

ENG 480, *Computers & Writing*, Fall 2003

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# Unit two introduction & assignment

## 1. Understanding electronic media

*Understanding Media* was originally published in 1964. The edition of the text I ordered for our class was published in 1994—thirty years after its original publication, on the eve of the explosion of the World Wide Web into a globally important electronic medium. Unlike many introductions to later editions, Lewis H. Lapham's excellent introduction to the 1994 text merits your attention. It can help you understand *Understanding Media*, and you should read it before beginning McLuhan's text.

I hope you find McLuhan's work interesting. He draws connections (with varying degrees of success) between widely different elements of our culture and the world at large—such as the effects of warfare on the development of media (102). He shows how small, seemingly minor changes in the operation of a technology can indicate profound difference—such as the shift from clocks which showed a continuous flow of time (using sand and water) to those which ticked, dividing time into segments (153).

Like *Orality and Literacy*, as a scholarly text, *Understanding Media* includes numerous citations and quotations. As I suggested for Ong's work, who-said-what is much less important than what was said and how it relates to the book's argument. This is especially important when McLuhan uses quotations and repetition to support his habit of "Delphic aphorism" (x).

Aphorism-example-repeat is a common technique in *Understanding Media*. McLuhan often makes a point by stating it in several slightly different ways. His technique is less often linear explanation (like Ong) than a collage or pastiche constructed from repeated movement over similar terrain. Consider the notion of hot and cold media introduced in chapter two. First McLuhan offers a direct definition (22), extends that with examples (22-23), adds detail about hot media (23), and so on. The basic point is repeated again in the beginning of chapter three (33), and revisited often in part two.

That's one reason I advocate taking notes on the text: write down a few lines about each page. You don't have to understand everything perfectly the first time you read it. As your notes get longer, you'll see patterns start to emerge. Then you can re-read the text, using your notes to guide you, and deepen your understanding.

### The structure of the text

Part one of *Understanding Media* introduces McLuhan's theory of media. The following concepts, among others, are introduced in these first seventy pages (the citations offered here are *not at all* exhaustive):

- the concepts of hot and cold media (22-9, 33-4)
- "the medium is the message"—the relationship between form and content (7-10, 13, 21)
- Narcissus narcosis, or media-inspired fascination or somnambulism (41-44, 60, 63)
- why electric light should be considered a medium (9-11, 52, 57-8)
- translation and adaptation as models for media hybridization—our "and" (48-50, 56-8)
- "medium" as an extension of the senses, or of humankind in general (20-1, 43-7)

After reading part one, you should be able to describe each of these concepts in detail, consulting your notes to locate relevant quotations which support your descriptions. McLuhan will return to these concepts over and over again in part two.

Part two is a series of shorter chapters which treat various media in detail, filling out the concepts illustrated in part one while introducing a few new important ideas (see below):

- the importance of speed
- the role of transportation as a medium
- a technological cycle of explosion and/or implosion
- amplification (auditory and otherwise) as a model for media change

McLuhan considers recognizable media such as printing, photography, telephone, movies, and television. He also writes about a wide variety of objects, systems, and practices which are not commonly considered media (even today), and makes a case for thinking of them as media.

After reading the second part of the book, you should be able to understand the ways McLuhan applies concepts developed in part one to media in Part Two. You should understand the operation of supplementary theoretical concepts noted above (as well as others not indicated here). Finally, you should be able to consider the role of computing and contemporary electronic media using the concepts developed in *Understanding Media*. Many of McLuhan's predictions about the development of media have come true, which is astounding for a text which was "seventy-five percent new" when it was published (4).

The relationship between Ong and McLuhan should be visible to you. Concepts from Ong's work appear in McLuhan's—such as homeostasis (98-9). Many of the principles of print literacy, as McLuhan defines them, should be quite familiar (81-4). Ong and McLuhan share methodologies, as well: both carefully consider the meaning of paradoxes (12, 38).

As you can see on the course schedule (see below and on the course web site), the readings assigned from *Understanding Media* include most of part one but are selective about part two (the application of the theory). Our division of McLuhan's work into "on e/theory" and "two/a pplication and extension of theory" doesn't always work perfectly, and should be considered as convenience only.

If you have problems understanding *Understanding Media*, **I expect to hear about them.** We will not be spending nearly as much time working through the text in class as we did for *Orality and Literacy*. If you are having difficulty, please contact me or come to my office hours.

## 2. Project two assignment

The second project has two main parts: a small group project which addresses part one of the text, and a larger individual project which considers all of *Understanding Media*. We will write about McLuhan's theories using electronic forms of writing. Your projects will be hypertexts posted on the web. You will use email to discuss the work of other students. I suggest that you use email and the web, and consider Connections (the MOO), to communicate with other class members and complete your group assignment.

### Group project

Working with two other students, make a web site which defines, describes, and provides examples of one of the major concepts presented in Part One. These web sites will be available

to the entire course for consultation during the remainder of the semester. I will assign groups and distribute the major concepts of *UM* among them by Wednesday, September 24. Two or three class days during weeks six and seven will be reserved for group work. I expect you will supplement this class time with email, MOO, or other discussions outside of class.

Each group will use the class email list to publicize their work and to request reviews of it by other students and by me. Groups are also encouraged to use the class list to articulate questions about *Understanding Media* or the process of making web pages. We will spend class time on this process, and I will answer questions about it to the best of my ability, but you will have to learn parts of it on your own.

The first public version of this group assignment should be posted on the Web by October 3, and work should be completed by October 10.

At the conclusion of this unit (October 24), each student in the group will compose an email to me which describes his or her contributions to the group project, as well as the contributions of other group participants.

#### *Email reviews of group projects*

Each group will use the class email list to publicize the posting of their project (the web address and the subject matter). Every student in the class will be required to engage in email review of projects completed by other groups. You should look over posted projects and offer your opinion about the way they are constructed, their representation of McLuhan's argument, their usefulness for our class, etc. As a public critique, your reviews should be polite and constructive, but they should also be substantive and, as necessary, critical. I will coordinate assignment of these reviews so that every group has an equal number of students providing email reviews.

Also, you can use the class list to respond to initial announcements of posted projects, or to messages sent by other students about them. You can disagree with a posted opinion and argue why you believe it is incorrect. I expect every student to post at least three messages about other projects to the class list. I also expect groups to engage students who review their projects, in order that revisions may be successfully undertaken, or to clear up misunderstanding.

#### **Individual project**

You have three options for an individual project based on McLuhan's work. As with unit one, you will need to complete a prospectus (or draft, if you desire) which informs me which option you intend to undertake, and how you plan to answer the questions asked by the assignment.

##### *1. Two minor media*

As noted above, part two of the text branches into everyday life, discussing objects, systems, and practices which are still today not commonly considered media by many people. Make a web site (or a pair of sites) which describes the operation of two of the "minor" media explained in Part Two of *Understanding Media*. Ideally, these forms will be related in some way, but you can consider different media. Use images, your own explanations, outside research, and your personal experience to build a Web site which demonstrates McLuhan's argument for considering a certain object, system or practice as "media." Your work should cover much more than instrumental features: include the cultural and unintended effects which make McLuhan's work provocative.

You are encouraged to engage in critique of McLuhan here: what did he get right? What did he get wrong? But be charitable and cautious: consider how many predictions about technology from the past were completely off-base (we aren't all flying helicopters and taking moon vacations these days).

For this option, your prospectus should indicate the media you wish to describe, the sections from part two you wish to work with, a list of any outside sources you plan to use, and a description of the theoretical concepts of *Understanding Media* which you see as relevant for the media material you are describing.

## 2. *Ong and McLuhan: theoretical similarity and difference*

McLuhan was Ong's student, but McLuhan became famous long before Ong did—and today is probably more famous than Ong ever was or will be. *Orality and Literacy* was published after *Understanding Media*. Ong and McLuhan have a lot in common—though they also have considerable differences. Construct a hypertext which compares and contrasts part of McLuhan's theory and practice with part of Ong's. While you will be working on the web, it would be helpful to keep some of the trappings of print—like citations and quotations—since this is a pedagogical exercise. Demonstrate the differences in the two theories with examples constructed from hypertext and/or images.

Your prospectus should indicate the ideas you wish to contrast and the major points of similarity and difference you envision. Your understanding of the concepts should be apparent from your prospectus (and if you're off the mark, I'll intervene). If you are using outside research to clarify your understanding of McLuhan and/or Ong, your prospectus should include a Works Cited.

## 3. *Rebuilding Understanding Media*

As Lapham notes in his introduction, *Understanding Media* is at times non-linear: its argument has been described as a repetitive series of recursive loops, a mosaic, a collage, and in other forms. None of these forms are typical for the codex book. Some critics have suggested that McLuhan would have published *Understanding Media* as hypertext, if a widely distributable form of hypertext had been available in 1964.

Recast selections from *Understanding Media* as a web-based hypertext, using illustrations, images, graphics, and a linked structure. Your prospectus must indicate the chapters you wish to recast and why you have selected those chapters. (I expect a mix of chapters from parts one and two of the text: you should connect theory and application in this project.) The prospectus should describe the methodology you plan to use to adapt *Understanding Media* to hypertext.

Your hypertexts must not be a simple web-based presentation of the text—that would be maintenance of the print-oriented structure in an electronic form—and it would be far, far too much typing. While you should include quotations and passages from the text in your hypertext, use paraphrase, substitution of images and links to replace McLuhan's form.

You can (and perhaps should) also include commentary which describes your methodology. This will also allow you to replace actual insertion of large components of the text with notes, and enable you to deal with "holes" in this project which are simply necessary due to its small scope.

### About your web sites—for both group and individual work

Your web sites must be detailed, comprehensive works which integrate images, text, and/or other media of your choice. Technical perfection and sophistication is not expected, but uninspired use of the form is not sufficient. This assignment will give you a first experience working with hypertext, in preparation for the last part of the semester, where you will be expected to show a higher degree of expertise with the form.

Your web site should do much more than summarize and present a Web-based version of McLuhan's work. Get beyond the logic of print with links and other techniques. Mix text and graphics in your explanation. Scan or create illustrations if you need to. If you are looking for particular photographs and cannot find them, create them yourself. Creative use of the capabilities of hypertext is a must. Ask me (or better yet, the class list) if there's something you want to do but don't know how to approach it—I might have some ideas.

Regardless of the task you are completing: explain and demonstrate carefully. Consider that your audience is the world, and write accordingly: your work should be understandable to English speakers who have not read McLuhan's text.

### 3. Updates to the syllabus

The following changes to course policies are effective immediately:

- 1) Unless noted on the syllabus, or you have permission from me, response papers are due on Mondays. (Response papers for Week 6 are due on 9/24; for the rest of the semester, they are due on Mondays.)
- 2) Late response papers will be penalized 5 points per calendar day.
- 3) Multiple-page responses must be stapled or paper-clipped, with the student's name on every page.

#### Schedule revision

I have altered our schedule by moving Week 10 into Unit Two. This gives us a little more time to work on McLuhan and to complete group presentations and a revision cycle. I have also moved all readings from Ulmer's text to Unit Three. (I may delete some readings from weeks 7 and 8; stay tuned.)

<i>Week</i>	<i>Dates</i>	<i>Readings and activities</i>
6	9/22-9/26	UM part one: theory (Intro through Ch 7, or pages ix-73)
7	9/29-10/3	UM part two selections: major media (Ch 8-10, 20-21, 25, 29-31) Group assignment draft due 10/3
8	10/6-10/10	UM part two selections: minor media (Ch 11-19, 22-24, 26-28, 32-33) Group assignment final due 10/10 Prospectus for individual project due 10/10
9	10/13-10/17	
10	10/20-10/24	Final individual project and group evaluation due 10/24