



Literature in the Digital Age: From Close Reading to Digital Reading

Video transcript

Is the medium the message?

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Until around 1962, Marshall McLuhan was a fairly obscure Canadian professor of English literature. Two books of his changed that. One of them was *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which was published in 1962. The other was *Understanding Media*. And that one was published in 1964. These two books made McLuhan one of the most talked about intellectuals of his time.

It's first and foremost his claim that 'the medium is the message' that made McLuhan a household name in the 1960s. In making this statement, McLuhan challenged his contemporaries to think about the media in new ways. McLuhan challenges not to think about what messages or contents that media, such as television, radio and newspapers communicate. Instead, he invites us to focus on the media themselves: on their physical properties, their technological operations, and the social and psychological effects they have on individuals and the societies they live in.

In other words, 'the medium is the message' asks us to consider the mediality and the materiality of media. What does this mean? Well, a focus on the mediality of media forces us to zoom in on the question of what makes a given medium a medium, what makes it a go-between, between two entities? And a focus on the materiality of media forces us to zoom in on the material properties that allow media to perform certain functions for human beings and societies.

In his own words, 'The message of any medium or technology is the change of scale or pace or pattern it introduces into human affairs.' McLuhan then is crucially interested in how new media changed the very structures and the operations of society. Let me give you McLuhan's own, most famous example.

For McLuhan, Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the mid-15th century radically changed the world. The printing press invented a whole new world that McLuhan calls the *Gutenberg Galaxy*. Why is that so? Well first and foremost, the invention of the printing press inaugurated an entirely new culture, a culture that was no longer centered around face-to-face communication.



This new culture was a culture of print, in which texts assumed central importance. In other words, with the invention of the printing press, Western societies moved most decisively from oral to literate culture. And in the process, the human perception of the world changed radically too. When human beings entered the Gutenberg Galaxy in the mid-15th century, they began to see the world rather than hear it. And this had radical consequences. For one, it meant that humans were now less reliant on exchanging ideas face-to-face. Instead they could withdraw into their own rooms and enter the minds of strangers all alone as they read those strangers' texts.

Something else changed with the invention of the printing press. Printed texts allowed for greater complexity and greater abstraction of thought than face-to-face communication. Thus, with printed text, the sciences had a powerful, new tool at hand that allowed for the creation of complex models. Models such as Isaac Newton's 17th century theory of gravity. And yet another thing changed with the invention of the printing press. Before the introduction of the telegraph and then the telephone, words most often only travelled as far as they could be heard. With the invention of the printing press, words could be easily reproduced and distributed over vast, geographical spaces. Without the printing press, McLuhan argues, the Reformation would have never happened, since Martin Luther's theses would have never gained the distribution they had.

Also, the emergence of nation states in the 18th and 19th centuries would have not been possible without the printing press. Because only printed texts made available one common, standardised, national language to all citizens of a future nation. Also, only printed texts made possible bureaucracy on a national scale.

So you see: for McLuhan, Gutenberg's invention of the printing press had radical effects. It really changed the world, introducing new scales, new paces and new patterns. In McLuhan's own words: 'We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.'

Now, when McLuhan published *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962, he proclaimed that the Gutenberg Galaxy had already come to an end. But his original insights are still valid for our own time. 'The medium is the message' and 'we shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.'

Let me give you but one example. The introduction of personal computers into our lives has fundamentally changed the way we live our lives and fundamentally changed the way we work. From then on, we've been spending much of our daily lives interacting with a machine.

Not only that, personal computers also allow us to work from home, thus blurring the distinction between our private selves and our business selves. And it's also personal computers such as tablets that allow you to participate in this course and communicate with like-minded individuals in widely distant parts of the

world. So you see, the introduction of the personal computer radically affected our daily lives, and it radically changed the way our societies work.

McLuhan's famous claim that the medium is the message invites us to zoom in, not only on the material and physical properties of new media. It also invites us to think hard about how new media change us and how they change the world we live in.