



sLAB (Strategic Innovation Lab)

2015

Laws of the media, their environments and their users: The flip of the artifact, of its ground and its user

Iseri, Zeynep Merve and Logan, Robert K.

Suggested citation:

Iseri, Zeynep Merve and Logan, Robert K. (2015) Laws of the media, their environments and their users: The flip of the artifact, of its ground and its user. [preprint]. pp. 1-10. (Unpublished) Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/581/>

Open Research is a publicly accessible, curated repository for the preservation and dissemination of scholarly and creative output of the OCAD University community. Material in Open Research is open access and made available via the consent of the author and/or rights holder on a non-exclusive basis.

The OCAD University Library is committed to accessibility as outlined in the [Ontario Human Rights Code](#) and the [Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act \(AODA\)](#) and is working to improve accessibility of the Open Research Repository collection. If you require an accessible version of a repository item contact us at repository@ocadu.ca.

Laws of the Media, Their Environments and Their Users: The Flip of the Artifact, of Its Ground and Its User

Zeynep Merve Iseri

Book and Media Studies, University of St. Michael's College
and

Robert K. Logan

Department of Physics and St. Michael's College, University of Toronto

Abstract: Marshall McLuhan's Laws of Media (LOM), which describe the evolution of artifacts in terms of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal (or flip) are extended to create Laws of Media Environments (LOME) and Laws of Media Users (LOMU). It is shown that the environment or ground in which the figures of the artifacts in the LOM operate and the users of those artifacts undergo respectively a similar evolution of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal paralleling McLuhan's original LOM.

1. Introduction

McLuhan's Laws of Media (LOM) describes how an artifact enhances some human function, obsolesces a former artifact that achieved that function, retrieves an artifact from the past and when pushed far enough flips into a new artifact that is a complementary form of the original artifact (McLuhan, M. 1975 and 1977 and McLuhan M. & E. 1988). The LOM, also referred to as a tetrad, therefore represents a model for how artifacts or technology evolves as each artifact when pushed far enough flips into a new artifact that is its complementary form. The artifacts treated in the LOM create their own individual environment or ground in which they operate and they involve the users of those artifacts. In this paper, we will extend McLuhan's LOM. We will examine how the evolving media of the LOM cause a parallel transformation of their environment or the ground in which they operate as well as a parallel transformation of their users. We will therefore extend McLuhan's LOM to include their media environments and their media users. We formulate these two extensions of the LOM as the Laws of Media Environments (LOME) and the Laws of Media Users (LOMU).

The LOM represent a model for the evolution of artifacts. According to the LOM, every artifact when pushed far enough flips into a new more advanced artifact. As an evolutionary model, it explains the continuous emergence of new artifacts in the ongoing cycle of the four laws of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and flip. Each cycle of these four laws (the tetrad) is linked to the previous one and to the next cycle or tetrad and hence has a spiral structure. We will illustrate this linkage in Table 6 later in the article for the communication media of speech, ideographic writing, alphabetic writing, the printing press, computers, the Internet, the Web and social media.

2. McLuhan's LOM

Marshall McLuhan (1975 & 1977) first published his Laws of Media (LOM) as articles. Subsequently his son Eric based on his work with his father and on notes his father made during his lifetime published the book Laws of Media: The New Science (McLuhan, Marshall and Eric 1988). McLuhan (1977) formulated the four laws of media as four questions. He wrote:

Exploration of the "Laws of the Media" opens up the matter of the grammar and syntax of each artifact. There seems to be only four features, and they are in analogical proportion to each other:

- (a) What does it enhance?
- (b) What does it obsolesce?
- (c) What does it retrieve that had been obsolesced earlier?
- (d) What does it flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential?

The four laws known as the tetrad or the LOM has been represented in many different forms over the years in addition to the form formulated by McLuhan (1977). One can also formulate the LOM in terms of the following four statements instead of McLuhan's original four questions to give the tetrad more of a representation of four laws rather than as four questions:

Table 1: LOM as Statements

1. Every medium or technology enhances some human function.
2. In doing so, it obsolesces some former medium or technology, which was used to achieve the function earlier.
3. In achieving its function, the new medium or technology retrieves some older form from the past.
4. When pushed far enough, the new medium or technology reverses or flips into a complementary form.

3. Laws of Media Environments (LOME)

Zeynep Merve Iseri in a remark in Logan's McLuhan seminar course at the University of St. Michael's College pointed out that the focus of the LOM is on artifacts. She also suggested that the environments in which each of the LOM artifacts operate also undergo a process of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval and reversal similar to the one of the artifacts of the tetrad. McLuhan formulated his tetrads in terms of human artifacts. The pronoun 'it' in the two versions of the LOM above refers to an artifact that is the focus of the LOM. It will be useful for our discussion to label this artifact as Artifact 1. We will also call the obsolesced artifact: Artifact 2, the retrieved artifact: Artifact 3 and the artifact that Artifact 1 flips into: Artifact 4.

Table 2: LOM expressed in terms of Artifacts: 1, 2 3 and 4

- The answer to question (a) What does it enhance? is some human function that the artifact, that we will call Artifact 1 enhances.

- The answer to question (b) What does it obsolesce? is an artifact that we will call Artifact 2.
- The answer to question (c) What does it retrieve? is an artifact that we will call Artifact 3.
- The answer to question (d) What does it flip into when pushed to the limits of its potential? is again an artifact that we will call this time Artifact 4.

The chronological order of the emergence of the artifacts in a cycle of the LOM is A_3 (the retrieved artifact); then A_2 (the obsolesced artifact); then A_1 (the artifact that is the subject of the LOM that enhance some human function and which is also the flipped artifact of the previous cycle or LOM) and then A_4 (which is the artifact A_1 flips into and is also the subject of the next LOM). The previous cycle, the current cycle and the next cycle are part of an evolutionary chain which we will illustrate in Table 6 later in the article for the communication media of speech, ideographic writing, alphabetic writing, the printing press, computers, the Internet, the Web and social media.

The new artifact, A_4 that emerges from the flip of A_1 , acts as an anti-environment in the McLuhan sense, because it makes us aware of the ground or environment of artifact A_1 , which we were not aware of before A_1 flipped into A_4 .

The focus of the LOM is strictly concerned with four artifacts: the one that enhances some human function, Artifact 1, the one that is obsolesced, Artifact 2, the one that is retrieved, Artifact 3, and one that emerges from the reversal, Artifact 4, which becomes the Artifact 1 of the next LOM. Nothing is said about the environment or ground these artifacts create nor the impact on the users of these artifacts. The environments in which the artifacts operate are also transformed as the artifacts evolve from one LOM to another.

In addition to enhancing some human function Artifact 1 creates a new environment, namely its ground. It also obsolesces the ground of Artifact 2 that was obsolesced and retrieves the ground of Artifact 3 that was retrieved. Finally when Artifact 1 is pushed to the limits of its potential it flips into Artifact 4 and the ground of Artifact 1 flips into the ground of Artifact 4. Similarly the ground of Artifact 2 is obsolesced and the ground of Artifact 3 is retrieved. Thus we can formulate four more laws of media environments, which we will call Laws of Media Environments or LOME for the environments or grounds of the four artifacts of our original tetrad. They are:

Table 3: The Laws of Media Environments or LOME

- LOME 1. Every medium or technology (Artifact 1) creates a new environment or ground.
- LOME 2. In doing so, it obsolesces the environment or ground of the former medium, Artifact 2 that was obsolesced.
- LOME 3. In addition to creating the ground of Artifact 1 it also retrieves some elements of the ground or environment of the retrieved Artifact 3.
- LOME 4. When pushed far enough, the new medium or technology, reverses or flips into a complementary form and its ground, the ground or environment of Artifact 1 also reverses or flips into the new ground or environment, that of Artifact 4.

According to LOME 4 when pushed far enough, not only the artifact flips or reverses into a complementary form but also does the ground or the environment of the artifact flips into a complementary ground or environment. The Laws of Media Environments take into

account the changes to the environment that the artifacts create. But neither the LOM nor the LOME tells us about the users of the artifacts.

4. Laws of Media Users (LOMU)

If we look at the big frame of LOM and our LOME, there is in addition to the artifacts of the LOM and the environments of the LOM, a third component in our theory, namely the users of the artifacts. The evolution of the artifacts and their environments also entails the evolution of the users of the artifacts. The artifacts, their grounds and their users are intimately connected and their interaction with each other is a never-ending process. First, a medium needs a user working in an environment to be created. The medium and the user together share the same environment, which they shape by their transformations. Then, together they create new environments. Users continue to create new media that suit the new environment and in return the user is transformed to conform to the new medium.

In *Understanding Media*, McLuhan explained this interactive change between the user and the media with the following words:

To behold, use or perceive any extension of ourselves in technological forms is necessarily to embrace it. By continuously embracing technologies, we relate ourselves to them as servo-mechanisms (McLuhan 1964, 46).

We will therefore formulate four more laws to include the users of the artifacts of the LOM, which we will call Laws of Media User (LOMU). We shall take into account the environment's effect on the user as well as McLuhan's idea of the user as the servo-mechanism of an artifact or medium.

Table 4: Laws of Media Users (LOMU)

- LOMU 1. Users of the new medium, Artifact 1, become their servomechanisms.
- LOMU 2. They are no longer the servomechanisms of the obsolesced Artifact 2.
- LOMU 3. In addition to being the servomechanisms of Artifact 1 the users retrieve some patterns of usage of Artifact 3.
- LOMU 4. When pushed far enough, the new medium or technology reverses or flips into a complementary form and its users flip from the servomechanisms of Artifact 1 into the servomechanisms of Artifact 4.

5. The Structure of the Three Sets of Media Laws: the LOM, LOME and LOMU

The three sets of laws LOM [in Table 5 below we will denote LOM as LOMA for convenience where A stands for artifact], LOME and LOMU follow a similar pattern of development, transition, reminiscence and emergence respectively for Laws 1, 2, 3 and 4.

Table 5: The Structure of LOM A, E and U

- LOM (A, E, U) 1: Development (Creation of a new artifact, environment or user)
- LOM (A, E, U) 2: Transition (Obsolescence of an old artifact, environment or user)

- LOM (A, E, U) 3: Reminiscence (Retrieval of an even older artifact, environment or user)
- LOM (A, E, U) 4: Emergence (Creation of the next flipped artifact, environment or user)

6. Examples to support our theories.

Transition from speech to pictographic writing; to the alphabet; to print; to computing; to the Internet; to the World Wide Web; to social media.

Table 6: LOM for Six Communication Media

ARTIFACT/ MEDIA Date Emerged	<u>Speech</u> 50,000 to 100,000 BC	→ <u>Pictographic Writing</u> 3000 BC	→ <u>Alphabet</u> 1500 BC	→ <u>Print BLOCK</u> 600 BC <u>MOVABLE</u> 1450	→ <u>Computers</u> 1945	→ <u>Internet</u> 1969	→ <u>WWW</u> 1990	→ <u>Social Media</u> 1995
<i>Enhancement</i>	Human Interaction	Memory and Codification	Codification	Dissemination of alphabetic communication	Production of Information	Dissemination of information	Internet with graphical displays	Social Networking
<i>Obsolescence</i>	Mimesis	Speech/ Oral communication	Pictographic Writing	Hand written - Manuscript	Hard Copy Information	Stand alone computers	Text only messaging on Internet	E-mail
<i>Retrieval</i>	Co-operation	History, Experience, Heroic deeds	Speech/ Oral communication	Greek Culture through Renaissance	Alphabet	Community	Billboards, televisions and movies	Insularity of a small village



<i>Flip</i>	Pictographic Writing	Alphabet	Print	Computing	Internet	World Wide Web	Social Media	Cyber bullying and gossip mongering
-------------	-----------------------------	-----------------	--------------	------------------	-----------------	-----------------------	---------------------	--

7. The Spiral Structure of the Linked LOM for the Communication Media of Table 6

Table 6 illustrates the way in which the LOM for the evolutionary chain of speech, ideographic writing, alphabetic writing, the printing press, computers, the Internet, the Web and social media are linked together in a spiral like structure. The flip of a prior medium results in the emergence of the next medium in the chain. The structure is spiral like in that each medium eventually flips into a new medium, its complementary form in the future and although the enhancement phase of the medium, the obsolescence of the older medium and the retrieval of the still older medium all occur at the same time in the present, the medium that is obsolesced emerged in the past and the medium that is retrieved emerged in an even more distant past (Pruska Oldenhof and Logan 2014). The time line for the emergence of the four artifacts in the LOM is as follows: the retrieved artifact (Artifact 3) is the oldest, then comes the obsolesced artifact (Artifact 2), then comes the artifact that enhances some function (Artifact 1) and finally there comes the flipped artifact (Artifact 4).

Let us illustrate this idea by considering the LOM for the alphabet (Artifact 1) which emerged in approximately 1500 BCE enhancing codification, obsolescing ideographic writing (Artifact 2) that emerged in 3000 BCE and retrieving orality (Artifact 3) that emerged in 50-100,000 BCE in that the letters of the alphabet code the phonemes of speech. The alphabet then flips into movable type print (Artifact 4) starting in 1450 CE. The enhancement, obsolescence and the retrieval all happen at the outset of the arrival of the alphabet or shortly thereafter but the flip into print takes 3000 years.

8. LOMU and LOME explained

a. LOMU

Table 7: The Users of the Eight Media in Table 6

For each cycle we list the medium and indicate the type of users of that medium:

Cycle 1 (SPEECH): Orator, poet, storyteller, every day conversation

Cycle 2 (PICTOGRAPHIC WRITING): Government scribes

Cycle 3 (ALPHABET): Religious texts, philosophic texts, histories

Cycle 4 (PRINT): Individual authors, Renaissance scholars

Cycle 5 (COMPUTING): Computer literate users (Computer as the extension of memory)

Cycle 6 (INTERNET): Scientists and military

Cycle 7 (WORLD WIDE WEB) Global village citizens (Crowd sourcing and sharing)

Cycle 8 (SOCIAL MEDIA) Social cliques

b. LOME

When an existing artifact flips into another new artifact, the user of the new medium adopts new skills to conform to the demands of the new artifact. In addition to this a new environment emerges. Table 6 and Table 7 document the flips of the communication media and the parallel flips of their users. Now we will explain how both the artifact and its users affect the environment that they create and in which they operate:

1. When oral communication flipped into written communication an environment of record keeping of commercial transactions and government edicts and laws emerged
2. When pictographic writing flipped into alphabetic writing its users an environment of abstract thinking emerged in terms of analytic Greek philosophy and Hebraic ethical monotheism.
3. When alphabetic writing flipped into movable type printing press an environment of increased scholarship and science emerged resulting in the Renaissance, the scientific revolution and new genres of literature.
4. When print flipped into computing an environment of automation and the increased organization and flow of information emerged.
5. When computing flipped into the Internet an environment of global networking emerged.
6. When the Internet flipped into the World Wide Web an environment of disintermediation and do it yourself culture emerged.
7. When the World Wide Web flipped into social media an environment of social networking among cliques emerged.

When pushed far enough the old artifact or medium flips into a new one with a parallel flip of the practices of its users and a parallel flip of the environment in which the artifacts and its users operated. In other words there is a cascade of flips of the artifact (in the LOM), their users (in the LOMU) and the environment in which the artifacts and users operate (in the LOME). In Table 6 we documented the evolution of communication media and the cascades of flips associated with their evolution.

As communication media evolved the community of users increased and hence the environment in which these media operated. Oral communication allowed for communication only among those in earshot. Written communication allowed for communication at a distance. The printing press facilitated the creation of multiple copies of a written communication greatly expanding the reach of that written communication. Computing, the Internet and the Web each in its turn increased the number of individuals that could be reached by written communication. The Web also expanded the different kinds of audio-visual media that could be transmitted in addition to text. As demonstrated in Table 6, as one moves from left to right, every new medium is a more advanced form compared to the previous medium and it improves the communication among people and expands their reach. As the circle of users widens so too does the environment in which each of these media operate.

The LOM cycle of enhancement, obsolescence, retrieval, and flip of a given artifact represents a continuous cyclic structure which connects the given artifact to the artifact that flipped into it and the artifact into which it will flip, representing a spiral structure. Table 6 demonstrates this structure in which every artifact is connected to its past and its future. Table 6 also reveals how the flip from one artifact to another has occurred over a shorter and shorter time frame. Another insight that emerges from the table is that the reach of each new medium increases. Even though the reach of media becomes global with the emergence of the Internet, both the Web and social media increased the reach of the Internet because they involved greater numbers of participants. The smart phone (not listed in the Table), a device that houses the Web and social media increased the use of these two media because smart phone users are in constant contact with the Internet. The

idea of the Global Village, which McLuhan introduced before the arrival of the Internet became an unassailable fact with its arrival. And now with smart phones their users can carry the Global Village around in their pockets or their pocketbooks.

Each step along the way in the evolution of communication detailed in Table 6 represents an Internet-like linking of media users; i.e. a lower case 'i' internet in the sense that it connects human agents and allows them to share information and communicate with each other as does today's Internet. The myths of the oral tradition according to Havelock (1963) served as a "tribal encyclopedia." The Hammurabic code of written laws was the 'internet' of its days and extending this metaphor, the stone stele upon which the code was written was the 'Web' of its days as were the hieroglyphic writings on the monuments of Ancient Egypt. The printing press was the 'internet' of its day, which allowed the written communication of Copernicus, Galileo, Brahe, Kepler, and Newton and contributed to realization of the scientific revolution. The written record provided by the printing press also allowed the accurate storage of scientific data, which contributed to the scientific revolution. Soon after the arrival of computing ways were found to locally network users connected to the same server creating a local internet housed on that server.

9. Conclusion

We have shown that McLuhan's Laws of Media, which trace the evolution of media, can be extended to include similar sets of laws for the environments that these media create and in which they operate as well as for the effects of these media on their users and the users' effects in turn on the media. One of the effects of the media on the users is that they find new ways to carry out the same function and thereby create new media. It is by taking into account the laws of media environments and the laws of media users that we understand the dynamics of media evolution as described in Table 6.

References

Havelock, Eric. 1963. *Preface to Plato*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1975. "Communication: McLuhan's Laws of Media." *Technology and Culture* 16 (1), 74-78.

McLuhan, Marshall. 1977. "Laws of Media." *English Journal* 67 (8): 92-94.
Also published *Et Cetera* 34 (2): 173-179.

McLuhan, Marshall, and Eric McLuhan. 1988. *Laws of Media: The New Science*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Pruska Oldenhof, Izabella and Robert K. Logan. 2014. "The Spiral: A Universal Structure". Unpublished preprint.