

CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 11

The New Medium is the Message

I first became interested in Marshall McLuhan, the famous communications guru who introduced the term *The Medium Is the Message*, when I was living in Paris in 1968. I was working on a degree in theology and communications. The student riots had broken out, the university libraries were closed for a number of months and the only things I had to work with were McLuhan's books. I was also working as a student chaplain and living in a community center across from the *Cite Internationale Universitaire de Paris*, a huge campus with forty national houses for students from around the world.

One day I went over to the Cite for lunch in a very large cafeteria. What a scene! Several hundred students eating out of tin plates, speaking in their own languages, yelling at one another to be heard above the din of other students speaking their own languages. It was like wandering into the ground floor of the Tower of Babel.

I was standing on a long line next to two young American students waiting to be served. They were also looking out over the incredible sight of all these students with different languages and different cultures. I heard one of them say to the other, "Gee, I wish we had a culture, don't you?"

Recently, while writing these chronicles, I remembered this event and wondered what would happen if I were to go over to the cafeteria today and stand next to two American students in a long line. I suspect they wouldn't be looking out at the students eating their lunch. I think they would be looking down at their cell phones.

McLuhan's point about "The Medium is the Message" was clear. We seem to be captivated by the message and ignoring the instrument transmitting the message. But the medium is its own message. The television, the radio, the computer, the cell, phone—these communication instruments carry their own message and they are changing the world.

So what does all this about technology have to do with climate change? Everything.

When we try to get people involved in climate change projects at the community level we run into two problems. Sometimes they must work with people they do not know. There is a trust factor. And, if they are already involved in particular projects they are often reluctant to create the links between their projects and climate change. They don't want to take on more than they can handle. These problems are real. But there may be at least a partial solution—cell phones.

We all know that there are significant problems with the over use of cell phones. But there is another side to the use of cell phones, something we can build upon.

All cell phone users have a list of friends or acquaintances on their phones—the people they call regularly. We might call this list their network. In our efforts to recruit people for the climate change struggle it makes sense to start with friends who are part of these personal networks.

Starting with one's personal network avoids the problem of talking to strangers. Instead they can start with someone they know and trust. And, the members of your network will have their own cell phone networks. Within their networks may be friends who are already involved in climate change and are willing to share their expertise. What's the old expression, "It takes a community to build a community"? There is nothing more powerful in the struggle with climate change than others who can share their expertise. They are like walking mediums with a message.

I remember a community project we were struggling with a while back —the proposed Raven Coal Mine that was threatening our water sources. We did all the usual things: organized the event, put up posters all over the community, recruited the speakers, and so forth. I played a key role. I was kept as far away from the stage as possible. I was assigned to the far end of the property. There I directed traffic. I held up a sign to let pedestrians cross the road safely in front of the site. I was doing a great job.

Then I heard the noise of bells. I looked down the road and saw a parade of forty or fifty teenagers on bikes coming to the event. As they turned into the property I wondered where they had come from and how they found out about the event. I'm sure they didn't come because they saw a poster. I asked one young man how he heard about the event he said, "I got a text message."

Building on cell phone networks to create committed climate change communities seems to be a winning approach. And it seems so logical we miss it. That's not unusual. As McLuhan noted, "*We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.*"

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