

# A McLUHANIAN APPROACH TO THE TYPEWRITER CENTURY

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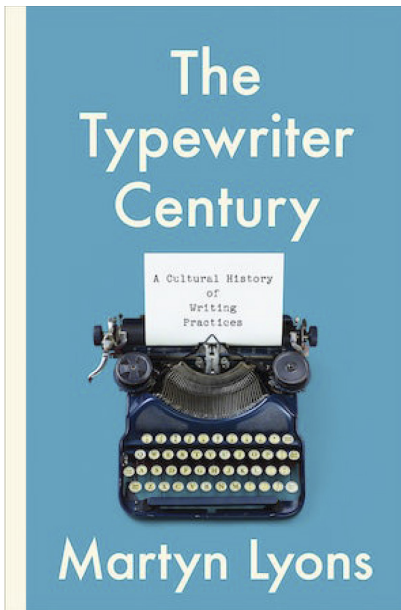
LYONS, MARTYN. *THE TYPEWRITER CENTURY: A CULTURAL HISTORY OF WRITING PRACTICES*. TORONTO: UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO PRESS, 2021. 261 p. ISBN 978-1-4875-2573-6.

In 2021, a new book from the book series *Studies in Book and Print Culture* was introduced to the public. The scientific community did not remain indifferent – so far, there have been at least 4 published<sup>1</sup> and several online<sup>2</sup> reviews. Many good things (and some constructively critical remarks as well) have been said about Martyn Lyons' recent book. The book is certainly relevant,

- 1 ZATZMAN, Julie. 2022. "Martyn Lyons, The Typewriter Century: A Cultural History of Writing Practices". *Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* 34 (1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.32316/hse-rhe.v34i1.5015>; SHIACH, Morag. *Journal of British Studies*, Volume 61, Issue 2, April 2022, p. 521–523. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/jbr.2022.2>; WEBSTER, Gretchen. *Martyn Lyons: The Typewriter Century—A Cultural History of Writing Practices*. *Pub Res Q* 37, p. 510–512 (2021). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12109-021-09828-3>; INGLIS, James. Review of 'The Typewriter Century: A Cultural History of Writing Practices', by Martyn Lyons. *Technology and Culture*, 2022, vol. 63, no. 4, p. 1216–1217. DOI: [doi:10.1353/tech.2022.0173](https://doi.org/10.1353/tech.2022.0173).
- 2 <https://www.booktopia.com.au/typewriter-century-martyn-lyons/book/9781487525736.html> [accessed 2022 11 03]; <https://ilabprize.org/breslauer-entries/the-typewriter-century-a-cultural-history-of-writing-practices> [accessed 2022 11 03]; <https://insidestory.org.au/feeding-the-machine/> [accessed 2022 11 03].

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and that is a fact. In this Review, I will try not to repeat what has already been said, but, instead, I will highlight two points: a) the impact of the media on the **individual** and b) the *McLuhanian*<sup>3</sup> type of view of the media impact on the **society**. In my opinion, these two points are the core of the book, and they lie behind the author's words: *The many ways in which different writers reacted to the typewriter, and incorporated it into their work routines, form the subject of this book* (p. 4).

**Short overview.** The author of the book is well known for his interest in history and the culture of reading and writing practices<sup>4</sup>. *The Typewriter Century* extends the original research area of Martyn Lyons which covers the geographic frame of the Western Civilization

(mostly France and Australia). The book was published by University of Toronto Press, and funded by the Government of Canada. It was published both as an ebook (epub and pdf) and a paperback (softcover as well as hardcover). The book is enriched with extensive Bibliography, Index and 13 illustrations.

All the historical researches, the author's insights and conclusions are based on a vast array of archival documents which have been preserved in their original form in Australia, Belgium, the United Kingdom and the United States. Martyn Lyons shapes the main narrative of the book around reflections of typewriter users. He had read (and used directly in the book) a lot of ego-documents (letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, reflections), basically created by

3 <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/McLuhanian>

4 LYONS, M.; TAKSA, L. *Australian Readers Remember: an oral history of reading, 1890-1930*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992; LYONS, M. *Readers and society in nineteenth-century France: workers, women, peasants*, Original, Palgrave, Houndsmills, UK, 2001; *A history of the book in Australia, 1891-1945: a national culture in a colonised market*, Lyons M.; Arnold J., (ed.), 2001, Queensland University Press, St Lucia, Queensland; *Ordinary Writings, Personal Narratives: Writing Practices in 19th and early 20th-century Europe*, Lyons M., (ed.), Peter Lang, 2007, Switzerland; LYONS, M. *Reading culture and writing practices in nineteenth-century France*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2008; LYONS, M. *The Writing Culture of Ordinary People in Europe, c. 1860-1920*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, Cambridge UK, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139093538> .

(or about) ‘celebrity writers’, such as Henry James, Thomas Stearns Eliot, Ezra Pound, Jack Kerouac, Agatha Christie, Georges Simenon, Erle Stanley Gardner, Ernest Hemingway and quite a few others. This way, Martyn Lyons continues and expands the methodological view of Friedrich Kittler<sup>5</sup>, who launched this thematic area by discussing only two cases regarding the feedback of celebrity writers about the typewriter (p. 12). Overall, the use of these primary sources lets the reader of the book experience this special relation between the typewriter and its owner-user. Moreover, Martyn Lyons successfully referred to many other relevant sources, such as novels (p. 56), TV series (p. 53) as well as his own experiences with the typewriter captured in the private documents of his family (p. 86) which helped to reveal the phenomenon of the typewriter *culture*.

The typewriter century has a strong theoretical background based on social theories. Moreover, the author discusses the main classical researches of the typewriter. However, there is lack of information about the more recent (mostly non-scholar, but still valuable) books on this phenomena: how does *The Typewriter Century* differs from the books by Anthony Casillo<sup>6</sup>, Tony Allan<sup>7</sup>, or Janine Vangool<sup>8</sup>?

Impact of the media on the individual. In his book, Martyn Lyons refers to McLuhan’s idea that media is a human’s extension: The typewriter is an organic extension of their body (p. 13). And, with all the collected evidence (reminiscences and reflections of typewriter users), Lyons proves that McLuhan is still right. The media (the typewriter in this particular case) shapes the way we use it: the *typewriter could induce a leaner and sparer literary style*, at the very least (p. 93). I am sure that every reader of this book is extremely grateful for being convinced that the typewriter changes the way one thinks and writes. Although, even more, the reader could appreciate any possible attempts by the author to explain such a change. However, no attempts of that type can be found in the text, although, the science of neuroplasticity has already given all the necessary answers to such an impact. In 2010, Nicholas Carr revealed<sup>9</sup>

- 5 KITTLER, A. Friedrich. *Grammophon Film Typewriter*. Berlin: Brinkmann & Bose, 1986; KITTLER, A. Friedrich. *Grammophone, Film, Typewriter*. California: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- 6 CASILLO, Anthony. *Typewriters: Iconic Machines from the Golden Age of Mechanical Writing*. Chronicle Books, 2017.
- 7 ALLAN, Tony. *Typewriter: The History. The Machines. The Writers*. Shelter Harbor Press, 2015.
- 8 VANGOOL, Janine. *The Typewriter: A Graphic History of the Beloved Machine*. Uppercase Gallery, Books & Papergoods, 2015, 336 p.
- 9 CARR, Nicholas. *The Shallows: what the Internet is doing to our Brains*. New York-London, 2010, p. 115–143.

that our brain is not static, it is absolutely *not* like hardware with some software installed. The brain is a live, organic structure, built of the nervous tissue (the neural tissue), and interconnected inside with synapses. Synapses are used to transfer signals inside our brain. The higher amount of synapses is used for a specific action, the better way the action is performed by us. Moreover, when we repeat the action, more and more synapses are used to transfer that signal. This way, neuroplasticity gives us the ability to learn (after some good practice, one could repeat actions even with their eyes closed!). Furthermore, as Carr pointed out, our brain is willing to learn not only the action itself, such as reading, but the way the action is performed, as well. This means that a human is able to learn the way to read. Or to write, depending on the writing instrument. This is the reason why our brain learns / gets used to using the media, whether it is facebook or a typewriter.

*McLuhanian* view on the typewriter's impact on the society. If the media makes an impact on the individual, it inevitably makes impact on the whole society as well. McLuhan managed to observe changes from the distance in the society caused by the new media<sup>10</sup>. The same way is used by Martyn Lyons in *Typewriter Century*. Lyons detected huge changes in the structure of the society, particularly the new working class of the 'typewriter girls' – the so-called *bureaucratic underclass* (p. 61) – the newly emerging type of schools to prepare typewriter professionals, and their new (im)moral standards of life. The author also made an impressive remark on domesticating the Typewriter and the rise of women writers (p.175). Moreover, Lyons drew attention to the cultural industries which responded to the invention of the typewriter by creating TV series, books, etc. about the life of such an invention. Lastly, notable changes in personal communication – such as letter writing – were also exhaustively discussed (p. 95).

Overall, *The Typewriter Century* is a brilliant book – a must-have for scholars and academics working in the field of history of communication and related areas. The facts collected by Lyons make reading valuable and profound, while the literary style of the Author (full of fabulous classical British expressions) turns reading into a pleasure. Lastly, I would like to wish Martyn Lyons to *spot* more *familiar items* (p. ix) – writing tools – and bring their history back as well.

10 MCLUHAN, Marshall; FIORE, Quentin. *The medium is the message*. London: Penguin, 2008; MCLUHAN, Marshall. *Understanding media: the extensions of man*. Introduction by Lewis H. Lapham. Cambridge, London: The MIT Press, 1994.