

Classifying Media: Hot and Cool




McLuhan's basic classification of media as either "hot" or "cool" hinges on special senses of the words "definition" and "information"—and on our physical senses more than word-senses. McLuhan borrows from the technical language of television to make his point about definition. It's a two-part tale.

Part One:

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In the TV world, "high-definition" means well-defined, sharp, solid, detailed, etc., in reference to anything visual. So, to McLuhan, letters of the alphabet, numbers, photographs, and maps, for example, are high-definition objects.

Forms and shapes and images that are not so distinct (like sketches and cartoons) are "low-definition." For these, our eyes must scan what is visible and fill in what is missing to "get the full picture." This "fill-in-the-blanks" principle applies to sounds (our sense of hearing) as well. 



A HIGH-DEFINITION MEDIUM

gives a lot of information and gives LITTLE to do *and* →



A LOW-DEFINITION MEDIUM

gives A LITTLE information and makes the user WORK to fill in what is missing

Part Two:

When McLuhan speaks of the "information" that a medium transmits, he is not referring to facts or knowledge; rather, he is referring to how our physical senses respond to, or participate in, media.



HIGH-DEFINITION IS
HOT

LOW-DEFINITION IS
COOL

Here's how McLuhan classifies various media:



radio



print

photographs

movies



lectures



COOL



telephone

speech

cartoons

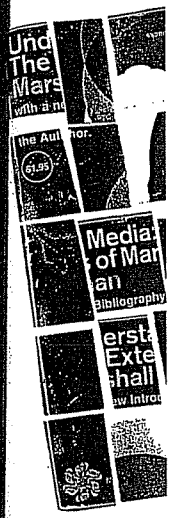
television



seminar



gain, McLuhan emphasizes the role of our physical senses and our perceptions and how we relate to media. "Hot" media are low in participation; "cool" media are high in participation. Participation does not refer primarily to intellectual involvement, but, like "definition" and "information," to how a medium engages our physical senses.



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