

## Embracing the Fragmented McLuhan: A New Reading of ‘Understanding Media’ (Postprint)

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### Abstract

In an era of new media where the impacts of media transformation are becoming increasingly intense and frequent, Marshall McLuhan’s media theory has once again attracted considerable attention. However, his most influential original work, *Understanding Media*, remains daunting for many due to its “mosaic-like” fragmented prose style. Although numerous scholars have attempted to lower the threshold for applying McLuhan’s theory through the method of “condensed conclusions,” this does not necessarily represent the optimal approach for reading and understanding his work. Understanding McLuhan requires a three-dimensional, holistic perspective that seeks to shift the focus from content to environment, and from usage to understanding. This paradigm shift enables a better understanding of the long-controversial “hot and cold media” theory, which is not a fixed and precise classification system for media, but rather a new metric that McLuhan provided for understanding media.

### Full Text

#### Preamble

#### Embracing the Fragmented McLuhan: A New Perspective on Reading *Understanding Media*

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**Abstract:** In the new media era, where the impact of media change grows increasingly intense and frequent, Marshall McLuhan’s media theory has once again captured widespread attention. Yet the original text of his most influential work, *Understanding Media*, remains daunting for many readers due to its “mosaic-like” fragmented style. While numerous scholars have attempted to lower the threshold for applying McLuhan’s theory through methods of “condensing conclusions,” this approach does not necessarily represent the best

way to read and understand him. Understanding McLuhan requires a three-dimensional, holistic perspective that deliberately shifts focus from content to environment, and from use to understanding. This paradigm shift enables a better grasp of the long-controversial “hot and cool media” theory, which is not a fixed and precise classification scheme but rather a new scale that McLuhan offers for understanding media itself.

**Keywords:** McLuhan; media change; *Understanding Media*; hot and cool media; the medium is the message

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## 1. Fragment and Whole

From the television era to today’ s internet and social media age, McLuhan’ s writing style has always been unconventional—sometimes collage-like, sometimes galaxy-like, sometimes aphoristic, sometimes mosaic. In short, it is fragmented and cannot be approached as conventional academic writing. His 1951 debut *The Mechanical Bride*, for instance, could be described as “collage-style,” comprising dozens of cases related to newspapers, posters, film, and other mass media. The 1962 *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (whose Chinese title translates as *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*)—the “galaxy” here also captures McLuhan’ s prose style: short, seemingly independent pieces like scattered stars. The 1964 *Understanding Media* features a whimsical, “mosaic-style” approach.

Over half a century, McLuhan’ s ideas have been “red-hot” several times, continuously attracting followers. In the 2019 Chinese translation of *Understanding Media*, figures like Ma Huateng and Luo Zhenyu contributed recommendations, claiming to discern “internet thinking” in its pages. McLuhan’ s thought is remarkably open-ended. Rather than saying his own thinking already contained some predetermined framework, it is more accurate to say his discourse is profoundly inspiring, capable of stimulating fresh thinking in readers across different eras. In this age of proliferating new media, people more easily resonate with McLuhan because the shocks of media change grow ever more intense and frequent. Transformations that once took millennia—such as the shift from manuscripts to printed books—now occur with every few years of technological updates. This explains McLuhan’ s renewed prominence.

Yet McLuhan’ s original works remain intimidating. Many scholars criticize his “mosaic-style” prose as obscure and difficult to understand [1]. Some have attempted to extract and summarize concrete theories [2][3][4]—such as the “three classical theories,” “four laws,” “seven principles,” “14 quotations,” and “38 methodologies”—making his theory more accessible. However, this “condensing conclusions” approach is not necessarily the best way to read and understand McLuhan, nor any philosopher with broad vision and acute thinking, for the value of such works lies not in specific conclusions but in the inspiration generated by their unique perspectives and modes of thought.

Like the poem “Withered vines, old trees, dusk crows; small bridge, flowing water, homely dwellings,” many literary works emphasize artistic conception over logic. Yet McLuhan’s fragmented style is not entirely a product of his literary background. In his early years as a literature student, he was actually quite conventional. His master’s thesis on a 19th-century English poet was “exquisitely crafted and beautifully written—a fine piece compared to his later incomprehensible style” [5]. After turning to media studies, McLuhan consciously developed this distinctive fragmented style. He applied his thoughts and attitudes consistently, expressing them not only through content but through the very form of expression. McLuhan opposed mechanical, linear, detached thinking modes—the very qualities emphasized in mainstream academic writing. He advocated holistic, cubist, sensory-involvement thinking methods, and he personally embodied these approaches.

McLuhan’s style and thought are highly distinctive. Readers who cannot adapt to his rhythm will likely struggle to enter his world and resonate with his ideas. The title *Understanding Media* is significant: “understanding” is not “analysis,” let alone “use” or “utilization.” The term itself calls for a three-dimensional, holistic perspective. Simultaneously, it demands a “paradigm shift”—adjusting one’s reading attitude and purpose, attempting to move focus from content to environment, and from use to understanding.

McLuhan often observed that artists are typically ahead of their time, and that contemporary art has already silently expressed the new media philosophy. He frequently referenced the Cubist painting school represented by Picasso. Many laypeople cannot understand Cubist paintings “because people always ask what content a painting represents” [6]. Since the Renaissance—or more precisely, since the printing era—the fundamental characteristic of Western art has been mechanical, linear, and detached. The viewer stands before the painting, the depicted object on the other side, with both positioned outside the frame. The painting itself serves as a transparent intermediary of “perspective.” Beyond conveying content exquisitely and realistically, this intermediary has no intrinsic meaning. Contemporary art no longer regards painting as a transparent medium; artists believe painting itself can unfold an independent space of meaning—the painting’s meaning resides on the canvas, not prescribed by some object behind it. Of course, Cubism never completely abandoned “objects” and still attempted to express them, but it tried to present all aspects of an object on a single canvas. The scale provided by the object began to recede to a secondary position, while the scale endowed by painting technique itself grew. Post-Cubist contemporary art movements further broke free from these constraints. McLuhan’s core insight—“the medium is the message”—aligns perfectly with contemporary art’s philosophy. The transformation from classical to contemporary art is essentially a shift from “conveying messages through paintings” to “the painting itself is the message.”

## 2. From Content to Environment

Beyond artists, the idea of “the medium is the message” had already been expressed in various ways by earlier thinkers, including McLuhan’s mentor Harold Innis’s “bias of communication,” as well as earlier philosophers of technology such as Lewis Mumford and Martin Heidegger, and can even be traced back to Marx. All recognized that “the intermediary is not neutral.” Whether means, tools, media, or technology—those things typically considered merely “intermediate links” —are not purely neutral.

McLuhan criticized neutralism from the outset. Consider statements like “The products of modern science are neither good nor bad in themselves; what determines their value is the way they are used” [8], or the common claim that “technology is a double-edged sword.” These represent typical neutralist viewpoints. McLuhan argued that such statements “ignore the nature of the medium” [9]. When assessing firearms, neutralists understand them entirely from the perspective of their targets—firearms can kill both good and bad people; killing good people is bad, killing bad people is good. This is not wrong but superficial, because beyond the scale provided by the target, firearms themselves offer new scales.

Marx once declared, “Gunpowder blew the feudal knightly class to smithereens” [10]. Yet gunpowder could kill knights, peasants, workers, and capitalists alike. Neutralist thinking struggles to explain why gunpowder specifically shattered the knightly class. The key lies in firearms providing many new scales. For example, in terms of lethality alone, early firearms were not necessarily superior to crossbows, but training musketeers was far easier than training longbowmen or mounted archers. Consequently, military organizations had to transform recruitment and training according to firearms’ scales. Moreover, the sensory experience of hot versus cold weapons warfare differed dramatically for participants and spectators; individual bravery and knightly glory were greatly diminished before firearms. Additionally, firearms manufacturing aligned with standardized industrial production, promoting total war forms centered on state machinery with comprehensive mobilization. With gunpowder’s proliferation, these new scales would drive conceptual and social transformations.

McLuhan preferred the railway example. As a transportation intermediary, railways merely move people or goods, but focusing only on cargo makes it difficult to comprehend railways’ role in human society. McLuhan observed: “The railway...creates new types of cities, new types of work, and new types of leisure... Such changes have nothing to do with the cargo or content transported by the railway medium” [11]. While no one denies railways’ impact on society, understanding this impact varies by disciplinary perspective. Robert Fogel, a 1993 Nobel Memorial Prize-winning econometrician, conducted a controversial study concluding that “railways had almost no impact on the 19th-century American economy” [12]. He calculated railway transportation volumes, assumed they were replaced by other methods, computed cost-benefit changes, and found that

without railways, U.S. GNP in 1890 would have decreased by only 1.7%.

Fogel' s method stared at railway “content,” yet railways’ impact on late-19th-century American society was extensive. The entire Westward Movement depended on the transportation network of railways and inland steamships; the cowboy culture ubiquitous in Western films realistically centered on east-west railway 贯通. America’ s emergence as an agricultural powerhouse also related to railways. In these aspects, railways provided not greater transportation efficiency but many previously nonexistent scales. Without railways, transporting live cattle from Texas to eastern cities was not a cost issue but a feasibility problem. Many trade routes simply would not exist without railways. Cost-benefit calculations presuppose the existence of corresponding trades. Railways stimulated new trade routes, enabling cost-effectiveness measurements based on those trades.

The firearms and railway examples reveal that neutralists treat them as isolated fragments that can be split and cut from the entire social system for analysis, whereas McLuhan’ s perspective is cubist and holistic. These innovations function less as individual new parts than as components building an entirely new “environment.” Firearms changed not merely the means of warfare but the military environment; railways changed not merely transportation but the trade environment.

McLuhan himself added: “The meaning of ‘the medium is the message’ is that a brand-new environment is created” [13]. Even if we regard media as passive “tools” completely controlled by human use, this does not mean human tendencies remain unchanged before these tools. McLuhan quoted psychologist Carl Jung: “Every Roman was surrounded by slaves. The slave and his psychology flooded ancient Italy, and every Roman became inwardly a slave, living in a slave-like environment. Because they constantly lived in an atmosphere of slavery, they were unconsciously infected by the slave mentality. No one could protect themselves from such influence” [14]. Simply put, masters accustomed to an environment composed of slaves would have their thinking revolve around slavery. When contemplating anything, they would measure it by the scale slavery provided: how to drive slaves, how to utilize slaves—these slave-centered questions became the foundation of all their thinking.

### 3. From Use to Understanding

Chapter 2 of *Understanding Media*, titled “Hot Media and Cold Media,” is famously off-putting. Readers may find McLuhan’ s introduction of this key concept persistently vague and even contradictory. Many scholars who admire McLuhan have reservations about this section, believing it can be ignored or skipped [15].

Gordon’ s preface to the annotated edition includes a table: telephone (cool)/radio (hot); speech (cool)/print (hot); cartoon (cool)/photo (hot); television (cool)/film (hot); seminar (cool)/lecture (hot). This table is not

wrong, but treating it as the theory's important achievement may mislead, as such tables easily direct thinking toward "splitting and cutting," using hot/cool concepts as a method to accurately label media.

McLuhan stated: "Our conventional response to all media, namely, that it is how they are used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot" [16]. Rather than fixating on the theory's conclusions and classifications to better use it, we should examine the understanding method it embodies. Hot and cool media is not an either/or binary label but a new scale McLuhan provides for "how to understand media." Moreover, this scale is not a precise linear measure like a ruler or thermometer from 0 to 100. McLuhan borrowed "cool" and "hot" not from natural science but from slang. Perhaps better translations would be "cool media" and "spicy media." We might say, "That cool girl is wearing hot pants," or "That hot girl's top is cool." Cool and hot often intertwine. McLuhan noticed this semantic ambiguity and borrowed these terms precisely because of, not despite, their ambiguous popular meanings.

McLuhan clearly preferred "cool." When we say "This is not cool at all," we express no temperature concept but rather that something is "boring" or "irresponsible, shameful, undignified." He explained: "The term 'cool' in slang may have many other meanings. It means commitment, personal involvement, engaging all human faculties" [17]. McLuhan acknowledged a medium being "cool" is somewhat ambiguous, but no more so than calling a person or thing "cool." Despite the ambiguity, slang "cool" still conveys meaning and can serve as a scale for measurement—far from scientifically precise but more intuitive and perceptual.

The hot/cool media theory is often misunderstood, and McLuhan bears some responsibility for providing easily misinterpreted "definitions." He stated: "Here is a basic principle. Hot media extend only one sense, with 'high definition.' High definition is a state of being filled with data. Visually, a photograph has high definition, while a cartoon only has 'low definition' because it provides very little information. The telephone is a cool medium, or low-definition medium, because it provides rather scarce information for the ear. Speech is a low-definition cool medium because it provides pitifully little information, requiring the listener to fill in a large amount. In contrast, hot media do not leave so many blanks for the receiver to fill in or complete. Therefore, hot media require low participation; cool media require high participation, demanding more completion by the receiver. Naturally, the impact of a hot medium like radio on the user is quite different from that of a cool medium like the telephone" [18].

Terms like "high definition," "filled with data," and "information scarcity" easily induce an information-science interpretation. In information science, "information volume" is a precisely measurable objective value, leading us to assume hot/cool media is also a precise classification. But from McLuhan's consistent style, the information volume he discusses refers to the degree of "blank space." The hot/cool distinction focuses on whether media extend senses monotonously or comprehensively, whether user participation is rich or scarce, and how users

are affected. Simply put, “hot media” are more powerful in information transmission, allowing greater laziness—delegating everything to the medium without personal responsibility. Conversely, “cool media” provide more limited information but inspire more active participation.

Different media environments affect people differently. McLuhan believed media influence people by altering sensory patterns. In Chapter 1, he wrote: “The effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance” [19]. The so-called “sensory ratio,” though seemingly scientific, remains an intuitive analogy rather than an actual calculation of, say, an 86.7% visual ratio. McLuhan compared senses to colors: “Sensation is a 100% constant, and color is also a 100% constant” [20]. A color mixes multiple primaries, but its total always remains 100%. Yellow is 50% red plus 50% green, but adding more red does not create a 120% state of 70% red plus 50% green—we always see some 100% color. When red’s proportion increases, green is suppressed, diluted, or obscured. Human “perception” works similarly: vision, hearing, touch, and other senses are like “primary colors” composing perceptual worlds. But McLuhan argued perceptual capacity is limited; people can only perceive 100% of the world. When one sense becomes particularly intense, other sensory backgrounds blur, dull, or even close off [21].

McLuhan’s claim that “hot media only extend one sense” [22] does not mean such media use only one sense. Watching movies requires hearing, and in terms of sensory mobilization, film seems no different from television—both use eyes and ears. Yet McLuhan opposes them, calling film “hot” and television “cool.” The key lies in how senses are restricted and suppressed. When reading books, we clearly sense the need to suppress other senses. In libraries, proper posture means sitting quietly, tending to close off non-visual senses. More precisely, this characterizes the print era. In the manuscript era, “silent reading” was not mainstream; “reading” (读) contains the speech radical—reading meant reciting aloud, shaking one’s head and chanting loudly, the dominant mode of engaging with manuscripts. Thus printed books are “hot” relative to both speech and manuscripts.

Suppressing a sense does not necessarily mean closing it but can involve numbing it with high-intensity stimulation. Movies employ this method. Cinemas do not offer quiet but strong audio stimulation, with volume exceeding any daily scene, filling ears and preventing listening in all directions. Whether silent or deafening, hearing’s “space” is greatly compressed, limiting auditory “participation.” Television, though using vision and hearing, typically does not require sensory closure. The typical TV-watching scene involves a family at the dining table, eating, chatting, and watching simultaneously. Only part of the time is vision fully focused on the screen; often, the television serves as background sound. In this scenario, vision, hearing, smell, and taste all remain open. While some watch television like films—locked doors, lights off, sitting motionless for two hours—the typical, usual modes of engagement differ dramatically. McLuhan’s hot/cool

scale highlights such differences. Analysis focused solely on “content” struggles to reveal perceptual pattern differences between manuscripts and printed books, films and television.

The comparison between “hot” radio and “cool” telephone better illuminates “participation.” Radio listening positions one as an outsider, listening with cool detachment. Telephone calls draw people into an interactive space—not just mouth and ears but the entire body becomes involved, as seen in people nodding or gesturing while on the phone. The post-80s generation, accustomed to text messaging (now WeChat), often fears phone calls, preferring to type slowly on a nine-grid keypad rather than speak. McLuhan’ s penetrating explanation held that “cool” implies “commitment, personal involvement, engaging all human faculties.” “Hot media” make people “cool,” while “cool media” make people “hot.” What we fear is that the “cool medium” of telephone might strip away our cool, detached stance, forcing us into a “personal involvement” state where we must take responsibility for every immediate reaction.

McLuhan’ s inspiration can be subtle, opening new perspectives and questions when facing specific media like television, film, telephone, or WeChat. It can also be macroscopic, shaping understanding of an entire era’ s spirit—such as our frequent references to the “internet era” and “internet thinking.” McLuhan never witnessed the internet age; his focus was the transition between the mechanical (print) and electronic ages. Yet many of his discussions of the electronic age apply to today’ s internet era because his grasp of its fundamental characteristics was remarkably prescient: “In the mechanical age, many actions could be taken without looking back. Slow movement inevitably made reactions lag for a considerable time. But today, action and its reaction occur almost simultaneously. In fact, we seem to live in a magical integrated world” [23]. Delay between action and feedback enabled “cool-eyed observation,” “cool analysis,” and detachment, but electronic “immediacy” shatters this objectivist attitude, forcing more emotional involvement in the “global village.”

McLuhan held a positive view of this new era but recognized that total involvement is not always beneficial. Involvement may stimulate responsibility and participation, encouraging enthusiasm and accountability, but it may also make people hot-headed, directionless, and prone to drifting with the tide. From today’ s perspective, the latter appears to be the mainstream.

*Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.*

*Source: ChinaXiv –Machine translation. Verify with original.*