SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to analyse whether some of McLuhan’s theories could be partially applied in the Roman Empire of Emperor Hadrian. After a brief summary of the Canadian professor’s main ideas, in particular the concept of the global village and that the message is the medium, we contrast the ideas with some precedents, Avant-la-lettre, in classical antiquity, cross-referencing them with an in-depth study of the Empire in the second century AD.

The exercise is provocative, because it is normal to update theories in the new digital environment, especially social networks, but not retrospectively. We claim that some of the points already existed, or at least had some points in common, and that contemporary concepts can be applied to explain the reality of antiquity. The analysis can go no further, because historical comparisons are often excessive. But, it is interesting because it gives a new perspective to the whole developed system.

As conclusions, we state that McLuhan focuses his analysis on the radical change brought about by the printing press and then television, but ignores two things: that the starting point was lower than that of the classical urban world compared to the 15th century, and the degree of literacy, which was not as great as expected; that, even so, a certain “global village” already existed because of administrative convergence in the Roman world. On the other hand, the concept of hot and cold media also serves as a tool for analysing sources of imperial communication and propaganda.

KEYWORDS:
global village; media; printing; urban world; literacy

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to analyse whether some of McLuhan’s theories could be partially applied in the Roman Empire of Emperor Hadrian. After a brief summary of the Canadian professor’s main ideas, in particular the concept of the global village and that the message is the medium, we contrast the ideas with some precedents, Avant-la-lettre, in classical antiquity, cross-referencing them with an in-depth study of the Empire in the second century AD.
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1. Introduction

The journal Comunicación y Hombre has decided to publish a monograph on the person and work of professor and scholar Marshall McLuhan. His work has been a point of reference in the study of communication and he is a pioneer in many aspects. As a result, many scientific articles have been written about him and his work. Moreover, the Internet revolution and, above all, social networks, have taken to the extreme some of the points he advanced on the concepts of the global village and the importance of the medium (the medium is the message). Therefore, it is understandably important to look again at the detail he put forward, looking towards its adjustment or modification in this new revolution of knowledge, but also of social relations.

Although all eyes are focused on his work and its future adaptation, especially in articles on social networks (Graciyal, D. G., & Viswam, D. (2018). Lo Verde, F. M. (2018). Udenze, S. (2019). Velasquez, A. (2018)), we believe it would not hurt to look back at the past and contrast whether any of their ideas correctly reflected reality. Specifically, we focus first on one of his main axes, which was that from the tribal village of oral tradition we had moved to the community of written communication and that the printing press first, and radio and television later, had produced a return to the origin, a “retribalisation”, by interconnecting all members of the community, especially the latest mass media, but on a global, planetary scale.

The question that arises is: had there never been a similar revolution before? Were all the small communities isolated in terms of communication, living as ghettos superimposed on the more complex political organisations such as the empires of China, India or the Roman Empire? Similarly, if the media had played a critical role, it is legitimate to ask
whether there had not been a similar precedent in this respect in the world of classical antiquity. Curiously, we have not found any studies in this sense, looking for possible applications or adaptations of McLuhan’s theories prior to their formulation, so our contribution focuses on shedding some light on the subject, albeit circumscribed to the Western sphere, leaving the great cultures of Asia or pre-Columbian America out of the picture.

It goes without saying that historical comparisons are always forced, because so many elements change, that it is difficult to do a rigorous job in a limited article for a journal. However, it helps a lot when trying to understand reality to look for precedents, even if they are distant, and to contrast new theories with historical situations that are very well documented.

2. Methodology

A study such as this one does not come out of a few months of research on the author in question and on classical antiquity, in order to try to see parallels or contradictions. In fact, I have always been interested in McLuhan’s work because of my work as a professor of Global Mindset, “Globalisation” and international market research in various business schools such as ICEX-CECO, ESIC Business & Marketing School or ESIC University, and others.

My four-year research on the Emperor Publius Elius Hadrian, on whom I am preparing a comprehensive book, preceded by some scientific publication, in particular on the Emperor’s legislative work and on the joint promotion of cities with Roman heritage, has led me to delve into several issues in this respect.

Therefore, having a mixed, albeit incomplete knowledge base, it was necessary, firstly, to reread Marshall McLuhan’s work, followed by a task of collecting and analysing some secondary literature on McLuhan’s work, which are cited in the text and in the bibliography, trying to get an overview of the main ideas, in order to be able to carry out the comparison of some key points. This has left out the richness of McLuhan’s exposition, and the rich nuances he brings to it, but if we did not focus on the quintessence of the work, it would not be possible to undertake a work of this scope.

3. Analysis of results

The global village

The most famous element of McLuhan’s theory is undoubtedly that of the global village, which has given more depth and a new meaning to the term globalisation, already present in Theodore Levittal though he confined it more to economic issues. For McLuhan, there are a series of stages in the evolution of human communication, ranging from
smaller, preliterate cultures that communicate orally and share information, to a different stage with the invention of writing, with a qualitative leap in the typographic information revolution of Gutenberg’s printing press and the subsequent revolution in technology associated with the written word, producing different relationships between people, up to today’s mass media, specifically radio and television, which, in some ways, represent a reflux, even more evident with the internet revolution.

The author argues that small communities have direct communication, but that societies grow and the concept of collective oral culture as a basic means of information is lost. This does not mean that there is no oral communication, but it is losing ground to the written word, which takes on a new dimension from the 15th century onwards. As far as Gutenberg’s invention is concerned, it is true that the printing press was a true cultural revolution for the West and for those parts of the world it came into contact with, replacing permanent copies on papyrus, parchment, paper and other materials.

McLuhan speaks of the fragmented man, and indicates that globalisation is already beginning, (which can be seen with the spread of Luther’s ideas and the Protestant Reformation, or with those of the Enlightenment and then those of the French Revolution, etc.), although he seems to forget that the degree of illiteracy remained very high in Europe from the 15th to the 19th century, and more so in some southern countries, because there were strong differences between two Europes (Vicent, D. 2000), although it seems to be forgotten that the degree of illiteracy remained very high in Europe from the 15th to the 19th century and even more so in some southern countries, because there were strong differences between the two Europes (Vicent, D. 2000) up to the 20th century, and we are talking about the developed Europe of the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution, not about the peasant masses of Latin America, Africa or Asia. Thus, around 1820, it is estimated that only 12% of the world’s population could read and write, as opposed to the opposite today (Roser, M. and Ortiz-Ospina, E. 2013). The urban inhabitants of the Roman Empire were more in need of a rudimentary knowledge of reading, or at least of understanding a few written words, than the peasant masses or the early urban proletariat (Leslie, L. 2005). On the other hand, the author himself said that there were even elite meaning to this change (McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. 1967): “In England, however, such was the power of the old oral traditions of the Common Law, backed by the medieval institution that was Parliament, that it could not completely take over any uniformity or continuity of the new printed visual culture” (McLuhan, M., & Fiore, Q. 1967): “In England, however, such was the power of the old oral traditions of the Common Law, backed by the medieval institution that was Parliament, that it could not completely take over any uniformity or continuity of the new printed visual culture”.

With regard to the technological revolution, McLuhan states (McLuhan and Fiore, 2009: 16) that the new media bring with them the following: “Their message is total change, ending psychic, social and economic and political parochialism. The old civic, state and national groupings no longer work’. But this phenomenon had already occurred in the course of the 2nd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D. with the Roman Empire. Communities with their own languages, customs, basic organisation and even laws continued to coexist, but the unifying Roman administrative framework had made a
number of dispersed units part of a larger political unit in which they interacted, and very intensively, not only commercially but also culturally. While the Greek polis shared a common culture and many traditions, they were all within the same cultural sphere, with strong contempt for the “barbarian”. The Medo-Persian empire, on the other hand, left a very high degree of autonomy. In the case of the Roman Empire, which was much more heterogeneous than the Greek polis as a whole, local laws continued to have weight, but with a process of unification and standardisation that began with Augustus, shone with Hadrian, began to be consolidated with Theodosius and culminated with Justinian (Centenera, J. 2019). Clearly, the political management of such a heterogeneous world must have been very complicated, which is why the need for harmonisation was established. Curiously, it was Christianity, from the 4th century onwards, that cemented this uniformity.

Hadrian’s great change, as his main biographer (Birley, 2010) pointed out, is that his Hellenistic philhellenism led him to make true the saying: “Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit et artes intulit in agresti Latio” (Horace Epistles II, 1, 156-157), but giving it a greater political relevance, with the Pan-Hellenic league. I believe that his intended development was along the lines, mutatis mutandis, of the supposed equity of the dual Danubian monarchy of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where, although the German element ruled over a multitude of peoples, it recognised the specific weight of the Hungarian element. In the case of Emperor Hadrian, political power and management shifted from the “city of Rome” to the basically Roman imperial environment, but he recognised the strong weight of Greek culture and the economic and demographic weight of the eastern part of the Empire, maintaining a dual Roman and Greek chancellorship.

The emperor intrudes, through evergetism, of which numerous remains remain, with high tourist potential (Centenera, J. 2018), as well as through legislation (D’Orgeval, 1950; Centenera, J. 2019), in the daily life of the subjects of the eastern part of the Empire. But it is true that his passion for Greece, for its customs and traditions, for its mystical religions and its games, led him to impregnate Rome itself, from palatine relations to the construction of monuments such as the Athenaeum or the Greek library. There is not only a “commercial globalisation”, as evidenced by the need for the olive oil law in Athens (Johnson, A. Ch., et al. 1961; Placido, D. 1992), but a genuine cultural community from heterogeneous bases.

Returning to McLuhan, his theory assumes that the elites have always been cosmopolitan, but that it is the media, especially modern technology, that have affected the masses, bringing about a return to more fluid and closer relations, as in the village of oral communication, and therefore he speaks of “retribalisation”. But we have seen how this symbiosis was already taking place in classical antiquity, which suffered a brutal setback with the fall and decomposition of the Empire by the Germanic invasions, or, as they like to say, by the “migration of peoples” (Schmidt, M. 1778).

The author, in a television interview in the second half of the 1960s (McLuhan, M), speaking of the new media and the technological revolution, commented as follows: “They have transformed our world as a single unit... the world is now like a tribal drum
beating incessantly, where everyone gets the message, all the time. If a princess gets married in England and boom boom boom, the drums go, we all hear about it; an earthquake in North Africa; a Hollywood star gets drunk, and there go the drums again”.

And it is true that even then, and even more so now, what is happening all over the world is in the news every day. But this does not mean that, with an excellent road network, with first-rate naval communications and, above all, with a more or less centralised administration, which at least guaranteed peace and order, there was already much of this global information about the Mediterranean world, which would later be lost in the “dark centuries”. In the specific case that we will discuss later, the coins informed all the members of the Empire of the travels of the Emperor Hadrian and his actions in all parts of the Empire.

Similarly, the author seems to avoid elaborating on the fact that the European technological revolution, which ushered in the era of imperialism from the 18th to the 20th centuries, meant that the examples he recounted occurred, de facto, among segments of the European enlightened population, and, to a lesser extent, among the working classes.

Therefore, recognising McLuhan’s merit and the general theory of his idea of the “global village”, we consider that he overlooks the convergence that was taking place in the Roman Empire (which goes beyond the joint citizenship granted by the emperor Caracalla at the beginning of the second century AD), which had already been moving towards a “retribalisation” of another level since a century before, although, admittedly, without sufficient means for everyone to know and speak about everyone. Obviously, Medieval Europe was transformed into a collection of units that diverged from each other and produced a much more heterogeneous picture than the confluence that was taking place in the Empire. So there are several examples of a global village long before McLuhan launched his approach.

4. The medium is the message

For McLuhan, media are different in that they require more or less interaction, which is why television is a cold medium and radio is a hot medium: “A hot medium, on the other hand, does not let its audience complete it as much. Thus, hot media are low in participation, and cold media are high in audience participation or completion. It is obvious that, for the user, a hot medium like radio has different effects from a cold medium like the telephone (McLuhan, 2009: 47).”

The division between hot and cold media is very interesting, although, in my humble opinion, they could be interpreted the other way around. Reading or radio, by focusing on a single sense, force us to “imagine” the rest, from sounds or images, from faces to costumes, forcing more interaction, while today’s television achieves the opposite hypnotic effect, but that would make us enter into an in-depth discussion of the categories assigned, which is not the object of this article. Therefore, let’s follow their pattern, their
definitions and classifications, to look, if possible, for parallels prior to both concepts.

What would be our equivalent in imperial mass communication? Monuments, stone edicts and statues would be cold media, because the citizen would have to supplement them, as there was not enough information. The distance, the remoteness, the message to be conveyed was very simple, who was the new Caesar, but there were no nuances, and it would have to be deciphered. Stretching the historical leaps and comparisons a little further again, it was like the Kremlinologists reading the Politburo authorities at the victory parade in the Soviet Union, trying to figure out how the balance of power evolved depending on who was where. For the majority of the population, this was distant, difficult to understand and would need the support of others, or, more likely, be ignored.

Coins, on the other hand, were a “hot” medium, because they had a message, the legend, with standard formulas that everyone could know, due to their brevity, repetition and constant use, together with an image, which reflected reality or a symbolic representation of it, in a world with different roots, but with a convergent cultural context. Unlike the Pharaonic images, which were always hieratic and standardised, with the exception of the “heresy” of Amarna (López, M. T., and Valentín, F. M. 2010), the Roman coins (Mattingly, H. 1923) showed beings with their own characteristics. What was conveyed was not the concept of “Emperor” (like the Egyptian pharaoh), but the person who held the office. In the specific case of the Emperor Hadrian, he was the first to wear a beard, something which was normal in Greece, but which had not occurred at the top of the Empire, although it would later be repeated by several of his successors, such as Antoninus Pius, Marcus Aurelius, Lucius Verus and others. It was therefore evident that the image on these coins was different. Although there is a clear evolution in the representation of the emperor, the concept is easy to understand for the lower classes of the Empire.

But beyond the image and the caption, which would be the “information” in the pure sense, that is, the visible part of the content of each medium, as opposed to the hidden structure behind it, (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1975) and which could also be seen in the statues and their bases, the coins had a double characteristic which, in my opinion, made them “hotter”. Firstly, there was the fact of their proximity, as they were constantly carried by the entire population, being a phenomenon of everyday use. Unlike our society, which has evolved towards less use of physical means of payment, direct debit and more deferred payments (e.g. monthly purchases), in the Roman Empire the use of coins was a daily, everyday, and frequent occurrence. Like first television, and then social media, coins were omnipresent in the daily life of the Empire, for all citizens, and were the most effective method of propaganda.

We have spoken of the image of the Emperor, but not of the reverse, which dealt with themes ranging from the adoption by Trajan, to the generousities of the Prince, the Liberalitas, or his civic virtues, from visits to cities and his evergetism, to military inspections or returns to Rome (Garzón Blanco, J. A., 1990), and even themes of juridical or religious virtues. For all these reasons, the coins showed something fixed, the image of the Emperor, together with something new each time, the propaganda reverses (Pavón Torrejón, P. 2009), and it is evident that the masses could not fail to comment on the changes in the
coins, and the messages received, but these were explicit, and not distant like the statues or the official inscriptions on stone. Moreover, by repeating the messages and legends, with variations (Mattingly, H. 1923), and certain iconic representations, we find that the people of the village recognised the message without having to decipher it, with some ease.

The decomposition of the Empire brought the destruction of the economic system and monetary exchange, returning to a barter economy or local currencies in the different kingdoms, but, above all, the disappearance of that common context of interpretation, global and everyday, which had brought the political unity of the Empire. Thus, even with great heterogeneity, the Roman Empire had created a cultural community, in which certain messages, everyday, habitual, close and useful, were common to all, while others had remained distant and distant. Without being able to freely use Marshall McLuhan’s concepts of hot and cold media, we can reflect on how the medium reinforced the message, as far back as classical antiquity, something that was lost in medieval Europe.

5. Conclusions

Marshall McLuhan’s work was pioneering in many respects, but, above all, it coined a series of terms that have taken hold in many subsequent studies. The new revolution of social networks has brought about a new paradigm shift, which we still have to learn to handle, and which gives a new vision, which continues to grow in itself, of the understanding of the Canadian professor’s ideas, with even greater interest and depth, making him a prophet of modernity.

Long sentence. Suggest breaking it into at least two, perhaps after ‘media’ then beginning ‘There were two opposing waves, that of the printing press and its book culture, versus that of the mass media, with messages and interpretation of the common reality, followed by the concept of the difference between hot media, which make the viewer passive, and cold media, which force the viewer to supplement information.

In our brief paper, we have asked whether the phase divisions were so emphatic, or whether an early globalisation, both economic-commercial and, above all, cultural, had taken place over a number of centuries of the Roman Empire, taking the period of the Emperor Hadrian as an example. We believe, like some scholars, that the degree of impact of political communication and the exchange of ideas was greater among the citizens of the empire than in later Europe, until well into the 19th century, or the 20th century in southern Europe, and that the literacy of the population was greater in classical antiquity than in Europe in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, a phenomenon that continued for centu-
ries. That, although the printing press was an undeniable revolution, it was not until mass literacy that it had more impact, creating that individualistic culture of interpretation of reality, that of the reader. In contrast, the technological revolution is unparalleled, and amplifies the concept of the global village, making it truer than ever.

On the other hand, the concept of hot and cold media is an original contribution of Marshall McLuhan, but there were already differences in the way imperial propaganda was transmitted in classical antiquity. Without being extrapolated, the general concept can be used to see that the media were indeed the message, even before the theory was formulated, albeit at a less pronounced level.

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