

McLuhan's World, Or, Understanding Media in Japan

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Marshall McLuhan was a divisive figure. To some he was a revolutionary media theorist and thinker, who literally put media theory on the map. To others he was a mere prophet (or profiteer) of the new media age, a public figure who lectured to private corporations, and was a hot topic in Madison avenue circles whose aphoristic style blended well with advertising copy.

In Japan McLuhan was a divided figure. Before he was translated he was introduced, and this introduction was performed by two different people in two markedly different ways. In lieu of discussing my own encounter with McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, I'd like to use this space to ask us to think of a different space of reception: late 1960s Japan. Here interest in McLuhan had a fireworks-like intensity matched by an accompanying brevity. There would be McLuhan revivals – around his death in the early 1980s, and from the late 1990s into the 2000s, as his work was repurposed for a new media era. But what is fascinating about reception of McLuhan in Japan – in addition to its impact on media theorization thereafter, and its important place in the still-to-be-written story of McLuhan's global reception – is the way that the divisive figure of McLuhan is literally mapped onto two very different writers, who introduce two very different McLuhans.

The McLuhan boom in Japan was brief, but intense. It began in late 1966, and had all but died out by mid-1968 barely lasting long enough to see the translation of *Understanding Media*, which appeared in November 1967. Far more popular than the translation was the 1967 *McLuhan's World* (Makurūhan no sekai), a work of applied McLuhanism by a man who did the most to shape the reception of the figure in Japan: Takemura Ken'ichi. Takemura is known as the preeminent McLuhanist in Japan, and his 1967 *McLuhan's World* sold ten times more copies than the eventually translated *Understanding Media*, and made it up to #8 on the bestseller list of 1967. *McLuhan's World* was the *Understanding Media* for Japanese audiences. What marked Takemura's work was its appeal to general audiences, and perhaps even more significantly its presentation of McLuhan as the prophet of the electronic age, best read by business people, salaried workers, television industry heads and marketing executives.

Takemura channeled a very specific McLuhan for Japanese readers: McLuhan the business visionary, McLuhan the adman, McLuhan the prophet of media industries and their transformations. And perhaps most importantly, a McLuhan localized for the Japanese context, complete with references to Japanese popular culture, ads, and politics with predictions thrown in to boot. McLuhan's focus on television as tactile medium meshed with then current journalistic discussions about TV kids as the so-called "skin tribe"; television was presented as a "happening" medium, a conception that influenced both TV producers and advertising directors; Toyota and Honda

came in for praise for grasping the current age as one of variety, market segmentation and post-mass production; and so on (Takemura, 1967). In Takemura's capable hands, McLuhan's work was living theory, easily shaped to address current trends and business discourse. In fact McLuhan's work was so marked by his most vocal proponent in Japan that the latter became known as "Takemura McLuhan" (Takemura, 1970: 30).

Takemura's main rival in the presentation and reception of McLuhan was Gotō Kazuhiko, a researcher affiliated with the NHK Broadcasting Research Department. As might be expected from someone working for national broadcaster in Japan, Gotō emphasized the need to read McLuhan carefully, to ignore the popularization attempted by Takemura, and to take a step back before proclaiming McLuhan a business prophet and the key to newest marketing techniques. Part of the emerging field of communication studies, Gotō wrote for both leftist magazines and for advertising journals; while his tone and approach towards McLuhan varied according to the venue, his main preoccupation was to disabuse people of the notion that the writer "could be used like a prescription drug for management, advertising, marketing and store window displays" (Gotō et al., 1967: 72) – as some sought to imply. Gotō was one of the co-translators of *Understanding Media*, presented in Japanese as *Ningen kakuchō no genri* (The Principles of the Extensions of Man). A month after the publication of the translation, in December 1967, Gotō released a co-written book described on the cover as "The first genuine introduction [to McLuhan] in Japan" (Gotō et al., 1967) – a clear dig at Takemura.

This rivalry had an interesting effect. In North America, Britain and France assessments of McLuhan's intricate combination of media theory and mediatic persona tended to be polarized; either negative or positive. But because of the forcefulness of Takemura's introduction, discourse around McLuhan in Japan tended to be rather more about the promises made about McLuhan than about the value of his work. And so rather than criticize McLuhan the thinker or media personality, writers would criticize Takemura's performative adoption of McLuhanese. Criticisms of McLuhan's work were more often than not framed as evaluations of how he had been presented. Writers often concluded that while the media theorist may not be the salvation for the marketing world after all, this didn't mean there was no value in his work. Rather than writers treating McLuhan as a false prophet, they tended to treat Takemura as the false prophet, thereby immunizing McLuhan to attacks. Indeed, the greatest critics of Takemura were in fact those who claimed to find theoretical value in McLuhan – like Gotō, as well as art critics like Tōno Yoshiaki.

And so there were two McLuhans in Japan: the sober academician introduced by Gotō; and the media personality and prophet of a new era brought to life by Takemura. McLuhan's physical and medial absence from Japan at the time allowed Takemura and Gotō to stand in for him. The divisive figure of McLuhan was quite literally a divided figure in the 1960s McLuhan boom in Japan. Japan's encounter

with *Understanding Media* in the 1960s was for better or worse mediated by a detour through *McLuhan's World*.

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