



McLuhan's Laws of the Media

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Communication

McLUHAN'S LAWS OF THE MEDIA

TO THE EDITOR:

I have been experimenting with developing a series of "Laws of the Media," which I submit herewith for comment and discussion by readers of *Technology and Culture*. My purpose is to invite criticism, directed not at me or at my rhetoric, but rather at the substance and contents of my thoughts. It seems to me that historians of technology—and kindred students of the sociology and philosophy of technology, economists, practicing engineers, and the like—might enjoy and profit from attempting to disprove my "laws."

So, cognizant of the seeming paradox that a "scientific hypothesis is one that can be disproved," I have put my "Laws of the Media" in a "disprovable" form, hoping that in the course of disproving each of them, many new discoveries might occur.

How did I arrive at these "Laws of the Media"? By a structural approach. The structuralists, beginning with Ferdinand de Saussure and now Lévi-Strauss, divide the approaches to the problem of form into two categories: *diachrony* and *synchrony*. Diachrony is simply the developmental, chronological study of any cultural matter; but synchrony works on the assumption that all aspects of any form are simultaneously present in any part of it. Although I have used the simultaneous approach in arriving at these Laws of the Media, any one of them is susceptible to the diachronic approach for filling in the historical background and details.

Since electric speeds of information constitute a sort of simultaneous structuring of experience, synchrony, representing all directions at once, is, as it were, acoustic; whereas the diachronic, representing one stage at a time, is visual in its analytical pattern. Few people seem to be aware that visual space and order are continuous, connected, homogeneous, and static. In these regards, visual space is quite different from any other kind of space, be it tactile, kinetic, audile, or osmic (smell). Visual space alone can be divided.

You will note that, although these are called Laws of the Media, only a few of them deal with communications media narrowly conceived. Instead, I am talking about "media" in terms of a larger entity

of information and perception which forms our thoughts, structures our experience, and determines our views of the world about us. It is this kind of information flow—media—which is responsible for my postulation of a series of insights regarding the impact of certain technological developments. I call them “laws” because they represent, as do scientific “laws,” an ordering of thought and experience which has not yet been disproved; I call them “laws of the media” because the channels and impact of today’s electronic communication systems provide the informational foundation upon which we order, or structure, these experiential perceptions.

In formulating these laws, I have utilized what is sometimes called the “scientific method.” That is, I have proceeded by induction, even though in the process of induction one discovers many things that could not be merely inducted. The Laws of the Media have been shaped by studying the effects of media, so there is always a hidden *ground* upon which these effects stand, and against which they bounce. That is, the law of a medium is a *figure* interplaying with a *ground*. As with a wheel and an axle, there must be an interval between the two in order for the play to exist.

Even if the readers of *Technology and Culture* might not agree with my underlying structure, approach, and methodology, I hope they will examine these sample apothegms for their validity on a historical basis. I am not primarily a historian, so my reference base is not historical. However, I should like to test the validity of my laws in terms of history. In other words, do my Laws of the Media—derived from my inductive approach to synchronous form—correspond to historical data as viewed from the vantage point of historians of technology? Does the history of technology “prove” or “disprove” my postulates?

I should appreciate hearing from readers of *Technology and Culture* in response to the above question. They might write me directly, or they might address me through the pages of this journal. Perhaps in this way we can get a dialogue going, from which we might all profit greatly.

A sample of my proposed “Laws” of the media follow (the four steps of the process are *named* in the first “law” and *assumed* for the rest):

- I. Cable TV
 - A. Amplifies quality and diversity of signal pickup.
 - B. Obsolesces diffusion broadcasting.
 - C. Retrieves early transmission broadcast pattern of point-to-point (ship to shore).
 - D. Reversal is flip to home broadcasting.

- II. Housing
 - A. Private enclosed visual space (three little pigs).
 - B. Cave, tent, wigwam, dome.
 - C. Wagon trains, covered wagon (pioneers), mobile home clusters.
 - D. High-rise corporate.
- III. Elevator
 - A. For mines, enhanced depth—real low-down.
 - B. Steps, ladders—gravity, that is, is levity.
 - C. Retrieves hidden treasures—retrieves hierarchy!
 - D. Flips into high-rise—new egalitarianism of the elevator.
- IV. Clothing
 - A. Private energy—clothing as weaponry.
 - B. Climate—clothing as thermal control.
 - C. Mask, trophy, corporate energy.
 - D. Conventional attire.
- V. Number
 - A. Plurality—quantity, for example, possessions.
 - B. Notches, symbols, tallies.
 - C. Math, algebra, zero, blank.
 - D. Profile of crowd—pattern recognition.
- VI. Steamboat
 - A. Opens sea for hardware.
 - B. The wood sail—uncertainty, exploration.
 - C. Creates tourism—programmed pilgrims.
 - D. Centralism via sea power (vs. old decentralization of sea power).
- VII. Railway
 - A. Tonnage hardware—horizontal speed.
 - B. Country life.
 - C. Frontier.
 - D. Vertical organization chart; hierarchy—robber barons.
- VIII. Copernican revolution
 - A. Enhances role of the sun (central).
 - B. Pushes aside the crystalline spheres.
 - C. Retrieves Aristarchus.
 - D. Flips into relativity—centers everywhere (decentral) and margins nowhere.
- IX. Xerox
 - A. Speedup of printing process.
 - B. Obsolesces assembly-line book.
 - C. Retrieves the oral tradition, the committee (the happening).
 - D. Reversal is “everybody a publisher.”

- X. Microphone—P.A. system
 - A. Amplifies individual speech and rhythm.
 - B. Obsolesces the big band, the Latin Mass, grand opera.
 - C. Retrieves group participation.
 - D. Flips from private to corporate sound-bubble.
- XI. Money
 - A. Transactions.
 - B. Barter.
 - C. Potlatch (conspicuous consumption).
 - D. Credit.
- XII. The wheel
 - A. Locomotion.
 - B. Sled, roller, etc.
 - C. Roads as river—moving sidewalk—skis, snowmobiles, dune buggy, Skiddoo, tank.
 - D. Airplane via bicycle.
- XIII. Printing
 - A. Amplification of private, individual handicraft via mechanization.
 - B. Oral tradition, also handicrafts and guilds.
 - C. Retrieves antiquity, for example, the first Copernican revolution via Pythagoras.
 - D. Flips from private writing to corporate consumption, into the big mechanized environment (reading public and worker) of the second Copernican revolution, and the interiorization of the external world via Kantian revolt against Hume, and flip into Romanticism and subjectivism.
- XIV. Instant replay
 - A. Instant replay of experience = cliché. Amplifies cognitive awareness.
 - B. Obsolesces the representational and chronological.
 - C. Retrieves “meaning.”
 - D. Flips from individual experience to pattern recognition—archetype.
- XV. Satellite
 - A. Enlarges the planet.
 - B. Obsolesces nature.
 - C. Retrieves ecology.
 - D. Reversal—nature is art form. Retrieves globe as theater. Population goes from spectator to actor.
- XVI. Electric media
 - A. Amplification of scope of simultaneity and service environment as information.

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- B. Obsolesces the visual, connected, logical.
- C. Retrieves the subliminal-audile-tactile-dialogue.
- D. Etherealization—the sender is sent.

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