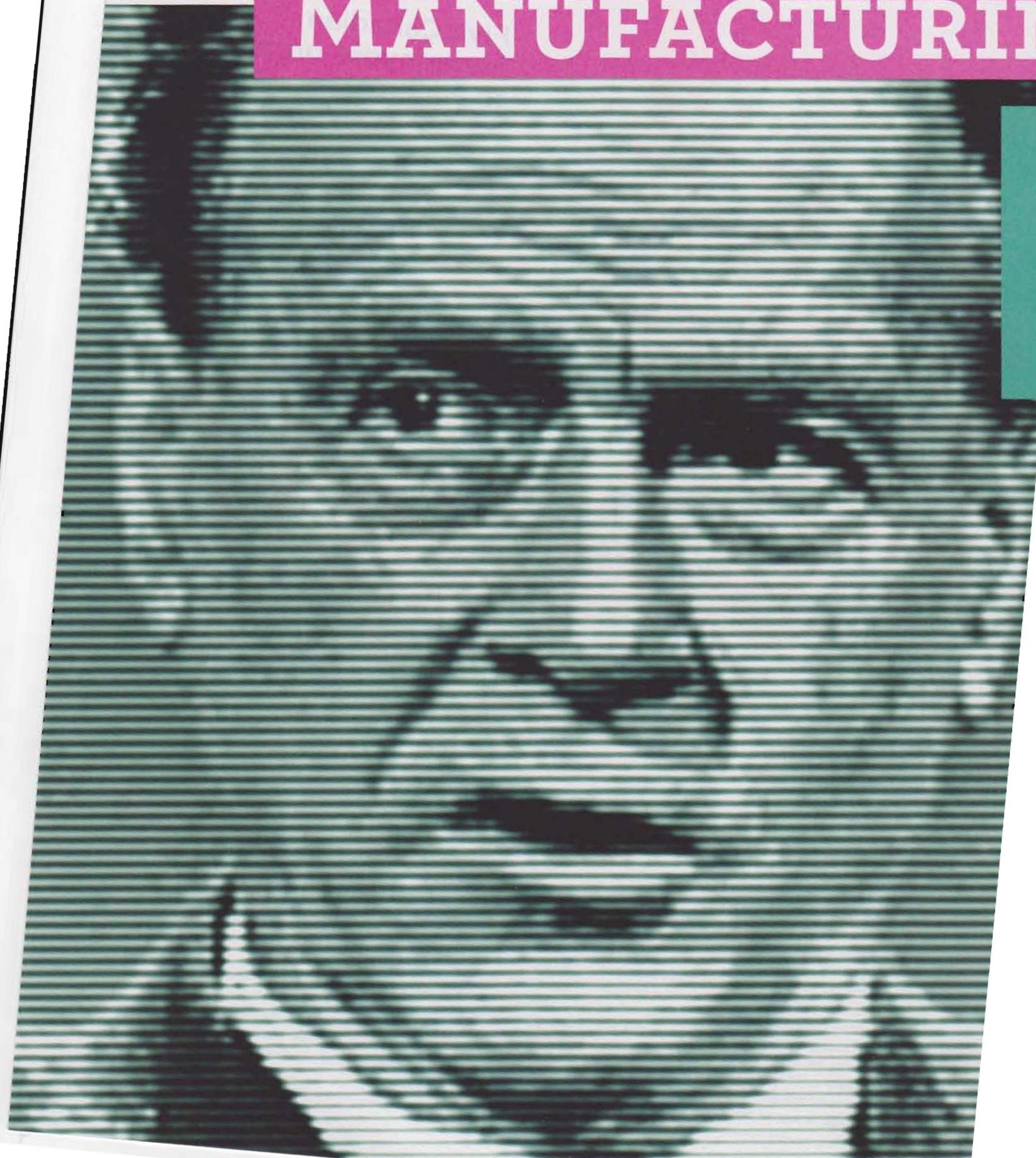


MANUFACTURING



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MARSHALL MCLUHAN

On McLuhan's centenary, how one writer helped introduce the legendary media theorist to the world

Kay Kritzwiser, a feature writer assigned to the *Globe and Mail's* weekend supplement, *The Globe Magazine*, had never heard of Marshall McLuhan when, on a mid-November morning in 1963, her editor, Colin McCullough, asked her to write a profile of him. She visited the *Globe's* library and took away a *Who's Who* entry and a few articles about the University of Toronto's English professor. One, a profile by Kildare Dobbs published the previous year, compared a conversation with McLuhan to a trip to outer space. "In orbit with him one looks down to see the comfortable world of familiar facts diminished to the scale of molecules; long vistas of history yawn frighteningly..."

Kritzwiser, who regarded herself as a woman with her feet on the ground, thought it sounded like a carnival ride. She read on: McLuhan's first book, an eccentric intellectual critique of advertising and society called *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, had been published in 1951 to good reviews and weak sales. His second major book, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, had been published in the fall of 1962 and widely reviewed both in Canada and in prestigious international publications, and had won that year's Governor General's Award for non-fiction. Nevertheless, McLuhan was, for the most part, a high-brow academic whose challenging ideas on communications and media were confined mainly to university campuses and a few industry and government organizations. In the fall of 1964, he was two years away from the mega-celebrity-hood that his theories in part addressed.

At that time, almost all female reporters were forced into one of two stereotypes: those who specialized in

women's-page fare (weddings, fashion, cooking tips) and the so-called "sob sisters"—reporters whose great journalistic achievement was the use of sympathy to coax family photos from grieving widows. Kritzwiser fit into a third category that might be classified as post-emanicipation and pre-feminism: independent, determined career women actively competing with their male counterparts (at half their salaries) who nonetheless saw no irony in backing up serious reporting and research skills with a feminine flair.

BY DAVID HAYES

They were the precursors of the liberated, college-educated go-getters who began pouring into newsrooms in the mid-1960s.

A Regina native, Kritzwiser was recruited by the *Globe* in 1956. A year later, she had established herself as one of the paper's senior feature writers. In his 1999 memoir, *Hurly Burly: A Time at the Globe*, Richard J. Doyle fondly described Kritzwiser in a passage that also revealed an attitude toward women shared by many of his generation:

The lady knows how to bat an eyelash, swivel a hip, show off an ankle or arch an eyebrow. A rustle of silk announces her arrival, a breathless voice begins the interview, a laugh like [Lauren] Bacall's punctuates the questions. Tiny gasps greet the most mundane of responses to her guileless prodding into the dark recesses of the hapless fellow on the other side of her notepad.

Until the interview appears in print. "Did I say that? I didn't admit... but if I did... why did I tell her about... Who does she think she is?"

Kritzwiser's writing reflected Doyle's modernizing of the *Globe* in the 1960s. Although most of us take it for

granted today, at this time people were just beginning to realize that objectivity, a goal of news reporting for decades, was seen as too confining to cope with the complexities of modern life. Features were longer than a conventional news story and had a beginning, middle, and an end; readers who devoted time and attention to them expected some interpretation, not just a recitation of facts. Pierre Berton and a handful of others had turned out these kinds of features from time to time since the 1940s, but now they were becoming accepted practice. And it was the only approach that had a hope of making sense out of a figure like Marshall McLuhan.

“How do you do, Professor McLuhan?” Kritzwiser said, stepping into McLuhan’s cramped, shabby office on the U of T campus. Considering McLuhan’s published statements about how the electronic media were killing print, it was hard not to notice the books: shelves groaned with them, they were piled high on tables and the floor, and they spilled out into his secretary’s tiny alcove.

“How do you do,” said McLuhan, standing up behind his desk and indicating a chair. Kritzwiser sat down, crossed her legs, and placed a notebook on her knee.

Like most things she did when working, Kritzwiser dressed for effect; this morning she was wearing her beautifully tailored grey wool suit with the pearl-white buttons and a stylish grey felt hat. She was a short, trim woman with a sunny personality and plain, boyish features. On most occasions she seemed entirely at ease, a function, in part, of several years spent in amateur theatre in Regina, which she regarded as excellent preparation for interviewing. She drew a cigarette from its package and politely asked McLuhan whether he had a light.

He was a tall, lanky man, his thinning grey hair swept straight back, handsome in a distinguished way, she observed. He wore a russet-coloured Harris tweed suit and, as he leaned forward in a courtly gesture to light her cigarette, she noticed his relaxed stance, the angular lines of his free hand on his hip, index finger pointing downward. Then he sat down and lit a thin cigarillo.

Kritzwiser was a social smoker. Cigarettes, to her, were mainly aesthetic, a prop, part of a formality that relaxed both interviewer and interviewee in the days before anti-smoking sentiments came to dominate Canadian society. Her brand was Sweet Caporals, not for the taste but for the red filter that approximately matched her lipstick.

McLuhan, she knew, had been born in Edmonton and brought up in Winnipeg, so they chatted about the West. McLuhan had no idea how to make small talk—he described it as “a world without a foreground, but with the whole world as a background.” Then he began a discourse about how the industrial revolution was symbolized by the extension of feet into the wheel, the knight-in-armor into a tank. Next the earth’s curvature was discovered, which led to the invention of modern media.

“Today, the central nervous system has been extended outside the body through the age of electricity,” he explained, smoke forming a nimbus around his head. “Literally, our brain is now outside our skull. We’re lashed around by the fury of these extensions. It’s like a

spinning buzz-saw. It’s not known where the teeth are but we know they’re there.”

It didn’t take much to get McLuhan started, and he was warmed up now, his voice purring on eight well-tuned cylinders while his thoughts wound circuitously through a maze of theories, many related to a work-in-progress that would be published, a few months later, as *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Kritzwiser’s pen darted back and forth across the page in an effort to keep up. McLuhan was incredible; he spoke in what sounded like feature-story paragraphs, although following his train of thought was like trying to scoop up a puddle of mercury. It was, she thought, as though he simply hadn’t stitched together all the loose ends yet, as though he was feeling his way toward a new philosophy, like a blind man acquainting himself with a new neighbourhood.

An exhilarated Kritzwiser arrived back at the office. In today’s world, where computers are not just in most homes but now ubiquitous in the palms of millions, it’s hard to remember that 50 years ago McLuhan’s ideas—about a “global village” and a computer-driven medium of communication that sounded a lot like the internet—might as well have been science fiction. “I don’t know what I’ve got,” she told her editor, “but I do know a man has pulled aside a curtain for me. I don’t know what I saw but I know I glimpsed the future.”

Later she read over her notes. The story hadn’t gelled yet, she thought. She was still looking for what she called the “moment of truth,” that dramatic scene or anecdote or object that symbolically captures the essential theme of a story. But what was the theme? So far, Kritzwiser had a professor in a book-filled office and seven pages of notes that included references to Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Baudelaire, and Flaubert, as well as cryptic phrases (even though they were in her own handwriting) such as “in a non-specialist society, relevance will be our business.”

The following Saturday, she arrived at McLuhan’s rambling two-storey home in the Annex district of Toronto, a few blocks north of the U of T campus. There were bicycles on the front porch and inside the homey smell of a baking pie filled the air. McLuhan, in a rumpled flannel shirt and casual slacks, looked like a homebody sitting in his chair beside a crackling fire with his legs stretched out. He was talking to a friend who worked at the Royal Ontario Museum about a lecture he was scheduled to give the following week.

“TV is tactile,” McLuhan was saying, rubbing his fingers together as though he were feeling silk. “The eye has immunity to radio...”

But Kritzwiser’s attention was captured by a carved wooden slab of a mask hanging on the wall. Was it Greek? She was interested in Greek and Roman mythology and her instincts told her she had found the symbol for her story. On January 4, 1964, her article, bearing the title “The McLuhan Galaxy,” was published.

On the fireplace wall of the Herbert Marshall McLuhan home, a giant wooden mask broods over the living room. Visiting children swarm up the

chair beneath it to stroke its satiny furrows. It is a mask of Tiresias, the Theban of Greek legend who saw Athena bathing and was struck with blindness when she splashed water in his face. Through she repented, Athena was unable to restore his sight. Instead, she gave Tiresias the power of soothsaying. She opened his ears so that he could understand the language of the birds. She gave him a staff with which he walked as safely as a sighted person.

Six foot tall and lean, Marshall McLuhan, an internationally known expert in the new science of communications, casts a shadow like a television tower on the University of Toronto campus... But in his home, sprawled beside the fire, the mask of Tiresias above him makes a provocative comparison. For McLuhan's new global reputation as a communications authority credits him with the power to see as few do, to hear a new language and to walk confidently in the strange and frightening world of the electronic age.

It was not Kritzwiser's best story. McLuhan was both charming and hard to pin down, and her profile was overly flattering. Some of McLuhan's ideas were summarized but they weren't critically analyzed, nor was Kritzwiser particularly well qualified to do so. Few reporters were at the time, but she might have included one or two of the critics of McLuhan who thought he was a self-absorbed crackpot whose theories lacked intellectual rigor, or more often simply lacked a point. The closest Kritzwiser came to representing that view was through an unnamed faculty member who said he admired McLuhan's ability to challenge tradition but admitted he left his seminars "with a thundering headache."

Her story was otherwise typical of how daily journalism usually dealt with McLuhan in the mid-1960s. The opening was revealing. The key phrase was the reference to McLuhan's ability "to hear a new language and to walk confidently in the strange and frightening world of the electronic age." Aside from tying neatly into the Tiresias myth, it reflected the accepted wisdom among mainstream journalists that the electronic age was to be feared and mistrusted. Since the public had as much trouble understanding abstract subjects involving science, physics, and technology as the press had writing about them, most stories focused on a person. The mid-1960s was a time of accelerated change, and McLuhan seemed to offer an accessible link with the future. A Canadian, he was emerging as an internationally acknowledged "expert"—which lent him credibility—but he was also easily portrayed as a literary invention: an ivory-tower egghead who might be a genius, an adventurous non-conformist who, against all odds, wasn't a young, bearded, wild-eyed revolutionary. Instead, he was a respectable family man with six children, and it was as easy as it was natural for Kritzwiser to "humanize" him near the top of her story by presenting him in a Norman Rockwell-like setting where Corrine McLuhan, "wife and mother, calm, hand-

some and dark-haired," appeared as "the pivotal force in the McLuhan galaxy."

Sometimes the mainstream media seemed like a three-ring circus, with a few big attractions on the front page (or leading the TV newscast) and plenty of sideshows to ensure there was something of interest for everyone. Even papers like the *Globe* or the *New York Times*, with their well-educated readers and lofty reputations, still had to *entertain* as well as inform. A few months later, when McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was published, *The Globe Magazine* ran a critical review by Lister Sinclair in which he declared, "He has become a writer and he can't write. He has become an authority on communications and he can't communicate." Many academics agreed, and if the debate had been confined to the insular world of university scholarship, today McLuhan might be an obscure curio of the '60s. But instead, he became even more popular and controversial; a "McLuhan story" had increased in value because it was viewed as entertaining, which resulted in more coverage.

By publishing Kritzwiser's respectful profile, the *Globe* introduced McLuhan to an elite audience and acted as a stamp of approval, signalling to timid editors of other papers that McLuhan was important. Over the next few years, the momentum grew. Articles were written about him in virtually every major North American publication, including the *New York Times*, *Playboy*, *Time*, *Life*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Harper's Saturday Night*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*. (Which, in November 1965 in its week-

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end magazine, *New York*, published Tom Wolfe's legendary profile of McLuhan that posed the Wolfian question: "Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein, and Pavlov, studs of the intelligentsia game—suppose he is the oracle of the modern times—*what if he is right...?*")

As McLuhan had written, *the medium is the message*. That meant new technologies, from television to computers, were revolutionizing human consciousness and altering the context of communications, but it could also be summarized as *content follows form*. The properties of the medium were more important than the information it conveyed. Still, even many scholars had trouble following his train of thought, so, in 1964, the job of communicating McLuhan and his ideas fell to journalists like Kay Kritzwiser who focused on the most accessible information—and left the theories to the future in which we live. 🍷