

Yi He

## Breaking Down Media: An Overview of Media and Communications in This Course

As you can tell by the title of this course and my course welcome message, I have claimed to use communication as a main theme or perspective through which to understand the New England Puritans. But what do I mean by the terms “communication” and “media” and how will I use these themes to examine the Puritans? In this *course*, I will be using ideas within the scholarly field of communication and media studies to inspect the Puritans, and in this *lecture*, I’ll explain some facets of this field. In-depth debates from scholars have ensued over what exactly we consider a communications medium and how they impact people, times and places. Sure, we can easily think of examples, like “newspapers,” or “books,” as a medium, but what about something like a portrait, or a ritual? And what role do media play in our lives? Many media theorists argue that media, or certain kinds of media, have had a foundational, underlying influence on humans’ lives. Let’s look more closely at what they think. This lecture should help you to understand this field of communication and media a little more and give you some perspectives that will inform your understanding of several of my course lectures. First, I’ll focus on the significance of Marshall McLuhan and why I draw upon him heavily in this course; second, I’ll discuss the transition from orality and literacy, especially as portrayed by Walter Ong; thirdly, I’ll discuss a prominent debate within book history. The learning goals are for you to be able to describe at least one of these three key concepts or debates that I present in my lecture.

In this course I draw frequently on Marshall McLuhan. Professor of English at the University of Toronto in the 1940s, he burst into prominence, both nationally and internationally in the 1960s. It was his book *Understanding Media*, first published in 1964, that catapulted him into fame, although some of his well-known phrases and ideas had appeared in earlier works, like *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. I use McLuhan for this course because his works are a foundational part of media studies<sup>1</sup> and because, due both to his popularity and his pithy way of summarizing his thoughts, he might be more accessible to learners. I visit a variety of McLuhan’s ideas in this course, including: McLuhan’s analysis of towns and spaces in my lecture, “Native Common Pots and English Towns”; his view of media as translation in my lecture, “Divine Impressions”; his views on orality and literacy in my lecture, “Look and Feel: Early New England Books”; and his definition of media in my lecture, “The Second Commandment.” In the present lecture, I’ll focus on the statement for which he has come to be known, a statement which captures a distinctive way of understanding communications media. It is: “The medium is the message.”

Perhaps this statement is deceptively simple. On one level it might simply mean that the medium, or the way in which something is communicated, is what is most important. It does mean this, but it also means more. Let me introduce the context in which this statement comes up. It’s in the very first chapter of McLuhan’s book *Understanding Media*, and in fact, is part of the first sentence. Let me read this first sentence: “In a culture like ours, long accustomed to

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<sup>1</sup> Of course, there have been many media scholars since McLuhan, and McLuhan was writing in a time before widespread use of digital technology, so he does not begin to interpret digital media. However, apparently McLuhan was the one who started to use the word “media” in the way that we mean it today (Lapham x). John Durham Peters writes that his thoughts are valuable and needed in the digital era: “Both of these moves—ontologizing and pluralizing of media—make him strikingly relevant in the digital era” (15). (Durham adds, “He has become an unmissable destination for media theorists” (15).) Lance Strate writes, “Whether McLuhan firmly occupies the center [of the field of media ecology] or is positioned slightly off-center, may be debated, but his importance in establishing the field is generally accepted” (“2. McLuhan”).

splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message” (7). McLuhan was writing in the 1960s; “splitting and dividing all things as a means of control” might refer to organizing larger tasks into smaller subunits in order to get work done faster, such as automated technology in factories (something of the sort he mentions in the same paragraph, below) or electricity powering manufacturing tasks. He says the idea that “the medium is the message” will “shock” people, because we are accustomed to thinking that we can control the outcomes and results of what we do, especially as we desire to use media to accomplish things faster and more efficiently. However, he indicates that he is merely “remind[ing]” people of the obvious: that the way in which something is done or said, is what is truly changing us, rather than the reverse, when we think we are changing the world by using new techniques. McLuhan explains his idea explicitly in the next sentence: “This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium—that is, of any extension of ourselves—results from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology” (7). While people have been accustomed to looking at the “consequences” of our actions according to whether we have achieved our goals or not, McLuhan points to the fact that the consequences we should be looking at are how we are thinking and acting differently due to the medium we are using. Not just that, but among these consequences is the new sense of proportion that come about through the new ways in which we can do things. McLuhan indicates that he thinks of media as an “extension of ourselves.” For example, later he describes how he thinks of the radio as an extension of the ear: it is a way in which we can hear things from long distances away (297-307). With a new scope and a new scale, humans begin to think and do things very differently.

The next theme I wish to touch upon is the contrast between orality, or spoken words, and literacy, or written words. Many of my lectures engage in this discussion, and in fact, one unit of my course, “Speech and Writing: Is There More to These Media Than We Think,” engages this topic heavily. In these lectures, I frequently draw upon the work of 20<sup>th</sup>-century American media scholar Walter Ong to discuss orality and literacy. One of Walter Ong’s key implications is that the transition from primarily using spoken words to primarily using written words, in the West, was so large that it is one of the key differences separating the period before the 1500s with the period after it. With the introduction of literacy, the way we use our senses shifted and we lost a certain kind of understanding, a kind of unity of understanding and perception that results from attending to the world of sound (Ong, *Orality and Literacy* 70-4; Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 117-28). Walter Ong distinguishes primary orality, in which there is no or very little exposure to written words, from secondary orality, in which there has been a great deal of exposure to written words already (*Orality and Literacy* 2-3). It could be said that we in America live in a period of secondary orality, because we engage with much media involving sound, like TV and films; but, we would not be in a period of primary orality, because we are accustomed to the presence of written words. Ong notes several key features of primary oral cultures including: their reliance on mnemonics and patterns in order to remember key information; thought that is additive, that links elements with “and”; and “traditionalist” because it favors people who can retain and preserve knowledge (*Orality and Literacy* 33-42). The New England Puritans were living a little over 200 years after the printing press was invented, and many years after the introduction of writing into society. While in many ways, they are shaped by the written word, at least according to Ong, the impact of oral thought still remains. To what degree the Puritans were still shaped by orality is a question I address especially in my lectures “Putting It to Memory:

Speech and Memorization in Puritan Society,” as well as “Speaking, Writing, and Fighting in Early New England.” Some scholars have argued that there is still a surprising amount of oral influence upon the Puritans, citing how Puritans sometimes thought of the Bible as comprising an audible voice (Hall Chapter 1). Other scholars besides Walter Ong, such as Jack Goody, Dorothy Lee, Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, and others, have extensively investigated the impact of literacy on societies. Their points are not dissimilar to Ong; for example, several of these scholars have also explored how literacy encourages abstract and linear thought, in which ideas that are not tied to specific people, places, and actions, in the real world, can be developed extensively. Walter Ong is a little more distinctive in asserting how thorough and extensive the influence of literacy has been on all of the West.

Another field this course draws upon is the History of the Book. In my course, I draw upon several scholars working in this field, including David D Hall, Matthew Cohen, and Matthew Brown. History of the book examines how texts were made, printed, and distributed. It includes printed books, of course, but has also come to include handwritten texts and digital texts. It includes material aspects of books, including the sizes of pages and papers of books, how images might have been printed in them, and how pages were bound together. Not only that, but it also investigates how texts have been transported from place to place, and generally, how books and texts reflect the nature of society and readers at the time.

Book historians have reflected continually on the meaning of the term “book,” and related terms like “reading”; specifically, investigating book history amongst Native societies in America and Canada has led to a number of insights in understanding ways to conceive of “book,” and the significance of this term. The field of book history has focused much on the material aspects of books, such as how they were put together and printed, but several scholars have opened up the field to include more than just an “objective,” scientific study of book-making. D.F. McKenzie, a major scholar in the field, famously described how the field of bibliography could be called the “sociology of texts.” He show how “texts” could include any form of recording, from maps to music and by using the word “sociology,” he emphasized the role of societal conventions and human behaviors and beliefs that affect texts (McKenzie 12-15). Now, scholars of Native history have deepened this discussion of what the field of book history and what a “book” could be. In my lecture, “Communicating Across Boundaries: Wampanoag and English Communication Systems,” I present Matt Cohen’s notion of a publication event, which he seems to see as a more useful concept in analyzing early America than something like the term “book.” By “publication event,” Cohen means some kind of meaning or knowledge that is made known, or “published.” In fact, Cohen considers a range of “readable” media that he sees worthy of analysis, as much as if they were books: maypoles, gestures, and wolf traps, for example.

Scholar Germaine Warkentin scrutinizes our understanding of “book,” as well. She concludes, finally, that it is not the concept of “book” that is significant, but really, a set of perspectives and behaviors that go along with the concept of a “book”—what she informally calls “bookishness.” Warkentin examines historic Native communications in Canada using a book history lens—as well as the reverse, examining book history through the lens of historic Native communications in Canada (in her article “In Search of ‘The Word of the Other’”). She brings up a range of communication systems employed by Native people, including alphabet-based writing systems arising from European influence, but also wampum, rock carvings, bark scrolls, performances with wampum, and more. For her, the notion of a “book”—of a material object with marks that correspond to exact linguistic units, carried around by people—must be

seen merely as a conception present to certain degrees in different cultures and societies. She's not interested in the somewhat value-laden judgements of whether a culture has "books" or not, but rather why a culture might show a certain degree of what she calls "bookishness." She acknowledges that a culture might not have a high degree of "bookishness," and this merely demonstrates a different value system. For example, a lower degree of bookishness might show that this society prioritizes meaning guided by social contexts and performative actions and sounds (16-18).

This lecture only touches on a small corner of scholarly debates and discussions about communication and media. Scholars have continued to develop and debate what media and communications is. Recent scholarship on communication has, ironically, taken us back thousands of years to the beginnings of the formation of the earth. Jussi Parikka and John Durham Peters argue for how nature plays a prominent role in media, and in Peters' case, even is media. Parikka shows how media are material objects within a longer history, stretching back to the time when the metals and minerals forming these objects were first formed in the earth. John Durham Peters points out that media are not just ways through which to pass messages, but constitute the very system in which these messages might be passed, showing how the ocean, wind, and other elements of nature are precisely media. Siegfried Zielinski also shows how media might be placed into a larger, rich, human history, not a history of progression, but of what he calls "variants" (7). In this lecture I've described three concepts or debates within communication and media studies, which will help you to understand and analyze my own lectures in this course. I've discussed the ideas of some prominent media theorists, such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong, whose ideas I also draw upon in additional lectures. I discussed how critics understand and use the term "book." Take a look at the discussion questions on the course website to engage with this lecture more, as well as to share your thoughts on what I've presented. Happy discussing!

Discussion question 1: What are times in your life or in our world where we might have missed that "the medium is the message"? McLuhan says that we often tend to be distracted by the "content" of the message—what the authors intended to say with the medium. Where has there been a time in which we missed the medium for the content, and what were the implications, if any? McLuhan discusses print at length in his work, as long with a range of other elements we wouldn't have thought of as media before (clothing, numbers etc.). What do you think of the medium of print, in which massive amount of written material can be produced and distributed in a uniform way? Theorize and speculate, using what you know from McLuhan, about how different scopes and proportions are introduced into our lives through print and how this shapes humans' actions and behaviors. (After you answer this question, you could check out McLuhan's chapter "The Print" in *Understanding Media* to get some of his views)

Discussion question 2: Simply share your thoughts on Ong's somewhat startling implication that it is the presence of a primarily oral environment, or lack of it, that has deeply shaped so much of human history. Where do you think this might be accurate and why? Where do you think this might be inaccurate and why?

Discussion question 3: There are numerous media that Native Americans have used, historically and today; however, one scholar I have quoted, Warkentin, discusses wampum extensively. Read and learn a little about wampum in [this](#) discussion on the web (presented by the Onondaga Nation, a member of the Haudenosaunee confederacy); then, discuss how you think wampum might shape our understanding of the term “book” and its use (mentioning the idea of at least 1 critic in this lecture in your discussion).

### Additional Reading

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