

# Media Ecology

## of Marshall McLuhan

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 heating up for now, but climates are dynamic, critics suggested, and the current rise in temperature may just be an uptick in a cycle that will later go down. These skeptics also asked how it's possible to know if human beings are directly responsible for the ongoing climate changes.<sup>1</sup>

The debate on global warming turns on our attitude toward the relationship between modern civilization and the environment. Do human inventions and actions really matter when it comes to the stability of global temperatures? Are we affecting our atmosphere and, if so, does it affect us in return?

In the 1960s, University of Toronto English professor Marshall McLuhan burst onto the public scene by asking similar questions about the relationship between *media* and culture. Like *An Inconvenient Truth*, McLuhan's *Understanding Media* was a surprise hit that generated both admiration and dissension. His theory suggests that media should be understood ecologically. Changes in technology alter the *symbolic environment*—the socially constructed, sensory world of meanings that in turn shapes our perceptions, experiences, attitudes, and behavior.

### Symbolic environment

The socially constructed, sensory world of meanings.

## THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE

McLuhan's theory of media ecology is best captured in his famous aphorism: "The medium is the message." This pithy statement is meant to upset our expectations. We're accustomed to thinking of the message as separate from the medium itself. The *medium* delivers the message. McLuhan, however, collapsed

**Media**

Generic term for all human-invented technology that extends the range, speed, or channels of communication.

**Medium**

A specific type of media; for example, a book, newspaper, radio, television, telephone, film, website, or email.

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

When considering the cultural influence of *media*, however, we are usually misled by the illusion of *content*. 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."<sup>2</sup> We focus on the content and overlook the *medium*—even though content doesn't exist outside of the way it's mediated. *Moby Dick* is a book. *Moby Dick* is a movie. *Moby Dick* is an oral tale. These are different stories. For this reason, we shouldn't complain that a movie is not like the book, because a movie can never be like a book. A movie can only be a movie.

Whether a TV show is about killer whales, current events, crime scene investigations, or discovering the next American pop star, the message is always television. It is the distinct experience of TV that alters the symbolic environment. From the perspective of media ecology, the Diehard Peyton MasterCard ad discussed in Chapter 2 is important not for its content but for its televisual characteristics, such as its reliance on humor and 10 cuts in a 30-second commercial. Media ecologists might point out that neither Glenn nor Marty even mentioned these features in their analysis.

After reading about McLuhan's theory, John had no problem recognizing the message of a medium. In his application log he wrote:

Instant messaging is a recent fad as society moves deeper into the digital age. I don't regard IM as necessary for exchanging information. Emails and phone calls can take care of that. For me, instant messages are a sign of affection; they are "flirtatious." I've got a crush on Ashley, and when I see that I have an instant message from her, I can't help but smile—this even before I read the message. Overshadowed by a media form that signifies intimacy and fondness, the content seems irrelevant. The medium is the message.

**THE CHALLENGE OF MEDIA ECOLOGY****Media ecology**

The study of different personal and social environments created by the use of different communication technologies.

Any understanding of social and cultural change is impossible without a knowledge of the way media work as environments.<sup>3</sup> But evaluating the *ecology of media* is a difficult enterprise because all environments are inherently intangible and interrelated. An environment is not a thing to identify; rather, it is the intricate association of many things. By definition, these things are part of the background. They are everything and no thing. McLuhan noted that "their ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns elude easy perception."<sup>4</sup>

**Invisibility of Environments**

McLuhan was fond of quoting the mantra of anthropologists: "We don't know who discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't the fish." In the same way, we have trouble recognizing "the way media work as environments" because we are so immersed in them.

McLuhan's theory of media differs from the traditional warnings against technological advances. The tales of *Frankenstein*, *Blade Runner*, *Jurassic Park*, and *The Matrix* posit technology gone awry and turning on its maker. These fantastical threats prove terribly obvious. As long as our technologies are not chasing after us, we are supposedly safe from the consequences of our creations.

**Technology**

According to McLuhan, human inventions that enhance communication.

According to McLuhan, it's not technological abnormality that demands our attention, since it's hard *not* to notice the new and different. Instead, we need to focus on our everyday experience of *technology*. 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 only when it fades into the background of our lives that we're truly subjected to its patterns—that is, its environmental influence. In the same way that a girl growing up in California may unconsciously absorb a West Coast attitude, a boy growing up in our electronic age may unconsciously absorb a digital attitude.

**Complexity of Environments**

In *An Inconvenient Truth*, Gore offers scientific evidence that the planet is experiencing a critical change in climate. Even when global warming skeptics grudgingly admit a rise in average temperature, they suggest that there's no direct relationship between this change in climate and the emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases from human activities. Because environments are incredibly intricate, there are always a number of other factors and conditions that opponents can claim are contributing to the climate. Systems theorists call this *overdetermination*, or *equifinality* (see Chapter 14). When it comes to the environment, there is no easy formula for a cause-and-effect relationship such as *global warming increases 0.0001 degrees for every million gallons of gasoline burned*.

**Overdetermination**

Equifinality; a systems theory assumption that a given outcome could be effectively caused by any or many interconnected factors.

This lack of a one-to-one relationship is also why it's so easy to ignore our contributions to global warming. If the sun got brighter and hotter every time we filled our tank with gas, we'd probably look for an alternative energy source. In like manner, if our ears grew and our eyes dimmed every time we used our cell phone, we'd surely take notice. Understanding the influential relationship between the media environment and society is a subtle yet crucial endeavor that demands a complex sense of both incremental and sudden change. For this reason, McLuhan traced the major ecological shifts in media throughout human history.

**A MEDIA ANALYSIS OF HUMAN HISTORY**

McLuhan was critical of social observers who analyzed the Western world but bypassed the effects of symbolic environments—be they oral, print, or electronic. He specifically accused modern scholars of being “ostrichlike” in refusing to acknowledge the revolutionary impact of electronic media on the sensory experience of contemporary society.

As Figure 25–1 shows, McLuhan divided all human history into four periods, or epochs—a tribal age, a literate age, a print age, and an electronic age. According to McLuhan, the crucial inventions that changed life on this planet were the phonetic alphabet, the printing press, and the telegraph. In each case the world was wrenched from one era into the next because of new developments in media

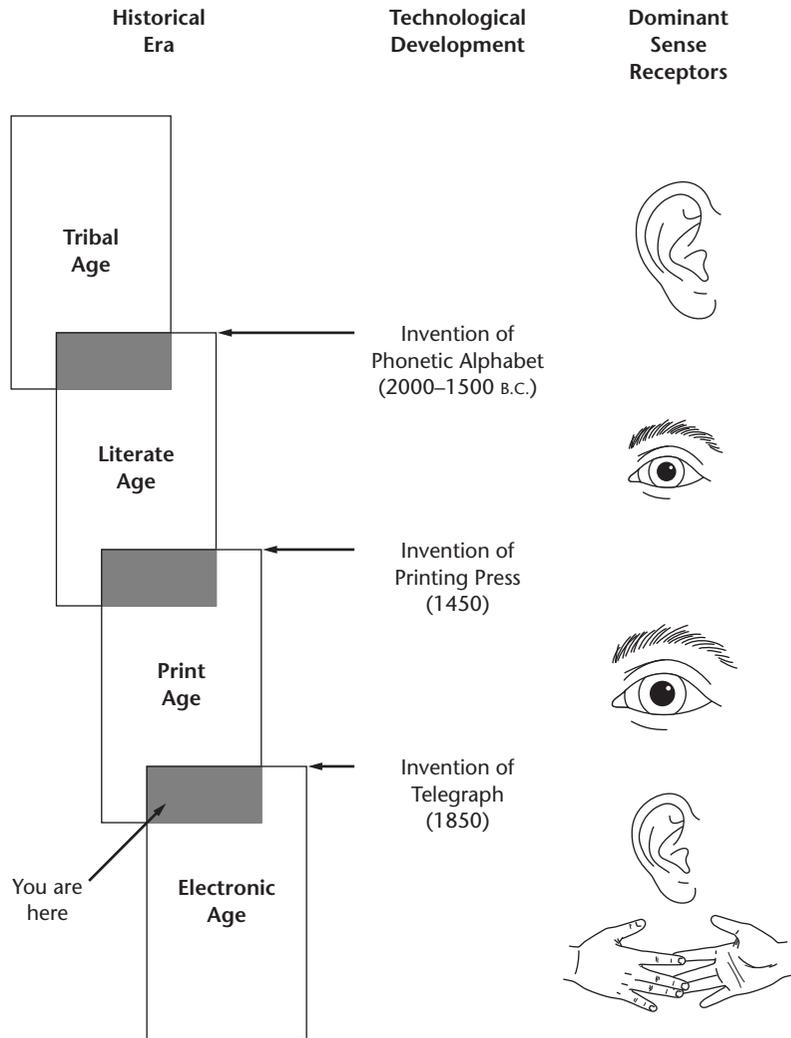


FIGURE 25-1 Marshall McLuhan's Media Map of History

technology. Those of us born in the twentieth century are living through one of those turbulent transitions—from the tail end of the *print* age to the very beginning of the *electronic* 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.

#### Tribal age

An acoustic era; a time of community because the ear is the dominant sense organ.

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.

**Print age**

A visual era; mass-produced books usher in the industrial revolution and nationalism, yet individuals are isolated.

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 *Understanding Media* 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.

Printing, a ditto device, confirmed and extended the new visual stress. It created the portable book, which men could read in privacy and in isolation from others.<sup>5</sup>

Many libraries have the words "The truth will set you free" carved in stone above the main entrance.<sup>6</sup> From McLuhan's perspective, libraries provide readers with the freedom to be alienated from others and from the immediacy of their surroundings.

#### 4. The Electronic Age: The Rise of the Global Village

With the tap-tap-tap of the telegraph, the power of the printed word lost its bearings. Of course, Samuel Morse's invention was only the first of the new electronic media devices that would make the corner Radio Shack seem, to previous generations, like a magic shop.

Telegraph	Radio	Telephone	
Film projector	Phonograph	TV	
Photocopier	Tape recorder	Answering machine	
VCR	Computer	CD	
Cell phone	Fax	Video game	
Internet	DVD	MP3	Smart phone

McLuhan insisted that electronic media are retribalizing the human race. Instant communication has returned us to a pre-alphabetic oral tradition where sound and touch are more important than sight. We've gone "back to the future" to become a village unlike any other previous village. We're now a *global village*.

Electronic media bring us in touch with everyone, everywhere, instantaneously. Whereas the book extended the eye, electronic circuitry extends the central nervous system.<sup>7</sup> Constant contact with the world becomes a daily reality. All-at-once-ness is our state of being. Closed human systems no longer exist. The rumble of empty stomachs in Bombay and of roadside bombs in Baghdad vibrate in the living rooms of Boston. For us, the first postliterate generation, privacy is either a luxury or a curse of the past. The planet is like a general store where nosy people keep track of everyone else's business—a 12-way party line or a "Dear Abby" column writ large. "The new tribalism is one where everyone's business is everyone else's and where we all are somewhat testy."<sup>8</sup> Citizens of the world are back in acoustic space.

Linear logic is useless in the electronic society that McLuhan described. Acoustic people no longer inquire, "Do you see my point?" Instead we ask, "How does that grab you?" What we feel is more important than what we think.

**Electronic age**

An era of instant communication; a return to the global village with all-at-once sound and touch.

**Global village**

A worldwide electronic community where everyone knows everyone's business and all are somewhat testy.

## 5. The Digital Age? Rewiring the Global Village

When *Wired*, a magazine on digital culture, was launched in 1992, the editors declared Marshall McLuhan the magazine's "patron saint." There was a sense that another revolution was looming, and many returned to the words of McLuhan for guidance. However, digital technology doesn't pull the plug on the electronic age, because, quite frankly, it still needs its power source. The *digital age* is wholly electronic.

### Digital age

A possible fifth era of specialized electronic tribes contentious over diverse beliefs and values.

With that said, there's no doubt that the introduction of digital technology is altering the electronic environment. The mass age of electronic media is becoming increasingly personalized. Instead of one unified electronic tribe, we have a growing number of digital tribes forming around the most specialized ideas, beliefs, values, interests, and fetishes. Instead of mass consciousness, which McLuhan viewed rather favorably, we have the emergence of a tribal warfare



*"You see, Dad, Professor McLuhan says the environment that man creates becomes his medium for defining his role in it. The invention of type created linear, or sequential, thought, separating thought from action. Now, with TV and folk singing, thought and action are closer and social involvement is greater. We again live in a village. Get it?"*

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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."<sup>11</sup>

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."<sup>12</sup> His media ecology approach asks, *What are the moral implications of this bargain? Are the consequences more humanistic or antihumanistic? Do we, as a society, gain more than we lose, or do we lose more than we gain?*

Postman argued that television is detrimental to society because it has led to the loss of serious public discourse. Television changes the form of information "from discursive to nondiscursive, from propositional to presentational, from rationalistic to emotive."<sup>13</sup> *Sesame Street*, *60 Minutes*, and *Survivor* all share the same ethos—amusement. The environment of television turns everything into entertainment and everyone into juvenile adults. Triviality trumps seriousness.

Shortly before the 2004 U.S. presidential election, *Daily Show* comedian Jon Stewart shocked TV audiences by confronting the hosts of *Crossfire* for hurting public discourse in America. He suggested that their program turned debate into theater and "partisan hackery." Some compared Stewart's criticism to Neil Postman's sentiments in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Stewart's criticism seemed warranted, but it was significantly different than Postman's critique of television news shows. Whereas Stewart argued that shows like *Crossfire* should be more responsible, Postman believed that, on television, panelists are unable to respond in a serious manner. *Crossfire*, which is no longer on the air, was bad at public discourse because, for a while, it was good at being television—silly and shallow.

### 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.”<sup>14</sup> 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 *McLuhan: Hot & Cool* and *McLuhan: Pro & Con*, collections of essays that critique his ideas, are filled with denunciation:

[McLuhan] prefers to rape our attention rather than seduce our understanding.<sup>15</sup>

He has looted all culture from cave painting to *Mad* magazine for fragments to shore up his system against ruin.<sup>16</sup>

The style . . . is a viscous fog through which loom stumbling metaphors.<sup>17</sup>

George Gordon, then chairman of the department of communication at Fordham University, labeled McLuhan’s work “McLuhanacy” and dismissed it as worthless. Gordon stated, “Not one bit of sustained and replicated scientific evidence, inductive or deductive, has to date justified any one of McLuhan’s most famous slogans, metaphors, or dicta.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is hard to know how one could prove that the phonetic alphabet created Greek philosophy, that the printing press fostered nationalism, or that television is a tactile medium.

It is also hard to say that he was wrong, because it’s difficult to be certain what he said. As a writer, McLuhan often abandoned the linearity and order that he claimed were the legacy of print technology. As a speaker, he was superb at crafting memorable phrases and 10-second sound bites, but his truths were enigmatic and seldom woven into a comprehensive system. He preferred to offer theoretical punch lines for people to accept or reject at face value.

A different attack on McLuhan comes from those who lament that he merely *explored* rather than publicly *deplored* 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.<sup>19</sup> In a letter to anthropologist Edward Hall he wrote, "I deliberately keep Christianity out of these discussions lest perception be diverted from structural processes by doctrinal sectarian passions."<sup>20</sup> But as a comment he made during a radio interview reveals, his scholarship informed his faith and his faith informed his scholarship. "In Jesus Christ, there is no distance or separation between the medium and the message: it is the one case where we can say that the medium and the message are fully one and the same."<sup>21</sup>

For those who regard falsifiability as a mark of a good theory, McLuhan's leaps of faith make it difficult to take his ideas seriously. However, history is littered with theories that were ahead of their time and couldn't immediately be tested. Tom Wolfe reverses the question: "What if he's right? Suppose he is what he sounds like, the most important thinker since Newton, Darwin, Freud, Einstein and Pavlov?"<sup>22</sup>

McLuhan's historical analysis has heightened awareness of the possible cultural effects of new media technologies. Other scholars have been more tempered in their statements and more rigorous in their documentation, but none has raised media consciousness to the level achieved by McLuhan with his catchy statements and dramatic metaphors.

The late economist Kenneth Boulding, who headed the Institute of Behavioral Sciences at the University of Colorado, captured both the pro and con reactions to McLuhan by using a metaphor of his own: "It is perhaps typical of very creative minds that they hit very large nails not quite on the head."<sup>23</sup>

## QUESTIONS TO SHARPEN YOUR FOCUS

1. What would McLuhan say about the impact of the Internet on the *global village*? Consider the fact that civic, political, and religious participation are declining in America.<sup>24</sup> Has *electronic technology* increased social connectedness?
2. How are portable media devices such as smart phones, iPods, and handheld video games altering the *media environment*? How are these devices shaping sensibilities?
3. Beyond changes in content, what are the differences in experiencing a book and its translations into film or television?
4. Can you conceive of any way that McLuhan's idea of *media ecology* could be proved false?



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**A SECOND LOOK**


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