



Media Ecology Theory

Marshall McLuhan (1911-
1980)



Focus

- symbiotic relationship with mediated technology
- we create technology and technology re-creates who we are
- views media as an environment

“technological determinism”





Influenced by Harold Innis

- 1. Great empires of history (e.g. Greece, Rome, Egypt) were built by those in control of the written world (1951).
- 2. Canadian elites have used communication technology to build their economic empires.
- 3. Referred to the shaping power of technology on a society as the bias of communication.

Assumptions of Media Ecology Theory

- 1. Media permeate our existence.
- 2. McLuhan has a very broad definition of media.
 - In addition to looking at traditional media (e.g. TV, radio etc) he looked at the influence of numbers, games, and money.
 - through numbers, a “mass mind” was constructed by the elites
 - “All games are media of interpersonal communication,” which are extensions of our social selves.



Global Village

Media tie the world together.



The Medium is the message

Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man
(1964)

Media fix our perceptions and organize our experiences.

- The effect of the medium is largely subconscious.
- McLuhan and Fiore (1967) argue that not only are we influenced by the media, we can be seduced by it as well.

Hot or Cool?

- Hot media are high-definition forms of communication that demand little involvement from a viewer, listener, or reader. (radio, lectures, movies, books, and digital photographs)
- Cool media are low-definition forms of communication that demand active involvement from a viewer, listener, or reader. (cartoons, conversations, television, telephone, and seminars as examples of cool media.)
- More recent conceptualizations may consider the television to be passive.



McLuhan and Fiore (1967) Four eras in media history

- **The tribal era** - oral tradition; hearing was the paramount sense; story telling
- **The literate era** - written communication; the eye the dominant sense; the creation of the alphabet; Mathematics and analytical logic replaced storytelling

Four eras

- **The print era** - printed word was customary and seeing became the dominant sense; printing press brought knowledge to the masses; multiple, identical copies creates homogenization.
- **The electronic era** - electronic media pervades our senses, allowing for people across the world to be connected; returned us to tribalization



The tetrad

- McLuhan and McLuhan (1988) offer four laws of media, phrased as questions.
- 1. What does media enhance?
- 2. What does media make obsolete?
- 3. What does media retrieve?
- 4. What does media reverse?