

Kim H. Veltman and Gys Nijeholt¹

McLuhan's Oppositions and the Internet

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In his *Understanding Media* (1964), Marshall McLuhan made a number of between *print* and *electronic media*. Lewis Lapham, in his introduction to the new edition of *Understanding Media* (1994) added a parallel list of differences between *citizen* and *nomad* (figure 1).

If McLuhan and Lapham were right then one might expect that each of these oppositions would generate an equal number of hits on the Internet. A search for McLuhan's terms on 17 January 1996 using four leading search engines at the time, namely Opentext, Lycos, Webcrawler and yahoo showed that this was not the case (Appendix 1). Indeed of the 15 oppositions with respect to print-electronic media there no pair was close with respect to its numbers using the Opentext, Lycos or Webcrawler. The one exception was Yahoo which showed a precise match of 128 hits for both *mathematical* and its opposition *organic*.

Print	Electronic Media	Citizen	Nomad
1. visual	tactile	16. build	wander
2. mathematical innocence	organic	17. experience	
3. sequence	simultaneity	18. authority	power
4. composition	improvisation	19. happiness	pleasure
5. eye	ear	20. literature	journalism
6. active	reactive	21. heterosexual	polymorphous
7. expansion	contraction	22. civilization	barbarism
8. complete	incomplete	23. will	wish
9. soliloquy	chorus	24. truth as passion	passion as truth
10. classification	pattern recognition	25. peace	war
11. centre	margin	26. achievement	celebrity
12. continuous	discontinuous	27. science	magic
13. syntax	mosaic	28. doubt	certainty
14. self-expression	group therapy	29. drama	pornography
15. Typographic man	Graphic man	30. history	legend

Figure 1. McLuhan's oppositions between print and electronic media and Lapham's oppositions between citizen and nomad.

¹ Gys Nijeholt did the searching for these terms as part of his work during a "stage" at the Perspective Unit of the McLuhan Programme (Spring term 1996) while finishing his degree at the Hogeschool in Maastricht.

One would at least expect that an electronic medium such as the Internet would favour terms concerning electronic media as opposed to those entailing print media. Again this was generally not the case. (Appendix 1). Only 2 of the fifteen oppositions, namely soliloquy-chorus and syntax-mosaic showed a consistently higher hit rate for the term associated with electronic media. However, since the concepts of *chorus* and *mosaic* both predate the advent of electronic media one wonders how seriously these oppositions should be taken.

A similar pattern is found in Lapham's oppositions. The number of hits for terms related to citizen are not congruent with those relating to nomad. Only three sets of Lapham's oppositions showed an increase in moving from citizen (print) to nomad (electronic media), namely, authority-power, happiness-pleasure, peace-war. And again the number of hits for citizen related terms are generally larger than their nomad related equivalents (Appendix 2).

All the terms were looked up using four major search engines at the time. It is striking that each of the search engines comes up with very different amounts of hits for the respective terms. If the search engines were consistent, the amount of hits would exactly be the same for each search engine. To gain some impression whether these findings pertained strictly to the particular set of 30 oppositions, a set of 16 further terms relating to information technology were used. These confirmed wide discrepancies of hits between the various search engines.

Conclusions

McLuhan proposed a number of oppositions to characterize differences between print media and electronic media. Lapham proposed a parallel set under the headings citizen and nomad. A search for these terms on the Internet in February 1996 showed neither a nearly equal treatment of these terms, nor a preponderance of hits relating to electronic media. Instead, the Internet contained a preponderance of hits for terms relating to print media.

McLuhan did say that each new medium tends to use the previous medium as its content. This is one of the meanings of his provocative: the medium is the message. Optimists may therefore conclude that this tendency explains the paradoxical dominance of print related terms over electronic media terms in the Internet. Hence most of the material available on the Internet in 1996 still reflected the old values of print culture.

Pessimists might conclude that while McLuhan and Lapham's oppositions are clearly provocative, they may not be as precisely analytical or as synthetic in their precision as one would have hoped. Perhaps the oppositions proposed by these learned gentlemen are not precisely indicative of the cultural changes which they set out to map?

Appendix 1. Number of Hits for fifteen terms relating to *print* and *electronic* media respectively in May 1996 (cf. figure 1) using four leading search engines of the time.

Print	Opentext	Lycos	Webcrawler	Yahoo
1. visual	32390	35844	6614	708
2. mathematical	20810	33713	2679	128
3. sequence	53143	24180	3020	62
4. composition	15305	21122	1895	92
5. eye	27879	24079	8306	130
6. active	51542	34905	8178	1024
7. expansion	17837	14209	2361	31
8. complete	116673	11034	24665	1003
9. soliloquy	219	208	23	219
10. classification	15130	23470	1572	35
11. centre	44610	78043	10246	658
12. continuous	15855	12489	2312	71
13. syntax	17757	15279	1092	13
14. self-expression	355	-	-	-
15. Typographic man	13	-	-	-

Electronic Media	Opentext	Lycos	Webcrawler	Yahoo
1. tactile	796	1034	110	2
2. organic	9406	12304	1606	128
3. simultaneity	115	160	14	115
4. improvisation	1070	2278	260	32
5. ear	8201	6509	1863	19
6. reactive	2920	2808	262	8
7. contraction	1420	1435	158	1
8. incomplete	10687	9803	1044	4
9. chorus	5820	5968	655	51
10. pattern recognition	2779	-	-	-
11. margin	5391	4506	842	9
12. discontinuous	642	714	52	1
13. mosaic	55283	59937	7222	130
14. group therapy	181	-	-	-
15. Graphic man	3	-	-	-

Appendix 2. Number of Hits for fifteen terms relating to *citizen* and *nomad* respectively in May 1996 (cf. figure 1) using four leading search engines of the time.

Citizen	Opentext	Lycos	Webcrawler	Yahoo
16. build	44038	80304	7987	991
17. experience	77423	85883	21072	857
18. authority	23852	16670	3424	59
19. happiness	4964	3516	885	34
20. literature	34527	45687	5878	400
21. heterosexual	977	1738	162	8
22. civilization	5790	8189	1153	38
23. will	2384499	stop word	stop word	1035
24. truth as passion	0	-	-	-
25. peace	21472	20073	3706	235
26. achievement	7372	9812	1809	42
27. science	160666	240229	31718	1167
28. doubt	16594	7336	1992	4
29. drama	7095	9776	1246	164
30. history	99614	146573	21637	1101

Nomad	Opentext	Lycos	Webcrawler	Yahoo
16. wander	3337	2997	645	46
17. innocence	2447	2125	254	4
18. power	84605	70832	14897	1021
19. pleasure	11448	10256	3414	80
20. journalism	7335	11325	1221	146
21. polymorphous	52	49	0	1
22. barbarism	281	251	23	281
23. wish	69482	48258	12049	427
24. passion as truth	0	-	-	-
25. war	34956	34796	6928	301
26. celebrity	2407	4142	1183	50
27. magic	23147	25278	4606	473
28. certainty	2938	1682	199	4
29. pornography	2182	.3538	497	18
30. legend	13956	8765	2091	147

Appendix 3. The same approach used with respect to sixteen terms from relating to information technology.

Information Technology	Open Text	Lycos	Webcrawler	Yahoo
1. Future	98293	79554	16554	537
2. Bell	26703	23399	3400	433
3. Satellite	24207	26866	4287	282
4. Videoconferencing	1603	3853	306	37
5. Television	29773	41569	5912	760
6. Telephone	61156	78041	11916	271
7. Broadband	3521	4140	344	21
8. Internet	271128	479763	65447	2000
9. ISDN	10251	15490	1706	200
10. Modem	22552	27024	4744	171
11. Ethernet	17393	13533	1306	77
12. browser	62038	98443	18822	224
13. SGI	18619	23780	1446	61
14. Software	203883	281511	36356	1131
15. SUMS	3310	2794	1019	8
16. McLuhan	694	828	86	5