



Through McLuhan's Lens

The Failure We Do Not Name

April 08, 2026 | 2,530 words

In the gleaming conference rooms where AI pilots are announced, success stories flow as smoothly as the PowerPoint transitions that frame them. Press releases herald "unprecedented efficiency gains" and "overwhelming user satisfaction." Academic papers quantify improvements in processing time and accuracy rates. Yet in the hallways afterward, educators exchange glances that speak of unmentioned struggles—students confused by AI feedback, teachers overwhelmed by implementation demands, systems that work perfectly in demonstrations but falter in practice. These failures do not appear in reports, not because they are censored, but because the medium of institutional communication itself cannot accommodate them. The gap between announced success and lived experience reveals something profound about how discourse shapes perception in the age of artificial intelligence.

McLuhan would recognize this phenomenon immediately. The structure of AI implementation reporting—its press releases, pilot evaluations, and academic papers—has become a medium that determines not just how we communicate about AI, but what can be communicated at all. This essay examines how institutional discourse about AI operates as a medium that systematically excludes certain messages, creating what McLuhan termed "technological numbness" around actual experiences of failure. Through analysis of both the "medium as message" and "hot and cool media" frameworks, this exploration reveals how the very success of AI discourse lies in making its failures invisible.

The Medium of Institutional Communication

"The medium is the message," McLuhan famously declared, arguing that the structure of communication shapes content more powerfully than any specific information conveyed. In examining AI implementation reporting, this principle illuminates why certain experiences vanish from institutional discourse. The medium of press releases, with their binary structure of problem-solution narratives, cannot accommodate the messy reality of partial failures, unexpected complications, or gradual discoveries of incompatibility. A press release announcing an AI pilot must declare either success or failure—and given institutional pressures, success becomes the only speakable option.

Consider the typical structure of an AI pilot evaluation. The format demands metrics: processing times reduced by percentages, satisfaction scores on five-point scales, efficiency gains measured in hours saved. This quantitative framework becomes what McLuhan would call the "invisible environment" that shapes perception. Within this medium, a student's experience of receiving confusing AI-generated feedback cannot register as data. A teacher's growing sense that automated grading misses crucial nuances in student work translates poorly into satisfaction survey responses. The medium transforms complex experiences into simplified metrics, and in that transformation, failure disappears.

The academic paper, another dominant medium for AI discourse, operates through its own structural constraints. The methodology section demands clearly defined variables and measurable outcomes. The results section requires statistical significance. The discussion section calls for implications and future directions. Where in this structure can researchers locate the failure that manifests as a gradual erosion of student-teacher connection? How can peer review processes, themselves embedded in success-oriented academic culture, validate papers that document systematic failure when the very act of publication implies achievement?

McLuhan observed that "the 'content' of any medium is always another medium." The content of AI implementation reports consists of data, but the data itself serves as a medium carrying only certain types of messages. Among 1,623 articles analyzed in recent research, the "tool frame" for AI dominates while the "partner frame" remains nearly absent. This framing reveals how the medium operates: AI can be discussed as a tool (controllable, instrumental, serving defined purposes) but not as a partner (unpredictable, autonomous, capable of failure in relationship). The medium of institutional discourse shapes AI into something that can only succeed or be abandoned, never fail in instructive ways.

The structure of institutional communication creates what McLuhan termed "technological numbness"-a condition where the medium's effects become invisible through constant exposure. Administrators, immersed in the medium of success-oriented reporting, lose the ability to perceive failure even when directly confronted with it. A student's complaint becomes "resistance to change." A teacher's implementation struggle transforms into "need for additional training." The medium reframes every failure as a temporary obstacle to inevitable success, maintaining numbness to actual experience.

This numbness extends to the very language available for discussing AI implementation. The vocabulary of institutional discourse-"efficiency," "optimization," "enhancement," "transformation"-provides no terms for partial failure, productive confusion, or valuable resistance. McLuhan noted that "language is the greatest medium of communication that has no content... It's an environment itself." The linguistic environment of AI discourse excludes failure not through prohibition but through absence of expression.

Hot Success and Cool Failure

McLuhan's distinction between hot and cool media provides another lens for understanding why AI failures remain unspoken. Hot media, in McLuhan's framework, are high-definition experiences that provide complete information and demand little participation from the audience. Cool media offer incomplete information and require active participation to construct meaning. The announcement of AI success operates as hot media-complete, definitive, requiring only acceptance. The experience of AI failure, conversely, manifests as cool media-ambiguous, requiring interpretation, demanding participation to understand.

Press conferences announcing AI initiatives exemplify hot media at its peak intensity. The speaker presents complete

information: problems identified, solutions implemented, results achieved. Visual aids display arrows pointing upward, percentages in green, satisfaction scores above target thresholds. The audience receives a fully formed narrative requiring no participation beyond absorption. McLuhan would recognize this as similar to his example of the traffic violator film that proved "too hot"-its graphic imagery prevented viewers from genuinely understanding safe driving because it allowed no space for participation.

The actual experience of AI implementation failure, however, occurs in cool media spaces. A student receives AI-generated feedback that technically addresses the assignment criteria but misses the creative risk they attempted. This experience requires interpretation: Is the AI wrong? Is the student's approach invalid? Should creativity be sacrificed for algorithmic approval? The coolness of this experience-its interpretive demands, its ambiguity, its requirement for active meaning-making-makes it incompatible with hot media reporting structures.

Institutional discourse consistently transforms cool experiences into hot announcements. Student voices, as research reveals, appear primarily as "subjects of survey data" rather than participants in interpretation. The cool medium of lived experience, with its uncertainties and interpretive demands, undergoes conversion into hot statistics: "87% of students report satisfaction with AI tools." This transformation eliminates the participatory space where failure might be processed and understood.

McLuhan observed that hot media create "tribal" conditions where deviation from the dominant message becomes difficult. The hot medium of AI success announcements creates a tribal environment in educational institutions where expressing failure violates group cohesion. Faculty meetings that begin with celebration of AI achievements establish a hot media environment where cooling observations about actual struggles cannot penetrate. The temperature of the medium itself prevents certain messages from being received.

The paradox emerges clearly: processing failure requires cool media conditions-spaces for interpretation, ambiguity, and participation. Yet institutional structures demand hot media outputs-clear metrics, definitive results, and complete narratives. This temperature mismatch ensures that failures remain unprocessed, existing in cool experiential spaces but unable to enter hot institutional discourse.

The Invisible Environment of Success

McLuhan's concept of "environments" as invisible forces that shape perception illuminates how AI discourse creates conditions where failure cannot be perceived, much less reported. "Environments are not passive wrappings," McLuhan wrote, "but are, rather, active processes which are invisible." The environment created by AI implementation discourse actively processes experience, filtering out failures before they can be consciously recognized.

This invisible environment operates through multiple mechanisms. Funding structures reward successful implementations and punish admissions of failure, creating an

economic environment where only success can exist. Career advancement systems value positive project outcomes, establishing professional environments hostile to failure acknowledgment. Publication biases favor positive results, constructing scholarly environments where failed AI implementations vanish from the academic record.

The environment shapes perception so thoroughly that participants often cannot see failures occurring directly before them. McLuhan noted that "the effects of technology do not occur at the level of opinions or concepts, but alter sense ratios or patterns of perception steadily and without any resistance." The steady alteration of perception through success-oriented discourse creates conditions where an educator can simultaneously experience implementation failure while perceiving and reporting success.

Student experiences provide particularly clear examples of this environmental effect. Research indicates students appear in AI discourse primarily as data points rather than interpreters of their own experience. The environment of institutional communication transforms students from meaning-making participants into metrics-generating subjects. Their complex experiences of confusion, frustration, or alienation become simplified into response rates and satisfaction scores, processed by an environment that can only recognize success.

The environmental processing extends to faculty experiences as well. Teachers struggling with AI implementation find their experiences translated through environmental filters. "Technical difficulties" explain away pedagogical mismatches. "Adjustment periods" account for persistent failures. "Training needs" reframe fundamental incompatibilities. The environment processes all input through success-oriented frameworks, making failure literally unthinkable within institutional discourse.

The Rear-View Mirror of Efficiency

While McLuhan's "rear-view mirror" concept offers another valuable perspective on this phenomenon, the analysis reveals most powerfully through the medium-as-message and hot-cool frameworks already explored. McLuhan observed that "we look at the present through a rear-view mirror. We march backwards into the future." Educational institutions evaluate AI through old frameworks-efficiency metrics, satisfaction surveys, productivity measures-while remaining blind to its actual effects on learning relationships and knowledge creation.

The backwards march manifests clearly in how AI success gets measured. Institutions apply industrial-age metrics of efficiency to post-industrial learning environments. Time saved, costs reduced, processes automated-these rear-view measurements capture nothing about AI's effects on curiosity, creativity, or critical thinking. McLuhan's observation that "the student today lives mythically and in depth" while encountering education "organized by means of classified information" precisely describes the mismatch between AI's measurement and its meaning.

The New Equilibrium of Silence

McLuhan wrote that "the effect of any kind of technology engenders a new equilibrium in us." The discourse about AI in education has created a new equilibrium where failure cannot be named, only success can be announced, and actual experience dissolves into metrics. This equilibrium maintains itself through the very structure of institutional communication, creating what McLuhan called "huge collective surgery" performed "with complete disregard for antiseptics."

The surgery metaphor proves particularly apt. Educational institutions undergo massive transformation through AI implementation, yet the discourse provides no space for examining wounds, complications, or healing processes. The medium of institutional communication acts as anesthesia, numbing participants to the actual effects of technological change. Success announcements function as bandages covering unseen damage, preventing examination or treatment.

The collective nature of this surgery ensures individual experiences of failure remain isolated and unvalidated. When the medium prevents failure from being communicated, each person experiencing difficulty assumes their struggle is unique. The teacher whose AI grading system consistently misunderstands creative work believes the fault lies in their implementation. The student receiving meaningless automated feedback questions their own understanding rather than the system. The administrator facing integration nightmares focuses on fixing technical issues rather than questioning fundamental assumptions.

Breaking the Pattern

McLuhan warned against becoming "the reproductive organ of the technological world," yet institutional discourse about AI creates exactly this condition. By reproducing only success narratives, education becomes an organ for AI proliferation rather than a space for critical engagement. Breaking this pattern requires recognizing discourse itself as a medium that shapes possibility.

Faculty might begin by creating what McLuhan would recognize as cool media spaces-environments that demand participation and interpretation rather than absorption of complete messages. Workshop discussions that begin with sharing failure experiences establish different temperature conditions than presentations announcing success. Narrative accounts of implementation struggles, with their inherent ambiguity and interpretive demands, offer alternatives to hot statistical reports.

The recognition of discourse as medium suggests new strategies for discussing AI implementation. Instead of asking "Was the implementation successful?" faculty might ask "What can we not say about this implementation?" Rather than measuring satisfaction scores, they might collect stories of confusion and struggle. In place of efficiency metrics, they might document moments of human connection lost or preserved.

Creating cool spaces for failure processing requires structural changes in how institutions communicate about AI. Peer review processes might value negative results. Funding structures could reward honest failure analysis. Career advancement systems might recognize the courage required to document unsuccessful implementations. These changes acknowledge that the medium of institutional communication must be reconstructed to accommodate the full range of AI experiences.

The Paradox of Effect

McLuhan noted the paradox that we increasingly "turn from the content of messages to study total effect," yet with AI, institutions obsessively focus on content-what AI can do-while ignoring effects-what it does to us. The very success of AI discourse lies in making its failures invisible, creating conditions where the most significant effects remain unexamined.

This paradox reveals itself most clearly in the gap between announced capabilities and lived experiences. Institutional discourse celebrates AI's ability to grade essays, provide feedback, and personalize learning. These content-focused announcements ignore AI's effects on teacher-student relationships, the development of authentic voice, or the cultivation of intellectual risk-taking. The medium of institutional communication directs attention toward measurable functions while concealing immeasurable impacts.

The failure to name failure becomes, paradoxically, AI discourse's greatest success. By creating conditions where only positive outcomes can be reported, the discourse ensures its own proliferation. Each success announcement generates more implementations, which generate more success announcements, in an accelerating cycle that excludes contrary evidence. The medium succeeds precisely because it fails to accommodate failure.

Conclusion: Toward New Possibilities

The inability to name failure in AI implementation reveals how institutional discourse operates as a medium that shapes not just what we say about AI, but what we can even perceive about our own experience with it. Through McLuhan's lenses, we see how the structure of communication creates environments where failure becomes invisible, hot media announcements prevent cool participation, and success narratives reproduce themselves without resistance.

Recognizing these dynamics opens new possibilities for faculty engaging with AI implementation. By understanding discourse as medium, educators can work to create alternative structures that accommodate the full spectrum of experience. Cool media spaces allow failure to be processed and understood. Environmental awareness enables perception of previously invisible effects. Temperature adjustments in communication create conditions for genuine participation in meaning-making about AI's role in education.

The path forward requires neither wholesale rejection nor

uncritical acceptance of AI, but rather the creation of new media for discussing its implementation. These media must be cool enough to accommodate ambiguity, structured to include failure narratives, and environmental in recognizing their own shaping effects. Only through such reconstruction can education avoid becoming merely the reproductive organ of the technological world, instead maintaining its capacity for critical engagement with the tools that seek to transform it.

McLuhan's framework reveals that the failure we do not name is not merely absent from discourse but actively excluded by the medium of institutional communication itself. Recognizing this exclusion as a structural feature rather than an oversight represents the first step toward creating conditions where the full complexity of AI implementation-including its failures-can be perceived, discussed, and learned from. In this recognition lies the possibility of moving beyond the endless reproduction of success narratives toward genuine understanding of AI's effects on educational environments and the humans who inhabit them.

