

"We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us"  
-Marshall McLuhan

### **McLuhan's Laws of Media**

Marshall McLuhan was constantly challenged to provide a scientific basis for his media observations. Taking on the challenge, he and his son, Eric, reviewed *Understanding Media* with the intention of doing just that. The result was McLuhan's Laws of Media. McLuhan concluded that four things happen to all media and human artefacts; this phenomenon was inevitable, and they apply universally. Additionally, while some results may take years to become apparent, McLuhan insisted that these things all happened simultaneously.

The Laws of Media are four questions that help us understand the effect of any artefact on our culture, on us. The answers form a tetrad.

- **Enhances:** What does the artefact enhance or intensify or make possible or accelerate?
- **Obsolesces:** If some aspect of a situation is enlarged or enhanced, simultaneously the old condition or unenhanced situation is displaced thereby. What pushed aside or obsolesced by the new 'organ'?
- **Retrieves:** What recurrence or retrieval or earlier actions or services is brought into play simultaneously by the new form? What older, previously obsolesced ground is brought back and inheres the new form?
- **Reverses:** When pushed to the limits of its potential (another complementary action), the new form will tend to reverse what had been its original characteristics. What is the reversal potential of the new form?

Example: Cell Phone

Enhances: Human Voice

Obsolesces: Telephone Booth

Retrieves: Childhood Yelling

Reverses: Becomes a Leash (controls us)

(Source: <http://www.horton.ednet.ns.ca/staff/scottbennett/media/index.html>)

### **Hot and Cool Media**

In order to find a unifying principle to explain the effects of different media in systematic way, McLuhan coined one of his most difficult concepts: hot and cool media.

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in "high definition." High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, "high definition." A cartoon is "low definition," simply because very little visual information is provided. the ear is given a

meager amount of information. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meagre amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone.

Understanding Media 22-23

To make this work you have to think of "single sense" very loosely. A movie is "high definition" in terms of the overwhelming nature of the experience, but it is hardly single-sensed. Radio is single-sensed, but is not higher in definition than television. It seems that either of these concepts will do to describe a given medium.

This concept has been roasted by critics, and may not be one of his very best ideas. But it does make you think about the characteristics of media as media, not about their contents.

(Source: <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~dabrent/mcluhan/hotcool.htm>)

### **Global Village**

With the possible exception of "The Medium is the Message," no McLuhanism has gained such currency as "The Global Village." As promoted by electronics manufacturers, it is usually taken to mean simply that we are in constant contact with each other. McLuhan means that with the radical decentralization of electricity, we are returning to the integrated wholeness and mythic existence that reigned before the cool tribal village became the mechanical-age city.

The village had institutionalized all human functions in forms of low intensity. In this mild form everyone could play many roles. Participation was high, and organization was low. This is the formula for stability in any type of organization. Nevertheless, the enlargement of village forms in the city-state called for greater intensity and the inevitable separation of functions to cope with this intensity and competition. The villagers had all participated in the seasonal rituals that in the city became the specialized Greek drama. Mumford feels that "The village measure prevailed in the development of the Greek cities, down to the fourth century . . ." (The City in History). It is this extension and translation of the human organs into the village model without loss of corporal unity that Mumford uses as a criterion of excellence for city forms in any time or locale. This biological approach to the man-made environment is sought today once more in the electric age. How strange that the idea of the "human scale" should have seemed quite without appeal during the mechanical centuries.

Understanding Media 97-98

Our speed-up today is not a slow explosion outward from center to margins but an instant implosion and an interfusion of space and functions. Our specialist and fragmented civilization of center-margin structure is suddenly experiencing an instantaneous reassembling of all its mechanized bits into an organic whole. This is the new world of

the global village. The village, as Mumford explains in *The City in History*, had achieved a social and institutional extension of all human faculties. Speed-up and city aggregates only served to separate these from one another in more specialist forms. The electronic age cannot sustain the very low gear of a center-margin structure such as we associate with the past two thousand years of the Western world.

Understanding Media 93-94

(Source : <http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dabrent/mcluhan/globvill.htm>)

### **McLuhan's Legacy : The Medium is the Message**

To help understand this difficult concept, please refer to the following article:

<http://individual.utoronto.ca/markfederman/MeaningTheMediumistheMessage.pdf>