Lecture – 36
Introduction to Marshall McLuhan

Welcome participants to the 8th week of our course on Literature Culture and Media. In the last module we had seen how culture and media are interconnected, shape each other and are also shaped by each other. We have seen how different media theorists in the beginning of the 20th century have started to talk about these interconnections. It is in the 20th century that the media technologies grew at a very fast pace. And therefore, it was only logical to imagine the critical work in this area.

One of the major theorist whom we would discuss in today's module is Marshall McLuhan who is primarily known as a medium theorist.

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McLuhan as a medium theorist

- Medium theory/Channel Theory/Medium Formalist
- McLuhan is a formalist
- Questions he has taken up:
    --Different channels of communication and how do they differ
    --Media is distinguished in terms of the cognitive processes required
    --How does medium alter perception and
      influences society and culture

He is a formalist and often he is termed as a propounder of medium theory or general theory or as a medium formalist. He has raised various questions in his work, for example what are the different channels of communication and how do they differ particularly in terms of influencing the cognitive processes which are required among the people to understand, interpret and use them.

He has also tried to find out answers and explanation to the issue of how a medium alters perceptions of people and thereby influence society and culture.

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Medium Theory

- Medium theory examines physical, psychological and social variables as the senses that are required to attend to the medium
- Whether the communication is bi-directional or uni-directional
- How quickly messages can be disseminated
- Whether learning to encode and decode in the medium is difficult or simple
- How many people can attend to the same message at the same moment
- The symbolic environment of any communicative act

-- These variables determine the medium's use and its social, political, and psychological impact.

(Source https://www.utwente.nl/en/bms/communication-theories/sorted-by-cluster/Media%2C%20Culture%20and%20Society/Medium_theory-1/)

The medium theory examines physical, psychological and social variables as the sensors that are required to attend to the medium, to understand it and to use it. It also depends on whether the medium which is being used is bidirectional or unidirectional. It also looks at the efficacy of a medium to quickly disseminate a message among the number of people. It also reviews the simplicity of decoding a message in the context of a particular medium and at the same time the number of people whom a particular medium can access immediately.

The symbolic environments of any communicative act are also looked at in the medium theory. These variables determine the use of the medium and as well as the impact in the context of social, political and psychological environments in any given cultural setting.

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Important Publications

- *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* (1951)
- *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962)
- *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964)
- *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (1967)
- *War and Peace in the Global Village* (1968)
- *From Cliché to Archetype* (1970)
- *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st Century* (1989). Published posthumously

Marshall McLuhan has written various books, even though the most famous book which is written by him is with the title *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* published in 1964. The other books have an equal significance to understand how media functions in contemporary days. There has been a renewed interest in Marshall McLuhan's work because 30 years before the internet was invented he had prophesied its invention.

His first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* had come out in 1951. His last book, *The Global Village: Transformations in World Life and Media in the 21st century* was published in 1989 posthumously. The first book, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* is a pioneer study in popular culture. This book has been deeply influenced by the works of Denys Thomson as well as F. R. Leavis.

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The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man (1951)

- Is a pioneer study in popular culture
- Influence of F.R.Leavis *(Culture and Environment)* and Denys Thompson
- Title influenced by a piece of Marcel Duchamp, a Dadaist artist
- Essays, independent as well as interconnected, the 'mosaic approach'
- Analysis of a newspaper article or advertisement to understand its eclectic cultural associations and ramifications

Particularly it is influenced by F. R. Leavis book entitled *Cultural Environment*. The title of this novel has been influenced by a piece of Marcel Duchamp, who was a Dadaist artist. This book has been written with what McLuhan has termed himself as a mosaic approach. It is a collection of essays which can be read independently as well as, as an interdependent hole.

In all these essays Marshall McLuhan has began with an analysis of either a newspaper article or a particular advertisement and keeping it as a focal point he has tried to understand the eclectic cultural associations and ramifications of that particular article or advertisement. **(Refer Slide Time: 05:05)**

- *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (1962), McLuhan examines the emergence of what he calls the Gutenberg Man
- Changes in consciousness and cognitive organization of human beings with the advent of the printed text and how the subject is produced through it
- Technologies are not simple inventions—people are changed and reinvented
- Movable type—encourages homogeneity, standardization and repeatability
- Invention of movable type (Gutenberg printing press)
  - Shift from a culture of common interplay to the *tyranny* of the visual over the oral

His next book *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* was published in 1962. In this book McLuhan has examined the emergence of what he called as the Gutenberg Man. As we can understand easily on the basis of the title, McLuhan has tried to understand the changes which have been brought about in our culture and in our psyche collectively by the advent of the Gutenberg press or the medium of the print.

According to McLuhan, the technologies are not simple inventions, they change people, they also help individual human beings to reinvent themselves in terms of the capacities, which might be latent in them. His idea is that every technology particularly the technology which is related with communication or media has the capability to change the cognition patterns and the perceptions of human being.

According to Marshall McLuhan, the movable type when it was invented encouraged a sense of homogeneity is standardization and repeatability. Because prior to this technological

invention it was not possible to create an exact replica of any book even. So, the invention of movable type created a technological revolution as well as a cultural revolution which changed the way human beings understand things and at the same time interact with each other.

Marshall McLuhan has termed this shift from a culture of common interplay to the tyranny of the visual over the oral. It is important for us to note that McLuhan has distinguished phonetic alphabet from logographic or logogramic writing systems. These systems in which a particular character represents a word. For example, the Chinese characters, the Egyptian hieroglyphs, the Japanese Kanji or the cuneiform systems also.

He writes that the world of visual perspective is one of unified and homogeneous space. Such a world is alien to the resonating diversity of spoken words. So according to him language was the last art to accept the visual logic of Gutenberg technology and the first to rebound in the electric age. So we find that with the help of the discussion of technological advancements in the field of media he is also trying to understand the changes in human culture.

He has also suggested that the invention of the printing technology has reduced the vagaries of handwritten manuscripts because they promoted a linear culture.

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- Distinguishes phonetic alphabet from logographic/logogramic writing systems (written character that represents a word, Chinese characters, Japanese kanji, Egyptian hieroglyphs, cuneiform script). He writes:

    "The world of visual perspective is one of unified and homogeneous space. Such a world is alien to the resonating diversity of spoken words. So language was the last art to accept the visual logic of Gutenberg technology, and the first to rebound in the electric age".

- Reduced the vagaries of hand-written manuscripts
- Commodification of literature
- Emergence of the "author"
- Emergence of a public culture

It also resulted into commodification of literature, emergence of an independent figure of the author and at the same time the public culture, which emerged after it was very different from

the previous one. As we have already noticed it motivated mankind towards a rational and liner approach towards thing resulting into various international changes.

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- *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964), is his most widely known work
- The medium is the message: focus should be on the media, not merely on the content
- Medium also affects the society: example of a light bulb
- Mankind's view of the world changes with the adoption of new technology, particularly the new media technology
- Concept of hot and cool media

His writings, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* is his most widely known work. It is in this work that we find the phrase 'the medium is the message', which is the phrase which is most commonly associated with the work of Marshall McLuhan. His focus in criticism is not merely on the content, but also on analysing the medium itself. According to him medium also affects the society initiating several changes.

In the previous discussions, we had seen how McLuhan had given the example of the railway networks. Another example which he has given is that of a light bulb. According to him the light bulb does not even have a content, it is a sheer and simple, a very primary technological invention, but it has initiated whereas changes in human habits in terms of claiming the time after the dark.

So the type of activities which could be conducted after the invention of a lightbulb initiated changes in the way human beings could organise their day, their business activities and other entertainment activities. So the simple invention initiated a change in our cultural values. In the same way when we adopt a new technology particularly the new media technology our world view also changes.

And since the 20th century the media technologies are developing at a very fast pace, we find that our perceptions in the context of cultural understandings are also changing in a very fast

manner. As people had tried to criticize Inns by saying that he proposes an argument which is basically deterministic.

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Technological Determinism

- New media technologies exert a gravitational pull over cognition, which changes social organization. New medium transforms and alters perceptual habits and affects social interaction
- "The theory Marshall McLuhan advanced has been called technological determinism. As with any deterministic theory, the basic claim is that some single cause or phenomenon determines other aspects of life
- "The theory of technological determinism states that technology – specifically, media – decisively shapes how individuals think, feel, and act and how societies organize themselves and operate" (238).

The similar idea has also been propounded by the critics of Marshall McLuhan. He has also criticized for forwarding what is normally known as technological determinism as with any other deterministic theory the basic claim in this is that there is a single cause of phenomenon which determines the other aspects of life. This theory of technological determinism states that technology particularly the media technology decisively shapes how individual human beings think, feel and act and how societies organise themselves and operate themselves.

McLuhan suggested that the new media technologies exert what can be compared with the gravitational pull over cognition. These changes in our cognition change the social organisation and therefore the new technologies in the context of media, transform and alter our perceptual habits affecting not only individual cognition, but also the way we socially interact with each other.

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Crucial Inventions according to McLuhan

- **The phonetic alphabet**
- **The printing press**
- **The telegraph**

Why these particular Inventions are important?
What are the effects?

McLuhan has suggested that there are certain inventions over the passage of time which are crucial for understanding the way human culture has evolved and changed. And these three things which are important to him are the phonetic alphabet, the printing press and the telegraph. So, he tries to understand what is the significance of these innovations for our cultural changes and how they have affected individual cognition and perception also.

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Basic concepts

- Cultural repercussions of technology enrichment. Technological inventions cause cultural change
- Changes in modes of communication shape human life: "We shape our tools and they in turn shape us."
- Way we live and understand reality and ourselves is primarily a function of how we process information and media technologies
- Phonetic alphabet, printing press, and telegraph dramatically altered the way people perceived themselves

As we have already seen, Marshall McLuhan basically contains that technological inventions result in significant cultural shifts and changes and therefore there are cultural repercussions of every technological changes and advancement. Changes in communication technology shape human life and I quote a sentence from Marshall McLuhan in which he says "we shape our tools and they in turn shape us". So the way we develop the media technology we are shaped by them.

So the way we live and understand the reality and ourselves is primarily a function of how we process information which we received through different sources of media. So phonetic alphabet, printing press and telegraph dramatically altered the way and the speed with which people perceived themselves and the world around them. And therefore according to him these are the three most significant technological developments of mankind.

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Media as Extensions of Ourselves

- Core of McLuhan's media theory is outlined in *Understanding Media* (1964)
- Dominant medium of an age dominates people
- McLuhan writes: "all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed" (90)
- "Any extension, whether of skin, hand, or foot, affects the whole psychic and social complex." (4)
- Saw all technology as the pushing of the "archetypal forms of the unconscious out into social consciousness."

He has also suggested that media is an extension of our senses. His idea is that in every age our culture is dominated by a particular medium. So, in every age there is a dominant medium which dominates people and at the same time it acts as an extension of our physical and our nervous system to enhance the power and speed with which we can work. This is a very old and conventional analogy, but the way Marshall McLuhan has added the latest developments of media to it, it has become very interesting.

So, he says that it can be any extension whether of skin or hand or foot which is affected the psychic and social complexities of mankind. So, in his opinion the technology is same as pushing of the archetypal forms of the unconscious out into the social consciousness with enhanced sensory perceptions which the media technology has provided to us. Each new media innovation is in a way an extension of some human faculty.

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- Each new media innovation is an extension of some human faculty
  - --The book is an extension of the eye
  - --The wheel is an extension of the foot
  - --Clothing is an extension of the skin
  - --Electronic circuitry is an extension of the central nervous system
- Media amplifies or intensifies a bodily organ, sense, or function. It extends our reach, increases our efficiency, acts as a filter to organize and interpret our social existence

For example, the book is an extension of the eye, the wheel is an extension of the foot, clothing is an extension of the skin and electronic circuitry is an extension of the central nervous system. So, in his views media amplifies and intensifies a bodily organ, a sensory perception or a function of human society. It therefore extends our reach, increases our efficiency and at the same time, it helps us to filter and organize and interpret our social existence by receiving the ideas and information in a particular fashion.

And therefore these extensions of our sensory perceptions and cognitive perceptions also have psychic and social consequences which cannot be undermined.

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- Psychic and social consequences of these extensions
- Media, by altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act – the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, men change.
- Examples: wheel extends the feet; phone extends the voice; television extends the eyes and ears; computer extends the brain

By changing the environment, we find that the media evokes certain ratios of sense perceptions among us and the extension of anyone since alters the way we think and act and

the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, we find that men also change and the examples he has already given are wheels, which we have discussed, how phone has extended the voice, the television has extended the eyes and ears and how the computers have extended the functions of the brain.

Marshall McLuhan also treats language as a medium of technology, because according to him it is an extension of thought and extension of our consciousness, ideas and feelings, because without the invention of language it would have been impossible for mankind to express its own ideas thoughts, creativity, intellectual impulses or to record them for posterity.

So in his opinion, the invention of artificial intelligence which in a way he has been able to forecast much before its actual invention is like approaching the final phase of the extension of man.

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- Language is also a medium or technology (extension of thoughts, consciousness, ideas, feelings):
  - -"It is the extension of man in speech that enables the intellect to detach itself from the vastly wider reality. Without language . . . human intelligence would have remained totally involved in the objects of its attention" (79).
- Approaching the final phase of the extension of man—technological simulation of consciousness (AI)
- Neither a technophile nor a technophobe— interested only in the implications of technological extensions
- Envisions a move towards global consciousness

It is a technological simulation of our very consciousness. So, he is neither a technophile nor a technophobe. He has also envisioned a move towards global consciousness and it is his capability to foresee the changes in such an effective way that have made him such a profound voice in the context of media theories.

McLuhan has also analysed the development of human history with the help of the changing face of media. The first age in human history according to him is a tribal age which was dominated by an oral culture. The speech by humankind was developed about 20,000 to 40,000 years back and at that time orality was the primary mode and our world was an

acoustic place. It was dominated only by the sounds. So, then we find that in this culture there was a lot of passion and spontaneity in human interactions. This is how McLuhan has imagined that the spoken word normally has more emotionality laden in it than the printed text because the printed text allows us certain time gap in order to rephrase our passions and to understand our emotions in a better way. This time gap was not possible in the oral culture.

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McLuhan's Media Analysis of History

The Tribal Age: Oral Culture. Speech developed by human around 20,000-40,000 years ago. Orality was the primary mode

- World was an acoustic place--aurality
- Sensory fields of hearing, touch, taste, and smell more developed than sight
- High involvement, passion, and spontaneity in interactions - spoken word more emotionally laden than printed text
- Life more complex because the ear is not capable of selecting the stimuli it takes in
- Narrative Storytelling, Immersion and Simultaneity
- Interconnected Communities

And therefore the spoken word is normally more laden with emotions. And therefore we find that the culture which emerged during the tribal days was of narrative story telling in which people had to be immersed deeply to make certain meaning of it and at the same time there was a lot of simultaneity in the narration also. And therefore the communities used to interact a lot and they were interconnected. These features change when the media of expression changed. And the tribal age was replaced by what McLuhan has termed as the literate age.

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The Literate Age

- The invention of the phonetic alphabet in Greece, 2000 B.C.
- Visual becomes dominant sense - Ear exchanged for the eye
- Shifts to "civilized" private detachment rather than "primitive" tribal involvement and collectivity
- Solitary learning
- Boosts logical, linear thinking
    - Mathematics, logic, science, philosophy
    - Line became the organizing principle

The invention of the phonetic alphabet in Greece changed the situation and we find that the visual became a dominant sense for the human beings. The ear which was important to listen to the sound was exchanged for the eye which could read the phonetic alphabet.

So we find that there is a sudden shift to civilized private detachment rather than primitive tribal involvement and collectivity which was a necessity of those time and learning became a solitary affair than a collective narration or storytelling. And therefore we find that it is in this age that linearity in terms of thought was promoted, it has boosted logical interpretation of things and therefore mathematics or logic or science or philosophy matured during this time.

So line became the organising principle instead of simultaneity. Another major shift came when we move towards a print age, which began obviously with the intervention of the printing press in Germany in 1450 AD.

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The Print Age

- Began with the invention of the printing press in Germany, 1450 AD.
- Vision, linearity, logic, solitary learning (on a more expansive scale)
- Visual dependence becomes dominant
- "Repeatability" and "reproducibility" the most important feature of movable type
- Glorification of individualism
- Prototype of Industrial Revolution
- Mass production of identical products
- Standardization of national languages encouraged nationalism. Fragmented communities. Emergence of the middle-class

So, we find that the vision, the linearity, logic, solitary learning became much more important than they were in the previous cultures. And at the same time visual dependence became much more dominant. At the same time, we find that repeatability of a particular book or particular printed medium and its reproducibility at a price which was affordable became most important features of this culture.

It resulted into several changes which we have covered in previous modules for example, glorification of individualism, industrial revolution, mass production of identical products, standardization of national languages by promoting vernacular mediums among other things we can say that it also encouraged fragmented communities as well as the emergence of the middle class leading towards very fundamental cultural shifts in the 20th century.

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The Electronic Age

- Telegraph (1840s); revival of orality/aurality and tactility
- The idea of "Global Village" emerges
- TV encourages spontaneity and involvement
- Retribalization
- Instantaneous communication signals the return of a pre-alphabetic oral tradition
- Linear, logical thinking fades
- Emergence of new media
- The "global village": Fragmentation to cohesion

(Source: mattsmediaresearch.com/lecturenotes/MarshallMcLuhan.ppt and
https://soma.sbcc.edu/users/ajarabo/intro.../RyanPaul_HotnColdMedia.pptx)

The 20th century has been termed as the electronic age by Marshall McLuhan, it begins with the advent of the telegraph in 1840s which was the revival of orality or aurality as well as tactility. It is in the 20th century when the electronic age becomes matured that the idea of the Global Village emerges and new media forms like television encourage spontaneity as well as involvement at a bigger scale.

The instantaneous communication signals also indicated the return of a pre-alphabetic oral tradition where immediacy of understanding and communication was important. Even though in the emergence of the new media sometimes we can say that the linear and the logical thinking fits, but it does not actually fades. We can say that simultaneously the oral tradition has become much more important than it was previously.

So we have a coexistence of linear and logical thinking and the significant oral traditions in tactility.

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The medium is the....

- The medium is the **message**.
  - --The medium defines the meaning of communication.
  - --Form over content
- The medium is the **massage**.
  - --The medium has the power to manipulate our perceptions of world
  - --lulls our consciousness, cognition
- The medium is the **mass-age**.
  - --Mass communication has become the dominant form of interaction.

When Marshall McLuhan has said that the medium is the message, we find that the phrase can be interpreted in various ways. To begin with we can say that the medium defines the meaning of communication and the form is much more important than the content because the content is shaped by the form at the same time we find that the medium has the power to manipulate our perceptions of the world because it can null our consciousness, it can alter our cognition, and thereby, it can change our perceptions.

So it defines the medium of communication, form becomes much more important because the form has the capability more than the content to lull our senses and therefore mass communication has become the dominant form of interactions, the capability of the medium to be accessed by a large number of audience simultaneously.

So, we find that when McLuhan has suggested that medium is the message he communicates all these ideas simultaneously.

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Critique

- "McLuhan's whole argument rests on the grounds of psychology of perception" which is a weak foundation for such heavy probes
- The assumption that the shape of sensory impressions is determined by the structure of the media is a generalization
- Overlooks the struggle to overcome the limits of any media through subversion/innovation and invention of new forms of representation
- Considers the audiences as a passive entity that is moulded by the media

-- J.W Carey (1967)

As we have seen earlier he has also been critiqued by various people and one of the foremost critics of Marshall McLuhan is Carey, who has written that his argument rest on the grounds of psychology of perception which in fact is primarily a weak foundation because it can never be defined in a very straight jacketed manner. The assumption that the shape of sensory impression is determined by the structure of media is at best a generalization which cannot be scientifically proved.

Carey also says that McLuhan has overlooked the struggle to overcome the limits of any media through subversion and invention of new and different forms of representation. At the same time the audience cannot be a passive entity which can be moulded absolutely and entirely by the media as some other critics in the beginning of the 20th century have pointed out it is within the media that the possibilities of subverting the dominant culture also emerge. So these aspects have been overlooked by Marshall McLuhan.

It is also said that McLuhan's analysis lacks a systematic theory of the relationship between economy and technology.

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- Analysis lacks a systematic theory of the relationship between economy and technology
- Lacks the "critical appreciation of the appropriation, and thus privatization, of technology by the lead institutions, multinational corporations and the state, in advanced industrial societies." (Arthur Kroker)
- Privileges technology over other aspects of social existence
- Little deliberation on technology and its relationship with capitalist structures
- Ignores the problem of the political economy of technology

He has focused more on the cultural aspects which are influenced by technology and he has been by and large silent about the market forces in the economic forces. And, therefore he lacks the critical appreciation of the appropriation and thus privatisation of technology by the lead institutions, multinational corporations and the state in advanced industrial societies. And, therefore we can say that he has privileged media technology over all other aspects of social existence which according to the critics should not have been overlook to this extent.

There is a little deliberation on the way technology has also abated the capitalist and patriarchal structures in our society and he has also ignored the problem of political economy, but still we can say that McLuhan's ideas have influenced the way the 20th century has started to look at the significance of media as a whole. We will continue the discussion of McLuhan ideas in the next module. Thank you.