

2019-2020 CLIMATE CHANGE CHRONICLE 15

A New Global Culture for the Global Village

I'm writing this chronicle in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. Thousands of people around the world have died. It is likely that we are also in the beginnings of a world-wide recession. And hard on the heels of the recession and already moving in on us is climate change. This last challenge will be with us for a number of generations. I think we need a really big idea to deal with all of this based on a different way of thinking. .

Fortunately I think we have a really big idea, one that came out of the 1960s. It was Canadian Marshall McLuhan's concept of the Global Village. Unfortunately his idea was co-opted by the economic leaders and owners of the world-wide web so things didn't turn out the way McLuhan wanted them to turn out. But his idea was and still is sound. I think it can be revamped and put to better use.

In this chronicle I'll discuss my long interest in McLuhan and his ideas of the Global Village, the media and the economic consumer culture. I will then indicate how the Global Village can be revitalized to help us deal with the climate changing world that confronts us.

Discovering McLuhan

In 1968 I was a student living in Paris working on a degree in theology and communications. I was also working as a student chaplain at the Cite Universitaire Internationale, a huge campus with forty residences for students from around the world. The libraries were closed but fortunately I had some of Mcluhan's books on the power of the new electronic media.

One afternoon I went over to a student cafeteria for lunch. There were several hundred students eating in their national groups and yelling at one another to be heard over the din of other languages and tin plates.

I was standing next to two American students in a lineup waiting to get served. The two were looking out at this marvelous sight of fellow students

from so many different countries. I heard one of them say to the other, “Geez, I wish we had a culture don’t you?”

I was amazed. Their culture was changing many cultures throughout the world and they didn’t realize it existed. For that matter, neither did I — because it was a different kind of culture! That was when McLuhan introduced me to something new--the power of the media.

The Global Village

McLuhan coined the term “Global Village”. This was in the 1960s when computers were still in their infancy and well before the world-wide web. He used the term it to predict the impact that mass media would have on the world.

The word “village” suggests a certain intimacy among members of a community. McLuhan extended this idea to people in communities all over the world, tied together by the power of electronic communications.

Instant communications can be beneficial. In a world where all communities are dealing with climate change, worldwide communications can be very helpful. But there are also downsides, depending on who controls the media and the messages they are conveying.

If the local community controls the media the results may be beneficial. But if a community has valuable resources, their local culture is often controlled by major corporations in the developed world. As we shall see below, controlling the media can often mean controlling the country.

The Media and Its Culture

Today’s media are owned and operated by “Big Tech”: Google, Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc. These social media have huge audiences in the many millions and, for the most part, have a great deal of political power because of the jobs (and potential votes) they produce. Major newspapers in various parts of the world are also online.

First and foremost, the corporate owners are concerned with making a profit for their shareholders. Some of them are on different sides politically.

But since they all need to make a profit they are all part of the mainstream neoliberal economic consumer system and its economic culture.

The primary way these corporations promote their economic culture is through advertising. McLuhan's last book was on Madison Avenue advertising. He called the book "Culture Is Our Business."

The title indicates that purchasing the product is more than a financial transaction. Depending on the product, the purchase can have a cultural dimension. It often confers a certain prestige on the buyer. This becomes most apparent when you turn on your television and get hit with an unending stream of commercials. All of these products are designed for one group of people—the upper middle class and the wealthy who can afford them. (There are also a few other ads sponsored by organizations caring for people who are poor, sick and in need of help. The message is that these are people who you don't want to be like.)

A final note on advertising. All true cultures are concerned with passing on values to their young people. It is estimated that growing children can experience as many as forty thousand ads a year.)

An Earth Culture for the Global Village.

If McLuhan were alive today I think he would be deeply concerned about our current economic consumer culture. It is based upon the GDP—the Gross Domestic Product.

For the most part the GDP has no boundaries in terms of Earth's resources. It is only concerned with whether these resources are available or can be made available and turned into a profit. Thus leaders of wealthy countries have been scooping up Earth's resources and life support systems before they can be replaced or replenished.

I think McLuhan would see the need for a different kind of culture. Thomas Berry, Brian Swimme and some others have proposed a culture based upon the EDP--the Earth Domestic Product. The EDP recognizes that Earth is the source of all the life support systems that we and every species depends upon for our continued existence. If those systems go, we and

other species go. And right now, with Earth's resources being severely diminished and climate change damaging the remaining resources, we are in serious trouble.

The road ahead suggests three things. We desperately need a Global Village built upon a climate change culture that is mutually beneficial to Earth as well as ourselves and other species. We need to develop new economic, political and justice systems that can live within a living Earth. . And we need transitions from what we have now to what we need in our new Global Village.

To conclude: the task for this generation and the generations to come will require resilience and a great deal of patience. Ironically, climate change may be a helper. It will become increasingly obvious that the old way of doing things and using the old systems to do them is no longer viable.

As Einstein reminded us many years ago... *"We cannot solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."*

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