Marshall McLuhan:
The Medium is the Message

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Marshall McLuhan

- Media Poet
- Confused Academic
- Guru?

“We make our tools, and then our tools shape us”
Marshall McLuhan - Biography

1911 - born in Canada
1928-33 - BA at Manitoba Uni (Masters in 1934)
1937 - conversion to Roman Catholicism
1943 - Ph.D Cambridge, UK (Arts).
1951 - The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (impact of advertising)
1958 - Coins phrase “the medium is the message”

1962 - The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man
1963 - Establishes Centre for Culture & Technology, University of Toronto
1964 - Understanding Media: The extensions of man
1966 - The subject of 2 New Yorker cartoons!
1967 - The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects
Marshall McLuhan

1968 - Founded McLuhan-Dew-Line newsletter (business)
1976 - Appears in Woody Allen's Annie Hall, suffers stroke
1977 - City as Classroom (w. Eric McLuhan & K. Hutchon)
1979 - massive stroke
1980 - he dies, University of Toronto closes his Centre
Influence

From Informing Ourselves to Death by Neil Postman... “After all, anyone who has studied the history of technology knows that technological change is always a Faustian bargain: Technology giveth and technology taketh away, and not always in equal measure...

...A new technology sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it destroys more than it creates. But it is never one-sided.”
His Perspective

3 basic technological innovations:

- (1) the invention of the phonetic alphabet by the humans out of oral patterns of speech and thought, for the dominance of literate forms of communication
- (2) the introduction of movable type by Gutenberg in the 11th Century accelerated this process
- (3) the invention of electric media, beginning with the telegraph and followed in succession by radio, films, telephone and the Internet
The Medium is the Message

McLuhan understood "medium" in a broad sense. He identified the light bulb as a clear demonstration of the concept of “the medium is the message”.

A light bulb does not have content in the way that a newspaper has articles or a television has programs, yet it is a medium that has a social effect; that is, a light bulb enables people to create spaces during night-time that would otherwise be enveloped by darkness. He describes the light bulb as a medium without any content.

McLuhan states that "a light bulb creates an environment by its mere presence."
The Medium is the Message

For example, the message of a newscast about a violent crime may be less about the individual news story itself — the content — and more about the change in public attitude towards crime that the newscast engenders by the fact that such crimes are in effect being brought into the home to watch over dinner.
The Medium is the Message

McLuhan proposes that a medium itself, not the content it carries, should be the focus of study. He said that a medium affects the society in which it plays a role not only by the content delivered over the medium, but also by the characteristics of the medium itself.

Question:
Who in society is affected by the existence of TVs & TV stations?
1.  
2.  
3.  
4...
"The medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium - that is, of any extension of ourselves - result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology."
Extensions (of Man)

Thus, the wheel extends our feet;
the phone extends our voice;
television extends our eyes and ears;
the computer extends our brain, and;
electronic media, in general, extend our central nervous system.
Extensions (of Man)

[For a driver] “attention is fixed on the figure rather than the ground, on the wheel rather than the huge system of road services necessary to maintain the existence of a wheel or wheeled vehicles.

With a motorcar, most people are interested in changing designs or patterns of the car.

They pay only marginal attentions to the huge service environment of roads, oil companies, filling stations, and other allied services of manufacturing that are the ground of the car.
Extensions (of Man)

...by not looking at the ground around the automobile you miss the message of the car.

For it is the ground [context] of any technology that is the medium that changes everybody, and it is this medium that is the message of the technology, not the figure."
McLuhan’s Views

“I am resolutely opposed to all innovation, all change, but I am determined to understand what’s happening. Because I don’t choose just to sit and let the juggernaut roll over me. Many people seem to think that if you talk about something recent, you’re in favour of it. The exact opposite is true in my case.”

“Anything I talk about is almost certainly something I’m resolutely against. And it seems the best way to oppose it is to understand it. And then you know where to turn off the buttons.” (1966)
McLuhan’s Views

“Violence, whether spiritual or physical, is a quest for identity and the meaningful. The less identity, the more violence.”

“Our entire education system is reactionary, oriented to past values and past technologies … a dying and outdated system founded on literate values and fragmented and classified data totally unsuited to the needs of the first TV generation.”
“If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves”

“Most people live in the rearview mirror - moving ahead in time but actually living in the past.”

“People never want to live in the present...people live in the rearview mirror because it is safer...They've been there before, they feel comfortable.

“Like primitives, we now live in a global village of our own making, a simultaneous happening ... it doesn't necessarily mean harmony and peace and quiet but it does mean huge involvement in everybody else's affairs.” (1966)
McLuhan’s Views

“The new environment of simultaneous and diversified information creates acoustic man. He is surrounded by sound - from behind, from the side, from above. His environment is made up of information in all kinds of simultaneous forms, and he puts on this electrical environment as we put on our clothes, or as the fish puts on water.”
The Medium is the Massage...

The term "massage" was adopted to denote the effect each medium has on the human sensorium, inventorying the "effects" of numerous media in terms of how they "massage" the sensorium.
McLuhan’s Hot and Cool Media

“Any hot medium allows of less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar, and a book for less than dialogue.”
McLuhan’s Hot and Cool Media

**HOT** = High Definition (more data)
LOW in audience participation - completely engages one sense
Little audience participation required:

- Continuous Narrative
- Melody
- Photography
- High Resolution
- **Lecture**
- City slickers
- Explanatory
- **Newspapers**
- Engrossing

- Radio
- Literacy
- **Film**
- Paper
- Nuclear threat
- Individualization
- Phonetic Alphabet
- **Books**
- Industrialized Society
McLuhan’s Hot and Cool Media

**COOL** = Low Definition (less data)
HIGH in audience participation - engages several senses less completely
Requires recipient to fill in missing information:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Montage</th>
<th>Television</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tonal Intervals</td>
<td>Conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mosaic</td>
<td><strong>Telephone</strong></td>
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<td>Low Resolution</td>
<td>Stone Tablets</td>
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<td>Seminar</td>
<td>Cold War</td>
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<td>Rustics</td>
<td>Retribalization</td>
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<td>Allusive</td>
<td>Characters</td>
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<td><strong>Comic Books</strong></td>
<td>Icons</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interactive</td>
<td>So-called &quot;backward countries&quot; (McLuhan's term)</td>
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McLuhan’s Hot and Cool Media

We have to see hot and cool media not in terms of static definitions but as dynamic concepts that are designed to get at the experience and effects of how we use media.

Therefore, “hotness” or “coolness” of a medium is not just a function of the nature of the medium itself but also the nature of the society into which the medium is introduced.

For McLuhan, the hot versus cool media distinction describes effects, not definitions. A HOT (low) or COLD (high) label is determined by the amount of participation needed by the reader to extract value, to determine meaning.
McLuhan’s Hot and Cool Media

Furthermore, McLuhan argues that media can “heat up” over time.

Consider television. Writing in the 1960s, McLuhan described television as a cool medium, but one could argue that television has “heated up” since then as it has become more high definition and more ubiquitous.

For 50 years, families frequently sat around the television watching one show at a time.
Now, what do we do? Is the attention we now pay to TV different? Therefore the experience and effect of using electronic screen technology has heated up over time.
Prognoses

"The computer could become the basis of a cottage economy again… you could run the biggest factory in a kitchen by a computer. With telephones, telexes, and computers… management and all forms of hardware can be centralised. The computer, literally, could run the world from a cottage…"
Prognoses

“A computer as a research and communication instrument could enhance retrieval, obsolesce mass library organization, retrieve the individual's encyclopaedic function and flip into a private line to speedily tailored data of a saleable kind.”
Activity

“The violence that all electric media inflict on their users is that they are instantly invaded and deprived of their physical bodies and are merged in a network of extensions of their own nervous systems.”

“In the 80s as we transfer our whole being to the data bank, privacy will become a ghost or echo of its former self and what remains of community will disappear” (1980).
Activity

“The book was the first teaching machine and also the first mass-produced commodity. In amplifying and extending the written word, typography revealed and greatly extended the structure of writing.”

“I would suggest that if you were to put the TV in the classroom, it would BLOW THE CLASSROOM TO BITS. The teaching processes would be totally transformed…”
In summary...

“...I don't necessarily agree with everything that I say.”