



The critical and popular success of the film *An Inconvenient Truth* caught nearly everyone by surprise. Not even dedicated environmentalists expected former Vice President Al Gore's slide-show lecture on global warming to create the buzz it did, nor did they anticipate that Gore would be honored with the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize for his effort. Yet *An Inconvenient Truth* became one of the highest-grossing documentaries of all time, won the 2006 Academy Award for best picture in that category, and appears to have been the tipping point in Americans' concern about the effects of global warming.

Of course, not everyone liked the film. Some people stayed away, because they knew what they'd see and hear (see Chapter 17). Others argued strongly against Gore's claims. Science may prove that the climate is warming, but the

the distinction between the message and the medium. He saw them as one and the same.

When considering the cultural influence of *the medium*, however, we are usually misled by the illusion of *the message*. McLuhan wrote, "For the *content* of a medium is like the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind."² We focus on the content and overlook the *medium*even though content doesn't exist outside of the way it's mediated. *The medium* is a book.

The medium

According to McLuhan, it's not technological abnormality that demands our attention, since it's hard to notice the new and different. Instead, we need to focus on our everyday experience of it. A medium shapes us because we partake of it over and over until it becomes an extension of ourselves. Because every medium emphasizes different senses and encourages different habits, engaging a medium day after day conditions the senses to take in some stimuli and not register others. A medium that emphasizes the ear over the eye alters the ratios of sense perception. Like a blind man who begins to develop a heightened sense of hearing, society is shaped in accordance with the dominant medium of the day.

It's the ordinariness of media that makes them invisible. When a new medium enters society, there's a period of time in which we're aware of its novelty. It's

technology. Those of us born in the twentieth century are living through one of those turbulent transitions, from the tail end of the oral age to the very beginning of the written age.

1. The Tribal Age: An Acoustic Place in History

According to McLuhan, the tribal village was an acoustic place where the senses of hearing, touch, taste, and smell were developed far beyond the ability to visualize. In untamed settings, hearing is more valuable than seeing because it allows you to be more immediately aware of your surroundings. With sight, we are limited to direction and distance. We can only sense what is clearly in front of us. If a preying animal is behind us or hidden behind a tree, we are hopelessly unaware without a sensitivity to sound or smell. Hearing and smelling provide a sense of that which we cannot see, a crucial ability in the tribal age.

The omnidirectional quality of sound also enhances community. The spoken word is primarily a communal experience. To tell a secret, we must whisper or speak directly in someone's ear or make sure that no one else is listening. The sense of sound works against privatization. Listening to someone speak in a group is a unifying act. Everyone hears at the same time.

The spoken word is also immediate and alive. It exists only at the moment it is heard. There is no sense of the word as something that is fixed or objectified. Spoken words lack materiality. In order to keep an idea or an event alive, it must constantly be shared and reiterated and passed down. The ethereal quality of speech doesn't allow for detached analysis. In a tribal age, hearing is believing.

McLuhan claimed that "primitive" people led richer and more complex lives than their literate descendants because the ear, unlike the eye, encourages a more holistic sense of the world. There is a deeper feeling of community and greater awareness of the surrounding existence. The acoustic environment also fosters more passion and spontaneity. In that world of surround sound, everything is more immediate, more present, and more actual.

Then someone invented the alphabet.

2. The Age of Literacy: A Visual Point of View

Turning sounds into visible objects radically altered the symbolic environment. Suddenly, the eye became the heir apparent. Hearing diminished in value and quality. To disagree with this assessment merely illustrates McLuhan's belief that a private, left-brain "point of view" becomes possible in a world that encourages the visual practice of reading texts.

Words fixed on a page detach meaning from the immediacy of context. In an acoustic environment, taking something out of context is nearly impossible. In the age of literacy, it's a reality. Both writer and reader are always separate from the text. Words are no longer alive and immediate. They can be read and reread. They can be thoroughly analyzed. Hearing no longer becomes trustworthy. "Seeing it in writing" becomes proof that it's true.

Literacy also jarred people out of collective tribal involvement into "civilized" private detachment. Reading words, instead of hearing them, transforms group members into individuals. Even though the words may be the same, the act of reading a text is an individual one. It requires singular focus. A tribe no longer needs to come together to get information. Proximity becomes less important.

McLuhan also claimed that the phonetic alphabet established the line as the organizing principle in life. In writing, letter follows letter in a connected, orderly line. Logic is modeled on that step-by-step linear progression. According to McLuhan, when literate people say, "I don't follow you," they mean, "I don't think you are logical." He alleged that the invention of the alphabet fostered the sudden emergence of mathematics, science, and philosophy in ancient Greece. He cited the political upheaval in colonial Africa as twentieth-century evidence that literacy triggers an ear-to-eye switch that isolates the reader. When oppressed people learned to read, they became independent thinkers.

3. The Print Age: Prototype of the Industrial Revolution

If the phonetic alphabet made visual dependence possible, the printing press made it widespread. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, McLuhan argued that the most

Literary age
A visual era; a time of private detachment because the eye is the dominant sense organ.

important aspect of movable type was its ability to reproduce the same text over and over again, and a press run of 100,000 copies of *De Revolutionibus* suggests that he was right. Because the print revolution demonstrated mass production of identical products, McLuhan called it the forerunner of the industrial revolution.

He saw other unintended side effects of Gutenberg's invention. The homogenization of fluid regional tongues into a fixed national language was followed closely by the rise of nationalism. Concurring with this new sense of unification was a countering sense of separation and aloneness.



mentality. Despite the contentious nature of this tribalization of differences, many see benefit in the resulting decentralization of power and control.

Were he alive today, McLuhan undoubtedly would have spotted other ways that digital media are altering our present environment. And he would probably speculate on whether the electronic environment is the destiny of humankind, or if there's another media force waiting to upset the ecology of the previous century.

ETHICAL REFLECTION: POSTMAN'S FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

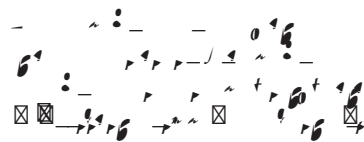
McLuhan's probes stimulated others to ponder whether specific media environments were beneficial or destructive for those immersed in them. Neil Postman founded the media ecology program at New York University and was regarded by many as McLuhan's heir apparent. Like McLuhan, Postman believed that the forms of media regulate and even dictate what kind of content the form of a given medium can carry.⁹ For example, smoke signals implicitly discourage philosophical argument.

Puffs of smoke are insufficiently complex to express ideas on the nature of existence and even if they were not, a Cherokee philosopher would run short of either wood or blankets long before he reached his second axiom. You cannot use smoke to do philosophy. Its form excludes the content.¹⁰

But unlike McLuhan, Postman believed that the primary task of media ecology is to make moral judgments. "To be quite honest about it," he once proclaimed, "I don't see any point in studying media unless one does so within a moral or ethical context."¹¹

According to Postman, a new technology always presents us with a Faustian bargain, a potential deal with the devil. As Postman was fond of saying, "Technology giveth and technology taketh away. . . . A new technology sometimes creates more than it destroys. Sometimes, it destroys more than it creates. But it is never one-sided."¹² His media ecology approach asks,

Faustian bargain
A deal with the devil;
selling your soul for temporary earthly gain.



Like McLuhan, Postman preferred questions to answers, so it is fitting that his legacy be defined by three questions he urged us to ask about any new technology:

1. What is the problem to which this technology is a solution?
2. Whose problem is it, actually?
3. If there is a legitimate problem to be solved, what other problems will be created by my using this technology?

To this end, Postman expressed concerns about the coming age of computer technology. He questioned if we were yielding too easily to the "authority" of computation and the values of efficiency and quantification. He pondered whether the quest for technological progress was becoming increasingly more important than being humane. He wondered if information was an acceptable substitute for wisdom. While Postman was primarily concerned with the ecology of television, his work set a precedent for considering the moral consequences of all symbolic environments.

CRITIQUE: HOW COULD HE BE RIGHT? BUT WHAT IF HE WAS?

McLuhan likened himself to "Louis Pasteur telling doctors that their greatest enemy is quite invisible, and quite unrecognized by them."¹⁴ Of course, the major difference is that Pasteur was a scientist, who ultimately gave tangible evidence for his germ theory. The problem with McLuhan's theory is that it suggests objectivity without scientific evidence. In other words, he used the subjective approach to make objective claims.

McLuhan faced harsh criticism from the scholarly community. He was one of the first academic superstars of the TV era, so perhaps his enormous popularity gave added impetus to critics' scorn for his methods and message. The pages of

A different attack on McLuhan comes from those who lament that he merely ~~criticized~~ rather than publicly ~~acknowledged~~ the effects that electronic media have had on public morals. His biographers agree that he held a deep faith in God as represented by the Roman Catholic Church; he was well-read in theology and attended Mass almost every day. Yet he believed that as a professor, he should keep his personal beliefs private.¹⁹ In a letter to anthropologist Edward

A SECOND LOOK

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