

Mapping the “M-Gen”

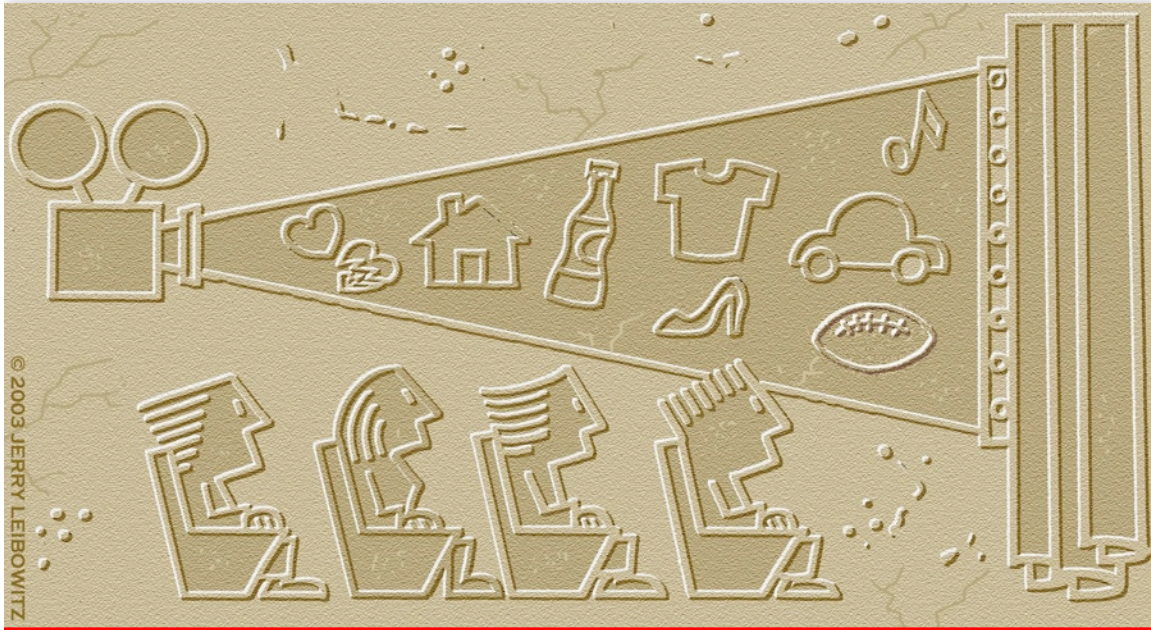


Illustration by: Jerry Leibowitz

BY: Ken Markman



he medium is the message.

All media work us over completely.

They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered.

Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without the knowledge of the way media work as environments.

--Marshall McLuhan



If you're reading this article and you're over six years old, you're out of control.

Meaning, you're no longer in control. In fact, you never were.

If you can slip stream into a generation of self indulgent "Baby Boomers," the last, lost "Generation X," or the newly adopting retro-80's "Generation Y," then you're not part of those who are taking control, the "**M-Generation**."

Who?

The McLuhan Generation: A "post-literate" bunch; perhaps the most powerful ever; born and immersed in an age of "ambient" electronic media. The first generation poised to intuitively assume more control of the media than be influenced or dictated by them.

But why choose McLuhan to define this new generation?

It was Marshall McLuhan who cast a "users guide to cultural prophesizing" in the 1960s. "The first and most vital step of all," McLuhan said, "is simply to understand media and its revolutionary effects on all psychic and social values and institutions."

Heady stuff!

But, "Understanding is half the battle," he claims. The other half, central to the message and merit of his work, is acknowledging, "That by understanding media as they extend man, we gain a measure of control over them . . . [that] all media, from the phonetic alphabet to the computer, are extensions of man that cause deep and lasting changes in him and transform his environment."

We are witnessing M-Gen taking control.

Unlike you and me, their seemingly intuitive environmental knowledge of media is demonstrating to us that they may very well be the first generation to not only extend media, but more importantly, take control of them.

When de-coding the M-Gens we discover that **we** are but a link in their complex, multi-faceted, multi-layered, multi-media, electronic-eco-chain environment.

Living side-by side with the M-Gens are the younger Baby Boomers (i.e., more 1964 than 1946), a generation changed forever in the 1960s when the world was

transformed by the “tube”; the Gen-Xs (c. 1965-1980) who, for all intents and purposes, had their primary school teachers replaced by Sesame Street (and were later the first to declare, “I want my MTV!”); and the Gen-Ys (c. 1981-1997), a cluster, at the front door of early adoption and usage of a global communication network, ushered in by the Internet.

However, no previous generation is more deeply immersed in, more inextricably linked to, and more poised to be in control over the evolving environment than the current crop of contemporary two-to-six year-olds.

“The future is the present,” declared McLuhan. He is proved to be right.

Our M-Gen is the literal and figurative, transitory, electronic, nomadic tribe passing from the 20th to the 21st century, born around 1998 and extending to nearly 2020 (demographers love dates!). They are a generation growing up in a highly mediated and interconnected world, where “ambient intelligence” and increasingly invisible technology is but a touch away.

“Mapping the Labyrinthine Terra Incognita”

McLuhan writes that “because of the invisibility of any environment during the period of its innovation, man is only consciously aware of the environment that has *preceded* it; in other words, an environment becomes fully visible only when it has been superseded by a new environment; thus we are always one step behind in our view of the world.”

Hmm . . . now what?

Are we supposed to watch the future from our rear view mirror?

How do we move one step ahead, to catch up with--and try to understand--where we are and not where we’ve been?

Well, we begin by asking questions: Questions designed to recognize the milestones and markers by which we can chart a course to crack the M-Gen code. Simply stated: “What are the clues embedded within their DNA that contain the secrets to help us understand their probable behavior and future potential?”

So, we asked this question and looked at the current state of world. We found a compelling pattern emerging. A pattern only recognized with the addition of each discovered clue.



Clues to the code

1. Total access, use and control: It's not just how or what they watch, use or do, but where.

Observing the media and technology consumption patterns of the tail end of the preceding generation gives us our first clue. According to Knowledge Networks/SRI, more than six in ten children (61%), age 8-17, say they have a television in their rooms, 35% have videogame systems, 17% own their PCs, 14% a DVD player, and 9% have access to the Internet. Autonomous they are in these media centers, 75% of these children are multitasking while watching TV.

The first wave of our M-Gens is already echoing this behavior. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study, which tracks media usage habits for children ages six and under, notes that 26% of kids under two years old (children who often cannot read or speak in complete sentences) have a television in *their* own bedrooms.

Consider further that 27% of these kids also have a VCR or DVD in their bedroom and Industry sources report that children under the age of 5 watch a video, on average, a total of 37 times; that 10% have a video console player in there; and that 43% of kids under two are watching TV or using the computer for more than two hours (in total) each day.

The M-Gens' bedrooms are active media centers. And these kids are "controlling" their media choices.

2. There's no place like home: Who's really there?

Really, there IS NO PLACE like home (at least not the home that we typically associate with the American family that is). Granted, nobody ever lived in the house that June and Ward Cleaver built, but many of us still believe that the typical household structure (i.e., married-couple households) holds as true today as it did in the 1950s (a structure extending back as far as our county's founding in fact). Well, wake up and smell June's coffee!

But wait, June is probably not at home to make the coffee.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, married-couple households have tumbled from approximately 80% in the glorious "happy days" 50s to just shy of 51% today. Married? "To be or not to be?" Perhaps that question is already answered. Unmarried people make up an impressive 42% of the workforce and 40% of all homebuyers. So what is in store (or who is "in home" as the case may be), exactly, for our M-Gens?

Today, families comprised of breadwinner dads (current day Wards) and stay-at home moms (thank you Mrs. Cleaver) make up a scant 10% of all U.S. households. Homes with mom, dad, “the Beaver” and Wally in residence account for only 25% of all U.S. households today; that number dropping to 20% over the next six years. And, certainly not a funny statistic, approximately 33% of children today are born to single parents (many are mothers, on or below the poverty line).

The impact such household structures will have on this generation cannot be underestimated, and certainly cannot be ignored--not by the society at large, not by the judicial system, not by the politicians, not by corporate America, and certainly not by us.

Social change has created an altered state. It’s complex. It’s not what we were expecting or prepared for and nothing like what our memory tells us of our past.

Today’s caregivers are inheriting a different generation.

3. The Integration of Everything: A New Media Gestalt?

From TVs to PC’s to PDAs and Video Games, media centers are at once becoming more “technology saturated” and far more rapidly integrated than perhaps once anticipated. Significantly, the rise and integration of these new entertainment products and services--such as DVRs, VOD and the Internet--are being widely cited as the cause of the decline in TV viewing habits among younger (particularly younger male) adults.

Not surprisingly, advertisers are beginning to experiment with new channels of communications by which to move their messages to their consumers, while at the same time, faced with potentially losing billions in advertising dollars, television and cable networks are attempting to develop new revenue streams, such as repurposing and packaging their shows on DVDs.

That’s yesterday’s news and the wrong generational strategy!

Instead, smart strategists are focusing upon entirely new media platforms that seamlessly touch and empower the self-discovering M-Gen audience; as the world slip-streams past the boomers, Gen-Xs and Gen-Ys.

M-Gens expect relevant content, messages, products and services that are personally delivered through a multitude of media devices--linking common interests in branded-bundles that reflect their habits and fuse with their daily life experiences.

4. Smaller is Better: It's about time.

Increased processing capacity at lower costs is leading to mass miniaturization of all media devices. It's axiomatic to technology and the consumer marketplace.

This fact enables not only the rise and rapid dispersion of advanced "standalone" and "integrated" devices and services in the new-media centers, but also the mobility and portability of such centers.

Simply, M-Gens are growing up and "going mobile" in a media saturated mediated life.

Case in point: If you have a Sprint PCS phone with a little screen, you have a new "playground" in the making. You can now watch ABC News Live on your cell phone--and all the content is original to the service. It's not re-purposed programming. It's real news in real time.

Provided through MobiTV, the service also includes programming from networks such as TLC and Discovery. Couple this with the fact that more than 150 million Game Boys have been sold since the machine was introduced in 1989 and that today four electronics companies have developed technologies that use the Game Boy Advance SP's screen to play anything from cartoon shorts to full-length movies in full-motion video. Hasbro, the toy manufacturer, gets it: they just introduced "VideoNow," a hand-held player for children that sells for \$50 and plays 30-minute cartoons. And that's just for starters.

Today integrated devices allow the M-Gen to reach anyone, anytime, everywhere. Importantly, they know and *will expect* nothing less.

5. Technology is no longer a product description or tool: Today, it's an accessory, a fashion accessory, and lifestyle statement.

We've come along way from the transistor radio, portable "boom-boxes," and the Walkman.

All iterations of the single media "device" had a single purpose in design, portable music, and conveyed a single message, always be plugged in. Today, kids not only easily transport media technology they wear it as a statement.

Current trends in fashion continue to show accessories as a growing part of the tweens' wardrobe. But most notable is the increasing influence of technology in their lives. So much so in fact that it has brought about a redefining of the word.

According to Youth Markets Alert, a publication which tracks and reports critical trends, “Accessory, in the fashion sense, now includes electronics” such as iPods, pagers and cell phones not only for calling but also for visual and text messaging.

Hats, bags and jewelry aren’t any less important, it just that this generation is using technology, as an extension of who they are, to stay in social contact while at the same time letting everyone know they are connected. As an illustration: Talking on the phone for tweens (ages 12-15) represents 47% of their daily activities; watching television is 90% and instant messaging to friends is 34%.

Still wondering about the magnitude of this trend, or just how far reaching the “connectivity statement” is being cast by a given tween? Consider that according to data recently released from "Children, Families and the Internet" (a survey by Grunwald Associates), more than 2 million American children ages 6 -17 have their own personal websites. And with wireless usage...well, you get the picture.

These tweens are setting the example (think baby-sitter, older sibling, parent-helper) and at once are both granting “permission” to the behavior and making “normal” the environment...for our M-Gens.

The usage patterns and social acceptance will only increase as M-Gens move toward their early consumer years.

6. Ambient Intelligence: Invisible technology everywhere!

When we were kids the environment was filled--well, not filled so much as scattered--with media technology primarily delivered in “tube form.” Tube radios and a tube television (and mostly black and white TV truth be told). In fact, the most advanced technology in the household that readily comes to mind was perhaps the telephone (rotary dial and all) or the electric toaster.

Today there is more computer processing power in your microwave oven than was available to launch and successfully bring back an Apollo crew to and from the Moon!

The M-Gen is immersed in it! This technology is not discrete, strewn about, piecemeal, easily distinguished from the background. It is the background, and the foreground, and the ceiling and the floor. It is the air that these children breathe, as well as the environment by and in which they create.

Phillips gets it.

Phillips’ vision is that technology is everywhere, invisible, intelligent, and accessible. And at their design headquarters in Eindhoven, the Netherlands,

they've set up a living lab to work through their concepts--with four-to-eight year-olds (of course, who else).

According to Ian Wylie of *Fast Company*, there's a room there that "resembles the front cover of a Fisher-Price catalog--but hidden in the silver dance mat, red tables, and assorted round-edged toys is an arsenal of microphones, cameras, projectors, and VCRs." The operative word is "hidden," without a "single computer, keyboard, or mouse" in sight.

And what about the children in this room?

They are engaged in storytelling . . . and what begins with spinning a yarn in the imagination, honed by dialogue, and roughed out in crayon, becomes digitized and eventually emerges as *their* movie.

Their movie! Their TV show! Their channel and their marketing communication! Not Steven's or George's or yours or mine. And that will be the way of the M-Gens.

7. The New Majority

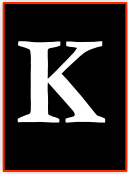
After taking a look at the 2000 census, marketers may need to go back to school.

Corporate America, long in anticipating but short on understanding the Hispanic market, needs to recognize the inherent "disruptive" power of the coming population shifts. For example: the number of 5-13 year-olds will increase 15.8% from 6.3 million today to 7.3 million in 2010. And the number of 14-17 year-olds is projected to increase almost 28% from 2.5 million today to 3.1 million by the end of the decade.

Regarding the Hispanic population, children ages 5-17 will comprise one-fifth of all children in 2010. A full 20% of all M-Gens! And, although they will be so much smaller in absolute number, the percentage changes for Asian and Pacific Islander children are even greater: In 2010, these children will represent 6% of the 5-17 year old population.

The implications are staggering. It's all about the shifting of the center of current "AIO," (Activities, Interests and Opinions), presumptions and understanding.

The impact of this shift on the fashion industry, the creative process, car design, style, language, music and home entertainment will be astronomical . . . and that's just the beginning.



ids: What are ya gonna do?

It's not a rhetorical question, but one **you** really have to answer.

Like the kids at Philips, we begin a yarn, we look out into uncharted territory searching for the clues. To imply that these early clues offer a comprehensive map with a true North cardinal point is a dramatic overstatement.

But we can ask questions; recognize change and begin to know who is controlling its influence. And that is important.

M-Gens don't represent a dramatic shift in demographic composition, as much as a sea change in psychographic and "technographic" topography.

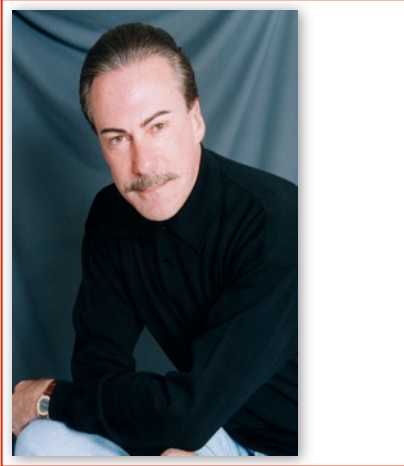
Juan Enriquez, author of, *As the Future Catches You*, says, "What is particular to humans is the complexity with which we network." Our ability to network, it's safe to conclude, is now perhaps matched by the M-Gens' ability to use media. **"WE ARE BEGINNING TO GLANCE AT A NEW WORLD...AND ARE BEGINNING TO REALIZE HOW PROFOULDLY DIFFERENT OUR CHILDRENS'S LIVES WILL BE."**

And if that is the only thing we know for sure, Marshall McLuhan would most likely have to agree.

Follow the clues.

Dr. Anthony White, of Media Twister contributed to this article.

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*Ken Markman is CEO of KKM Global Brand Strategies, a Los Angeles, California, based Licensing management company specializing in global brands for the entertainment and media industries. Clients include: Universal Pictures, Landor, The Weather Channel, Can-West/Content Entertainment, Equity Management, Inc, The Sporting Goods Manufacturers Association, Automatic Pictures, OmniCom Group and Luth Research. Ken is a member of The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences, a Lecturer on Entertainment and Brand Strategies at UCLA and is currently writing the book, **BrandCulture: From Batman to Bond and Beyond**, and may be contacted at (310) 472 7772 or by e-mail at globocom @ aol.com.*