

Literature, Culture and Media
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Lecture – 38
Hot and Cool Media

Dear participants welcome to the third module of this week. In this module, we would continue our discussion of McLuhan's theory and particularly discuss the differentiation between the hot and the cool media. In his book *Understanding Media*, which was published in 1964, McLuhan has mentioned the difference between the hot and the cool media in the second chapter of this book.

(Refer Slide Time: 00:47)

Hot and Cool Media

- McLuhan's *Understanding Media* (1964),
- Chapter 2: Media Hot and Cold
- Chapter fits between "The Medium Is the Message" and "Reversal of the Overheated Medium"
- Chapter 2 and 3 demonstrate the importance of temperature metaphors in McLuhan's formulations on media.
- Nothing essentially 'hot' and 'cold' about media forms. Metaphor to understand how medium is the message.



This chapter is in the middle of two other significant chapters, the first one is "The Medium is the Message" and the next is "The Reversal of the Overheated Medium" and the chapter 2 and 3 demonstrate the importance of temperature metaphors in McLuhan's formulation on media.

In fact, it is not the media which is essentially either hot or cool, it is nothing about the forms, it is a metaphor to understand how the medium is the message and how does it affect our cultural understandings.

(Refer Slide Time: 01:32)

- “After three thousand years of explosion, by means of fragmentary and mechanical technologies, the Western world is imploding” -- McLuhan starts the first page of his *Understanding Media* (1964)
- Written in a mosaic and non-linear style, the book was received as “infuriating, brilliant, and incoherent”, to quote a review by Gordon (the *Commonweal Review*)
- More recently, Nicholas Carr suggested that *Understanding Media* is “oracular, gnostic, and mind-bending”
- Resists exact summaries



McLuhan begins the first page of understanding media with a very interesting line and he says “After 3000 years of explosion by means of fragmentary in mechanical technologies the Western world is imploding”. In this sentence, he has said the tone of his ideas and how revolutionary his approach is going to be. This book has been written in a nonlinear and mosaic style and it was received as infuriatingly brilliant and incoherent by a contemporary reviewer Gordon, who had written this phrase in his review.

More recently we find that Nicholas Carr has suggested that this book *Understanding Media* is ‘oracular, gnostic and mind-bending’. However, we can say that McLuhan’s book is one which defies exact summaries and any idea, any effort to summarise his theories in need capsule forms become problematic for the readers. McLuhan had stated that it is the characteristics of the medium itself, which affect the society.

In his ideas, our focus on the content, which has been passed on through a medium, should not be very important. The content which is delivered through a media should not be prioritised over the medium.

(Refer Slide Time: 03:06)

- McLuhan asserts that it is the characteristics of the medium itself which affects the society; content delivered through a medium, should not be prioritized over it
- He also proposes two frames for categorizing the media as “hot” and “cool” according to different sensory effects associated with the media
- A confusing metaphor
- Rationale: “Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable in the same way that we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world.”
- Notion of temperature or rather *regulated temperature* is a necessity for maintaining equilibrium

It is always the medium which shapes our understanding of the content. He also proposes two frames for categorising the media as hot and Cool according to different sensory effects associated with the media. The metaphor may sound confusing to begin with, but the rationale with which McLuhan has developed this metaphor is compellingly clear. He says that “Whole cultures could now be programmed to keep their emotional climate stable. In the same way we have begun to know something about maintaining equilibrium in the commercial economies of the world”.

The notion of temperature is a necessity for maintaining equilibrium. We can say that it is a regulated temperature, which is required for maintaining equilibrium, and it is basically the idea behind this metaphor of hot and cool media. Hot medium according to McLuhan extends single sense in high definition.

(Refer Slide Time: 04:18)

- **Hot Medium** extends single sense in high definition, low in audience participation, engenders specialization/fragmentation
- Detribalizes, excludes
- Uniform, mechanical
- Extends space, horizontally repetitive
 - Examples: Photograph, radio, phonetic alphabet, print, lecture, film, books
- **Cool Medium** is low definition (less data), high in audience participation, engenders holistic patterns
- Tribalizes, includes, organic
- collapses space, creates vertical associations
 - Examples: cartoon, telephone, ideographic/pictographic writing, speech (orality), seminar, discussion, television, comics



There is low audience participation and it also engenders a specialisation or fragmentation. The examples he had given are the examples of photograph, radio, phonetic alphabet, the medium of print, books, lectures and films. In all these mediums, we find that there is a sense of exclusion and at the same time, there is a de-tribalization. These forms built on uniformity, they are mechanically reproducible, they extend into space, and they can be repeated over the horizon.

So in these hot mediums we find that this single sense for example when we look at the books we find that it is a sense of looking at something reading which is given a high definition. In comparison, cool medium is low definition there is less data in it, but the level of audience participation is high in this media and it also engenders holistic patterns.

It tribalizes, includes people, it is more organic in its form and approach, it collapses a space and also creates vertical associations. The examples which McLuhan has given about the cool medium include cartoon, telephone, ideographic or pictographic writing, orality, seminar, discussion, televisions and comics et cetera.

(Refer Slide Time: 05:51)

Basic principle to distinguish between hot and cool media

- Hot medium-radio, film, phonetic alphabet
- cool medium-TV, telephone, hieroglyphic/ideogrammatic characters
- Basic principle to differentiate between the categories: A hot medium is the extension of a single sense in "high definition."
- High definition is the state of being filled with a lot of data or information.

Examples:

- A photograph is visually "high definition"
- A cartoon is "low definition" because it contains little visual information.



The basic principles on the basis of which we distinguish between these two forms of media are relatively simple and they can be enumerated easily also. As we have seen the hot medium is radio, film, phonetic alphabet and cool medium incorporates TV, telephone, hieroglyphic characters et cetera. So the basic principle which we can use to differentiate between the categories is whether it is the extension of a single sense in high definition or is it not.

So in high definition we find that this is a state of being filled with a lot of data or information. For example, a photograph is visually high definition, a cartoon is low definition because it contains little visual information. The intensity which we have in a photograph is normally not present in a cartoon. So this is the first way in which we can distinguish between the hot and the cool medium.

(Refer Slide Time: 06:55)

- Telephone is a cool medium because the ear is provided inadequate amount of information.
- Speech is a cool medium because insufficient information is given and the listener is required to fill in the gaps.
- Thus, cool media requires a greater degree of participation by the audience who needs to actively process the given information to fill in the gaps.
- **Hot media** doesn't require much to be filled in or completed by the audience.



In comparison telephone is a cool medium because the ear is provided inadequate amount of information which we have to fill up with the help of other senses. Speech is also a cool medium because again it provides only insufficient information and the listener is required to fill in the gaps. So this cool medium we can say requires a greater degree of participation on the part of the audience, who needs to actively process the information which is given, so that the links can be formed and the gaps can be filled in.

In comparison hot medium does not require much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media is low in participation and requires more sensory involvement, and cool media is high in participation by the audience and requires less sensory involvement.

(Refer Slide Time: 07:47)

Hot media--low in participation/require more sensory involvement

Cool media--high in participation (by the audience)/require less sensory involvement

- Hot and cool media forms impact masses differently
- Radio and telephone will have different social and psychic influences.
- For instance: Typography is created when the alphabet is pushed to an extreme degree of visual intensity
- The printed word with its specialist intensity led to individualism; tore apart the non-specialist medieval bonds based on collectivity



At the same time, we can say that hot and cool media forms create their impact differently on masses. Radio and telephone will have a particular type of social and psychic influence on the masses and in the same way different media like television would have a different impact on the society as well as on the psyche of the audience.

McLuhan has analysed the introduction of typography as a major cultural shift in detail. He has also suggested that typography was created when the alphabet was pushed to an extreme degree of visual intensity. So the printed word had a specialist intensity which also led to individualism. It threw apart the non-specialist medieval bonds which were based on collectivity rather than it encouraged a going inward and it created a specialist, an individualist culture ultimately.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:00)

- Print culture—shift from church guilds and monasteries to individual enterprise and monopoly.
- Reversal happens when monopoly is pushed to its extremes—the return of corporation.
- “The hotting-up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism and the religious wars of the sixteenth century” (McLuhan)
- Writing on stones (cool media)—heavy and enduring—unify empires over time.
- Paper (hot medium) unifies spaces (political and entertainment) horizontally.

The print culture as we have seen in our prior discussions also made it possible for us to shift from church guilds and monasteries to individual enterprises and monopolies. This reversal also happens when a monopoly is pushed to its extreme and we can think of a return of the previous phenomena. McLuhan suggests that the hotting up of the medium of writing to repeatable print intensity led to nationalism and religious wars of the 16th century.

He also suggests that the writing on stones was a cool media, it was heavy and enduring and it unified empires overtime, but it was a cool medium. In comparison paper was a hot medium because it unified spaces horizontally and it could be used for political motives as well as for entertainment purposes.

(Refer Slide Time: 09:57)

Hot media: generally visual in nature

- For example, print occupies visual space and is “hot”.
- Associated with analytical precision, quantitative analysis and sequential ordering. Usually sequential, linear and logical. Stress one sense (sight or sound) over the others.

Cool media: generally linked with the sense of hearing.

- Require active participation by the audience. Observation of abstract patterns and immediate conception of all its parts.

Questions:

- How does McLuhan’s hot/cool relates to social media today? The future of social media is moving towards higher sensory experiences.



We can also say that hot media is generally visual in nature, whereas cool media is generally linked with the sense of hearing. In hot media, we find for example that print occupies visual space and it is hot, it is associated with an analytical precision, a quantitative analysis. It uses a sequential ordering, a linear and logical form and it stresses only one sense one time. For example, it puts emphasis either on sight or sound and emphasises only this sense in comparison to others.

In comparison we find that cool media requires active participation by the audience. Observation of abstract patterns and immediate conception of all its parts is also required on the part of the audience while we are using a cool media. However, we find that McLuhan’s distinction between the hot and the cool media raises a certain questions in today’s world. How does his distinction relate to the social media platforms today? Where we find that they can be simultaneously hot and cool?

The future of social media particularly is moving towards higher sensory experiences which would require an extension or a revision of McLuhan basic precepts.

(Refer Slide Time: 11:30)

Another Basic principle: "the hot form excludes, the cold one includes."

- Hot media excludes
- Cool media includes
- Intensity or high definition provokes specialism and fragmentation.
- Thus, intense experience must be "forgotten," "censored," and transformed to a cool state before it can be "learned" or assimilated.
- Hot media can induce sensory overload, shock, and thus lead to breakdown.
- Modern city induces shock experience: consciousness absorbs the sensory overload—routine and automatic responses to reality.

Another basic principle which we can hint at for distinguishing between these two forms of media is that hot media excludes whereas the cold one includes. The intensity or high definition of media provokes specialism as well as fragmentation, and thus intense experiences may be forgotten or censored and transform to a cool state before it can be learned or assimilated.

Hot media can induce sensory overload shock and thus it may lead to a breakdown among the audience. For example, a modern city may also induce shock experience, consciousness absorbs the sensory overload, routine and automatic responses to reality may also generate a particular type of shock and stress among the people. We can look at Freudian concepts from this perspective.

(Refer Slide Time: 12:27)

- For instance, Freudian "censor" and unconscious repression is less of a moral function.
- It's a prerequisite of learning and assimilation.
- A complete awareness of sensory overload or stimuli produces a state of shock that inhibits our ability to function.
- Can lead to nervous breakdown and panic!
- The "censor" protects us by cooling off the onset of experience a great deal.



The Freudian sensor and unconscious repression is less of a moral function rather in today's education system it is a prerequisite of learning and assimilation. A complete awareness of sensory overload produces a state of shock that inhibits our ability to function properly and it can also lead to a sense of panic resulting in a nervous breakdown, but this sensor protects us by cooling off the onset of experiences to a great extent and it helps us in avoiding the severity of impact of the media.

(Refer Slide Time: 13:11)

- Further on the theme of hot and cold media :
 - Backward/under-developed countries are cool. Developed countries are hot
 - The "city slicker" is hot. Rustic is cool.
- Mechanical world was hot in terms of reversal of procedures and values in the electric age.
- Forms and Types of Music
 - Waltz is hot—fast mechanical dance apt for the industrial time.
 - Jazz breaks the choral and courtly traditions
 - Twist is cool—involved and informal form of spontaneous gesture.
 - Hot jazz: in the phase of the hot media of film and radio
 - Cool jazz: emerges after the impact of the hot form of radio and media are absorbed

McLuhan has further said that in terms of civilizations, we can say that underdeveloped countries which are sometimes known in his times as backward countries and now we do not use this phraseology anymore, but let us say that in his opinion under developed countries are cool and developed countries were hot. The city slicker is hot and rustic is cool. Mechanical world was hot in terms of reversal of procedures and values in the electric age.

And, the same analogy can also be applied to different forms and types of music. For example, one can say that waltz as a form is hot. It is a fast mechanical dance which is apt for the industrial time. Jazz breaks the choral and country traditions on the other hand. Twist is a dance form is cool. Jazz can be hot and cool depending on the situation in the context in which we look at it. As a phase of the hot media of film and radio jazz can be hot, but if it emerges after the impact of the hot forms of radio and media are absorbed it can also be a cool medium.

(Refer Slide Time: 14:28)

The case of WWW—hot and cool

- Different levels of participation required by 'hot' and 'cold' media:
 - WWW: collection of various media forms
 - Most are hot
 - WWW in its ever-widening reach in connecting people across the world makes it into a cool medium as it promotes greater participation
- Youtube and other video sharing portals like DailyMotion, Metacafe etc contain "low-definition", high-participatory elements—greater sensory involvement from the audience.



It is interesting to analyse the case of the world wide web whether it is hot or cool. So we find that when we look at McLuhan's differentiation between the hot and the cool media, we find that different levels of participation on the part of the audience are required in it. But the web is a collection of various media forms most of them are hot and it is also an ever whitening reach in order to connect people across the globe which makes it a cool medium as it promotes greater and active participation on the part of the people.

The YouTube and other video sharing portals like DailyMotion or Metacafe et cetera contain low definition and high participatory elements. So there is a greater sensory involvement from the audience. So it puts a fuzzy area if we try to decode it by McLuhan's principles only.

(Refer Slide Time: 15:27)

- Interaction of different media forms allows us to understand the kind of influence it exerts on those who engage with it
- Thus, WWW appears tremendously 'hot' at the surface level.
- Although, it's 'cool' in practice
- Why this seeming contradiction?
- Infrastructure of the World Wide Web builds upon the internet which comprises of computers connected through electric technology
- According to McLuhan's ideas, this is responsible for retribalization (inclusion) and thus it makes it 'cool'.

But the interaction of these different media form simultaneously allows us to understand the kind of influence it exerts on those people who engage with it. So the web appears on the surface level has being hot whereas in practice we find it is very cool. So it may look like a contradiction, but the infrastructure of the web is built on the internet technology which comprises of computers connected through electric technology.

And this is responsible for retribalization or inclusion of the people and therefore it basically makes it a cool medium.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:11)

- Hot and cold media does not have a linear order, consistent interpretation or structure
- Should be seen as dynamic concepts and not as static definitions
- As Paul Grosswiler points out, McLuhan's method was dialectical, process-oriented, and open-ended, not mechanistic.
- These distinctions suggest the *experience* and *effects* of how we use media, "More and more we turn from the content of messages to study total effect. . . . Concern with effect rather than meaning is a basic change of our electric time, for effect involves the total situation, and not a single level of information movement."

Hot and cool media do not have a linear order and therefore we find that very rigid compartmentalization or structuring of media forms on this basis would be rather difficult. Rather this distinction between these two media forms should be seen as a dynamic concept and not as a static highly classified academic definition. Paul Grosswiler has rightly pointed out that McLuhan's method was dialectical, process oriented and open ended and not mechanistic.

In fact, we can say that the distinction between the hot and the cool medium suggest the experience and effects of how we use media and, I quote from McLuhan again "More and more we turn from the content of messages to study total effect....Concern with *effect* rather than *meaning* is a basic change of our electric time. For effect involves the total situation and not a single level of information movement".

McLuhan has presented the quintessential interpretation of media in this particular court. He has pointed out that in this media forms we are looking at the totality of effect rather than attempting to take out a single meaning in a concrete form as it was done in the context of previous media.

(Refer Slide Time: 17:46)

- Also, since hot and cool media are not definitions, but attempts to capture the experience or effect of a medium, whether a medium is hot or cold can also depend on the society into which it is introduced – *socio-technological aspects of development of different societies*
- McLuhan illustrates this idea further, comparing two different levels of techno-advanced societies and how a medium would be interpreted differently in them:
“The hot radio medium used in cool or non literate cultures has a violent effect, quite unlike its effect, say in England or America, where radio is felt as entertainment. A cool or low literacy culture cannot accept hot media like movies or radio as entertainment.”

Since hot and cool media are not definitions, but at best they can be understood as attempts to capture the experience or effect of a medium. Whether a medium is hot and cool is also dependent on the society into which it is introduced. So, it is not only the medium isolated from a cultural or a social context, but let us say that the socio-technological aspects of development of different societies is also important to give a particular form to a media.

A media can be simultaneously hot in some places and may be cool in certain other places. McLuhan has illustrated this idea further by citing examples from two cultures which are basically different in the level of their technical advancements and he says that the hot radio medium used in cool or non-literate cultures may have a violent effect, quite unlike it is effect, say, in a country like England and America where the form of radio is basically a form of entertainment.

So this medium is a form which caters to the requirements of the entertainment, whereas a cool or low literacy culture cannot accept hot media like radio or movies simply as an entertainment. So it is the level of a particular society, the social, cultural and technological development of a society which is also responsible to give a particular form to our understanding of the media. So McLuhan has considered this distinction to be instinctive and

spontaneous investigation designed to understand the experience or effect of using a particular media.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:35)

- Not straitjacketed academic explanations
- McLuhan considered his ideas to be as instinctive and spontaneous investigations designed to understand the experience or effect of using a particular medium,
- He remarks in *Understanding Media*,

“Everybody experiences far more than he understands. Yet it is experience, rather than understanding, that influences behavior, especially in collective matters of media and technology, where the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effects upon him”.



And therefore he says that we experience far more than we understand things and it is our experience rather than understanding which influences our behaviour. And this is particularly true in the context of collective matters of media and technology where I quote, the individual is almost inevitably unaware of their effects upon him.

So we find that our experiences of total impact of media become much more important and cohesive in the electric age.

(Refer Slide Time: 20:23)

- The manner in which a particular society uses a medium can also determine whether the medium is hot or cold. This usage can change with time as medium's impact on society is dynamic and multi-dimensional; and not linear
- Introduction of a new media will change how a society used or still uses an old form of media as, “no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media”
- As extensions of our senses media establishes new ratios for individuals and also among themselves when they interact among themselves
 - Entertainment and news stories changed forms as well as roles of media continually – print, radio, film, television ...

Similarly, we can say that the manner in which a particular society uses a medium can also determine whether this form of medium is hot or cold and this usage of this medium in a society can change with time, depending on how dynamic and multidimensional and nonlinear a society is. McLuhan posits that the introduction of new media will change how a society keeps on using an old form of media.

Because no medium has its meaning or existence alone, but there is a constant interplay with other media in any society. As extensions of our senses media establishes new resource for individuals and also among themselves when they interact among themselves. So entertainment and news stories change forms as well as the roles of media continually with the onset of new forms of technology.

For example, the medium of print, the radio, the film, the television and later on the computers and internet changed the way in which people seek and create entertainment for themselves and at the same time they receive news or how news and non-fictional information is given to them. So the difference in these media forms keeps on occurring repeatedly in our culture. So McLuhan also says that media can also heat up over time.

(Refer Slide Time: 22:03)

- McLuhan argues that media can also “heat up” over time
- Eg., writing in the 1960s McLuhan described television as a cool medium, but now it has changed form and is “heated up” - it has become more high definition, pervasive and ubiquitous
- Ways of using it have changed – not a single family screen showing one program at a time only
- Multiple screens, sizes and shows provide a stream of images, text etc.
- Disconnected and indiscriminate manner of viewing it
- Experience and effect of using electronic screen technology has heated up over time.



Writing in 1960s for example McLuhan has described television as a cool medium, but now we can say that it has become very much a hot medium, it has become more high definition, it has become more pervasive and ubiquitous. When McLuhan was writing then the TV was associated with a particular type of culture. There used to be a single-family screen, which used to air only one program at a time.

Now we find that this single-family time TV has been replaced by multiple screens and sizes of the screens also keep on changing and at the same time we find that all these screens continually provide a stream of images and texts. The manner of viewing a TV program has also changed with the passage of time and with the way the density of this medium has changed, we find that we view it in a more disconnected and indiscriminate manner.

So the experience and effect of using electronic screen technology has heated up over time and the medium has changed its basic form.

(Refer Slide Time: 23:18)

- To sum up, hot and cool media distinction describes effects, not definitions.
- These effects may differ on the basis of a society's stage of social and technological development
- These effects may also transform over time as that society changes and develops and the manner of using a particular medium also changes
- Role of technology
- Prophetic analysis of media



To sum up we can say that hot and cool media distinctions describe effects and they should not be taken up as finished and finalized definitions. These effects differ on the basis of a society's a stage of social and technological development. These effects also transform and change over time as the society changes and develops and also as it changes its manner of using a particular medium.

The role of technology is also important because technology introduces new types of media and which are being adapted by the society. We can say that McLuhan had made a highly prophetic analysis of media and after the discovery of the internet technology, we find that there has been a renewed interest in the works. Most of his analysis in terms of the cultural impact of new media forms on the psyche of individuals as people and as a member of the group is highly pertinent even today. Thank you.