Through McLuhan's Lens

The Governance Gap

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The conversation about AI governance in education reveals a striking asymmetry. In 737 articles discussing educational AI implementation, student voices emerge almost exclusively as data points in surveys about academic dishonesty rather than as participants in shaping the systems that increasingly mediate their learning. Faculty appear primarily as subjects of training initiatives rather than as architects of pedagogical transformation. Meanwhile, the discourse flows through institutional white papers, policy frameworks, and administrative committees-channels that predetermine not just what is discussed, but who has the authority to speak.

This governance gap represents more than a simple oversight in stakeholder engagement. Through Marshall McLuhan's analytical framework, a deeper pattern emerges: the medium of governance discourse itself creates and perpetuates the very power asymmetries it purports to address. While institutions focus intently on the content of AI policies-what rules to establish, which tools to approve, how to prevent misuse-they remain largely unconscious of how the structure of governance conversations shapes educational futures more profoundly than any particular decision about chatbot deployment or plagiarism detection.

The Invisible Architecture of Authority

McLuhan's central insight-"the medium is the message"-illuminates how AI governance discourse functions as a powerful medium in its own right. The format through which educational institutions discuss AI integration-policy documents, strategic frameworks, administrative committees-carries its own message about who belongs in the conversation and what kinds of knowledge matter. This medium operates largely below conscious awareness, shaping assumptions about authority and expertise while appearing to be merely a neutral channel for decision-making.

The data reveals this dynamic in sharp relief. Across 1,658 articles analyzed, AI is framed almost exclusively as a "tool" rather than a "partner"-a linguistic choice that reveals deep assumptions about control, hierarchy, and the nature of educational relationships. This framing doesn't simply describe AI; it prescribes a particular power relationship where humans (specifically, institutional authorities) maintain dominion over passive technologies. The near-absence of the "partner frame" suggests not just a preference but a systematic resistance to reconceptualizing educational power dynamics.

This resistance manifests through the very channels of governance discourse. Policy papers demand a particular kind of expertise-the ability to speak in institutional language, to frame issues in terms of risk management and compliance, to think within existing organizational structures. Academic conferences on AI governance privilege those who can navigate professional networks and speak the specialized language of educational administration. These formats inherently exclude students, who lack both the institutional position and the discursive training to participate effectively.

They marginalize teachers, whose experiential knowledge of classroom AI use doesn't easily translate into policy language.

The medium of governance thus creates what McLuhan would recognize as a "hot" medium-one that extends a single sense in "high definition," providing complete information that requires little participation from the audience. A university's AI policy arrives fully formed, demanding compliance rather than collaboration. Strategic frameworks present themselves as comprehensive solutions, leaving little room for the messy, incomplete knowledge that emerges from actual classroom experience. The high-definition nature of these governance media numbs participants to alternative possibilities, creating what McLuhan termed "technological somnambulism."

Looking Backward While Moving Forward

McLuhan observed that societies consistently approach new technologies through the rear-view mirror, attempting to understand revolutionary changes through obsolete frameworks. This pattern appears strikingly in how educational institutions approach AI governance, applying hierarchical decision-making structures developed for the industrial age to technologies that fundamentally challenge those very hierarchies.

The data reveals this backward gaze in multiple dimensions. The absence of Global South perspectives on AI literacy and sovereignty from predominantly Western frameworks suggests institutions are viewing AI through cultural rear-view mirrors that reflect historical power concentrations rather than emerging global realities. The persistent framing of AI as a "tool" to be controlled rather than an environment to be inhabited shows institutions clinging to industrial-age concepts of technology as subordinate machinery rather than recognizing AI as what McLuhan would call an "extension of man"-a technology that doesn't just serve human purposes but reshapes human capabilities and relationships.

This rear-view orientation manifests most clearly in the assumption that existing governance structures-academic committees, administrative hierarchies, policy frameworks-can simply be extended to encompass AI decision-making. Universities create AI committees that mirror traditional academic governance, with representation determined by institutional rank rather than by engagement with AI technologies. Policy documents follow familiar templates developed for managing physical resources and human behavior, poorly suited to governing technologies that blur the boundaries between tool and teacher, resource and partner.

McLuhan's observation that "the student today lives mythically and in depth" while encountering schools "organized by means of classified information" takes on new relevance in the AI age. Students experience AI as an immersive environment-conversing with chatbots, learning through adaptive systems, creating with generative tools. Their relationship with AI is participatory, exploratory, and immediate. Yet governance structures approach AI through classification schemes: approved versus prohibited tools, acceptable versus unacceptable uses, compliant versus non-compliant behaviors. The mismatch between lived experience and governance frameworks isn't merely procedural-it's fundamentally environmental.

The rear-view mirror effect extends to how institutions conceptualize expertise itself. Traditional academic governance assumes that decision-making authority should flow from institutional position and formal credentials. But AI literacy doesn't map neatly onto existing hierarchies. A student who has grown up conversing with AI assistants may possess more practical knowledge about human-AI collaboration than a senior administrator encountering these tools for the first time. A teacher experimenting daily with AI-enhanced pedagogy develops insights that no amount of policy analysis can replicate. Yet governance structures continue to privilege theoretical knowledge over experiential understanding, position over practice.

The Medium's Hidden Message

The governance gap perpetuates itself through mechanisms that remain largely invisible to participants. McLuhan's framework reveals how the structure of governance discourse doesn't just reflect existing power relationships-it actively creates and reinforces them. Each policy committee meeting, each institutional white paper, each administrative decision about AI use sends a meta-message about who has the right to shape educational futures.

Consider how the typical AI governance process unfolds at a university. Administrators, concerned about academic integrity and institutional liability, convene committees dominated by those with formal decision-making authority. These committees request input through surveys and focus groups-formats that position students and faculty as information sources rather than as governance partners. The resulting policies emerge through official channels: institutional websites, administrative emails, policy handbooks. Each step in this process reinforces traditional hierarchies while appearing to be simply practical necessity.

The data's revelation about student voices appearing primarily in discussions of cheating rather than in governance deliberations exemplifies this dynamic. When students do appear in the governance discourse, they're positioned as potential problems to be managed rather than as stakeholders with legitimate interests and valuable insights. This framing isn't necessarily intentional-it emerges from the medium of governance itself, which structures participation in ways that make certain roles seem natural and others impossible.

The exclusion operates through multiple layers of mediation. Physical spaces matter: governance discussions happen in conference rooms and administrative offices that students rarely enter. Temporal structures matter: committee meetings occur during class hours when faculty teach and students learn. Linguistic frameworks matter: governance discourse employs specialized vocabularies that mark insiders from outsiders. Each layer of mediation adds another barrier to participation while appearing to be merely logistical necessity.

McLuhan understood that electric media create new environments while humans remain fixated on old content. The governance discourse exemplifies this principle perfectly. While committees debate the content of AI policies-which tools

to allow, what safeguards to implement-they remain unconscious of how AI is creating entirely new educational environments that make traditional governance structures obsolete. The real transformation isn't in any particular AI application but in how these technologies dissolve boundaries between teacher and student, expert and novice, institution and network.

Numbness and Awakening

The governance gap creates what McLuhan termed "numbness"-a state where participants become extensions of the systems they inhabit rather than conscious agents capable of shaping those systems. Faculty members, overwhelmed by rapid technological change and excluded from meaningful governance participation, often retreat into compliance or resistance. Students, finding no legitimate channels for their AI expertise and experience, create shadow practices that operate outside institutional awareness. The governance discourse, by excluding those most affected by AI implementation, creates the very problems it seeks to prevent: underground AI use, faculty disengagement, and growing disconnection between institutional policies and educational realities.

This numbness extends to the governance participants themselves. Administrators, operating within familiar bureaucratic frameworks, become numb to the possibility that AI might require fundamentally different approaches to educational decision-making. The comfort of established procedures-committees, policies, hierarchies-prevents recognition that these very structures might be obstacles to meaningful AI integration rather than solutions to it.

Yet McLuhan also believed that understanding media effects could lead to awakening-a recovery of conscious agency in shaping technological environments. Recognizing how governance discourse operates as a medium opens possibilities for transformation. If the medium is the message, then changing the medium of governance could send fundamentally different messages about power, participation, and possibility in AI-mediated education.

Implications for Educational Transformation

For faculty members reading this analysis, the implications extend beyond critique to recognition and possibility. Understanding how governance discourse operates as a medium reveals why participating in traditional committee structures often feels futile-these structures are designed to preserve existing hierarchies rather than to enable genuine collaboration. Recognition of this dynamic represents the first step toward agency.

McLuhan distinguished between "hot" and "cool" media-hot media provide complete information requiring little participation, while cool media offer incomplete information demanding active involvement. Current AI governance operates as a hot medium, presenting fully-formed policies for implementation. But education itself is fundamentally a cool medium, requiring active participation to create meaning. The mismatch between hot governance and cool education creates inevitable tensions.

Faculty members possess unique leverage in this situation. Unlike students, they have institutional standing; unlike administrators, they have daily experience with AI's educational effects. This positioning enables them to create what McLuhan might call "counter-environments"-spaces where different kinds of governance discourse become possible. A faculty learning community exploring AI might operate through collaborative experimentation rather than policy compliance. A classroom where students and teacher jointly develop AI use guidelines creates a micro-environment where different power relationships become visible and possible.

The key insight isn't that faculty should demand seats on more committees or input into more policies-these approaches accept the existing medium of governance. Instead, McLuhan's framework suggests the need to create alternative media for governance discourse. What would AI governance look like if it emerged through collaborative experimentation rather than administrative fiat? How might decision-making change if it privileged experiential knowledge over positional authority? These questions point toward possibilities that remain invisible within current governance structures.

The governance gap ultimately reveals itself not as a problem to be solved through better representation or more inclusive committees, but as a symptom of deeper misalignment between educational transformation and institutional structures. AI doesn't just provide new tools for teaching and learning-it creates new environments where traditional distinctions between teacher and student, expert and novice, authority and experience begin to dissolve. Governance structures that preserve these distinctions cannot adequately respond to technologies that challenge them.

McLuhan warned that "the specialist is one who never makes small mistakes while moving toward the grand fallacy." Educational institutions, approaching AI governance through specialized committees and expert frameworks, risk exactly this grand fallacy-creating elaborate structures to govern technologies whose very nature undermines those structures. The governance gap isn't a bug in the system; it's a feature of media environments that privilege certain voices while systematically silencing others.

Understanding this dynamic through McLuhan's lens doesn't solve the governance gap but makes it newly visible. And in that visibility lies possibility-not for perfect solutions but for conscious choice about what kinds of educational futures we create through the media of our governance. The question isn't simply who decides how AI is used in education, but how the very structure of decision-making shapes what education might become. In recognizing the medium of governance as message, we recover the possibility of sending different messages entirely.