MEDIA AND VIOLENCE: DOES McLuhan PROVIDE A CONNECTION?

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Abstract. School shootings publicized worldwide inevitably awaken the debate about contemporary communication media and violence. It is often conjectured that regular exposure of young people to countless acts of aggression in contemporary popular media leads them to become more aggressive and, in some cases, to commit violent crimes. But is this claim valid? Media guru Marshall McLuhan argues that it is not so much the content of such media that incites aggressive actions as the sociostructural conditions they bring into being. In this article, Jane O’Dea draws on the cultural context of postmodernity and on Jean Baudrillard’s thought to explore and critically assess the validity of the linkage McLuhan proposes, identifying the kinds of questions, inquiries, and educational implications it potentially raises.

Worldwide mass and school shootings from 1996 to the present currently number eighty-six,¹ the most infamous perhaps being the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, where students Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris shot and killed twelve fellow students and a teacher. The deadliest school shooting in U.S. history was the 2007 Virginia Polytechnic Institute shooting that claimed thirty-two people, followed by the December 14, 2012, shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, that saw twenty children and six others killed. When such events occur we are inundated with images of tear-strewn, shocked faces as newspapers and television alike carry interviews with frightened peers and parents. People ask in bewilderment why “schools” are targeted?² Seeking to ascertain what triggered such apparently “senseless” shootings,³ the social and academic backgrounds, interests, and general dispositions of the perpetrators are dissected and discussed, leading inevitably, in addition to arguments about gun control, to the old debate about contemporary technological media and violence. Engaged in such media, children and young people are exposed regularly to countless acts of violence. Such ongoing exposure, it is argued, increases the risk of youthful aggressive behavior in at least two ways. It desensitizes adolescents to violence, thereby making them more inclined to adopt violent

². For an analysis of why schools are interpreted as appropriate places for violence, see Bryan Warnick, Sang Hyun Kim, and Shannon Robinson, “Gun Violence and the Meaning of American Schools,” in this issue.
³. The perceived senselessness of school shootings is analyzed in Gabriel Keehn and Deron Boyles, “Sense, Nonsense, and Violence: Levinas and the Internal Logic of School Shootings,” in this issue.
solutions to real or perceived problems, and/or it leads to imitative, copycat acts of violence.4

But does exposure to violent movies and television programs or to gory video games and websites lead children and perhaps also adults to become more aggressive and, in some cases, more likely to commit violent crimes? It is notoriously difficult to establish direct causes for complex human behaviors. It is not surprising, therefore, that the results of scientific studies designed to establish such a causal link are inconclusive.5 However convenient and comforting it would be to isolate and blame a single catalyst, such as mass media, the issue of violence appears sufficiently complicated and complex to make it virtually impossible to do so. Rowell Huesmann and Laramie Taylor suggest that violent mass media is “best viewed as one of the many potential factors that influence the risk for violence” and not as “the cause of violent behavior.”6 Likewise, Douglas Kellner asserts, “school shootings have multiple causes and need to be addressed by a diverse range of responses.”7 In the words of film producer Steve Tisch [responding to the Columbine incident], “It’s not just movies. Lots of other wires have to short before a kid goes out and does something like this. It’s a piece of a much bigger, more complex puzzle.”8

MARSHALL McLuhan

If it is indeed a puzzle, media guru Marshall McLuhan argues that it is one to which contemporary media culture holds a key. Foretelling an escalation in random outbursts of violent behavior, he wrote in 1974:

The electric surround of information . . . has extended man in a colossal, superhuman way but it has not made individuals feel important. [Instead] . . . the ordinary man can feel so pitifully weak that, like a skyjacker, he’ll reach for a superhuman dimension of world coverage in a wild, desperate effort for fulfillment . . . . Violence on a colossal scale results from his feeling


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of impotence. . . . [T]here is a new desire to use the media to put on the colossal audience that today's media provide.9

Even more explicitly, in 1976 he suggested: “The loss of individual and personal meaning via the electronic media ensures a corresponding and reciprocal violence from those so deprived of their identities; for violence, whether spiritual or physical, is a quest for identity and the meaningful. The less identity, the more violence.”10 Finally we have the following provocative statement: “IT'S WHY THEY HAVE TO KILL . . . in order to find out whether they’re real. This is where the violence comes from. This meaningless slaying around our streets is the work of people who have lost all identity and who have to kill to know if they’re real or if the other guy's real.”11

As indicated above, if McLuhan does indeed connect media culture with aggressive social behaviors, the connection is subtler than that usually envisaged. In particular, he argues that it is not so much the content of such media that incites aggressive actions as the sociostructural conditions that they engender. This is in line with his famous aphorism “the medium is the message.”12 Although enigmatic, McLuhan's thesis here is uncomplicated. He contends that, regardless of the messages they communicate, media in and of themselves exert a compelling influence on society.13 What is communicated has much less effect on us than the means by which it is communicated.14 Although content undoubtedly plays a role in influencing thought and behavior, “societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media with which people communicate than by the content of the communication.”15

In making this argument, McLuhan challenges the conventional wisdom that communication media are but “tools” and that it is the uses to which they are put — their content — that determines their influence. Not so, says McLuhan. The brutal images presented in violent movies and television programs are far less influential than the specific kind of social environment such communication


media bring into being. In such a milieu, accepted notions of meaning and identity are called into question. Being by nature meaning-seeking creatures, human beings find this situation intolerable ultimately and therefore strive to recreate meaning and identity through engagement in various kinds of “testing” behavior, including acts of physical brutality.  

The subtlety of the link McLuhan proposes between violence and contemporary media now becomes clear. Electronic media are instrumental in creating structural conditions that are conducive to violence. But those structural conditions, in particular our “ostrich-like” refusal to acknowledge and respond to them, rather than the media are responsible for the ensuing changes in social behavior. In McLuhan’s words, “Cataclysmic environmental changes . . . [induced by electronic media] . . . 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.”

And there’s the rub. We typically don’t perceive them. Arrogantly assuming that media will function only in the manner we had intended when they were created, we fail to notice the unintended consequences that may ensue. But McLuhan argues that it is precisely these unperceived side effects of technological development that generate the most change and that, largely unobserved, trigger sweeping transformations in culture, values, and attitudes. Such transformations ultimately cause discernible changes in patterns of social behavior, including those of contemporary youth.

Although terse, McLuhan’s comments offer a thought-provoking perspective on the potential influence of contemporary communication media on social mores and behavior. While he agrees with defenders of popular media that our overall social environment, not particular movies or video games, is responsible for transformations in social behavior, McLuhan nonetheless corroborates the common intuition that such media are somehow integrally involved. If he is right that contemporary electronic media are instrumental in creating social structures conducive to the development of aggressive behaviors, then we need to become cognizant of those conditions and respond appropriately. Indeed, parents and educators, in particular, need this awareness if the issue of youthful aggression in schools, as well as in society at large, is to be adequately and effectively addressed.

But is McLuhan right? That’s a question not easily answered given his proclivity [demonstrated above] to express ideas not in linear prose but in “thought probes” — short, bold assertions explicitly designed to “prod” the reader into completing a thought process.  

out insightful, original perceptions that capture our attention. Their drawback is that they inevitably fail to provide nuanced analysis and authoritative references/documentation. My purpose in this article is to fill in the gaps by exploring and critically assessing the validity of the linkage McLuhan proposes, and by identifying the kinds of questions and educational implications it potentially raises. We will begin by considering the kinds of social transformations contemporary communication media have brought in their wake and their impact on identity formation in the postmodern era.

**Identity in Postmodernity**

In the postmodern media-saturated environment, people abandon “the desert of the real” for the ecstasies of hyperreality.” The evocative phrase “the desert of the real” is Jean Baudrillard’s and it refers to postmodernity’s fascination with images. Although humankind has always been fascinated by images, Baudrillard maintains that there is a subtle but important distinction to be made between peoples’ fascination with images in the past and our contemporary fascination with media images. In the past, it was possible to make a strict distinction between an image and reality. We recognized and understood that images were but signs or representations of the real. Moreover, they implied a theology of truth — insofar as the images were perceived as reflecting reality accurately, they were seen as “good,” but where they were seen as masking or perverting reality, they were seen as evil and malevolent. Images, in short, were “sites of the production of meaning and representation.” Today, it is quite the opposite. Modern media images have become “sites of the disappearance of meaning and representation . . . sites of a fatal strategy of degeneration of the real and of the reality principle,” “murderers of the real.”

All of this sounds more than a little apocalyptic, but what Baudrillard is arguing merits consideration. He suggests that images in consumer society have progressed from being signs of reality to reality itself. In short, contemporary technologies have rendered images so ubiquitous, sophisticated, and convincing that it is now all but impossible to differentiate between an image and reality — “images become more real than the real.” Consumer-related industries such as fashion, advertising, design, and the various media that serve as their vehicles illustrate Baudrillard’s point. Although ostensibly designed to sell products — items of clothing perhaps, or various kinds of household accessories — they do so by selling


21. Ibid., 194.

22. Ibid., 194 (emphasis in original), and 196 (emphasis added).

23. Ibid., 195.
“fantasies.” They associate their product with socially desirable and meaningful character traits or lifestyles, creating the impression that if you want to be a certain kind of person, then you should buy the product. The famous “Marlboro man” advertising campaign aptly demonstrates this. In the campaign, a familiar icon of masculinity, independence, and ruggedness — the Western cowboy — is associated with cigarette smoking. The message conveyed is that if you want to be a “real man,” then you should smoke Marlboro cigarettes. Unlike earlier conceptions of identity, where being a “real man” entails engaging in a variety of socially designated “manly” activities — aggressive types of sports perhaps, or hazardous rodeo activities — that require time, effort, and commitment, in this postmodern version you simply buy the product to acquire the identity. But notice that the identity thus acquired is not a stable, substantial identity forged in the daily crucible of reality. It is an image, a superficial impression. Multiply this one image by countless others and you begin to acquire a more nuanced picture of identity formation in our contemporary commodity- and media-based society. It is one where we are dominated by images of what it is to be a healthy, successful, fulfilled human being. And though we may be unaware of it, these images function as powerful instruments of control that construct conditions of social “normality” not by repression but “by stimulation.” In so doing, they manufacture a subtle, unconscious social consensus that brings about “a new kind of subject and new kinds of desire and behavior that belong to him/her.”

In such an environment, rather than being identified primarily by what they do, people are identified also by what they consume. In other words, your “self-image” — the impression you create — becomes increasingly important. You are judged not just by your actions or character but also by the clothes you wear, the music you listen to, the car you drive, or the television shows you watch (it is noteworthy that the two Columbine shooters were identified as belonging to a clique called the “Trench Coat Mafia”). Consumer culture — the images, fashions, and lifestyles it promotes — becomes an important component in the construction of self, leading Axel Honneth to describe identity formation in this context as a “process of fictionalization of reality . . . through which the atomized individual becomes an imitator of styles of existence prefabricated by media.”

24. Kellner, Media Culture.


This actively undermines four key elements hitherto constitutive of identity. Because consumer styles incessantly appear, disappear, and reappear with great rapidity, identities connected to them are transitory and ephemeral, providing little sense of orderly connection, with no overarching goal or direction that relates these identities to what has gone before and what will come later. Instead, drawn to construct self-images out of the multiplicity of looks and lifestyles made available and promoted as self-fulfilling by the omnipresent charismatic gospel of advertising, we become nomadic subjects constantly negotiating different identities.

Consumer culture also undermines traditional social grouping and contexts of interaction, changing their character and weakening their influence. Its role as an indicator of social status notwithstanding, the commodity has a powerful tendency to diminish social differences by reducing (or elevating) everyone to the common level of consumer. Brought to the same “place” by consumer images broadcast worldwide, the collective identities of class, gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity weaken. At the same time, conventional social roles and stages of socialization blur, diminishing the influence of community-based norms, rules, and rituals, and loosening the constraints maintained by traditional patterns of deference and authority.

Conceptions of personal identity are also altered by consumer culture. Because we are encouraged to acquire our identities ready-made and not to earn them through effort and committed action, we are less emotionally invested in the acquired attributes. Effort, as we all know, typically entails a measure of anxiety and frustration. Such stresses notwithstanding, participating meaningfully in challenging activities (for example, ice hockey, playing a musical instrument, or writing an academic dissertation) provides its own unique brand of pleasure — the pleasure that derives from living powerfully, stretching your physical and mental capacities to the utmost, “living at the top of your bent.” Indeed, it is the sense of accomplishment and self-worth that derives from overcoming the particular challenges entailed that make them, in an important sense, identity-conferring.

Consumer-related identities are qualitatively different. They are not hard-won. Like the products to which they are attached, they can easily be taken up or discarded and their removal typically evinces a much less serious sense of personal

29. Dunn, *Identity Crisis*.


loss. This is not to suggest that their procurement is not pleasurable. It is, but the pleasure derived is usually experienced quickly and involves less effort. The ever-changing stimuli of consumer society enables subjects to “play” with their identities — to continually fashion and try out new self-images that draw on the vast repertoire of cultural styles and allusions preserved and made available in contemporary media culture. Pop culture icons Madonna and Lady Gaga illustrate this well. Their constant, sometimes dramatic shifts in image and style suggest that identity is change — a construct that you produce and can modify at will. Even more telling, their linking of image, fashion, and identity suggest that identity is indeed connected to how you look, dress, and make yourself up, consumer culture providing limitless possibilities for creative self-expansion and thus facilitating the emergence of a freer, more expressive self.

Not everyone, however, endorses postmodern image culture as a potentially liberating force in the construction and elaboration of personal identity. Fredric Jameson writes of the “emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness . . . superficiality in the most literal sense.” The question can also be raised, expressive of whom? However novel and outrageous the identities “fashioned,” insofar as they are assembled out of an amalgamation of consumer goods and images, they are still marketed identities, dependent on the carefully orchestrated fads and fashions of consumer culture. For Baudrillard, the autonomous, self-constituting subject that was the achievement of modernity implodes into mass consumer culture in the postmodern era, and is reduced to, at most, a “terminal of multiple networks.” In so writing, he echoes an earlier suggestion of McLuhan, that electronic media “angelize” (disembody) us, turn us into “items in a databank — software only, easily forgotten.”

Baudrillard’s account of consumer society is rightly criticized as exaggerated, excessively one-sided, reductionist, and deterministic, a dualist abstraction tinged with nostalgia for earlier (that is, modernist) times. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that McLuhan’s comment above, or his provocative statements about violence, also situate him on the negative side of Baudrillard’s binary.

33. For analysis of Madonna, see Kellner, Media Culture.
35. Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” in Postmodernism, ed. Docherty, 68.
36. Dunn, Identity Crisis.
39. Dunn, Identity Crisis.
40. I am grateful to Craig A. Cunningham for highlighting this dualism and aspects of it that had crept into my own thought, in reviewing an earlier draft of this article.
Throughout his work, McLuhan consistently refused to take a for-or-against position with respect to new technologies, insisting that there was no point in bemoaning change or engaging in moral indignation. Instead, recognizing that these technologies would create a complex social environment characterized by contradictory values and nearly infinite resources for identity development, he argued that the only feasible response was to understand them, for only thus could we determine where and when (if at all) to “turn off the buttons.” His remarks, therefore, should be read as intentionally provocative, designed to make us think and probe further. It is precisely this kind of deeper understanding that I am seeking to elucidate in this article.

Violence and Postmodernity

Returning to McLuhan’s disquieting comments and the foregoing discussion of postmodern identity, the potential connection between contemporary media and violence begins to reveal itself. Acknowledging the apparently limitless possibilities for identity formation tendered us by consumer culture, McLuhan believed nevertheless that the image-identities thereby collected could engender a peculiar sense of emptiness. This stems from the realization that however pleasurable and prestigious the powers or attributes (apparently) bestowed, they do not distinguish us in any important way from anyone else. Adopting the “Lady Gaga look,” for example, does not garner its wearers anything like the stature or notability of Lady Gaga herself. It does not transform them into sovereign individuals standing apart from the crowd. Quite the contrary, while offering us (apparently) the “opportunity to be supermen,” image-identities simultaneously reduce us into “pretty pitiable nobodies by merging [us] with everybody.” In the most ironic of twists, they lead us to feel at once powerful and powerless: they permit us a glimpse of mightiness while we are in fact subject to the capricious whims of fashion and the subtle indoctrinations of advertising and popular culture. Human beings, however, are creatures that care deeply about the kind of person they are going to be. As a result, the sense of powerlessness and anonymity visited on them by consumer culture, even as it promises the opposite, can leave them feeling “ripped off” and “deeply resentful.” Violence (and other kinds of vehement action) becomes a way of crashing through and finding one’s identity. It indicates to a wired planet that you are more than just an undistinguished item in a

41. McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”
42. McLuhan, This Hour Has Seven Days, CBC Television [1966], quoted in Forward through the Rearview Mirror, ed. Benedetti and DeHart, 70.
databank, that you are instead someone to be respected, even feared.\textsuperscript{46} Because the sphere of reference in postmodernity is not a small local community, but rather an amorphous “global village,” the tendency is not just to assert your individuality to your immediate local peers but to the world at large. In McLuhan’s words, there is “a new desire to put on the colossal audience that today’s media provide” and to engage in extraordinary acts of violence, for example, spectacular shootings in venues (schools) usually deemed safe and inviolable.\textsuperscript{47} Such shocking events make you “visible” — that is, they earn you worldwide attention, thereby making your name instantly recognizable and securing you fame (or infamy) and celebrity. Does this help explain Columbine and other such events?

Literature has often conjectured a connection between resentment and violence: Fyodor Dostoevsky and Joseph Conrad, for instance, have brilliantly depicted the peculiar sense of emptiness and resentment that bourgeois society can evoke in the apparently ordinary, unnoticed citizen, and the fantasy-driven dreams of revenge spawned in consequence.\textsuperscript{48} The notion of social customs and mores “taming” a human being and creating — via the invisible process of normalization — an outwardly meek and regulated modern soul, ashamed of all primitive impulses and acquiescent in the unrelenting discipline of civilized reason and morality, is most famously associated with Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault.\textsuperscript{49} More important for the purposes of this article, they both also raise the possibility of a seething internal resentment generated in reaction. “What bestiality of thought erupts [in a human being] as soon as he is prevented just a little from being a beast in deed,” writes Nietzsche.\textsuperscript{50} Referring to a “secret madness” lying within human being, made manifest in “phantasies” and including a “fundamental crime he has dreamt of committing,” Foucault explicitly characterizes extraordinarily violent crime as “an outburst of protest in the name of human individuality.”\textsuperscript{51}

McLuhan’s comments connecting violence and identity and the role the global media theater plays in lionizing spectacular acts of violence are consistent with

\textsuperscript{46} Similar ideas are voiced in the movie \textit{Fight Club}, directed by David Fincher (Twentieth Century Fox, 1999).

\textsuperscript{47} McLuhan, “Interview with Louis Forsdale,” 85.


\textsuperscript{51} Foucault, \textit{Discipline and Punish}, 193 and 289.
the analyses offered in some of the more recent literature specifically on school shootings.52 Bryan Warnick, Sang Hyun Kim, and Shannon Robinson explore background stories and personal declarations of suburban school shooters that resonate strongly with McLuhan’s comments, revealing not just the perpetrators’ hatreds but also their rage and lust for recognition and celebrity.53 Noting that the commonality of many shooters is that they all “want to be heard, seen, known,” journalist David Cullen suggests that in covering these events, the worldwide media inevitably put them “on stage, we make — you can call him hero, anti-hero, something — we give them a starring role in this.”54 Like McLuhan, Kellner connects violent behaviors to issues in contemporary social identity, pointing to a dominant connection between masculinity and toughness, and assigning culpability to a constellation of factors, including an “out-of-control” gun culture, male rage, a crisis of masculinity, and normative media images that link manhood and public respect with violence and “make celebrities out of murderers.”55 Amy Shuffelton explores the potential connection between gun violence, masculinity, and the concept of honor, suggesting that masculinity is an identity that constantly needs to be reissued by one’s “honor peers” and examining how the experience of dishonor may exacerbate feelings of marginalization and lead some people to pick up the cultural scripts of violence promulgated in events like Columbine.56 Aislinn O’Donnell provides a moving account of conversations about violence she had with current and former prisoners that depict what for some is an inescapable connection between violence and “being a man.”57

Thus, a wide range of literature appears to corroborate McLuhan’s provocative comments connecting media, identity, and violence. But does it provide sufficient support to justify his comments? I hardly think so. Although the ideas they articulate are often strikingly congruent with aspects of McLuhan’s thought, the support they provide is circumstantial and inconclusive and does not adequately address his structuralist orientation. I believe, however, such an argument can be made and I propose to elucidate it in the concluding section of this article. My thesis is as follows: Postmodern changes in identity formation may indeed trigger


55. Kellner, Guys and Guns Amok, 14.


some individuals to seek recognition by engaging in spectacular forms of violence such as the Columbine shootings, but that is not the full story. In addition, the social structures thereby created in and of themselves undermine the inculcation and practice of ethical/moral modes of deliberation, leaving youth (and humankind in general) more prone to impulsive needs and desires, and hence the inclination to engage in acts of violence — in extreme cases, spectacular violence. Note my argument is not that postmodern changes in identity formation directly cause young people to engage in violent actions; rather, these changes set up social conditions whereby they are more inclined to do so. To understand how such a consequence ensues we need to return to postmodernity and examine more closely the consequences for morality of living in an image-saturated, fantasy-ridden environment.

**Consumer Culture and Moral Development**

Experiences in fantasies usually are “idealized,” that is, they are envisioned in ways that accentuate desirable aspects while forgetting or choosing to ignore the unappealing aspects. When we are engaged in fantasies, we are relieved of all commitments to law and morals and can behave exactly as we desire without any real sense of consequences. In short, indulgently self-centered by their very nature, fantasies are freed from the checks imposed by practical experience of the world, hence their appeal and the unalloyed pleasure we derive from pondering them. Postmodern consumer culture via “the ads [that] are its teachers” actively encourages us to engage in such wishful thinking. This is not to suggest that it creates an alternative fantasy world that negates or replaces other more practical forms of thinking or social and moral obligations. It manifestly does not. But it does provide a forceful counterbalance to the latter, one that exists alongside practical forms of thinking and that promotes values and attitudes ill-suited to the development of moral responsibility.

One of the cornerstones of moral responsibility is the ability to deliberate on proposed courses of action: to determine whether they will likely lead to happiness or unhappiness (for ourselves and others) and whether they adhere to socially accepted principles of moral and ethical behavior. Wishful thinking actively discourages us from engaging in this kind of deliberation. Rather than meaningfully relating what we are currently doing, thinking, and feeling to what has gone before and what will come later, it encourages us to live one day (or one moment) at a time. The endorsement and celebration of change and transience lends little support to the notions of considering the long-term consequences of choices made or of unwavering commitment to courses of action deemed ethical. Instead, the playful experimentation endorsed in postmodern culture suggests that nothing is irrevocable, so if one course of action proves less than satisfactory, you can always take up another. All of this promotes less vigilant


concern for consequences or steadfast adherence to socially agreed-upon principles of conduct.

It also manifests itself in our attitudes toward others. The individual self-gratification that is the driving force of consumer culture counters ideas of fairness and equity, the notion that we should recognize and respect others’ autonomy. In light of all of the above, postmodernity is often characterized as an era of hedonistic narcissism. The trouble with such characterizations is that they tend to view the problem as a kind of moral lapse that can be corrected by exhortations about the values of hard work and community — values schools and teachers are expected to inculcate. They fail to recognize that it is inextricably woven into the social and economic structures of postmodern society. Add to the mix the structural biases of contemporary media and you begin to understand how the environment thus created promotes immoderate, irrational acts of violence.

Where modernity employed primarily print-based modes of communication, postmodernity saw the development and widespread adoption of electronic figural modes (including film, television, video, and beyond). The structural biases embodied in these two forms of media are very different. Print employs abstract symbols to make visible what formerly could only be heard, the spoken word. Speech, on the other hand, is a medium of communication that involves engagement, that is, we usually do more than simply listen to the words spoken. We also pay attention to gesture, tone of voice, stance, appearance, and other contextual features, all of which help to convey accompanying emotional states — anger, joy, sorrow, fear, approval, sarcasm, and so forth. In short, the spoken word is emotionally laden, leading McLuhan (and Tom Wolfe) to describe preliterate “aural man” as passionately volatile and spontaneous, someone whose emotions lie near the surface and who reacts emotionally to information.

Transformed into neutral spatial entities — visual objects that people can stare at and think about dispassionately — printed words are much less sensually engaging, much more distanced. Unlike speech, print generally encourages people to react less emotionally to information, affording them the possibility of being detached observers capable of thinking before reacting. It also encourages independence. Reading a newspaper, a novel, or a poem, we are released into the privacy of our own imaginations, and we are given the time and space to decide for

60. Lasch, The Minimal Self.
61. Dunn, Identity Crisis.
62. See McLuhan, “Playboy Interview”; and Tom Wolfe, “Suppose McLuhan is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, and Pavlov — what if he is right?,” in McLuhan: Hot and Cool, ed. Stearn.
63. McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”
ourselves the validity or invalidity of claims, the benefit or harmfulness of courses of action. Although a superb writer [such as the novelist Leo Tolstoy, for example] can overcome the inherently dispassionate character of the medium and employ it to express complex emotional states, even then there is a sense of standing on the edge, of looking into and thus coming to “understand” the affective experience described. In short, by its very nature, print constitutes a highly rational form of expression, bringing people’s cognitive capacities rather than their emotions close to the surface.

With the arrival of postmodernity, predominant modes of communication revert to full sensory involvement. Although the new media also enable people to stand on the edge, this time apparently “witnessing” the experiences of others, the character of the communication tool provided is totally different. Feeling, appearance, and mood once again become an important component of expression, leading postliterate aural man, like his preliterate predecessor, to be easily swayed by rhetoric and appeals to desire and emotion. The emotional immediacy and ubiquitous connectivity afforded by the new media no longer encourage independence but instead draw us into an amorphous “global theatre” where we are encouraged to identify with the images and experiences depicted. Carried around in mobile devices that are “always-on/always-on-you,” the newer forms of social media actively erode the possibility of solitude and its attendant benefits of dispassionate reflection. Similar to speech, the omnipresent, sensually engaging structural biases of postmodern technologies encourage people once again to be passionately volatile and spontaneous, bringing their emotions rather than their cognitive capacities close to the surface.

Drawing together all of the above, the implications for ethical development and education become clear. By generating transformed social environments that stimulate fantasy-driven wishful thinking, instant self-gratification, and the relatively shallow identity development associated with consumer society, postmodern media concurrently create conditions that actively undermine reflection and careful deliberation. Desperate to be “noteworthy,” less influenced by rational considerations, and confronted by emotion-laden communication media and a cultural ethos that urges them to “just do it” — to indulge their every whim, mood, and desire with less thought about consequences, less consideration of the effects of their actions on others — children and young people are more easily drawn toward immoderate, uncivil acts of aggression, belligerence, and, in extreme cases, über violence.

65. McLuhan, “Playboy Interview.”
68. Deresiewicz, “The End of Solitude.”
Does this not underestimate the young people of the postmodern era? As “digital natives,” are they not savvy about contemporary media, able to discern what media may be doing to their sense of self, and capable of negotiating the complex, disjointed environment that is postmodernity? The “native/immigrant” binary is hotly debated: in recent years researchers have refuted many of the blanket claims made in association with it and have challenged from a theoretical perspective some of the fundamental assumptions implicit in the discourse. Evidence to support the numerous claims about the technological capabilities of students is cited as lacking. Indeed, some writers argue that there is no evidence to suggest “a new phenomenon exclusive to digital natives.” It is also argued that the “digital native” categorization homogenizes what has empirically been shown to be diverse and varied groups of individuals and students whose skills do not all match the media reports. Sharon Stoerger tellingly remarks, “Someone had to design, build, and upgrade the technologies that have evolved into the electronic spaces that the natives now inhabit. . . . While the media implies that technology skills are unique to the new generation of young people, there is counterevidence to suggest otherwise.” Given all of the above, I find myself immensely skeptical of the notion that young people today are inherently “street wise” with respect to new technologies. Rather, the complexities of contemporary culture present navigation problems for everyone — both young and old.

We need to recognize that the scale of image circulation in postmodernity is sufficiently huge and sophisticated to construct a pervasive counternarrative whose values and aspirations often fundamentally contradict social and ethical principles and ideals. We need to acknowledge that young people today are growing up suspended between these two value systems, that they exist in a “hybrid limbo of constantly conflicting values” whose intermingling can cause confusion and the sense of being pulled in opposite directions. Situated in a society of the spectacle that regularly transforms ordinary people into “stars” of reality television or of

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71. Stoerger, “The Digital Melting Pot.”
73. Bayne and Ross, “The ‘Digital Native’ and ‘Digital Immigrant.’”
74. Stoerger, “The Digital Melting Pot.”
75. McLuhan, “Playboy Interview,” 250.
websites like Facebook or YouTube, increasingly equipped and conversant with sophisticated forms of video recording and photo messaging, children and young people today are encouraged to view their lives as a kind of ongoing “drama” and, in consequence, to adopt a theatrical approach to their “performances” at home, at school, on the playground, or in the local community. When things do not go according to their liking, there is always the temptation to forego considerate social negotiation, and, borrowing from the scripts of popular/consumer culture, to employ aggressive acts of belligerence and/or violence. The level and type of belligerence or violence exercised (if any) will clearly vary from child to child and from situation to situation. At its most extreme, however, there is the pleasurable and cathartic allurement (as in Columbine) of donning a long black coat, assembling an impressive arsenal of bombs and semiautomatic weapons, going to school, and exacting a spectacular, awe-inspiring vengeance that is truly (and tragically) the stuff of fantasy.

The argument outlined above suggests lines of inquiry that warrant closer attention. Space does not permit me to pursue those lines of inquiry here, but I would like to conclude this article by addressing briefly some important educational implications, specifically the manner in which schools might work to inhibit the expression of aggressive impulses, and so, one hopes, incidents like Columbine. First, we need to take McLuhan seriously and acknowledge the messy, complicated environment we now inhabit, the forcefulness of the opposing social values imbued in consumer culture and their potential to undermine reflection, careful deliberation, and, as a result, efficacious moral development. But we also need to fight the inclination to view über violent events as senseless faits accomplis that are beyond our ability to address and counter. They are not. They are rooted in a contemporary culture that affords us an enormous range of compelling learning resources — videos, movies, documentaries, texts, games, and so forth — for addressing the issue. For all its drawbacks, the global theater and its pervasive social media have made young people acutely aware of the diversity of cultural beliefs and values throughout the world, and the importance of issues related to justice, equity, and the physical environment. They also know only too well the crippling pain and consequences of social exclusion. But awareness and having your heart in the right place are not enough. Throughout the curriculum, students need to be afforded multiple opportunities to consider, discuss, and contemplate the moral, social, personal, and emotional consequences of actions, the importance of moral principles related to inclusion and their connection to a just society. They need the space and time to learn and appreciate the importance of thinking before reacting, to recognize the cathartic draw of impulsive aggressive actions, and to accept and respect less aggressive forms of reaction as equally powerful and honorable. At a time when teachers everywhere are being encouraged to incorporate more technology (and related group methods), we need to remind ourselves that

there is still an important place for such traditional methods as silent reading, essay writing, and the like, and the habits of reflection, deliberation, and independence they promote. Finally, media and aesthetic literacy needs to become a central thrust in education. Students need to learn and to have access to best practices in a variety of different media. They need to know and understand the techniques used to fashion powerfully suggestive images, as well as the emotional impacts that accrue from combining sounds and images in particular ways. The fantasy thinking of consumer culture and its attendant conceptual stereotypes need to be critically considered and unpacked. Taught and encouraged to understand and work with diverse media, students in postmodernity could achieve a level of rhetorical and critical awareness of which modernity could only dream.

Isn't it time we took McLuhan seriously?