

**LYNN UNIVERSITY**  
**COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION & DESIGN**

COM 510: COMMUNICATION AND MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES

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Week 1: Media Technology Studies

# **MEDIA TECHNOLOGY STUDIES**

- **How to read the books and other texts in this course?**
- **what is a critical reading?**
- **What are some of the broader concerns of communication/media studies?**
- **Why do we study and think about the media?**



- In “Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man” (1964) Marshal McLuhan seeks to understand the laws that are governing the function of all sorts of media
- As one of the pioneers of a the field of Media Studies, his goal was to advance a new science
- Some accused McLuhan for advancing a *Technological Determinism*, others accused him for advancing *Technological Utopianism*
- McLuhan insisted that nothing is inevitable provided that we are willing to learn!
- Media, he claimed, are varied - there are new & ancient media - he started with language
- The laws of media show that every medium enlarges or magnifies certain functions and undermines others; calls us to retrieve data or to postpone knowledge
- Ultimately what McLuhan saw was that we start out as consumers of new media and ultimately we become consumed by the media (examples?)
- In that, he saw a self perpetuating loop that may pose a danger to humanity - we shape our tools and then allow them to shape us
- The preoccupation with identity is a major feature of the electronic age (something that was not fundamental to prior civilizations)
- If we study the laws of the media we can hope to reduce some of the confusion and try to find some order. Understanding would provide us with greater means of control
- Instead of evasion of knowledge and distraction, we will achieve pattern recognition

- Communication: One to One  One to Many   
Many to Many

- The study of communication is interdisciplinary in nature, borrowing from varying academic disciplines such as: philosophy, linguistics, technology, anthropology, sociology, history, comparative literature, art history, journalism, cultural studies, semiotics, political science, economy, ideology discourse, etc.



- Each area of academic research provides us with tools that advance the study of one or more aspects of the communication model
- What is the modern media?
- What does the academic study of modern media technologies involve?
- In each sphere we examine media application, adaptation, and effects

# Marshal McLuhan

1911-1980



- Each technology has a fundamental affect on our perception and experience of being in the world in terms of space and time - McLuhan calls this
  - *“The Extensions of Man”*
- He divides the media into Hot Media & Cold Media
- “Hot Media” - call for or demands action
- “Cold Media” - generate passivity



*“During the mechanical ages we had extended our bodies in space. Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time”* (Understanding Media, p. 3, 1964)

- What does McLuhan mean by the extension of Wo/Man?
- Give an example of a mechanical and/or electronic extension and how it works

# **The Medium is the Message?**

- Much of what McLuhan suggested was misunderstood at his time at the time of the book's publication.
- In a way he was a prophet of late capitalism, new media and the digital age.
- How can we benefit from his work?
- In what sense the medium is the message?
- What are the consequences of fragmentation?



- In what respect the content of each medium is another medium? can you think of other examples?  
(The content of a movie is the novel, p.18)

*“For the ‘message’ of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs”* (Understanding Media, p. 8)

*“It is only too typical that the ‘content’ of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium”* (Understanding Media, p. 8)

*“Print created individualism and nationalism in the sixteenth century. Program and ‘content’ analysis offer no clues to the magic of these media or to their subliminal charge”*  
(Understanding Media, pp. 19-20)

- How did the printed word create *individualism* and *nationalism*? How are they related? How can we reconcile these seemingly opposing terms?



# MEDIA STUDIES: CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES

- In *Media Technology: Critical Perspectives*, Joost van Loon extends McLuhan's work toward a broader Phenomenological analysis of media technology
- Phenomenology: A branch of philosophy that attends to the world of phenomena (unlike Ontology which focuses on the nature of being). Phenomenological inquiry examines the nature of consciousness in its direct experience of objects.
- van Loon argues that the media have been taken as given in communication research and proposes a shift to a focus on the study of the media as such (media as "black box")

“Our world can be characterized as an increase in *mediatization*” (van Loon, p.1)

- How is the assumption that John Locke makes that communication is the redesign of ideas into speech problematized by van Loon?



“...in John Lock’s ‘Essay on Human Understanding on the scarcely generalizable assumption that communication means the rendering into speech of perceived ideas and consequently the linking of isolated individuals through ‘bonds of language’. The only trouble is that philosophy omits to enquire how, without language, people are supposed to have arrived at their ideas and conceptions in the first place” (Van Loon, p. 1).

“Mediated communication is something that we *do*, rather than *think about*” (Van loon, 2)

- What does he mean by technological agency?

The aim of the book is to interrogate the “lynchpin between context, content, and effect: media” (van Loon, 3)

- The aim is to to focus on the role of the media as technology!



“When we refer to media-use, we are actually looking at how people interconnect with technological agents in structuring their everyday lives (Moore 2005)” ... In essence, technological agency “...refers to the idea that technology contains a capacity ‘to act’ (Latour 1988a). The question whether technologies are exclusively ‘reactive’ is not relevant here; what matters is that in everyday life, people interact with technologies *as if* they are capable of acting on their own accord, thus, have agency” (van Loon, p.2)

- In effect, van Loon joins in a discussion of an emerging field of inquiry — ‘*new media theory*’ — the aim: to generate a new discourse that does not rely on other fields of inquiry

Van Loon’s effort is to move away from a study that is value based (‘good’/‘bad’), which is driven by opinion and does not add information or extend knowledge.


- His goal: to scrutinize the ontological nature of media studies thus far: the assumption that the media are empty vessels that merely transmit content



“Thinking about media is something that we cannot do often enough. This is first of all because not only do we think ‘through’ media; media also structure our thinking (Curtis 1977). How we think is so closely bound to the media through which this thought is processed and by which this thought is generated, that we generally do not perceive thought as itself mediated. Hence, we normally take media for granted” (van loon, p. 4)

- *van Loon tackles different approaches to the study of the media: Instrumentalist (John Fiske, 1994), Philosophical approach (Friedrich Kittler, 1997/Fuller 2005,, MacKenzie, 2002), technological determinism (McLuhan, 1964), alternatives to McLuhan (Walter One, 1982), etc.*

Is unmediated social interaction possible?

- *Auditory cultures = Temporal emphasis*
- *Visual Cultures = Spatial Focus*
- When technologies of communication began the splitting of the enunciating actor (the creator of the message) from the reception of the enunciated act (receiver)  We face the beginning of *Alienation*



- Van Loon focuses on : *Form, Historicity, cultural embedding, and embodiment*
- *Key claims”*
  - 1) Media should be studied with privileging attention to their form
  - 2) Media should be studied with attention to the historical context
  - 3) Media should be studied with sensitivity to the cultural embedding of mediation
  - 4) Media should be studied with an orientation toward their embodied nature, which has a logical starting point in the human body