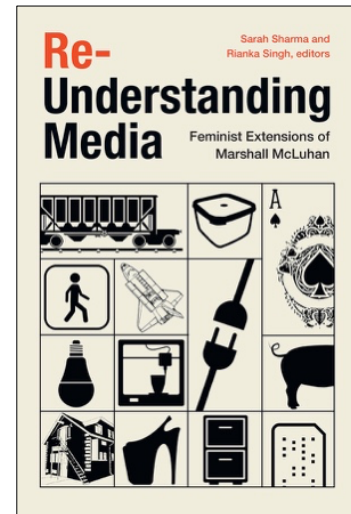


Sarah Sharma and Rianka Singh (Eds.), **Re-Understanding Media: Feminist Extensions of Marshall McLuhan**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022, 280 pp., \$27.95 (paperback).

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If Marshall McLuhan’s legacy is an awareness that “the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan, 1964/2002, p. 8), he expressed this awareness in a way that almost completely ignored other factors shaping human affairs. This was long interpreted as an ideological rejection of those other factors—an “attempted cancellation,” as Raymond Williams (1974/2003) put it, of questions about how media technology is articulated with politics and history (p. 129). The result, especially among left-leaning scholars, was a willingness to dismiss McLuhan’s ideas out of hand. McLuhan’s personal conservatism and his unscholarly idiosyncrasies—his cavalier use of evidence, his lack of interest in dialogue or nuance—helped to justify this.



To think as a feminist is to be sensitive to the instruments of marginalization, some of which are “instruments” in the commonsense way of being material technologies or tools. In a context where more and more such instruments are symbol processing machines, technological form and cultural content are more entangled than ever. Half a century after McLuhan and Williams wrote, there is no shortage of leftist scholars pointing to the power of technology in society and culture, even if they do not engage with McLuhan’s work (e.g., Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018). Donna Haraway’s (1985/2006) *Cyborg Manifesto* seems like a milestone in this respect, an indicator of McLuhan’s concerns—though not his writing—beginning to be taken seriously in left-critical circles. Haraway’s cyborg story resonates with McLuhan’s notion of technologies as “extensions of man,” not least by calling “man” into question. Yet Haraway does not mention McLuhan.

Sarah Sharma and Rianka Singh’s new edited volume, **Re-understanding Media: Feminist Extensions of Marshall McLuhan**, is a signal that a long-deferred engagement is finally under way between McLuhan’s ideas and feminist media theory, “a critical approach to media study oriented to issues of gender, race, sexuality, and social justice” (p. 7). Sharma is a successor of McLuhan’s, having served from 2017 to 2022 as the director of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, which McLuhan founded in 1963. In a preface, she recounts how McLuhan’s “disciples” (p. vii) would frequently arrive uninvited at the Center to effuse about its founder. The story illustrates the cult-like following that McLuhan has inspired, and suggests a two-way neglect. If feminist media scholars have tended to ignore McLuhan, McLuhan’s disciples have tended to ignore the concerns of feminists (Shade & Crow, 2004), favoring instead what Sharma describes as “hagiography, endless revivals, and self-serving resuscitations of a revered figure” (p. ix).

When McLuhan's papers and books were designated part of the UNESCO Memory of the World Register, Sharma organized a "Many McLuhans" symposium in Toronto. In the keynote, John D. Peters (2019) acknowledged McLuhan's sexism but, considering that dubious attitudes are an intractable human failure, called for charity as well as rigor in reading McLuhan. The contributors to *Re-understanding Media*—several of whom participated in the 2019 symposium—answer Peters' call. They are clear-eyed about McLuhan's misogyny and essentialism, but take his insights about media seriously nevertheless.

Reflecting the way McLuhan pluralized "media" to include any technology, a variety of technologies are considered in the book's chapters. Black Americans seeking freedom in the 19th century had to think of transportation technologies in ways that their White captors did not (Armond R. Towns, chapter 1). "Smart" sidewalks are a site for the contest between surveillance capitalism and more progressive visions of the future (Shannon Mattern, chapter 2). Wires are a readable part of the household infrastructure that sustains a notoriously antifeminist gaming culture (Nicholas Taylor, chapter 3). To embrace indigenous textiles in the global market as "extensions from the environment in" is a decolonial move, undermining the epistemology of colonizing capitalism (Ganaele Langlois, chapter 4, p. 70). Tupperware is a case study in how masculinist culture overrates technologies of extension and underrates technologies of containment (Brooke Erin Duffy and Jeremy Packer, chapter 6). Filing cabinets helped to organize gender, no less than information, in the early-20th century American office (Craig Robertson, chapter 7). "Knitting needle computers" (edge-notched index cards that could be sorted using knitting needles) illustrate how gender was implicated in the process of integrating digital information technologies into modern culture (Cait McKinney, chapter 8). Predigital platforms—slave auction blocks, gallows, and platform shoes—suggest that the increased visibility afforded by digital platforms is a vulnerability as much as an opportunity for liberation (Rianka Singh and Sarah Banet-Weiser, chapter 9).

Where McLuhan deployed his power analysis on a flat, homogenized "man," these authors incorporate an awareness of human plurality and difference. While they think with McLuhan in treating objects and technology as active, they do not understand this as a master key to understanding. Instead, technologies mediate existing inequalities and the struggle for power, and usually act in conservative rather than revolutionary ways. Media technologies "exert agency in ways that tend to reinforce power relationships" (p. 114), a point made explicit in almost every chapter of the book.

In addition to the standard academic essays in the chapters already mentioned, *Re-understanding Media* includes a personal letter—with extensive scholarly endnotes—from Sarah Martell to the incubator that allowed her son, born three months early, to thrive (chapter 5). The last three chapters are interviews Sharma and Singh conducted with artists and activists working with digital technologies. Where most of the previous chapters deal with media technologies in the past, the interviewed practitioners are focused on present struggles. Artist Morehshin Allahyari talks about 3-D printing and out-designing authority as a feminist practice (chapter 11). Jennifer Wemigwans talks about the challenges she faced in putting indigenous knowledge on a website ([fourdirectionsteachings.com](http://fourdirectionsteachings.com)), a form bound to the colonial imagination (chapter 12). Interviewed along with Ladan Siad (chapter 10), Nasma Ahmed tells of a reluctance among fellow activists to tackle technology as a site of power. "The same folks will fight oil and gas companies, real estate companies. But for some reason, dealing with the technology sector is different" (p. 183). Skeptical of Haraway's relevance to women of color, Ahmed is confident of the importance of McLuhan's "power

analysis” to the struggles of Black and other marginalized women. To her, the idea of technology-as-tool, and the related notion of ending marginalization through better representation—through employment in tech companies, through being seen and heard by digital surveillance technologies—is “a scam” (p. 183). This echoes Sharma, who inverts Williams’ old critique of McLuhan: “that technologies are even imagined as tools whose effects depend upon their use . . . or perceived as in need of more diverse representation in their development is part of today’s dominant techno-logic” (p. 8).

The one contributor who does not treat McLuhan charitably is Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, whose afterward offers a less-than-generous reading of McLuhan’s use of the Narcissus and Echo story, calling it “reprehensible at best” (p. 228). There is no denying the chauvinism that comes through in McLuhan’s writing, but it is decidedly unclear that, as Chun takes it, this means he feared the “retribalization” of human affairs he claimed electronic media would bring. Chun says McLuhan foresaw an apocalypse (p. 229), but he can just as easily be read as prophesying a new Aquarian age involving, as Sharma puts it, “a new depth of awareness that would catapult him [“man”] out of the restrictive mental and political confines of print society” (p. 2).

In a separate monograph, *Re-understanding Media* contributor Armond R. Towns draws a distinction between a materialist and historical *media philosophy* and a content-centered *media studies* (Towns, 2022). *Re-understanding Media* is a contribution to the former. As such, it will be of interest not just to feminists and critical race theorists but to anyone moved by McLuhan’s perception that media forms inflect human relations. Dialogue between these two lines of thought is long overdue. McLuhan offers feminism, in Sharma’s words, “the most critical framework for thinking about technology and power” (p. 5). Feminism in turn offers an antidote to McLuhan’s universalizing of the White male perspective, and to the narrowness of the analytical frame—technological determinism—that constitutes his enduring insight.

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