

"The Medium and the Messenger"

A retrospective study on the dynamic relationship between

Marshall McLuhan and Pierre Elliott Trudeau

PROSPECTUS by

PAUL J ELLIOTT

BCA 600

FALL 2005

I. Abstract

Former Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau's legacy as the top Canadian newsmaker of the 20th century is linked to his political career which began with his rise to leadership of the Liberal Party in 1968. Trudeau and media theorist Marshall McLuhan became associates in the 1960s, and enjoyed a dynamic, creative relationship during the 1970s. It was McLuhan who said the medium is the message, and Trudeau became the message as this political star rose and fell at different stages of this career and post-career life.

The relationship between McLuhan as the medium and Trudeau as the messenger will be examined in this research and might be the basis of a future documentary on these two men, to be entitled "The Medium and the Messenger." Trudeau's political career and legacy have long been studied because of his impact on Canadian politics and social evolution. An analysis of the relationship between the media and Trudeau is even more imperative now 40 years after Trudeau began his political career. Broadcasting has changed since the early years of television that helped transform Trudeau and Canada. Could anyone as charismatic as Trudeau come along again and captivate the public imagination as he did? How would the media see a figure like Trudeau in retrospect compared to when he was the center of political attention?

A critical examination of journalism during Trudeau's time is needed currently when ownership concentration, globalism, and expanding media technologies are changing the face of journalism, politics and society. Structural changes in the Canadian media over the last several years have resulted in more private broadcasting, cutbacks and reorganization at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, more pressure to reduce the Canadian content

requirements since the Broadcasting Act of 1991. The economic realities impacting the media are changing the face of Canadian democracy.

The role of the media and its mandate to safeguard the democratic process is a unique aspect of Canadian broadcasting. But with greater corporate input and concern for the bottom line, the commitment to maintaining Canadian cultural identity and diversity has taken a back seat to matters of serving the public trust.

Because there have been few studies on news media coverage of media issues. Studies done previously revealed only a small percentage devoted to the theme of the media, its role in election issues and outcomes. The only specific study in this area has been Kweon's study (2000) on the mergers of American newsmagazines, which revealed a positive viewpoint on the media mergers taking place.

Now is the time for a critical study on the dynamic relationship between Trudeau and McLuhan. As Trudeau became the medium of political power and social transformation in Canada, it was McLuhan's prophetic visions of the power of television, his understanding of the impact that the media has, and how Trudeau caught hold of a vision he had for a greater, united Canada under federalism.

Over the last several the Canada has seen several shifts since Trudeau last served as prime minister. During the 1980s, the Brian Mulroney government sought to pull back from the social changes undertook by Trudeau at a time when conservatism was sweeping across the border during the Reagan years. But the shift in tide was not as long-lasting in Canada as it was in the United States. The Liberal Party back the House of Commons during the momentous 1993 federal election, which saw the Conservatives swept from power, left with

only two House seats, with Kim Campbell tenure as the nation only woman prime minister proved very short-lived. Trudeau's disciple, Jean Chrétien, reinstituted Trudeau's policies that had once proved so popular. After the 1993 election, the Liberal Party became the only national party. With the Conservatives in disarray, the only opposition that remained were regionalized parties like the Bloc Québécois, the New Democrats and the short-lived Reform Party. Trudeau's legacy continues to live on as Canada strengthens its commitment to federalism against a tide of separatism, globalism and American dominance.

Just how did someone so unassuming like Pierre Elliott Trudeau, with both Anglo- and French-Canadian roots, growing up in a wealthy neighborhood of Montréal, become a star of the Liberal Party and so quickly its leader? The 1960s was a time of great social upheaval. The Quiet Revolution (*Révolution tranquille*) opened Québec society to new democratic and social ideas, and further away from an isolated provincial society, so closely tied to its Catholic heritage. Trudeau saw the potential for Canada to be split apart by this revolution, and new Canada could only become a powerful, modern state if it was united by a greater central government in Ottawa. Trudeau's dreams of federalism would soon be realized as his message would resonate across the Canadian landscape.

II. Research Objective and Definition of Terms

With the political and social landscape ready for new voices and new leadership to transform Canada, Trudeau took advantage of the times and spoke to the needs of Canadians like no politician since. His message resonated not with the Canadian citizens but with the

media. So, just how and why did the Canadian media contribute to Trudeau's political popularity? This study will examine that relationship and draw on several sources to demonstrate that the media played a significant role in Trudeau's political career.

At the same time, I will take a closer look at how the ideas of Marshall McLuhan influenced Trudeau's relationship with the media? What were the ideas that McLuhan espoused that Trudeau used to political advantage to carry forth a strong message that both the media and Canadians would seize?

A historical, qualitative look at the relationship between two individuals cannot lead to definite proofs that one influenced the other beyond what can be shown by the historical record. I will not attempt to prove that McLuhan's ideas were an independent determinant of Trudeau's political thinking. For that, I can only demonstrate by careful interpretation of several sources the connection between theories and practice of how the dynamic interaction of two individuals directly and indirectly can.

Understanding that my research will be read both in the United States and Canada, it is important to define several terms that readers will encounter during this study. During this research, I will be examining the several relationships that occur with the media: strictly speaking the interviews, press conferences given by Trudeau; with personal insights from Trudeau as drawn from texts.

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a native of Canada, a media theorist and author of the books *Understanding Media* and *The Message is the Medium*. Of all the terms that McLuhan is noted for the idea that *the medium is the message* refers to the fact that any medium, independent of its content, has its own intrinsic effects and are a message unto itself.

Pierre Elliott Trudeau (1919-2000) was Canadian Prime Minister from April 20, 1968 - June 4, 1979, and again from March 30, 1980 - June 30, 1984. Trudeau was the driving force for Canadian federalism in a nation formed by the confederation of its several provinces and territories. In Canada parliamentary government, the leader of the majority party assumes the office of Prime Minister, until a new election is called. In Canada, the Liberal Party is the largest and most national political party. Historically left of center, the Liberal Party was the architect of Canada health care system, and the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

A key term that I want to emphasize is the idea of *influence*. It is not my research purpose to prove that McLuhan directly influenced or controlled Trudeau as a political opinion leader. I only want to discover from their already-established relationship that McLuhan *influenced* Trudeau, much like a teacher influences his students. I will provide evidence to suggest influence without trying to prove cause-and-effect. The relationship between McLuhan and Trudeau was not so close during their lifetimes to establish such immediacy of effect, but close enough to demonstrate the influences of ideas that played a role in Trudeau political style of public communication and opinion change.

III. Literature Review

Several excellent works have been written about Trudeau life and career. Trudeau himself wrote an autobiography, *Memoirs* (1993). Trudeau wrote it after his life in politics, and it is a fascinating look at his life, his family, friends and associates. Trudeau describes

this work as "a personal and informal account of my political life as I remember it when prompted by questions from the interviewers"

I first read *Memoirs* to uncover the familial links I have to Trudeau, and rereading is helping me to understand the man more than just the politician. *Memoirs* covers his lifetime of work and achievements, and serves as the basis for understanding the man I am researching. I plan to read this book completely as a foundation in understanding Trudeau. I'll be interested to uncover his thoughts as related to communication and the media in general. By reading it again with the perspective of looking at his ideas of communication, his perception of opinion leadership and formation, I hope to apply Trudeau's very own perspective to this research. For if Trudeau is the medium, I want to examine the man as well as his message.

The Essential Trudeau (1988) is a collection of Trudeau's public writings and is organized by topic. A useful topical reference book on Trudeau's ideas and policies, *The Essential Trudeau* is essentially a secondary source of previously published material, and serves as a handy reference. I will draw on it for terms and subject matter on occasion, but not thoroughly implement it as a primary research tool. Extracted from published and unpublished sources, this book makes understanding Trudeau easier by its readable format. A good companion to his autobiography and to *Conversation with Canadians*, Graham also includes several good citations that make it a good research tool, as this project unfolds.

An in-depth look back at the 1968 general election and Trudeau's rise to power on the national scene in the Liberal party, *Mandate 8* (1968) covers the campaign and Trudeau's time before and after becoming prime minister. Sullivan offers a behind-the-scenes look at

Trudeau's politics and even his communication style as he forged his political power in Ottawa.

There are several works on Trudeau's career as prime minister, but this book is fascinating because it covers the cultural and political milieu surrounding Trudeau's early career, and in such detail. As such, it deserves a close study to look at the attitudes Trudeau brought with him that would be later shaped by the influences of this popularity. As 1968 seems like the logical place to document my story of McLuhan and Trudeau, it also serves as the beginning point for my research into the subject of the Trudeau relationship with the media.

More in-depth than *The Essential Trudeau, Conversation with Canadians* (1972) covers Trudeau's writings on a just society, democracy and global events. Speaking on the relationship between television and the electorate, Trudeau remarked, "Marshall McLuhan has helped us all to realize a lot of things in this area; how a child of three or four learns things on television which we learned only when we were 18 or 19." This type of insight makes *Conversation* a good source of Trudeau wisdom behind the policies he espoused, and is more revealing of his communication style other books written by and about Trudeau.

After several years of being relegated to the bookshelf, McLuhan is being seen in an entirely new light by researchers and scholars. A renewed interest in McLuhan is uncovered in Strate and Wachtel (2005) new look at McLuhan's legacy. The book covers such ideas as message, media, art and persuasion, cultural contributions, and current theory. With contributions from several scholars, Strate and Wachtel most effectively examine McLuhan writings and ideas from a modern perspective. Intrigued by many of McLuhan's ideas of

technological change in communication and the convergence of medium and message, scholars now view McLuhan more as timeless than out-of-time. Current theorists now attest to McLuhan's contributions, even those who once debunked many of his ideas as more populist than scholarly. As more scholars examine McLuhan, they find his ideas may be revisable but should be revisited as well.

Levinson (1999) examined from a historical perspective just how the digital age relates to McLuhan's ideas, although his preceded the Internet. Levinson draws out too many relationships which may not be supported, but do give a deeper understanding of what can be considered a medium. Levinson seems to infer far more than what McLuhan might even say about the power of the media on messages. Although this is a provocative reconsideration of McLuhan, it is difficult to draw definite conclusions from much of his reasoning, as he draws forth several metaphorical examples that challenge the mind to think about, but invite challenges themselves to his methodology and reasoning. Still Levinson actively applies McLuhan in a most provocative manner.

The inspiration behind my study of Trudeau, *The Medium is the Massage; An Inventory of Effect* (2001 reprint), although not as academic as his other books, presents how everything in our technological age is interconnected and influences society. The concepts are still applicable in today high-tech society. The book's pseudo-Freudian misspelling of message into massage leads to the interpretation that he speaking of an age when mass communication is so prevalent and pervasive that the messages of communication are indistinguishable from the messenger. Indeed the very act of transmitting communication becomes communication becomes a new message in and of its self.

The idea that so much information is floating around in the realm of mass communication, the sources of that information are indistinguishable now from the message. Unnamed sources, unverified and non-primary sources of information seem as credible as first-person accounts in the mass media. As the unofficial arbiter of truth, the media presents ideas on a mass scale which become the normative construct of reality, consisting of an altered array of mixed messages upon an unsuspecting mass audience.

The Medium is The Rear View Mirror (1971) is a fascinating look into McLuhan's ideas by a former student of his. A more esoteric look at McLuhan works and theories, especially from a more critical point of view, Theal delves more into methods and analysis, without the media focus that others have focused on. This book is more unique in that it more of insider guide to understanding McLuhan and is more willing to challenge some of his time-cherished ideas. To challenge McLuhan is not a new concept, but in researching the dynamic interpersonal relationship he had with Trudeau, caution would dictate avoiding assumptions whenever needed when discovering an idea of Trudeau's which would lead to an assumption that it was McLuhan who first brought forth the idea.

With a deeper look at theory and practice, *Understanding Media* (1994) explores how media is an extension of our selves, by way of our dreams and experiences. We invent ways to communicate and organize the world around us. This is an in-depth, theoretical backdrop to applying McLuhan ideas to my research. Insightful and invaluable, McLuhan provides much to consider when examining the effects of the media. How do subconscious constructs shape our opinions, our perceptions and our behaviors? If we are organizing the world around us, how then do opinion leaders influence those decisions we make every day to organize a world that is based on our experiences? McLuhan would suggest that

communication is first an extension of ourselves into the external world, more so than the world extending itself into ourselves. However, the media is very powerful in establishing the ideas we choose to think about. McLuhan predicted the pervasiveness and extent of media control we see today, and his ideas of its power is even more relevant in today media-centered society.

Laws of Media (1994) is a more in-depth and analytic work of McLuhan's and more difficult to follow and understand, he presents several ways to look at communication problems, inviting new ways to solve problems and rethink solutions. McLuhan believed our perceptions and actions are figure to the ground that is the media. As such the media plays a determinant role in how a society operates. Even though the media is rapidly changing, its effects are noticeable.

McLuhan emphasized that content does not mean knowledge, an important concept of looking at information overload. It is knowledge that flows from the medium and the message which is key to understanding communication. In short, McLuhan posited his four Laws of Media in the form of questions we can apply to any medium: what does it extend?; what does it make obsolete?; what does it retrieve?; and what is its reversal potential? In his primarily biographical study of McLuhan and how he developed his several ideas, Marchand (1989) makes it known that to understand McLuhan, his body of work in communication studies, and on his impact on society, you need to know why he came to believe and think the way he did. Of particular interest is McLuhan's relationship with Trudeau, as it highlights much of the political and sociological thought that McLuhan studied which Trudeau dealt with as prime minister.

The book highlights how McLuhan's media theories intersect with Trudeau's political career. For example, "McLuhan was careful not to lobby the prime minister on specific issues; instead he tried to give Trudeau advice on the use of television, much of which was very shrewd."

Not a primary source for researching McLuhan's ideas, the way Marchand examines his life and his lifetime of work does make this a good place to begin studying McLuhan, and understanding his formative processes.

A study of emerging technologies and how communication affects societal changes, *Empire and Communication* (1972) by Harold Innis includes a foreword by McLuhan. Notable in that Innis speaks of modern empires, including those affecting Canadian history, making this a useful study for my research. Considering Trudeau's contributions to Canada own mpire; this book covers the precedents of empire and how communication evolved and affected their age. *Empire* is a good historical work that is rich of good ideas, but not a focus of my study.

Heyer's *Communication and History* (1988) is a collection of essays and articles covering the history of communication and technology, and assessing the relationship to culture and society. Heyer includes both older and contemporary sources, including McLuhan article of nderstanding Radio, which is a excellent look at how McLuhan extended his ideas of medium and message into the world of radio communications, before the age of television. Other chapters are devoted to television and society, and other emerging technologies. As Trudeau emerged as a political leader during the 1960s, I want to examine the trends that occurred then.

Hovland (1964) instituted a program of systematic research on the variables that determine the effects of persuasion in communication, and on affecting public opinion. Hovland outlines how certain factors such as fear, resistance and susceptibility influence how audiences are persuaded. Covering both personality and societal factors, these ideas will help evaluate the way Trudeau communicated his political ideas and shaped Canadian policy.

In *Trudeau in Power* (1971) Stewart noted that "one of the first experts Trudeau consulted when he ran for leadership in the Liberal Party was communication specialist Marshall McLuhan." This book is a thorough biography of Trudeau, with an in-depth look at Canadian politics. As such, it covers the key issues Trudeau faced as prime minister.

IV Theoretical Perspective

While several theoretical perspectives can be applied to the effects of media messages on mass audiences, the two-step flow theory is based on a study of political mass communication during an election. In 1940, Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet based their initial research on the currently discredited hypodermic needle model. Their research showed that the media effects on the mass audience were quite minimal when compared to the social influences on opinion formation.

The Lazarsfeld study found that only around 5% of people had changed their voting behavior due to the effect of media messages. The electorate's viewing of election coverage was not a reliable predictor of voting behavior. Other factors were found to have more of an impact, such as talking with friends, co-workers, and others. People's own political ideologies and that of their social environment had more influence. This view of minimal media impact became known as the limited effects paradigm.

From their research, Lazarsfeld et al came up with the idea of the “two-step flow” of media messages, which indicated a far more important role for opinion leaders. They discovered that people respond to media messages based on their social relationship. The effects of the mass media is limited by the how people are joined by groups and to each other. Hovland (1964) also found that group membership is a major factor in interpreting mass messages.

Although the term of mass communications leads to the notion of some mass audience to the same messages are sent and received, the audience does not receive messages equally. For some audience members are more actively engaged than others. This is very notable especially in politics, where the politically active, though smaller in number, have a disproportionate amount of influence in the political process, public policy formation and the messages that opinion leaders choose to address. However, it would be a mistake to assume that certain members of the mass audience do not receive mass messages simply because they do not respond in the same way as the more politically engaged. But among the politically engaged, opinion leaders emerge because they have learned to use the media to their advantage to wield greater influence on other members of the mass audience.

What then are the reasons that Lazarsfeld finds to lead him to conclude that mass communication is not as effective as interpersonal communication in the area of political engagement and decision-making behavior? Lack of predictability is a main reason that gives interpersonal communication a built-in advantage. The mass media cannot respond inherently more efficiently to personal changes that come from face-to-face communication, nor can it adapt to all the individual differences. The mass media is more impersonal and distant. Therefore, opinion leaders, can circumvent the mass media and address the public

directly. Certainly, Trudeau was one such leader who resonated with the public regardless of how the media viewed him. But whether the media enhanced his influence will be borne out by the research.

The two-step flow model is criticized because it assumes that media messages flow first to the opinion leaders who then transmit the messages to the mass audience. Since mass media messages are directed to the audience, without being filtered, that assumption is wrong. Our social influences tend to enhance our reception of mass messages, without making us reliant on opinion leaders. As Lazarsfeld suggests that opinion leaders are formed by their characteristics, they also assume that holds true to all opinion leaders. We cannot assume that we can predict from what social group a political leader might emerge from. An opinion leaders are not in and of themselves experts as such. But opinion leaders develop from their basis of communicating knowledge to the mass audience and from their knowing how to more effectively using the media to their advantage. Again, Trudeau's ability to communicate to the electorate led to his political influence and power, based in part in the ideas of McLuhan, which gave Trudeau a political advantage.

In 1940 the public had fewer media outlets from which to receive mass media messages. Radio and newspapers were more dominant than today, or even in 1968. Television had not arrived. So does the research and findings of Lazarsfeld hold true today in our multimedia, technological world. Is the assumption on opinion leaders still valid. What effect did television have on Trudeau. Did it truly enable him to connect to Canadians across the nation who could in concert receive his messages? Was the power of television in the mass communication age a given advantage, or may it also have invited more immediate criticism of Trudeau as a man and as the messenger. Did English Canada see him as too

French? Did Quebecers see Trudeau as a mere aristocratic Anglo from the wealthy part of the Isle of Montreal?

As Lazarsfeld would suggest, you need to consider the social opinions of the time. To study Trudeau in 1968, you must examine the opinions of that time, and be able to see that Trudeau was a more powerful opinion leader than he would be contemporarily given the state of the media then and now.

Although the Lazarsfeld research was first conducted over six decades ago, it is still accepted and applicable even today. Advertisers already recognize that mass media advertising is not as important as person-to-person or word-of-mouth advertising. In the world of politics, grass-roots and door-to-door campaigning is still at the heart of the electoral process. In fact, a mass communications campaign begins with a successful local campaign. Only when an opinion leader can connect to a critical mass of audience does the media latch on to his campaign.

V. Method

In determining how well the two-step model applies to determining how Trudeau used the media to become a powerful opinion leader by applying the ideas and findings of McLuhan, who understood the impact of television, I have to first employ a historical/descriptive qualitative analysis in the biographical retrospective of Trudeau's relationship with the media, examining how the media influenced his political career, his social issues, personal life, and his popularity during and after his career. By looking at the various factors and attributes at play in the Canadian media during his career, I would like to establish a clear overview of how the media impacted Canada during the Trudeau years.

I will study the theories of communication by McLuhan that were evident during Trudeau's time in office, and study those correlate to political speech and media interaction. I will also draw on other theories of persuasion that will look at the effectiveness of McLuhan influences on Trudeau.

The major tool of research will be a content analysis of the historical literature that can establish the dynamic relationship between these two opinion leaders. The biographical data available on both Trudeau and McLuhan is the primary source for content analysis. It is the best source for establishing the relationship between theory and practice. Although McLuhan was so esoteric that his theories can be assumed to migrate and meld with other theorists of mass communication, direct non-causal links are the easiest to identify.

First, the archives of the CBC online library will be very useful. A wealth of audio and video is available on Trudeau. Much of what I discover will be the basis of my proposed documentary, apart from my research paper. Archives of newspaper clippings will be researched as well, looking for specific content connections between Trudeau and McLuhan, Trudeau and the mass media, and other mass communication influences. I am not looking just at Trudeau speaking to the media, but I am looking for Trudeau speaking about the media as a messenger and opinion leader themselves. Certainly, any conflict between Trudeau and the media is what I will be focusing on.

In searching newspaper archives, I will focus on the largest Canadian newspapers that serve as primary sources, those publications in Toronto, Montreal and Vancouver being the most important. But I will also look at French-language publications in Montreal and Quebec City, as they can represent a unique cultural and political bent on viewing Trudeau policies

that emerged after the Quiet Revolution, putting Quebec at the forefront of Trudeau's new federalism.

In researching the historical record, I will be prioritizing my findings on what is most relevant to the study of Trudeau, McLuhan and the mass media. I am not looking for a representative sample, but rather than an authoritative record to support my research, theoretical underpinnings and the search into my understanding of Trudeau's communication style and influence on opinion change during his political career.

Each article or document examined will be weighed on its merits as being contributory to the body of research, and will be placed within a proper context of understanding its significance without drawing causal links that cannot be supported or verified from additional sources. Again, it is my purpose to examine and study the historical record without removing Trudeau and McLuhan from the historical context that they belong. An accurate study requires that the content examined fits within the theoretical framework without being altered by newer explanations as to the historical interdependence between men and ideas that are the basis of "The Medium and the Messenger".

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Broadcasting Act (1991). Consolidated statutes and regulations. c.11 Retrieved August 15, 2002, from <http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/b-9.01/index.html>.
- Graham, R., ed. (1998). *The essential Trudeau / Pierre Elliott Trudeau*. Toronto: M&S.
- Heyer, P. (1988). *Communications and history: theories of media, knowledge and civilization*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Hovland, C. I. et al (1964). *Communication and persuasion; psychological studies of opinion change*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Innis, H. (1972). *Empire and communication*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Katz, E. and Lazarsfeld, P. F. (1955). *Personal influence; the part played by people in the flow of mass communications*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- Kweon, S. (2000). A framing analysis: how did three U.S. news magazines frame about mergers or acquisitions? *The International Journal on Media Management*, 2, 165-167.
- Levinson, P. (1999). *Digital McLuhan: a guide to the information millennium*. London: Routledge.
- Marchand, P. (1989). *Marshall McLuhan: The medium and the messenger*. New York: Ticknor & Fields.
- McLuhan, M. (1994). *Understanding media*. Rprt. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- McLuhan M. (1994). *Laws of media: the new science*. Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press.
- McLuhan, M. & Fiore, Q. (2001). *The medium is the message; an inventory of effect*. Rprt. Corte Madera, Ca: Gingko Press.
- Strate, L. and Wachtel, E., Eds. (2005). *The legacy of McLuhan*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Sullivan, M. (1968). *Mandate '68*. Toronto, New York: Doubleday.
- Task Force on Broadcasting Policy (1986). *Report*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Task Force on Broadcasting Policy (1986). *Report*. Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.
- Theal, D. F. (1971). *The medium is the rear view mirror: Understanding McLuhan*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Trudeau, P.E. (1972). *Conversation with Canadians*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Trudeau, P. E. (1993). *Memoirs*. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart.
- Uzelman, S., Hacket, R, & Stewart, J. (2005). Covering Democracy Forum: Canadian Press Treatment of Public and Private Broadcasting. *Critical studies in media communication*, Vol. 22, No. 2.