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Dr. John M. Culkin, 65; Scholar Studied Media's Effect on Society

Dr. John M. Culkin, a leading critic of the pervasive influence of films and television on modern life and proponent of using the mass media for society's benefit, died on Friday at St. Vincent's Hospital in Manhattan. He was 65 and lived in Manhattan.

The cause was complications from cancer, friends said.

Dr. Culkin was a colleague of Marshall McLuhan and helped to introduce him to the United States. Dr. McLuhan, the author of "Understanding Media," became famous for saying that electronic communications had turned the world into a global village.

From 1969 until his death, Dr. Culkin was director of the Center for Understanding Media, which he founded. It conducts research and carries out projects in education, communications and the arts.

In the 1960's, Dr. Culkin said that popular films, radio and television were having a profound effect on young people, who spend thousands more hours watching programs than studying in class. As a result, a cultural gap arose between what he called the "children of the electronic age" and older generations oriented to the written word.

He advocated that people be taught to analyze mass media, that modern communication techniques be used to enhance education, that programming quality be improved and that youngsters learn how to use other modern media.

"Kids with still and motion picture cameras, kids with audio and video recorders, are more fun than other kids," he said.

He advised the creators of "Sesame Street." In 1964 he helped organize televised instruction for parochial schools. In 1970 he proposed a special cable television channel for children. In recent years he promoted Unifon, a 40-character phonetic English alphabet, to combat illiteracy.

Through his private company, Hearth Communications, he was in demand as a communications consultant to many corporations and organizations.

While serving as the head of the Center for Communications at Fordham University in 1967, he recruited Dr. McLuhan to come from Canada and join the faculty for a year. He was then emerging as an internationally known intellectual figure for his new ideas and riddle-like statements.

In 1969 Dr. Culkin left Fordham and the Jesuit priesthood to form the Center for Understanding Media. He helped to develop ways for studying the media at Antioch College and then moved to the New School for Social Research until 1978. His center administered the film portion of the Artists in Schools program of the National Endowment for the Arts and created the Metropolitan Area Film Instructors Association, a forum for filmmakers in the education field that previewed important films.

He wrote several books, including "Trilogy" (MacMillan), an analysis of a story retold in print, on film and on television. He wrote articles on a wide range of topics, including theology, the Chicago Cubs and how to correct the idiosyncrasies of the calendar.

Typical of his style, he wrote in 1968: "One is often asked whether movies have gone too far. '2001' certainly went too far; that guy's wife is still holding dinner. 'War and Peace' extended way beyond the dinner hour. 'The Swimmer' went at least two pools too far. 'The Graduate' easily surpassed ordinary course requirements. 'The Sound of Music' went too far for Pauline Kael, but 'The Orgy at Lil's Place' ended too early for my Uncle George."

His survivors include a brother, Gerald T. of Glen Head, L. I.