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## Marshall McLuhan at 100: Excerpts from his Playboy Interview

by [Adam Thierer](#) on July 21, 2011 · [3 Comments](#)



I have always struggled with the work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan. I find it to be equal parts confusing and compelling; it's persuasive at times and then utterly perplexing elsewhere. I just can't wrap my head around him and yet I can't stop coming back to him.

Today would have been his 100th birthday. He died in 1980, but he's just as towering of a figure today as he was during his own lifetime. His work is eerily prescient and speaks to us as if written yesterday instead of decades ago. Take, for example, McLuhan's mind-blowing 1969 interview with *Playboy*. [\[PDF\]](#) The verse is awe-inspiring, but much of the substance is simply impenetrable. Regardless, it serves as perhaps the best introduction to McLuhan's work. I strongly encourage you to read the entire thing. The questions posed by interviewer Eric Norden are brilliant and bring out the best in McLuhan.

I was re-reading the interview while working on a chapter for my next book on Internet optimism and pessimism, [a topic I've spent a great deal of time pondering](#) here in the past. Toward the end of the interview, McLuhan is asked by Norden to respond to some of his critics. McLuhan responds in typically brilliant, colorful fashion:

I don't want to sound uncharitable about my critics. Indeed, I appreciate their attention. After all, a man's detractors work for him tirelessly and for free. It's as good as being banned in Boston. But as I've said, I can understand their hostile attitude toward environmental change, having once shared it. **Theirs is the customary human reaction when confronted with innovation: to flounder about attempting to adapt old**

**responses to new situations or to simply condemn or ignore the harbingers of change** — a practice refined by the Chinese emperors, who used to execute messengers bringing bad news. The new technological environments generate the most pain among those least prepared to alter their old value structures. The literati find the new electronic environment far more threatening than do those less committed to literacy as a way of life. **When an individual or social group feels that its whole identity is jeopardized by social or psychic change, its natural reaction is to lash out in defensive fury. But for all their lamentations, the revolution has already taken place.**

Moreover, as he points out in another portion of the interview, “Resenting a new technology will not halt its progress.” This reflects the powerful technological determinism at work in McLuhan’s work that earned him much scorn from his critics. There was a fatalism about his views that rubbed many the wrong way. That tension remains alive and well in debates between Internet optimists and pessimists today.

But what is so interesting about the interview is the next portion of the exchange in which Norden gets McLuhan to break away from his typically fatalistic “I’m-just-the-messenger” narrative and instead actually tell us how he feels about the technological changes and societal impacts he describes so colorfully. His response is terrifically interesting but somewhat schizophrenic. First, he says:

**PLAYBOY:** You’ve explained why you avoid approving or disapproving of this revolution in your work, but you must have a private opinion. What is it? **McLUHAN:** I don’t like to tell people what I think is good or bad about the social and psychic changes caused by new media, but if you insist on pinning me down about my own subjective reactions as I observe the reprimativization of our culture, I would have to say that I view such upheavals with total personal dislike and dissatisfaction. I do see the prospect of a rich and creative retribalized society — free of the fragmentation and alienation of the mechanical age — emerging from this traumatic period of culture clash; but I have nothing but distaste for the process of change. As a man molded within the literate Western tradition, I do not personally cheer the dissolution of that tradition through the electric involvement of all the senses: I don’t enjoy the destruction of neighborhoods by high-rises or revel in the pain of identity quest. No one could be less enthusiastic about these radical changes than myself. I am not, by temperament or conviction, a revolutionary; I would prefer a stable, changeless environment of modest services and human scale. TV and all the electric media are unraveling the entire fabric of our society, and as a man who is forced by circumstances to live within that society, I do not take delight in its disintegration. You see, I am not a crusader; I imagine I would be most happy living in a secure preliterate environment; I would never attempt to change my world, for better or worse. Thus I derive no joy from observing the traumatic effects of media on man, although I do obtain satisfaction from grasping their modes of operation. [...] The Western world is being revolutionized by the electric media as rapidly as the East is being Westernized, and although the society that eventually emerges may be superior to our own, the process of change is agonizing. I must move through this pain-racked transitional era as a scientist would move through a world of disease; once a surgeon becomes personally involved and disturbed about the condition of his patient, he

loses the power to help that patient. Clinical detachment is not some kind of haughty pose I affect — nor does it reflect any lack of compassion on my part; it's simply a survival strategy. The world we are living in is not one I would have created on my own drawing board, but it's the one in which I must live, and in which the students I teach must live. If nothing else, I owe it to them to avoid the luxury of moral indignation or the troglodytic security of the ivory tower and to get down into the junk yard of environmental change and steam-shovel my way through to a comprehension of its contents and its lines of force — in order to understand how and why it is metamorphosing man.

This sounds like grimly pessimistic and fatalistic stuff. But Norden wisely doesn't let it end there and he points out that much of McLuhan's work suggests a different interpretation or perspective is possible. McLuhan's response is inspiring:

**PLAYBOY:** Despite your personal distaste for the upheavals induced by the new electric technology, you seem to feel that if we understand and influence its effects on us, a less alienated and fragmented society may emerge from it. Is it thus accurate to say that you are essentially optimistic about the future? **McLUHAN:** There are grounds for both optimism and pessimism. The extensions of man's consciousness induced by the electric media could conceivably usher in the millennium, but it also holds the potential for realizing the Anti-Christ — Yeats' rough beast, its hour come round at last, slouching toward Bethlehem to be born. Cataclysmic environmental changes such as these are, in and of themselves, morally neutral; it is how we perceive them and react to them that will determine their ultimate psychic and social consequences. If we refuse to see them at all, we will become their servants. **It's inevitable that the world-pool of electronic information movement will toss us all about like corks on a stormy sea, but if we keep our cool during the descent into the maelstrom, studying the process as it happens to us and what we can do about it, we can come through. Personally, I have a great faith in the resiliency and adaptability of man, and I tend to look to our tomorrows with a surge of excitement and hope.** I feel that we're standing on the threshold of a liberating and exhilarating world in which the human tribe can become truly one family and man's consciousness can be freed from the shackles of mechanical culture and enabled to roam the cosmos. **I have a deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn, to plumb the depths of his own being and to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe.** We live in a transitional era of profound pain and tragic identity quest, but the agony of our age is the labor pain of rebirth. I expect to see the coming decades transform the planet into an art form; the new man, linked in a cosmic harmony that transcends time and space, will sensuously caress and mold and pattern every facet of the terrestrial artifact as if it were a work of art, and man himself will become an organic art form. There is a long road ahead, and the stars are only way stations, but we have begun the journey. To be born in this age is a precious gift, and I regret the prospect of my own death only because I will leave so many pages of man's destiny — if you will excuse the Gutenbergian image — tantalizingly unread. But perhaps, as I've tried to demonstrate in my examination of the postliterate culture, the story begins only when the book closes.

Cutting through the mind-blowing prose, we can see McLuhan clearly suggesting that, although he's personally uncomfortable with many of the changes that electronic media are bringing about — again, this is 1969! .. amazing! — he remains a believer in the power of human resiliency and adaptability.

This is a key theme — perhaps *the* key theme — of my forthcoming book on *The Case for Internet Optimism*. In a nutshell, many pessimists overlook the importance of human adaptability and resiliency. The amazing thing about humans is that we adapt so much better than other mammals. When it comes to technological change, resiliency is hard-wired into our genes. We learn how to use the new tools given to us and make them part of our lives and culture in a creative and constructive way such that we evolve and prosper.

Thus, while I still can't wrap my pea-brain around what McLuhan is talking about when he refers to man's ability "to learn the secret songs that orchestrate the universe," I certainly share his "deep and abiding belief in man's potential to grow and learn"!