

## McLuhan in a Nutshell.

“McLuhan’s basic premise is that all technologies are extensions of human capabilities. Tools and implements are extensions of manual skills; the computer is an extension of the brain.”

“For McLuhan, media are technologies that extend human sense perceptions. McLuhan argues that the cultural significance of media lies not in their content, but in the way they alter our perception of the world. The impact of any technology is in ‘the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs.’”

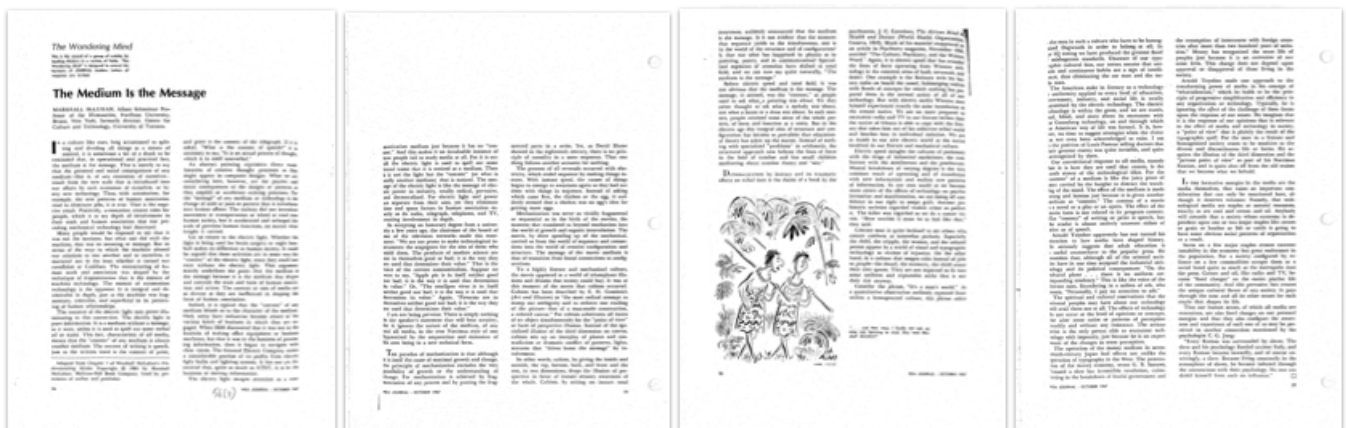
“For McLuhan, the cultural effects of the print medium were rationality and social fragmentation; audio-visual mass media by contrast provided a continuous and instantaneous stream of information from an enormous variety of sources. The result was a cultural implosion, in which people were more aware of the world as a [global]’ village’ community.”

Murphie, A. and Potts, J. (2003). *Culture and technology* (pp. 13-15). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

## The Medium is the Message

McLuhan, M. (2001, 2006). *The Medium is the Message*. In M. Durham & D. Kellner (Eds.), *Media and Cultural Studies: Key Works* (pp. 107-116). Malden, MA: Blackwell.

<http://books.google.ca/books?hl=en&lr=&id=umYwLkFOR0IC&oi=fnd&pg=PA107&dq=mcluhan+the+medium+is+the+message&ots=zvyi0NVrgy&sig=RWGxrGceJXbH3Z1GgLtRtac1y7g#v=onepage&q=mcluhan%20the%20medium%20is%20the%20message&f=false>





*“the medium is the message”.*

The entire article boils down to this seemingly simplistic thought: that “the medium is the message” and that the content of the medium is irrelevant.

It’s the “HOW” and not the “WHAT” that makes the difference. For example, whether you’re watching “Masterpiece Theatre” on PBS or “Jersey Shore” on MTV, the point of the matter is you’re watching TELEVISION, and THAT’s the only thing that matters.



*“Many people would be disposed to say that it was not the machine, but what one did with the machine, that was its meaning or message. But in terms of the ways in which the machine altered our relations to one another and to ourselves, it mattered not in the least whether it turned out cornflakes or Cadillacs.”*

Here again, McLuhan is arguing that the “how” supercedes the “what” of technology. It’s the fact that the technology exists and has altered how we, as a society, relate to and interact with one another. When MTV first began broadcasting, the first ever music video it played was “Video Killed the Radio Star” by the Buggles. A perfectly fitting “McLuhan” choice.



*“...the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium. The content of writing is speech, just as the written word is the content of print, and print is the content of the telegraph.”*

Communication is never straightforward. There are subtleties in posture, voice inflexion and so on. It’s also true of media. What we perceive is working on many levels at the same time. We read print – which is letters,

## MET 511 – DLG 6 : The History of Educational Technology

that represent words, that are really just thoughts; we see video – which is a series of pictures, that represent objects, that is really thoughts ; and hear sound – which is noise, that is language, that is really just thoughts.

Like the in the film “Inception”, we’re going “three levels deep” [at least] with every exposure to media.



*“...the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces to human affairs. The railway did not introduce movement or transportation or wheel or road into human society, but it accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, no matter what freight it carried.”*

Smartphones. We already had landlines and then mobile phones. We had enormous mainframe computers that led in turn to smaller desktop computers and eventually laptops. Smartphones didn’t bring anything new to the party, but it combined existing technologies and has changed the way society operates.



*“... the medium is the message because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action. The content or uses of media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association.”*

Think: “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.” It doesn’t matter what it’s called or how you use it, the fact is that it exists and has an effect on you.



*“... the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium.”*

Think of advertisements. While you’re busy watching the commercial or reading the ad, you’re preoccupied make sense of the information that you’re not processing HOW the information is being presented.

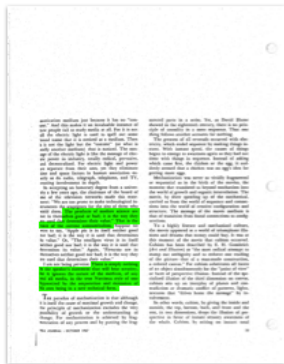
The same thing can be said about a magic show. While you’re busy listening to the magician, you don’t notice him grab something from his pocket.

We become more concerned with the WHAT, which is irrelevant, and stop taking notice of the HOW, which has made all the difference.



*“The message of the electric light is like the message of electric power in industry, totally radical, pervasive, and decentralized. For electric light and power are separate from their uses, yet they eliminate time and space factors in human association exactly as do radio, telegraph, telephone, and TV, creating new involvement depth.”*

Recalling McLuhan’s earlier statements, it’s irrelevant what a technology is used for, but rather that it exists in the first place. Electricity can just as easily power a microwave oven as it could a munitions factory. Nobody ever thinks about electricity – until it doesn’t work – because it’s taken for granted in society: flick a switch and it will be there. It has permeated the way we live and is, arguably, *responsible* for how we live.



*“...’The products of modern science are not in themselves good or bad; it is the way they are used that determines their value.’ That is the voice of the current somnambulism”*

**Referring to the above quote:**

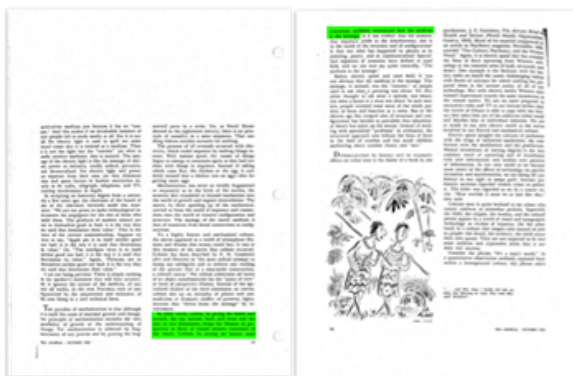
*“There is simply nothing in the speaker’s statement that will bear scrutiny, for it ignores the nature of the medium, of any and all media, in the true Narcissus style of one hypnotized by the amputation and extension of his own being in a new technical form.”*

Basically McLuhan is telling people to wake up. It doesn’t matter HOW you use things, it’s that they exist in the first place that’s important. Who cares *how* apple pie tastes – *it’s apple pie!*



*“The greatest of all reversal occurred with electricity, which ended sequence by making things instant. With instant speed, the causes of things began to emerge to awareness again as they had not done with things in sequence. Instead of asking which came first, the chicken or the egg, it suddenly seemed that a chicken was an egg’s idea for getting more eggs.”*

Here McLuhan is discussing the fragmentation of mechanization – like an assembly line. Things had to be broken down into steps and done in a certain order. Electricity put an end to that. Everything now moves at the speed of light, there’s no need to slow down or compartmentalize the way in which tasks are carried out.



*“...cubism, by giving the inside and outside, the top, bottom, back and front and the rest, in two dimensions, drops the illusion of perspective in favor of instant sensory awareness of the whole. Cubism, by seizing on instant total awareness, suddenly announced that the medium is the message.”*

In McLuhan's view, "cubism" eliminates the "I wonder what that painting is about" subjectivity of art. The image is in information. It offers every detail of the subject at once. There's no more guessing as to the artist's intent or perspective. What you see is what you get, and that's all that counts. A cubist painting of a toaster isn't about what a toaster represents, it's everything a toaster IS.



*"... with electric media Western man himself experiences exactly the same inundation as the remote native. We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal world and beaches him in individual isolation. We are as numb in our new electric world as the native involved in our literate and mechanical culture."*

*"Mental breakdown of varying degrees is the very common result of uprooting and of inundation with new information and endless patterns of information."*

Las Vegas. It's an onslaught of sensory information. Flashing lights, the sounds of machines, signs everywhere, and no windows. You're trapped. You're isolated from the "safety" of the outside world. Casinos designed like mazes, there is no escape. This is the grip technology has on us as well as the effect it has on us.

Technology is constantly evolving and with every stage there exists new methodologies and strategies to successfully learn in order to be technologically fluent. This of course yields a higher rate of "burnout" from the users who are fed up with constantly migrating and adapting to emerging technologies.



*"Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot. For the "content" of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar*

*to distract the watchdog of the mind. The effect of the medium is made strong and intense just because it is given another medium as “content”.*

I love this quote. Essentially McLuhan is saying that if you're paying more attention to *what* you're watching that *how* you're watching it, you're an idiot. The content of any media is powerful because, as we've seen earlier, it is simultaneously working on many levels at once. It's encoded in such a way that it speaks to many facets of the mind at once – in words, in sounds, in speech, in memories, etc...



*“The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense rations or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance.”*

*“Money has reorganized the sense life of peoples just because it is an extension of our sense lives. This change does not depend upon approval or disapproval of those living in the society.”*

Technology exists. It doesn't matter what an individual thinks, or wants or knows; technology is there. You don't need to believe in it, like Santa Claus, for it to be real. You may not like technology, but it won't stop it from steamrolling right over top of you.