

Letters to the Editor**Media mistrust begins with the medium**

From Alan Rohrbach, Chicago, IL, US



YESTERDAY

Sir, Andrew Edgecliffe-Johnson's foray into US "flyover country" provides real insight into why and how Americans outside of major urban centres have come to distrust the "liberal bias" of the "press elite" ("[I've spent 20 years believing I was trusted to report the news objectively. Then I went to Kentucky](#)", *Life & Arts*, November 18).

Back in 1980, the estimable reporter and media executive Arnaud de Borchgrave co-authored the compelling novel *The Spike*, about the "spin" editors can exert by killing ("spiking") stories inconsistent with their views. That certainly drives audience perception.

Yet the trend towards becoming more radicalised in one's existing views began long before that. This is because the medium that drives society often has more impact than the content. This is not an original thought. I was fortunate enough to become aware of the theories of Marshall McLuhan back in the late 1960s. It was he who coined the phrase "the medium is the message" in his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, published in 1964.

McLuhan's radical views on the societal impact of television and cable TV were questioned by some at the time. Yet he understood that self-selected viewing of, especially, cable TV was one of the key impacts of the electric age, and would destroy existing social structures. Neighbours would no longer necessarily share political or social attitudes. And he was humble in noting that he was only relating what was already occurring in the 1960s, rather than some far-fetched theory. The trend has continued into the more extreme polarisation we see today, compounded by other changes which, as Mr Edgecliffe-Johnson notes, the electric age has brought to journalism in the form of computerisation and the internet.

Many younger folks will not have heard of McLuhan, as he died at the end of 1980. As such, he had only cable TV as proof of concept. One can only imagine what he would have thought of handheld devices allowing narrowly defined viewing and news consumption.

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