

Technological Determinism Marshall McLuhan

Theory: Technological Determinism (a.k.a. Medium Theory)

“My work is designed for the pragmatic purpose of trying to understand our technological environment and its psychic and social consequences. But my books constitute the process rather than the completed product of discovery; my purpose is to employ facts as tentative probes, as means of insight, of pattern recognition, rather than to use them in the traditional and sterile sense of classified data, categories, containers. I want to map new terrain rather than chart old landmarks.

But I've never presented such explorations as revealed truth. As an investigator, I have no fixed point of view, no commitment to any theory--my own or anyone else's. As a matter of fact, I'm completely ready to junk any statement I've ever made about any subject if events don't bear me out, or if I discover it isn't contributing to an understanding of the problem. The better part of my work on media is actually somewhat like a safe-cracker's. I don't know what's inside; maybe it's nothing. I just sit down and start to work. I grope, I listen, I test, I accept and discard; I try out different sequences--until the tumblers fall and the doors spring open.”

-From "The Playboy Interview: Marshall McLuhan, *Playboy Magazine* (March 1969)

Basic Precepts

- 1) **All technology is communication, an extension of ourselves that allows us to reach further through time and/or space.** The sacrifice we make for this enhancement is an unnoticed auto-amputation that, combined with and Narcissistic desire and a bit of virtual phantom limb syndrome, forces us to both marvel at our feat and simultaneously experience strong senses of detachment and, eventually, conflict. “Every new technology necessitates a new war,” said McLuhan.
- 2) **These extensions mirror the human body:** vehicles extend our feet, machines extend our hands, radio extends our voices, etc. Electricity began a new age, wherein humanity stopped simulating *without* and began replicating that which is *within*—the central nervous system. Computers are a great example of this, as they (much like our brains) take basic inputs and, in parallel structuring, create complex patterns of understanding and interaction.
- 3) **All media is, to some degree, “hot” or “cool.”** This temperature-based metaphor applies to the level of audience/user interactivity with a given medium. Hot media are very “hands-off”; people cannot touch them (they’re *hot!*) and experiencing them makes a person more or less a passive audience member. Most television and film easily fall into this category. However, something like animation is a bit “cooler” because it takes imagination to bridge the gap between abstract lines and some version of reality... and, of course, a medium like video games is practically ice-cool as it approaches pure interactivity—between the user and

the content, between the user and the medium and, in multiplayer games, between each user.

- 4) **No one can fully understand a medium until it is no longer than dominant medium, and is seen through the lens of the new dominant medium.** It is only once a new medium usurps the previous dominant medium that we are able to examine the older medium's patterns and effects. "And it is only on those terms, standing aside from any structure or medium, that its principles and lines of force can be discerned."

Conquering the world and creating a Global Village: Human beings have dominated the natural world through our need to enhance communication. We have conquered the globe with our older technology, eliminating the concept of space with virtual extensions of our extremities: vehicles extend our feet cross-country; telescopes enhance our optical capabilities enough to gaze deeper into the heavens than ever thought possible; and even something as simple as the written word, an extension of spoken language through time and space—itsself an extension of basic thoughts, feelings, and intent—lets the voices of great minds reach across time to speak to us today. After such a thorough conquering of space and a solid dominance over one aspect of time, the past, it is only natural that we should devote our energies as a species toward the next step, the present. It all started with electricity or, more specifically, the light bulb.

Although most people, including quite a few communications scholars, have trouble embracing the notion that the light bulb is a medium in its own right, it is difficult to argue against it if one accepts McLuhan's definition of media and the messages they send: a medium, "any extension of ourselves" has "psychic and social consequences" through "designs or patterns as they amplify or accelerate existing processes". This change is always considered notable, regardless of the content produced. For McLuhan, content is a meaningless triviality.

Whether the light is being used for brain surgery or night baseball is a matter of indifference. It could be argued that these activities are in some way the 'content' of the electric light, since they could not exist without the electric light. This fact merely underlines the point that "the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and forms of human association and action. The content or uses of such media are as diverse as they are ineffectual in shaping the form of human association. Indeed, it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium (McLuhan, 1995, p. 152).

McLuhan said that the content of any new, current media is always the format of the medium that came before it. The content of film is that of photography and the phonograph (or sound recording in general), quite often with the narrative structure and dialogue of books and plays. The content of television is essentially film, and the content of the Internet is an amalgamation of television, photography, and text. The advent of new media, associated with innovations like "Internet 2.0" and its offspring of social networking, have brought about a burst in cool media.

McLuhan's allusion to the eventual "cooling down" of media was a spot-on prediction. His "hot-cold" metaphor, used to outline the level of audience participation with a medium, describes the hands-off media on television and in film as hot—consumers of the media cannot do much to add to the experience and are stuck simply being a passive audience. A cooler medium is one that consumers can "touch," or influence through feedback and, potentially, even actively participate. In the metaphorical-yet-still-literal analogies of McLuhan, electricity is the impetus for this perpetual and instantaneous

connection with and awareness of the world at large. Electricity is the extension of our central nervous system and because of this substantial alteration to our “bodies,” we are able to perceive “that great pattern of being that reveals new and opposite forms just as the earlier forms reach their peak performance” (McLuhan, p. 154). In other words, it is only once a new medium usurps the previous dominant medium that we are able to examine the older medium’s patterns and effects. “And it is only on those terms, standing aside from any structure or medium, that its principles and lines of force can be discerned” -McLuhan.

Using form to understand function - adopting the medium as the message: Because we are only able to understand the format of a medium once it has become the content of the next, it can be suggested that the modern world is still in a state of bewilderment when dealing with certain electronic media.

...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 (McLuhan, p. 157).

Fortunately, we have moved on from the initial wave of the electric age and are now able to understand more media. Computers and other interactive media have supplanted television and radio. They are no longer the dominant media of our culture. One needs only to apply McLuhan’s basic definitions to see how far we have come in the three decades since his passing.

The radio, once an ornate piece of furniture that brought families together and introduced the concept of broadcast into the home for the first time, is now a ubiquitous accessory for almost every electronic device with speakers. Additionally, many radio stations are not even “broadcast” in the traditional sense—satellite and internet radio are popular and prevalent.

Television, though it still permeates our daily lives, fared little better. Most television shows can be viewed online, and many news stories have additional content that is exclusively for the internet. We live in a digital age, where broadcast television is dead, books are downloaded as electronic files, and the human voice is reduced to ones and zeroes. Yet, despite this rapid and incredible series of leaps in technology, we have begun to move past even these marvels.

No one, except perhaps McLuhan, has been able to dissect a medium before its successor could shape the mind of its user.

Works: McLuhan’s work was a reflection of the turmoil of the times. He focused on technology, the medium of the message to our brains. He looked at the future as highly tactile and placed the main importance of a message in its medium or means of conveyance and not its content.

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Marshall McLuhan was a Canadian communications theorist; **Born:** Herbert Marshall McLuhan, on the 21st of July 1911, in Edmonton Alberta Canada; **Died:** 31st of December 1980 in Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

Education: Educated at the university of Manitoba in Canada and then at Cambridge in England - McLuhan became a scholar of Medieval and Renaissance literature and taught at various universities around the US and Canada.

Profession: McLuhan finally settled at St Michael's College at the University of Toronto where he became a professor of English. In 1963, he was appointed head of the Centre for Culture and Technology.

"This information is top security. When you have read it, destroy yourself." –M. McLuhan

Special thanks to Ken Rosenberg, as his unbridled enthusiasm for medium theory has enabled this document to be possible.