

Television as a Debating Medium

The National Broadcasting Corporation 1976

The Today Show

Hosts: Tom Brokaw and Edwin Newman (American journalists)

Visit Marshall McLuhan Speaks Special collection to view the video:

<http://marshallmcluhanspeaks.com/interview/1976-television-as-a-debating-medium/>

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons

Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.



Brokaw

Marshall McLuhan is practically a household word in this television conscious society. He is from the University of Toronto of course, the author of a book called *The Medium is the Massage*. He came to New York last night so that he could watch the debates, not so much from a policy point of view, but from a television point of view.

McLuhan

The glorious moment was the rebellion of the medium against the bloody message. The medium finally rebelled against the most stupid arrangement of any debate in the history of debating.

Brokaw

Why was it stupid? Not from a political -

McLuhan

No, from the scripting point of view the characters who had arranged that debate and scripted every aspect of it had no understanding of TV. They didn't even know that TV is not a debating medium. They had arranged it as if it were a newspaper setup or a radio setup. They had no awareness of TV. With the breakdown in the technology, the audience finally got into the act.

Newman

Well, Professor McLuhan, if this debate had been arranged by people who in your view knew and understood television, how would it have been setup?

McLuhan Now, this would take quite a while to explain but it would be much closer to what we're doing right here, chatting casually, spontaneously, without a script and paying attention to what is being said. What those men said last night was merely to hold the audience on the image. It did not matter at all what was said last night. The image was what mattered and is anything that could hold the attention on the image was all that mattered from the point of view of the arrangers.

Brokaw You are the proponent of course that television is a cool medium.

McLuhan Yes.

Brokaw Both candidates last night were programmed and costumed and made up precisely.

McLuhan Yes, had either candidate dared to present a policy it, would have destroyed his image.

Brokaw Was one more cool than the other from a purely television point of view?

McLuhan No, they were both in a sort of state of panic cool. They were terrified of making a false step and quite rightly so because -

Brokaw Why shouldn't they be terrified?

McLuhan That's right.

Brokaw Why shouldn't they have all of these conditions on a television debate when they're running for the highest office and they want to control the environment?

McLuhan With the breakdown in the mechanism, there was the wonderful revelation of all the characters who had scripted the show. They came out into the open like something out of the woodwork and revealed that a stupid show had been put together very carefully by people who had no idea what the TV medium was about.

Newman Would you argue, Professor McLuhan, that the candidates would be better off not to debate than to debate in the manner in which they did?

McLuhan Of course, the candidates they were standing in press the pants barrels looking absolutely like some straight jacketed characters, absolutely the hottest type of medium you could imagine. Everything that the scripters and arrangers had done was hot stuff. They had no idea of what the TV medium was made of.

Brokaw Professor McLuhan, you think that this medium is the future, that it is how society will be shaping its opinions and so on?

McLuhan It is the present which is also the future.

Brokaw But, why do you continue to write and print books?

McLuhan This is an outlet. You might as well ask why does somebody continue to make chewing gum? It is an outlet for various activities. I have never been against the book for heaven's sake. I'm a professor of literature. I teach books from morning till night.