saw them as inherently intertwined. The medium defines the content by shaping the culture that it addresses into a new entity, which itself becomes the content of the whole communication act.

McLuhan's emphasis on the environment of media or media ecology is a defining factor in his theory. The transformation that takes place in a new media environment has a far-reaching effect to the status and condition of epistemologies, economic life and societal values. To recall McLuhan's works in *Understanding Media* (1964): "What we are considering here, however, are the prolific and social consequences of the designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes. For the "message" of any medium or technology is the change or scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 24). Some of McLuhan's examples concern the so-called "detribalization" of man through the birth of the phonetic alphabet or the "retribalization" of twentieth century man through the birth of electronic technology.

The *Inter Mirifica* addresses the same scenario by noting the environment in which the electronic media thrives. As the *Inter Mirifica* (Kroeger, 2011) states:

> At the same time they must take into consideration the entire situation or circumstances, namely: the persons, place, time and other conditions under which communication takes place and which can affect or totally change its propriety.

Among these circumstances to be considered is the precise manner in which a given medium achieves its effect. (p. 387)

While it is not clear whether *Inter Mirifica* is referring to both short-term effects and long-term effects of media technology, the document affirms McLuhan's idea that broad conception of sensory culture is important in assessing technological change. While the Church may have been thinking of the possible deleterious effect of new technologies, their thoughts do not contradict or negate McLuhan's neutral outlook on the objectivity of technological change.

The Church thinks of the moral implications of the message or the effect of medium use on the ordinary lives in the following page: "For its influence can be so great that men, especially if they are unprepared, can scarcely become aware of it, govern its impact, or, if necessary, reject it" (Kroeger, 2011, p. 387). For McLuhan, on the other hand, the new electronic media, whether they bear good or bad effects, are revolutionizing ways of life by cursing the temporal and spatial boundaries and by reordering human life onto an experience of the total sensory surroundings all at once via the aural dimension and its simulation of a total experience (over and above the merely visual or symbolic experience of print). McLuhan says in *Understanding Media* (1964):

The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized. For electrical light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating involvement in depth. (p. 25)

The Church assigns responsibility to the message of the medium, its messenger and its knower; McLuhan to the whole unintended consequences of technological change. For the Church, the medium is passive, merely an instrument. Humans are acting as agents manipulating these technologies to accomplish their purpose. This is the reason why the Church is focused on the message and the communicants rather than the technologies. Even the depiction of the bad could accomplish certain ends for the Council Fathers. The communicants are considered free agents who are in control of these so-called "wonderful technological discoveries" (Kroeger, 2011, p. 385) in portraying Christian ethics and morality through the various genres of the media. Even the depiction of sin can have its instructional uses for as long as they are portrayed as they are and not in a distorted manner. Thus:

Finally, the narration, description or portrayal of moral evil, even through the media of social communication, can indeed serve to bring about a deeper knowledge and study of humanity and, with the aid of appropriately heightened dramatic effects, can reveal and glorify the grand dimensions of truth and goodness. Nevertheless, such presentations ought always to be subject to moral restraint, lest they work to the harm rather than the benefit of souls, particularly when there is question of treating matters which deserve reverent handling or which, given the baneful effect of original sin in men, could quite readily arouse base desires in them. (Kroeger, 2011, p. 389)

While McLuhan does not discount the deleterious effects of technology on society, some of the supposed changes may have been affecting man unconsciously because these are happening on a massive scale and that the re-wiring of the brain is happening gradually and is unnoticed by the general populace: "In our own world as we become more aware of the effects of technology on psychic formation and manifestation, we are losing all confidence in our right to assign guilt" (McLuhan, 1964, p. 31).

The release of *Communio et Progressio* [Unity and Advancement] in 1971 came in the wake of Vatican II and *Inter Mirifica* [Among the Wonderful]. It has been generally perceived that *Inter Mirifica* has been rushed by the Council because its preparation has been placed in between the tougher doctrines of the Church such as Divine Revelation and Liturgy. Because of the wide media attention generated by Vatican II, the conciliar document has been prepared also to guide the relationship of the Church with the media institution then (at the time of the Council sessions) and in the years to come. In view also of the *Inter Mirifica*'s brevity and lack of specificity, *Communio et Progressio* became a sort of a more specific set of Pastoral Instructions.

Communio et Progressio begins on a positive note by citing the uses of media technology in civilization: "That is why they are indispensable to the smooth functioning of modern society" (Eilers, 2014, p. 113). It reiterates the basic precepts of *Inter Mirifica* regarding "the Christian View of the Means of Social Communication" (p. 113), beginning with the truth that "Christ revealed Himself as the Perfect Communicator" (p. 114). It addresses the aims of social communication—the contribution of communications media to human progress (pp. 116-134). It refers to the media of social communication as "a great round table" (p. 116) where people could exchange ideas and establish "brotherhood and cooperation"

(p. 116). This principle of communion parallels the world conceived by McLuhan and Fiore (1967) in *The Medium is the Massage* where they claim that "the new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village" (p. 67). While *Communio et Progressio* considers the means of communication as a facilitator for this round table discussion, McLuhan and Fiore were more concerned in the possible "inventory of effects" of electronic means of communication.

Communio et Progressio claims that Catholics may contribute to social communication by Christians being active in this dialogue through the spiritual sphere, thus: "In this way this social interplay that makes neighbours of men can lead to true communion" (Eilers, 2014, p. 135). Corollary to this, the communications media contribute to Catholic life by acting as agency and instrument by which the church could dialogue with the modern world: "The Church lives her life in the midst of the whole community of man. She must therefore maintain contacts and lines of communication in order to keep a relationship with the whole human race" (Eilers, 2014, p. 137).

McLuhan's concept of media environment could be beneficial to this self-image of the post-Vatican Church but he has widely commented that the Church must embrace the notion that electronic media behave differently from print technology or the mechanism of literacy. McLuhan laments that the modern age has been caught by surprise by enormous change that coping with them had happened only after the human brain has been re-wired sufficiently to embrace the change: "Unhappily, we confront this new situation with an enormous backlog of outdated mental and psychological responses. We have been left d-a-n-g-l-i-n-g. Our most impressive words and thoughts betray us – they refer us only to the past, not to the present" (McLuhan & Fiore, 1967, p. 63).

McLuhan (in Edan, 2003) made the same observation with the Catholic Church whom he claimed had been too slow in reacting. He claimed that the Conciliar Fathers were not too keen about the new environment created by electronic media in the same way that the Fathers of the Council of Trent were not too keen in assessing accurately the changes wrought by printing technology and the assistance it afforded the advocates of the Reformation.

McLuhan's (in Edan, 2003) deep dive into the medieval trivium in his doctoral dissertation also influenced his conception of figure and ground, which he borrowed from Gestalt psychology. The figure is the grammar; the symbol through which we apprehend reality. The ground is the environment or the context through which this decoding of reality takes place. As Edan (2003) has said: "In order to recognize the impact of language of human sensibility, one must participate, through awareness of both, in bridging the gap between figure and ground—word and language" (p. 44).

To illustrate this particular McLuhanite conception of media: the figure is the visual representation of reality and the ground is the language through which it is understood. For McLuhan, it is "the encoded form of the collective perceptions and wisdom of many people" (Edan, 2003, p. 44).

In another demonstration, figure is visual, ground is acoustic. For McLuhan, the printing age was figural because it was fixated on the written symbol or the phonetic alphabet. The electronic age is ground because it is a return to the acoustic age of the tribal age. It extends the experience from the symbolic, which is linear, sequential and figural, to the electronic, which is acoustic and not bounded by time nor space. As Edan (2003) has interpreted McLuhan's view of electronic experience:

> Mankind was becoming tribal again. In the electric age, one could see and hear events that were happening in real time all over the world. People were no longer just reading about events after the fact. The entire world was connected through electricity, there was no longer any separation between people. (p. 10)

In another illustration of figure and ground that connects to the Catholic roots of his media theory, McLuhan holds that the tribal age during which ground or the acoustic environment is primary bent to favor an oral-based Christianity. This meant that since the age was predominantly oral, the transfer of tradition is based on the memory and oral skills of the believers. The birth of printing in the 16th century led to a symbol-dominated culture that is book-bound. The Protestant Reformation of the 16th century benefitted from the dominance of figure because it allowed for private acquisition of books and solitary reading. However, the print transmission of scriptural lessons backfired because it left interpretation to private judgment and divergent views of the scriptures.

The return of ground or the acoustic age of electronic media de-tribalized man and allowed his sensory skills to adapt to new stimuli. However, the instantaneous experience of the acoustic stimuli led to changes in the media environment that would have far-reaching implications on the nature and production of knowledge and the decoding of meaning. The new man is overinformed but his overarching understanding of his surroundings is based on the nature of the medium. His new self - personal, political, cultural, religious – is based on what he caught through the media, which is now his new identity as a creature of modernity.

Consolidation of the Catholicity of McLuhan's media theory

McLuhan's media theory may be linked to his conversion to Catholicism and to his Catholic ideas. Several schools of thought helped him develop it into a full-blown philosophy. From his Protestant father, he caught his early ideas and experience of Christianity but not his faith. From his mother, he got exposed to manifold views; partly owing to his mother's eclectic interests: Christian Science, Rosicrucianism and elocution (Edan, 2003). He called his early religion "loose sort of Protestantism" (Edan, 2003, p.8; Ripatrazone, 2022a, para. 3) because of his parents' divergent views of religion and his bland experience of Bible classes and church attendance in his local Baptist church. Early on, the figural, book-bound experience of Christianity did not resonate fully in McLuhan because its appeal was only on the intellect but not on the experiential, emotional and perceptual.

McLuhan's early exposure to the "biographical and historical" (Edan, 2003, p. 9) literature study at the University of Manitoba did not stir in him a yearning for the spiritual but instead highlighted the fundamentalism of the sliver of Christianity that he was born into. For a brief time, he slid into agnosticism and back to a Christianity that at its essence is unique because of the idea of the Pentecost which he considered separated the faith from other world religions. To borrow C.S. Lewis' (1952) term, McLuhan was a *mere Christian* in his early years as a university student. This was a nascent stage that will shape his theory of form—rather than content—later on.

Chesterton's influence on McLuhan's theory relies on the anagogical view of Christian thought (Chesterton, 1925). This is important because an epistemological process or a system of thinking became more paramount to McLuhan rather than the content of human life; similar to his disappointment over the biographical and historical content of his early literary studies that prevented him from having a fuller experience of the literary form. Analogy is important to the early Church Fathers such as St. Augustine because it facilitates the appropriation and application of divine revelation in human terms. Analogy is focused on form; it is an approach to reading. This could be extended to an experience of God's actions upon men. The New Covenant is analogous to the Old Covenant. The Holy Eucharist—blood, soul and divinity of Christ—is analogous to Old Testament's covenantal theology and the idea of the sacrifice of the lamb at the Passover. Through Chesterton's thoughts on analogical thinking, McLuhan imbibed his ideas of medium use that is mirroring the environments in which it thrives or it helps propel. The medium is analogous to the message because it creates a new environment that will have far-reaching consequences for man psychologically and culturally.

Analogical thinking also allowed McLuhan to think of new media environments as a reprise of the old but presented in a more revolutionary manner. The old is contained in the new, which in the final analysis is deeply-rooted in Catholic thought. In his Introduction to the Second Edition of *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan opined that no medium actually dies but is rather reinvented and re-circulated in an environment of users. The old becomes assimilated in the message of the new medium; thus: "The medium is the message" means, in terms of the electronic age, that a totally new environment is the old mechanized environment of the industrial age. The new environment reprocesses the old one as radically as TV is environmental and imperceptible, like all environments. We are aware only of the "content" of the old environment. When machine production was new, it gradually created an environment whose content was the old environment of agrarian life and the arts and crafts. This older environment was elevated to an art form by the new mechanical environment" (McLuhan, 1964, p. ix).

McLuhan's exposure to Chestertonian brand of analogical approach to reading is further enriched by his encounter with I.A. Richards in Cambridge. The New Critics' School provided him sufficient understanding of the literary form and how the immersion to such leads to a cultivation of perceptual rather than conceptual thinking. Conceptual thought is associated with print-based cultures because of the highly symbolic nature of written language. Perceptual thinking is associated with acoustic environments fuelled by electronic media. In this regard, the consideration of the literary form may be compared to how we understand cubism – as its own message. McLuhan (1964) explains:

> In other words, cubism, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back, and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that *the medium is the message*. Is it not evident that the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous, one is in the world of the structure and of configuration? Is that not what has happened in physics as in painting, poetry, and in communication? Specialized segments of attention have shifted to total field, and we can now say, "The medium is the message" quite naturally. (p. 28)

The New Critics' philosophy became naturally allied to McLuhan's view of the medium becoming the message itself. The form of the literary medium sets the condition for its environment, for its reception. For the formalist,

the era of epic is predisposed to think in terms of the mythic. The novel of the 19th century is the form of an individual solitary whose bourgeoise ethos shapes the novel's moral theme and which is subsumed to the prose form that enables it to become eventually a part of some "imagined communities" (Anderson, 2003, p. xxix). The novel, alongside the newspaper, allowed people to think in terms of nationality and of country. It has also become ripe in capturing the middle-class ethos, the consciousness of class and the deployment of social manners. The literary form itself becomes the message and for a literature professor like McLuhan, thinking analogically could might as well be the same as "the medium" becoming "the message."

McLuhan contributed to theorizing and research on social communication and in assisting the Church in tackling the challenges of the modern world. The Church, always deeply suspicious of the secular bent of popular media, looked toward McLuhan's writings for guidance not only on media ecology but also on the qualities and potentials of each of the electronic media. This will have a lasting influence on how the Church will tackle the current digital media, particularly its ethical implications.

Likewise, the Doctrine on Social Communication, one of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council, assisted in further understanding McLuhan's conception of the medium as the message and the global village through his understanding of sacramental theology (in which the medium of Christ in the Eucharist is the message itself) and the communal aspect of the Catholic faith and its emphasis on ground rather than the figure (the emphasis of the print age). The ground encourages a return to the oral/tribal understanding of communication which harks back to the oral, physical and sacramental expressions of Christianity during the Apostolic age, to which the Catholic faith claims its continuity.

Conclusion

This paper has outlined the parallel assumptions of the Catholic Church documents on Social Communication and Marshall McLuhan's medium theory. As one of the documents of Vatican II, *Inter Mirifica* served as the means by which the Church engaged the modern world through the media of communications. McLuhan, a convert to Catholicism and a deep believer in the sacramentality of the faith, has written works that have borne the impact of the Church upon his thoughts. Sought on several occasions by the Vatican and always referenced in a number of encyclicals, McLuhan's views—particularly the concepts of "the medium is the message" and "the global village"—have affirmed rather than negated the Catholic understanding of the instrumentality of the media in gathering the faithful in a collective. McLuhan's view of analogical thinking, depth perception and

media ecology are somehow a reaffirmation of the tradition of the Church from the apostolic age to the more recent times. In fact, the experience of the electronic media is multi-sensory and replicate the sacramental view of faith. Although McLuhan died on the eve of the internet age, his views continue to influence interpretation of the impact of the digital technology on the current century. The Church continues to value McLuhan's works as some of the most incisive and comprehensive secular references that these have served as valuable guidance to the Church in subsequent doctrines and encyclicals on social communication fifty years since *Inter Mirifica* was signed and promulgated.

References

Anderson, B. (2003). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised edition). Anvil Publishing, Inc. https://doi.org/10.1016/0191-6599(95)90485-9

Chesterton, G.K. (1910/2007). *What's wrong with the world*. Dover Publications.

Chesterton, G.K. (1925) *The everlasting man*. Ignatius Press.

De Souza, R. (2022). *Marshall McLuhan and the divine message*. https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/catholic-contributions/marshall-mcluhan-and-the-divine-message.html

Edan, T. (2003). *St. Marshall, mass and the media: Catholicism, media theory and Marshall McLuhan* [Masters' Thesis]. University of Montreal. https://core.ac.uk/reader/211506872

Eilers, F. (2014). *Church and social communication: Basic documents (1936-2014)*. Logos (Divine Word) Publications, Inc.

Fang, I. (1997). *A history of mass communication: Six information revolutions*. Focal Press. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780080508160

Kappeler W. (2006). *Communication habits for the pilgrim church: Vatican teaching on media and social communications*. [Unpublished doctoral thesis]. McGill University, Montreal.

Kroeger, J. H. (Ed.) (2011*). Inter mirifica* [Among the wonderful]. *Documents of Vatican II*. Paulines.

Lasswell, H. D. (1988). "The structure and function of communication in society." Jarice Hanson and David J. Maxcy, eds. *Notable sources in mass communication*. (pp. 22-29). Guilford, CT: Dushkin Publishing Group/Brown and Benchmark Publishers.

Lewis, C.S. (1952). *Mere Christianity*. Harper Collins.

Logan, R.K. (2016). McLuhan's philosophy of media ecology: An introduction. *Philosophies, 1*(2), pp. 133-140. https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies1020133

Manohar, A. (2021). The mass is the medium: Marshall McLuhan and Roman Catholic liturgical change. *Graduate Theses and Dissertations*. https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/etd/8817

McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. McGraw-Hill Book Company.

McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q. (1967). *The Medium is the Massage*: *An Inventory of Effects*. Bantam Books.

Ripatrazone, N. (2018). A Catholic media trinity: Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong, and Andy Warhol. https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2017/12/27/catholic-media-trinity-marshall-mcluhan-walter-ong-and-andy-warhol

Ripatrazone, N. (2022a). The material and spiritual vision of Marshall McLuhan. *Catholic Herald*. https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-material-and-spiritual-vision-of-marshall-mcluhan

Ripatrazone, N. (2022b). *Marshall McLuhan, the Catholic thinker who predicted the internet, spent his last days praying with a Jesuit*. https://www.americamagazine.org/arts-culture/2022/01/28/marshall-mcluhan-frank-stroud-242272

Ripatrazone, N. (2022c). *Marshall McLuhan's Catholic media vision*. https://angelusnews.com/arts-culture/marshall-mcluhans-catholic-media-vision/.

Roy, C. (2020). *Marshall McLuhan and Eastern Christianity: Probing an interfaith interface with the symbolic world in mind*. https://thesymbolicworld.com/articles/marshall-mcluhan-and-eastern-christianity-probing-an-interfaith-interface-with-the-symbolic-world-in-mind/

Sarno, R. A. (1983). *Modern communication theory and Catholic religious education, 1950-1980* [Unpublished dissertation]. New York University.

The Toronto School Initiative. (2022). *Marshall McLuhan*. https://thetorontoschool.ca/marshall-mcluhan/

Vu Ta, A. (2015). "Communication Theology." In A.V. Tan and F.J. Eilers (Eds), *Social Communication in Theological Perspective: Communication Theology* (pp. 33-105). Logos (Divine Word) Publications, Inc.

Grant Support Details

About the Author

JOYCE L. ARRIOLA (jlarriola@ust.edu.ph) is a Full Professor of Communication and Literature at the University of Santo Tomas (UST). She currently chairs the UST Department of Communication and is the Program Lead of the Communication and Literature courses at the UST Graduate School. She is also a research fellow of the UST Center for Theology, Religious Studies and Ethics. Her research interests include adaptation studies, memory studies and communication theology.