

Chapter 32 Primary Source Activity

Communications technology—radio, television, computers, satellites—changed every aspect of life in the later twentieth century (textbook page 841). Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian, studied the influence of the media, saying “The medium is the message.” He also predicted that technology would make the world a “global village.” This excerpt suggests a new way to look at media. ♦ *As you read, think about your own everyday interactions with media. Then, on a separate sheet of paper, answer the questions that follow.*

Media—“Hot” and “Cold”

There is a basic principle that distinguishes a hot medium like radio from a cool one like the telephone, or a hot medium like the movie from a cool one like TV. A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in “high definition.” High definition is the state of being well filled with data. A photograph is, visually, “high definition.” A cartoon is “low definition,” simply because very little visual information is provided. Telephone is a cool medium, or one of low definition, because the ear is given a meager amount of information. And speech is a cool medium of low definition, because so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience. Naturally, therefore, a hot medium like radio has very different effects on the user from a cool medium like the telephone. . . .

Any hot medium allows of less participation than a cool one, as a lecture makes for less participation than a seminar and a book for less [participation] than dialogue. . . .



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An example of the disruptive impact of a hot technology succeeding a cool one is given by Robert Theobald. . . . When Australian natives were given steel axes by the missionaries, their culture, based on the stone axe, collapsed. The stone axe had not only been scarce but had always been a basic status symbol of male importance. The missionaries provided quantities of sharp steel axes and gave them to women and children. The men had even to borrow these from the women, causing a collapse of male dignity. A tribal and feudal hierarchy of traditional kind collapses quickly when it meets any hot medium of the mechanical, uniform, and repetitive kind. The medium of money or wheel or writing, or any other form of specialist speed-up of exchange and information, will serve to fragment a tribal structure. Similarly, a very much greater speed-up, such as occurs with electricity, may serve to restore a tribal pattern of intense involvement such as took place with the introduction of radio in Europe, and is now tending to happen as a result of TV in America.

Source: *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, by Marshall McLuhan (New American Library, 1964).

Questions to Think About

1. According to McLuhan, why is the telephone a “cool” medium and the radio “hot”?
2. What does McLuhan say is the effect of a very rapid increase in information, such as the introduction of TV in America?
3. **Drawing Conclusions** Using McLuhan’s way of classifying media, do you think that the Internet and other parts of the “electronic superhighway” would be hot or cool? Explain your conclusion.
4. **Activity** Make a poster to illustrate McLuhan’s idea that television and other electronic media have made the world a “global village.”