

A Guide to Teaching and Learning

MARSHALL MCLUHAN'S

L A W S



MEDIA

By Scott Bennett & Paul Syme

About this Guide

The Laws of Media is an inquiry device, ratio, and science. The four questions or *tetrad* that make up these laws lead users to think critically and creatively about the media in their lives. This guide is designed to lead participants through the laws and how to teach or learn them.

We have created this short guide to introduce teachers and students to the Laws of Media. The first part offers direction instruction into the basics of this instrument of inquiry. Marshall McLuhan used the laws of media as a tool to direct inductive reasoning -- we also present it as such. Recognizing it as a powerful tool to probe media through, it is also a device to guide creative and problem based learning opportunities. We hope you find it useful and enjoyable to apply.



Marshall McLuhan, watcha dain?*

Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980) was a Canadian philosopher who established the movement that would become known as Media Ecology. He was the creator of the Centre for Culture and Technology to study the psychic and social consequences of technologies and media at the University of Toronto in 1963. He is most often known through his famous quotes, including “The medium is the message” and coining the phrase “the Global Village”.

After completing his PhD studies at University of Cambridge, he moved to the University of St. Louis as an English professor (1940). Initially, he experienced great difficulty connecting classical literature with his students, so he sought a way to connect with them by studying their preferred medium- television. The rest was history. (Marshall McLuhan.com)



*Tag line from a comedy skit with Goldie Hawn & Carl Reiner on *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*, 1970.

What is Media?

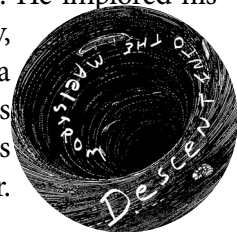
“We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us” (Historic Canada). In his book, *Understanding Media* (1964), McLuhan determined that media is “any extension of ourselves” (p7) – For example, the bicycle is an extension of the foot, clothing is an extension of our skin, and the written word is an extension of our voice. While this in and of itself is a meaningful deduction, McLuhan’s more focused impact of media to the user.



“We Don’t know Who Discovered Water, but We know It Wasn’t a Fish.”

An effective literary metaphor McLuhan liked to use was a short story called “A Descent

into the Maelstrom” (1841) by Edgar Allan Poe. Two brothers go fishing every day, but need to return at a certain time. If they don’t, the changing tides work with the local geography to create the titular maelstrom, which has claimed many unfortunate souls. One day, the brothers return home late and find themselves engulfed by the whirlpool. While spinning around, our narrator realizes that objects of certain shape and size (like a boat, for example) seem to descend to the ocean floor more rapidly than other objects. He implored his brother to jump into the water. Unfortunately, instead of jumping out and holding on to a barrel like our narrator, his brother refuses to look beyond the immediate and suffers his demise on the rocks of the ocean’s floor.



McLuhan saw this as a message that media by nature immerses us in an environment. We need to step out, recognize those environments for what they are, and respond accordingly.

The Laws of Media: Enhance, Reverse, Retrieve, Obsolesce

First, this is a predictive tool that led McLuhan to assert in 1966 that “Within 15 years an actor will be elected president”. Ronald Reagan was elected to the Oval Office, in 1980.

Marshall McLuhan was constantly challenged to provide a scientific basis for his media observations. Taking on the challenge, he and his son, Eric, reviewed *Understanding Media*. The result was McLuhan’s posthumous publication, *Laws of Media: the New Science* (1988). McLuhan concluded that four things happen to all media and human artifacts; this phenomenon was inevitable, and they apply universally. Additionally, while some results may take years to make themselves apparent, McLuhan insisted that these things all happened simultaneously.

Because these things happen simultaneously, the McLuhans settled upon the *tetrad* (a grouping of four) to display the interlocking nature of these effects:



Enhance:

Every new technology makes things “better” – it makes possible, makes more convenient, accelerates, and generally improves the previous situation.

Reverse:

“A blessing and a curse”. When taken to the extreme, it will un-do what it was supposed to enhance. While this is inevitable and instantaneous, people usually take longer to realize the reverse.



Retrieve:

“It’s all been done before!” Every new technology that comes into play, it actually borrows from an existing, obsolesced technology or behaviour.

Obsolesce:

Every time a new technology is embraced, something old is discarded – Cassettes rendered vinyl obsolete, which was in turn obsolesced by, CD, then MP3 digital technology.



The Laws of Media: as questions

Enhance: what ability does this media aim to extend or enhance?

Obsolesce: What media is pushed aside by this new media? In other words, what previously served the purpose that this new media replaces?

Retrieve: What older media or function does this new media bring back in new form OR release to serve a new function? For example, the RV campers bring back the idea of the wagon train. Another, consider photography. When the camera came on the scene it made portrait painting obsolete so artists were freed to paint expressions (artistic freedom became a new enhancement).

Reverse: At its extreme, what effects occur that are opposite from its intended enhancement?

Enhance voice
– now, without yelling, your voice can be heard around the world.

Enhance:
Voice

Reverse:
Leash

Obsolesce pay phones – no longer necessary when people carry their own.

Retrieve:
Childhood yelling

Obsolesce:
Pay phone

Cell Phone

Retrieves childhood yelling

– just like kids who yell for mom instead of thinking through a problem, people forfeit critical thought processes and “give a shout” instead of making a choice.

Reverse – now that you can be contacted anywhere, any time, you are expected to respond, anywhere, any time.

See
more
tetrads
here

Exploring through the Laws of Media

The Laws of Media is a tool of inductive reasoning where you are coming to a conclusion based on evidence derived through imagination and divergent thinking. **There are no right and wrong answers just probable or reasonable assertions.**

In approaching the Laws of Media on any given media, you might ask a series of questions to get to know the media, such as...

What do I know about the media?

What function is it designed to serve?

What else can it be used for? Is it designed to serve multiple functions (i.e. the smartphone recalls the swiss army knife)?

How might it fail?

What does it remind me of?

What served this function, in part or in whole, before?

Where did the previous device or medium excel or fail?

What are the unintended consequences of this device? Such as, cars help us move faster so we move farther away from our destinations (cars made the suburbs).

What practices have stopped as a result of this technology or idea?

With the evidence gleaned from your inquiry, try to plot it on a Laws of Media tetrad. Use the follow pages to organize your notes and claim an effect as either enhance, reverse, obsolete, or recall.

Media / technology /
device / concept

[Empty rounded rectangular box]

Observations / thoughts:

Consider intended
and unintended func-
tions.

Stay in context of the
enhancement. At its
extreme, how does it
fall appart?

Observations / thoughts:

Enhance:

Reverse:

connections?

Retrieve:

Obsolesce:

Observations / thoughts:

Consider what served
this function was
served in earlier ages
(pre-digital, electric,
mechanical, pre-
literate, tribal times).

What technology has
been pushed aside
by this new tool? Is it
being used for a new
function, if so its a
retrieval too?

Observations / thoughts:

Share and Discuss the Laws of Media

As this process assumes uncertainty, participants may feel uneasy about their observations and findings in the tetrad. As such, this is the time to place tetrads in a public space for discussion.

Share and discuss tetrads through whiteboards & smartboards, paper & posters, websites & blogspots, Powerpoints or Keynotes, etc.

A little advice... There are no set answers but it is worth striving for consistency. I.e., There should be some connection between enhancements and reversals; even in a traffic jam the car still works but it can't fulfill its function of expediency.

Going Creative with the Laws of Media

Recalls/retrievals, in particular, frequently lead to eureka moments -- in an instant people make new connections and gain new insights. These can be the catalyst for a creative project.

Participants might:

- Use a retrieval as the foundation for an advertisement to promote a product. I.e. the iPod's capacity to play back songs retrieves the uke box or kitchen party. Make an add where you take a whole juke box or a kitchen party of musicians in a car with you for a ride.
- Explore a reversal as a theme for a short story. For example, the theme of utopian and distopian environments.

Dig deeper into a medium's fortune.

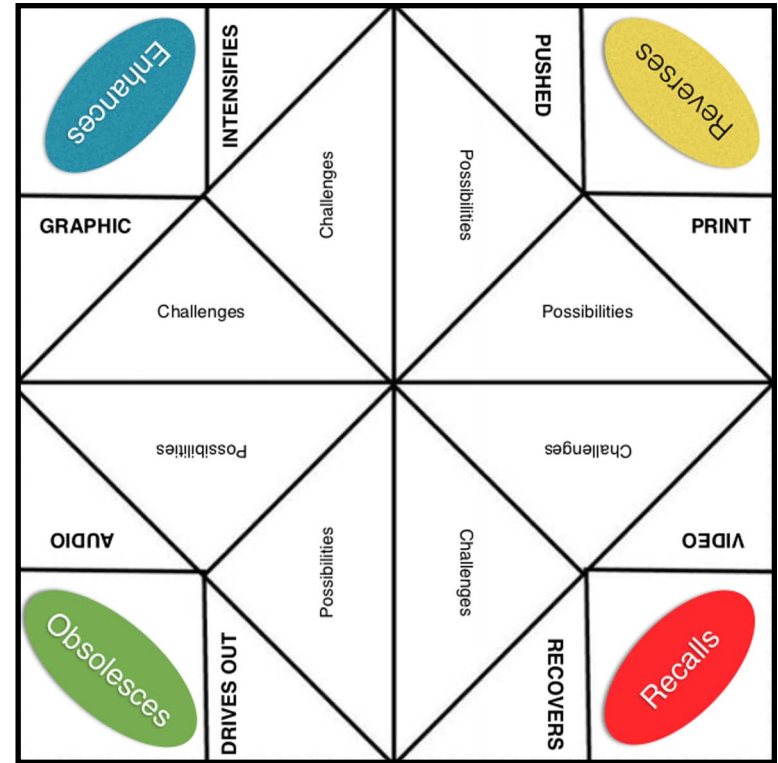
On the right is a template for a Laws of Media fortune teller*. Make your own, fold it and play it with others.

In case you don't remember how to play...

- Select a colour.
- Select a media type of graphic, print, audio or video,
- Decide if it is intensified, pushed to the end, driven out or recovered.
- Select possibilities or challenges.

You might have selected, for example, graphic, intensified, and challenges. This may guide an investigation into an issue such as a pulp and paper plant that is increasing production thus causing more pollution and with it public relation challenges.

*Fortune teller compliments of Lisa O'Neill.



What does he mean?

These ideas are worth discussion:

Note how we refer to *media*. McLuhan and others would use these words almost interchangeably.

Media, technology, device, extension, idea, human artifact, tool. What other terms do you know that would be synonymous with media?

McLuhan explains his approach to writing as exploration where: “Nearly everything I write is concerned with areas of exploration in which I am actively engaged in discovery. That is why I say “I have no point of view.”” (Logan, 2013, p.23)

“all advertising advertises advertising”

“I may be wrong, but I’m never in doubt.”

If it works, it’s obsolete.

We look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future.

Mud sometimes gives the illusion of depth.

Why is it so easy to acquire the solutions of past problems and so difficult to solve current ones?

People don’t actually read newspapers. They step into them every morning like a hot bath.

The answers are always inside the problem, not outside.

The future of the book is the blurb.

At the speed of light, policies and political parties yield place to charismatic images.

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Enhance:

Reverse:

Retrieve:

Obsolесce:

Find more Laws of Media resources at
www.hortonhighschool.ca/staff/scottbennett/media/

Extend your understanding of the Laws of Media through this toolkit series by Wayne Constantineau and Eric McLuhan.

The Human Equation: The Constant in Human Development from Pre-Literacy to Post-Literacy