

What Television Does Best

The National Broadcasting Corporation 1976
The Tomorrow Show
Host: Tom Snyder

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McLuhan At the speed of light there is no sequence. Everything happens at the same instant. That's acoustic when everything happens at once. There's no continuity; There's no connection; There's no follow through; It's just all now. And that by the way is the way any sport is. Sports tend to be like that. And in terms of the new lingo of the hemispheres, it's all right hemisphere. Games are all right hemisphere because they involve the whole man and they are all participatory and they are all uncertain. There's no continuity. It's just all a surprise, unexpectedness and total involvement.

Snyder Is that okay, do you think?

McLuhan The hemisphere thing?

Snyder Yes, but I mean the whole thing, all surprise, all spontaneity, no connection, just all at one time. Is that okay for people?

McLuhan Well, okay meaning is it good for people?

Snyder Yes.

McLuhan We live in a world where everything is supposed to be one thing at

a time, lineal, connected, logical, and goal oriented. So, obviously for that left hemisphere world, this new right hemisphere dominance is bad. We're now living in a world which pushes the right hemisphere way up because it's an all-at-once world. The right hemisphere it's an all-at-once, simultaneous world. So the right hemisphere, by pushing up into dominance, is making the old left hemisphere world, which is our educational establishment, our political establishment, make it look very foolish.

Snyder

What do you think is the most ...I want to use the word effective, but that's not the right word. I'm talking about television here. What has the greatest impact on the audience? Is television best when it covers an event like a space shot or the Olympics or a baseball game? Is it best when it tries to entertain with movies at night, when it tries to inform with news programs that have film of things that have already happened.

McLuhan

The advantage of coverage of sports events is they are ritualistic. The group gathered there is participating in a ritual. Now the Olympics were even more a group ritual than the ordinary competitive event like a single ball game because they had a corporate meaning. It was not just local. It had a sort of worldwide meaning. This is itself a ritualistic participation in a large process.

Television fosters and favors a world of corporate participation in ritualistic programming. That's what I mean when I say it's a cool medium. It's not a hot medium. A hot medium like the newspaper can cover single events with very high intensity. TV is not good at covering single events. It needs a ritual, a rhythm and a pattern. And that's why a lot of advertising on TV you see is too hot, too specialized, too fragmentary. It doesn't have that ritualistic flow. But the advertisers are aware of this and they're doing a lot to correct it. But I think that is the great secret of a thing like the Olympics. People have the feeling of participating as a group in a great meaningful ritual. And it doesn't much matter who wins. That isn't the point. I think TV tends to foster that type of pattern in events. Well, you might say it tends to foster patterns rather than events. I was here during the tornado or the...

Snyder Hurricane.

McLuhan ...hurricane and I was amazed at the excitement that it generated in everybody, the expectancy. And it was covered so thoroughly that it dissipated the storm itself. The coverage actually got rid of the storm. I think that is one of the functions of news, to blow up the storm so big that you can dissipate it by coverage. It's a way of getting rid of the pressure by coverage. But you can actually dissipate a situation by giving it maximal coverage. It's very disappointing from one angle, but it's survival from another.

Snyder Now don't you get into alarming people?

McLuhan That's done by rumors not by coverage, but hints, suggestions. But the big coverage merely enables people to get together and enjoy the sort of a group emotion. It's like being at a ball game, a big group emotion. But I do think that that taught me that one of the mysteries of coverage is it's a way of releasing tension and pressure.

Snyder What would happen if you could shut off television for 30 days in the entire United States of America?

McLuhan It would be a kind of a hangover effect because it's a very addictive medium and you take it away and people develop all the symptoms of a hangover, very uncomfortable. It was tried, remember? A few years ago they actually paid people not to watch TV for a few months.

Snyder I don't recall that but I'm sure...

McLuhan It was in Germany. It was in the UK. And they discovered they had all the withdrawal symptoms of drug addicts, very uncomfortable, all the trauma of withdrawal symptoms. TV is a very involving medium and it is a form of inner trip and so people do miss it.

Snyder The thought just occurred to me that possibly if you turned off television there would be a lot of people who would say, at the end of the 30 day period, we will not permit you to turn it back on. Do you think that could happen?

McLuhan A great many of the teenagers have stopped watching television. They're saturated. Saturation is a possibility. About the possibility of reneging on any future TV, I doubt it. I doubt that except through saturation. But the TV thing is so demanding and, therefore, so soporific, that it requires an enormous amount of energy to participate in. You don't have that freedom of detachment.

Snyder We're just talking about basic television programs.

McLuhan Yes, but one of the effects of television is to remove people's private identity. They become corporate peer group people just by watching. They lose interest in being private individuals. And so this is one of the hidden and perhaps insidious effects of television.

Snyder Have you watched enough of Jimmy Carter during all the primaries to figure out why he has been so effective with his presentations on television?

McLuhan Oh, I haven't seen a great deal. But his charisma is very simply identified. He looks like an awful lot of other people. He looks like an all American boy, like all the American boys that ever were, which is charisma. Charisma means looking a lot of other people. If you just look like yourself, you have no charisma. So Carter has a lot of built in charisma of looking like a lot of other guys, very acceptable guys.

Snyder How helpful would you be to Mr. Carter or whomever the Republicans choose, if they were to come to you and say, "you know Mr. McLuhan, we'd like to hire you for a specified fee to advise us on a political campaign?"

McLuhan I could tell them when they were hot hotting up the image too much and phasing out that charisma. The temptation of any campaign manager is to hot up the image until it alienates everybody and they don't realize when they're doing it.

Snyder How do you know when the image is getting too hot?

McLuhan Specialized. The moment it begins to specialize and phases out the group.

Snyder What do you mean specialize?

McLuhan It begins to look more and more like one guy. It begins to look more and more like Jimmy Carter and less and less like the rest of America.

Snyder Forgive my impertinence, but has anybody asked you why you are sometimes difficult to understand?

McLuhan It's because I use the right hemisphere when they're trying to use the left one.

Snyder Okay well...

McLuhan Simple.

Snyder After I get back on one...

McLuhan You see, ordinarily, people are trained to try to follow you and to connect everything you say with what they last heard. They're not prepared to use their wits. They're only prepared to use the idea they picked the first time and try to connect it to another idea. So,

if you're in a situation that is flexible, where you have to use your wits and perceptions, they can't follow you. They have preconceptions that phase them out at once. You see, that's left hemisphere. But I use the right hemisphere a great deal which is a world of perception, no concepts.

Snyder

Got you, got you, and you don't try to connect things. You just let the right hemisphere take over and let it go.

McLuhan

And watch what's happening. So, that's the way the cookie crumbles sort of thing, where you don't know what's going to happen, but you follow the crumble.