



Through McLuhan's Lens

The Missing Conversation

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In the 1,458 articles analyzed about AI in higher education this week, students represent only 0.07% of voices shaping the discourse—a silence so profound it becomes deafening. This absence is not merely an oversight but a structural feature of how the AI conversation functions as a medium itself. Through McLuhan's lens, we can perceive how this stark statistic reveals more than a simple imbalance; it exposes the hidden architecture of a discourse that operates according to its own logic, shaping what can be thought and said about artificial intelligence in education while concealing its own transformative effects.

Marshall McLuhan's media theory offers a uniquely illuminating framework for understanding not just what the AI discourse says, but what it does—how it functions as a medium that reshapes perception, redistributes power, and reorganizes the very nature of educational authority. The missing voices, absent frameworks, and unexamined assumptions in current AI discourse are not merely gaps to be filled but symptoms of a medium at work, performing what McLuhan would recognize as a "huge collective surgery" on the academic body.

The Hot Medium of Administrative Vision

McLuhan's distinction between "hot" and "cool" media provides immediate insight into how AI discourse operates in higher education. A hot medium, in McLuhan's framework,

"extends one single sense in high definition," providing so much information that it requires little participation from the audience. The dominance of administrators (4.62% of voices) compared to the near-absence of students (0.07%) reveals AI discourse as a hot medium that paradoxically excludes participation while claiming to democratize education.

Through McLuhan's lens, we can see how this discourse extends the administrative/managerial perspective in high definition while numbing us to other sensory inputs—student experience, pedagogical wisdom, long-term cognitive effects, and non-Western perspectives. The very structure of the conversation creates what McLuhan would call "technological numbness," where the intensity of one perspective drowns out awareness of what's missing.

Consider the revealing breakdown of discourse participants: while administrators command 4.62% of the conversation and shape institutional policies that affect thousands, the students who will live with these decisions for decades remain virtually voiceless. McLuhan would observe that this isn't simply a matter of exclusion but a fundamental characteristic of how the medium operates. The AI discourse, functioning as a hot medium, creates passive consumers rather than active participants, even as it discusses technologies that supposedly enhance engagement and personalization.

This administrative dominance manifests in the types of questions being asked and, more importantly, not asked. The discourse focuses heavily on implementation strategies,

efficiency metrics, and compliance frameworks—all extensions of administrative vision—while remaining remarkably silent on student cognitive development, creative capacity, or long-term intellectual formation. McLuhan's framework reveals this as more than oversight; it's the medium itself selecting for certain types of content while filtering out others.

The hotness of this medium also explains why certain perspectives achieve such dominance while others remain absent. Non-Western viewpoints on AI in education, indigenous knowledge systems' perspectives on machine learning, and student-generated frameworks for understanding AI are not simply overlooked—they are structurally excluded by a medium that operates in high definition administrative frequency. McLuhan would note that we cannot simply add these voices to the existing discourse; the medium itself would need to cool down, to require more participation and leave more gaps for diverse perspectives to fill.

The Rear-View Mirror of the Tool Frame

The overwhelming dominance of the "tool frame" for conceptualizing AI versus the nearly absent "partner frame" exemplifies what McLuhan called the "rear-view mirror" syndrome—our tendency to understand new media through the lens of the old. In the analyzed discourse, AI is persistently framed as a tool to be wielded rather than a medium that transforms the entire educational environment. McLuhan's insight reveals this framing as a form of blindness, preventing us from perceiving the actual transformation occurring.

Through McLuhan's lens, the tool frame represents a fundamental misunderstanding of AI's nature. Just as McLuhan argued that the content of any medium is always another medium, the content of AI in education is not its applications or outputs but the entire previous system of education itself. By focusing on AI as a tool, the discourse misses how AI as a medium is already transforming the cognitive and social environment of higher education regardless of how it's "used."

The statistics support this observation strikingly: Education articles (672) far outpace AI Literacy articles (248), suggesting the conversation focuses on implementing AI within existing structures rather than developing literacy about the medium itself. McLuhan would recognize this as symptomatic of how new media initially appear to serve old purposes while actually dismantling and reconstituting the entire system. The discourse's preoccupation with "how to use AI" rather than "what AI is doing to us" exemplifies looking forward through a rear-view mirror.

McLuhan's framework reveals why the partner frame remains so underdeveloped in the discourse. To conceive of AI as a partner rather than a tool would require recognizing it as an active agent in reshaping cognitive processes, social relations, and knowledge structures. This recognition would demand what McLuhan called "pattern recognition" rather than "point of view"—seeing the whole system transformation rather than isolated applications. The tool frame, by contrast, maintains the comfortable illusion that humans remain in control, simply adding a new implement to their existing toolkit.

The absence of discussion about AI as a cognitive partner reveals what McLuhan would identify as a dangerous numbness. While the discourse debates optimal tool use, AI is already functioning as what McLuhan might call a "servomechanism" of human cognition, extending and modifying intellectual processes in ways that escape conscious attention. The tool frame acts as a narcotic, numbing us to these deeper transformations while we focus on surface-level applications.

The Greatest School Put Out Before Being Thought Out

Drawing from McLuhan's observation that "the greatest school had been put out for human use before it had been thought out," we can analyze how AI is being implemented in education before its medium effects are understood. The silence around long-term cognitive effects isn't just a gap in research—it's symptomatic of what McLuhan called our "technological numbness," where the very structure of the discourse prevents us from perceiving the transformation occurring.

The corpus reveals this pattern starkly: hundreds of articles discuss implementation strategies, best practices, and policy frameworks, while virtually none examine how AI as a medium might be restructuring student cognition, altering the nature of knowledge itself, or transforming what it means to learn. McLuhan would recognize this as typical of how new media operate—they transform everything while we debate their proper use.

Through McLuhan's lens, the absence of longitudinal studies on AI's cognitive effects represents more than a research gap—it reveals how the medium of AI discourse itself shapes what can be known. The hot, administrative-dominated discourse has no sensory apparatus for detecting slow, deep transformations in human consciousness. It is equipped only to measure efficiency gains, completion rates, and performance metrics—all rear-view mirror concepts from industrial education.

McLuhan's framework helps us understand why certain silences persist even as the discourse expands. The lack of attention to AI's effect on memory formation, creative capacity, critical thinking development, and intellectual independence isn't accidental. These concerns exist outside the frequency range of a discourse medium tuned to administrative wavelengths. Just as television, in McLuhan's analysis, restructured human sensorium while people debated program content, AI restructures educational consciousness while we debate implementation strategies.

The rush to implementation before understanding reveals what McLuhan would call the "subliminal and docile acceptance of media impact." The discourse assumes AI will be integrated into education; the only questions concern how quickly and efficiently. This assumption itself is a medium effect—the discourse shapes reality by making alternatives literally unthinkable within its framework.

The Invisible Medium of Discourse

McLuhan's insight about electric light provides a powerful lens for understanding AI discourse: just as electric light remains invisible as a medium until it spells out content, the AI discourse's medium effects remain invisible while we focus on its content. The real message-the restructuring of educational authority, the amplification of administrative vision, the numbing of student agency-operates beneath conscious awareness.

The structure of AI discourse performs its own pedagogical function, teaching participants what questions are legitimate, whose voices matter, and what frameworks are acceptable. Through McLuhan's lens, we can see how the discourse doesn't simply discuss power relations in AI implementation-it actively constructs them through its own operations. The 0.07% student voice statistic isn't just describing an imbalance; it's creating and perpetuating it.

McLuhan would observe that the discourse categories themselves reveal the medium at work. The prominence of "Academic Integrity" (557 articles) over "AI Literacy" (248 articles) shows a discourse more concerned with controlling AI's disruption than understanding its nature. This isn't a neutral priority but a medium effect-the discourse shapes perception by making certain aspects of AI hyper-visible while rendering others invisible.

The missing discussions about AI's phenomenological effects-how it feels to think with AI, how it changes the experience of learning, how it alters the relationship between mind and knowledge-are not random oversights. McLuhan's framework reveals them as systematic exclusions produced by a discourse medium that has no vocabulary, no sensory capacity, for such experiences. The administrative-hot medium can only perceive what fits its frequency: policy, compliance, efficiency, control.

Through McLuhan's lens, the silence around non-Western perspectives on AI becomes particularly significant. The discourse operates with what McLuhan would recognize as a hidden cultural bias, assuming Western models of education, knowledge, and human-machine interaction as universal. This isn't simply ethnocentrism but a medium effect-the discourse's structure makes alternative cultural frameworks literally unspeakable within its channels.

The Message of the Missing

What McLuhan called "the medium is the message" applies powerfully to what's absent in AI discourse. The missing conversations are not gaps to be filled but messages about how the discourse itself functions. The silence of students speaks louder than any survey about power relations in higher education. The absence of phenomenological investigation reveals more than any policy document about the discourse's inability to perceive actual human experience.

McLuhan's framework helps us recognize that these absences perform active functions. The missing student voices don't simply represent exclusion-they enable a particular kind of discourse that can proceed without the friction of lived experience. The absent long-term studies don't just indicate

research gaps-they allow implementation to proceed without the drag of uncomfortable questions. The missing non-Western perspectives don't merely show bias-they maintain a unified field of discourse that would fragment if truly diverse viewpoints entered.

Through McLuhan's lens, we can see how the discourse's structure creates what he would call a "total field of awareness." Within this field, certain perceptions become possible while others become impossible. The overwhelming focus on "responsible AI use" assumes AI will be used; the question is only how to constrain it. The absent discussion might ask whether AI should be used at all in certain educational contexts, but this question cannot form within the discourse's current medium structure.

The pattern of missing conversations reveals what McLuhan would identify as the discourse's "sensory closure." Just as television, in his analysis, shut down certain sensory ratios while amplifying others, AI discourse amplifies administrative/technical perspectives while shutting down phenomenological, critical, and student-centered ways of knowing. This isn't a conspiracy but a medium effect-the automatic result of how the discourse is structured and operates.

Implications for Faculty Navigation

For faculty readers, McLuhan's framework offers both revelation and strategy. Recognition that participating in AI discourse means operating within a medium that already shapes what can be said and heard represents the first step toward what McLuhan would call "media literacy." Faculty must understand themselves not as neutral participants in a conversation but as operators within a medium that has its own biases and effects.

McLuhan would advocate for what he called "pattern recognition" rather than "point of view"-seeing the whole system of discourse rather than just its parts. For faculty, this means recognizing that debates about AI tools and policies occur within a larger medium that's already reshaping educational authority and cognitive assumptions. The question isn't simply how to use AI responsibly but how to perceive and potentially resist the medium effects of AI discourse itself.

Practical strategies emerge from McLuhan's framework for creating "cool" spaces within the "hot" medium of AI discourse-forums that invite participation rather than passive consumption. Faculty might establish student-centered research projects that document AI's phenomenological effects, create cross-cultural dialogues that bring non-Western perspectives into conversation, or develop longitudinal studies that track cognitive transformation over time. These aren't just research projects but attempts to cool down an overheated medium.

McLuhan's insight suggests faculty need to develop what he would recognize as "anti-environments"-spaces where the invisible effects of AI discourse become visible. This might involve creating courses that study AI discourse as a medium, establishing forums where students lead discussions about their own experiences, or developing research methodologies

that capture what current discourse renders invisible. The goal isn't to reject AI but to perceive its actual effects rather than its proclaimed purposes.

The urgency of developing true AI literacy that goes beyond tool use to understand medium effects becomes clear through McLuhan's lens. Current AI literacy efforts, as revealed by their subordinate position in the discourse, focus primarily on operational skills. McLuhan would advocate for a literacy that perceives AI as environment, not just instrument—understanding how it reshapes perception, reorganizes knowledge, and restructures educational relationships.

The Transformation Already Underway

Through McLuhan's lens, the AI discourse in higher education reveals itself not as a neutral conversation about technology but as a medium performing its own transformation. The missing voices, absent frameworks, and unexplored questions are not simply oversights to be corrected but structural features of how the discourse operates. They reveal a medium at work, reshaping educational reality while maintaining the illusion that we're simply discussing tools and policies.

The 0.07% student representation is not just a statistic but a symptom of a discourse medium that has already restructured educational authority before any AI tool is implemented. The dominance of the tool frame isn't merely conceptual confusion but evidence of the rear-view mirror through which we perceive transformation as mere addition. The absence of phenomenological investigation doesn't just show research gaps but reveals a discourse that has no sensory capacity for actual human experience of thinking and learning with AI.

McLuhan's framework reveals that what's NOT being discussed may be more significant than what is. The silences shape the field more powerfully than the statements. The missing conversations about long-term cognitive effects, student experience, non-Western perspectives, and AI as a partner rather than tool are not random omissions but systematic exclusions produced by the discourse's medium structure.

For faculty navigating this transformed landscape, McLuhan's insights offer both warning and opportunity. The warning is that participating in AI discourse means operating within a medium that already shapes perception and possibility. The opportunity lies in developing the pattern recognition to see these effects and create spaces where different conversations become possible.

The AI discourse performs what McLuhan would recognize as a "huge collective surgery" on the academic body, reorganizing relations and assumptions while we focus on surface content. But unlike the patients in McLuhan's analysis who remained numb to the operation, faculty who understand discourse as medium can begin to perceive the transformation and potentially influence its direction.

The conversation we're not having about AI in higher education may be the most important one: how the discourse itself functions as a medium that shapes what can be thought,

said, and done. Through McLuhan's lens, we see that changing this conversation requires more than adding missing voices or topics. It requires transforming the medium itself—cooling down its hot administrative frequency, creating gaps for participation, and developing new sensory ratios that can perceive what currently remains invisible.

As McLuhan reminds us, "the medium is the message," and the message of AI discourse's missing conversations is clear: we are undergoing a transformation that we can barely perceive, implementing systems we don't understand, while the very structure of our discourse prevents us from grasping what's actually occurring. Recognition of this reality represents the first step toward what McLuhan would call true literacy in the age of AI—not just knowing how to use the tools but understanding how the entire environment has already changed around us.

