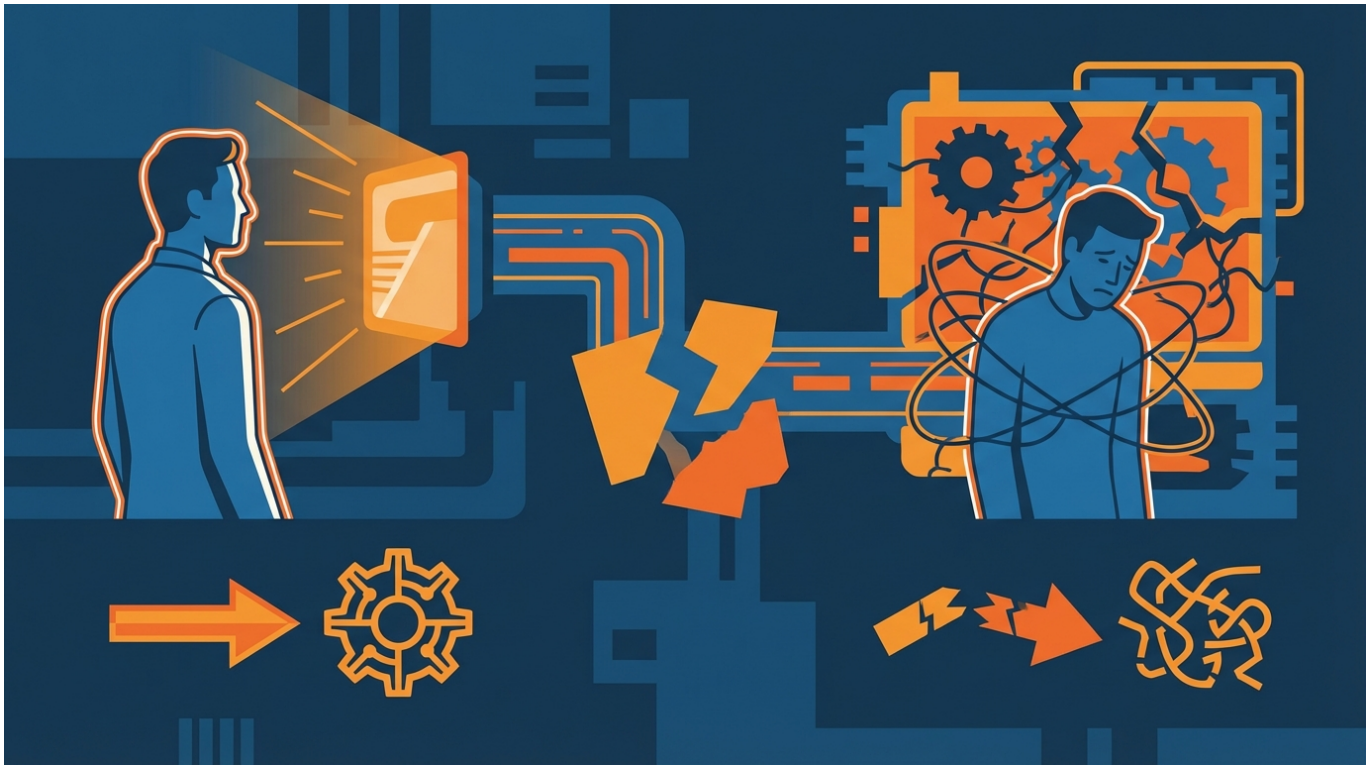

Through McLuhan's Lens

The Failure We Do Not Name

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The Invisible Infrastructure of Success

In the spring of 2023, a prestigious university announced with fanfare the launch of an AI-powered tutoring system that would "revolutionize personalized learning." The press release cited impressive pilot results: 40% improvement in problem-solving speed, 85% student satisfaction rates. Six months later, the system quietly disappeared from the course catalog. No announcement marked its departure. No analysis examined why students had abandoned it after the first few weeks. The failure vanished as if it had never occurred, leaving only the original success story archived in the university's digital memory.

This pattern repeats across higher education with unsettling regularity. Harvard's AI tutoring system generates headlines about its success in physics education, but the students who found it unhelpful, confusing, or alienating remain unnamed and uncounted. Universities trumpet the adoption of AI writing assistants while faculty members silently return to traditional methods, their reasons for abandonment undocumented and undiscussed. Through McLuhan's lens, this gap between announced success and actual experience reveals something profound about how institutional discourse shapes not just what we say about AI, but what we can perceive about its effects.

The Medium of Success-Only Discourse

McLuhan's famous assertion that "the medium is the message" provides a crucial framework for understanding this phenomenon. The discourse about AI in education-not merely AI itself-functions as a medium that transforms the institutional environment of higher education. Through McLuhan's lens, one can see how the consistent pattern of reporting only successes while silencing failures creates more than a simple information gap. It establishes a new environment that fundamentally alters behavior, expectations, and institutional reality itself.

The structure of this discourse-as-medium reveals its own message. When institutions can speak only of AI successes, the medium creates an environment where certain experiences become literally unspeakable. A faculty member struggling with an AI grading system finds no institutional language to articulate their experience. A student confused by an AI tutor's explanations discovers no official channel through which to register their confusion. The medium of success-only discourse doesn't merely hide failures-it renders them grammatically impossible within institutional communication.

This transformation extends beyond simple reporting bias. The data reveals a striking pattern: among 665 education articles analyzed in recent corpus studies, student voices remain largely absent from institutional analyses of AI implementation. The discourse creates what McLuhan would recognize as an

environment that shapes perception itself. When the only permitted narrative is success, institutions develop a form of selective blindness, perceiving only those aspects of AI implementation that conform to the established narrative structure.

The dominance of the "tool frame" in conceptualizing AI-found in the vast majority of institutional communications-while the "partner frame" remains nearly absent, further illustrates how the medium constrains possibility. McLuhan observed that environments are invisible because they saturate our perceptual field. Similarly, the success-only discourse creates an invisible environment where AI can only be conceived as a successful tool, never as a failed partner or a problematic presence. The medium's grammar permits certain constructions while making others impossible.

The Architecture of Technological Numbness

McLuhan's concept of "technological numbness" provides another crucial lens for examining this phenomenon. He observed that we become "servomechanisms" of our technologies, unconsciously adopting their patterns and losing the ability to perceive their effects. In the context of AI implementation in higher education, the constant announcement of successes creates a peculiar form of institutional numbness-not to success, but to the actual experiences of failure that contradict the official narrative.

This numbness operates through what McLuhan would identify as the narcotic effect of media. Just as Narcissus fell in love with his reflection without recognizing it as himself, institutions become mesmerized by the reflection of their AI successes without recognizing these announcements as constructions that obscure actual experience. The steady stream of success stories-AI tutoring systems that outperform traditional instruction, writing assistants that improve student outcomes, grading systems that ensure fairness-creates a narcotic environment where contradictory experiences cannot penetrate institutional consciousness.

Evidence from studies proclaiming that "AI tutoring outperforms in-class active learning" illustrates this numbness in action. These studies focus intensively on efficacy metrics-test scores, completion rates, time-to-mastery-while implementation challenges vanish from the analytical frame. When a system shows a 30% improvement in learning outcomes for the students who complete the program, the institution becomes numb to the 40% who abandoned it in frustration. The medium of metrics-driven success creates an environment where certain forms of failure become imperceptible.

The numbness extends to faculty experience as well. When an instructor discontinues use of an AI teaching assistant after finding it creates more work than it saves, this experience finds no place in institutional memory. The discourse-as-medium has no channel for transmitting such information. McLuhan would observe that the institution has become a servomechanism of its own success narrative, automatically filtering out experiences that don't conform to the established pattern.

This technological numbness creates what McLuhan termed "the invisibility of environments." The success-only discourse becomes the water in which institutional fish swim, unaware of its presence or effects. Faculty and administrators operate within this environment, unconsciously adjusting their perceptions and reports to match its contours. A department chair, asked about AI implementation, automatically recalls the successful pilot program while forgetting the three failed attempts that preceded it-not through deliberate deception but through the numbing effect of the discourse itself.

The Grammar of Unseeable Failure

Through McLuhan's lens, the revelation emerges with startling clarity: The discourse of AI success in higher education has become a medium that transforms institutional perception itself. This medium creates an environment where failure becomes literally unspeakable-not through censorship but through the medium's own grammar. The gap between announced success and actual experience isn't a communication failure; it's the message of the medium itself, revealing how institutions are being reshaped to perceive only what the discourse allows them to see.

This transformation operates through what McLuhan would recognize as the fundamental action of any medium: the alteration of patterns of perception and cognition. When success becomes the only grammatical construction available in institutional discourse about AI, the medium reshapes the institution's sensory apparatus. Failures don't get suppressed after being perceived; they never achieve perceptual existence in the first place. A student's frustration with an AI system doesn't register as "failure" but gets recoded as "adjustment period" or "learning curve"-or simply vanishes from institutional awareness altogether.

The absence of student voices in policy discussions provides a particularly revealing example. The data shows 665 education articles with students remaining largely absent from institutional analyses-a pattern that mirrors McLuhan's observation about education's "classified information" structure that offers "no possible means of involvement" for students. The medium of institutional discourse about AI maintains this structure, creating an environment where student experiences of failure cannot enter the official record because students lack standing within the discourse's grammar.

The Rear-View Mirror of Educational Metrics

McLuhan's concept of the "rear-view mirror" effect illuminates another dimension of this phenomenon. He observed that we understand new media through the lens of old media, moving forward while looking backward. In the context of AI implementation, institutions evaluate these new systems through metrics of past educational success-grades improved, content covered, time saved-rather than understanding the new environment AI creates.

This rear-view mirror perspective renders certain failures invisible because they don't register on traditional metrics.

When an AI tutoring system produces correct answers but fails to develop students' intuition for problem-solving, traditional assessment methods may show improvement even as educational capacity diminishes. When AI writing assistants help students produce grammatically correct essays while undermining their development of authentic voice, rubrics focused on surface features register success while deeper educational failure goes unmeasured.

The institutional reports celebrating AI success exemplify what McLuhan called "the spectacle of digitalized education"-impressive displays that obscure actual educational transformation. Through the rear-view mirror, a 40% improvement in problem-solving speed appears as pure success. Only by turning to face forward-to see the new environment AI creates-would institutions perceive how students learn to game the system rather than engage with content, how they develop dependence rather than capability.

Hot Success, Cool Failure

McLuhan's distinction between hot and cold media provides yet another lens for understanding why institutions gravitate toward success narratives while actual user experiences of failure remain unexamined. Hot media, in McLuhan's framework, are high-definition, providing complete information and requiring little participation from the audience. Cold media are low-definition, requiring active participation to complete the message.

Success announcements about AI function as hot media-complete, detailed, leaving little room for audience participation or interpretation. The press release proclaiming an AI system's effectiveness provides all necessary information: percentages, metrics, testimonials. These hot announcements require only passive reception, creating what McLuhan would recognize as a hypnotic effect that discourages critical engagement.

In contrast, actual user experiences of failure constitute cool media-fragmentary, incomplete, requiring active participation to construct meaning. A student's sense that an AI tutor "doesn't get" their confusion, a faculty member's frustration with an AI assistant that misunderstands assignment objectives-these experiences resist the clean packaging of hot media. They demand institutional participation to interpret and understand, a demand that the hot medium of success discourse trains institutions to avoid.

This dynamic creates a self-reinforcing cycle. Institutions, accustomed to the hot medium of success announcements, lose the capacity to engage with the cool medium of actual experience. The more success stories circulate, the less able institutions become to perceive or interpret the fragmentary, participatory information that signals failure.

Surgery Without Antiseptics

McLuhan warned of "huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics"-transformations enacted without awareness or preparation. Through this lens, the failure to report failures in AI implementation appears not merely as poor communication but as performing surgery blindfolded, unable to see or treat the wounds being inflicted.

The surgical metaphor proves particularly apt. Each AI implementation cuts into the existing tissue of educational practice, severing connections, creating new pathways. When institutions cannot perceive failures, they cannot see where the surgery has damaged vital educational functions. A writing assistant that improves grammar while atrophying critical thinking performs surgery on student cognition, but the success-only discourse provides no antiseptic awareness of the wound.

This blindfolded surgery extends beyond individual implementations to transform the entire educational body. When failures remain invisible, institutions cannot develop immunity or resistance. Each new AI system enters an environment already numbed by previous unreported failures, encountering no antibodies of learned experience. The surgical cuts accumulate, transforming education in ways institutions cannot perceive because their sensory apparatus has been altered by the discourse itself.

The Complicity of Silence

For faculty members operating within this environment, McLuhan's framework reveals a troubling complicity. Educators become participants in maintaining the success narrative even while experiencing failure, not through deliberate choice but through the medium's shaping of possibility. When a professor quietly abandons an AI tool that proved ineffective, their silence gets woven into the fabric of institutional discourse, strengthening the success-only narrative through the absence of contradiction.

This complicity operates through what McLuhan identified as the "subliminal" effects of media environments. Faculty don't consciously choose to hide failures; rather, the discourse environment makes reporting failure feel inappropriate, unprofessional, or simply impossible. The professor who struggles with an AI system finds no departmental meeting agenda item for "failed implementations," no annual review category for "unsuccessful technology adoption," no conference panel on "What didn't work and why."

The medium creates what McLuhan would recognize as a form of "participation mystique"-unconscious participation in collective patterns. Faculty members, swimming in the success-only discourse, unconsciously adjust their own perceptions and reports. The AI grading system that created more problems than it solved gets remembered as "not quite right for our needs" rather than as a failure. The abandoned tutoring system becomes "something we tried" rather than a documented learning experience.

Toward Integral Awareness

McLuhan's call for "integral awareness"-the ability to see whole patterns rather than fragments-offers a pathway beyond

the current predicament. Developing this awareness requires recognizing how the medium of institutional discourse shapes perception itself. Only by seeing the discourse as a medium, with its own grammar and effects, can institutions begin to perceive what that medium currently renders invisible.

Integral awareness in this context means developing the capacity to perceive both success and failure as necessary components of understanding AI implementation. It requires what McLuhan called "pattern recognition" rather than "point of view"-seeing the whole configuration of effects rather than isolated instances of success. This shift in perception would transform failure from an unspeakable embarrassment to valuable data about AI's actual effects on education.

Creating spaces where failure can be named, examined, and learned from requires more than policy changes. It demands recognition of how the current discourse medium must be altered or supplemented. McLuhan observed that new media don't replace old ones but create new environments that transform their predecessors. Similarly, creating discourse spaces for failure doesn't mean abandoning success stories but establishing new environments where different perceptions become possible.

New Literacies for New Blindnesses

The urgency of developing new literacies extends beyond learning to use AI tools. McLuhan's framework reveals the need for literacy in recognizing how institutional discourse shapes what we can and cannot perceive. This meta-literacy would enable faculty to see not just AI's effects but the effects of how we talk about AI-to perceive the invisible environment created by success-only discourse.

These new literacies must include the ability to read absence-to notice what isn't being said, what experiences aren't being recorded, what failures aren't being named. McLuhan emphasized that environments are invisible until they change. By developing literacy in reading institutional silence, educators can begin to perceive the unchanged environment of failure that success discourse conceals.

Practical strategies emerge from this analysis. Institutions could establish "failure forums" where the grammar permits speaking about what doesn't work. Departments could create "implementation autopsies" that examine discontinued AI systems with the same rigor applied to celebrating new adoptions. Annual reviews could include categories for "instructive failures" that reward honest assessment over success theater.

The Message We Cannot Escape

Through McLuhan's lens, the failure to name failure in AI implementation reveals itself as more than an oversight or communication problem. The medium of institutional AI discourse transforms higher education in ways we cannot see precisely because the medium itself blinds us to failure. This blindness isn't a bug but a feature of how the discourse operates-a message embedded in the very structure of institutional communication.

The revelation carries profound implications for higher education's future. As AI systems proliferate, propelled by success narratives that obscure actual effects, institutions risk what McLuhan called "somnambulism"-sleepwalking into a transformed educational environment without awareness of the transformation occurring. Each unreported failure, each silent abandonment, each unexamined frustration contributes to an accumulating blindness that prevents institutions from developing wisdom about AI implementation.

Yet McLuhan's framework also offers hope. By recognizing discourse as a medium with its own effects, by developing integral awareness of whole patterns, by creating new spaces where failure can achieve linguistic existence, institutions can begin to see what the current medium renders invisible. The first step toward this vision requires acknowledging a simple truth: our inability to see AI implementation failures isn't a failure of AI or of implementation-it's the message of the medium we've created to talk about both.

In the end, McLuhan would remind us that every medium creates its own form of ignorance alongside its knowledge. The discourse of AI success in higher education has created a particular form of institutional ignorance-an inability to perceive or learn from failure. Recognizing this ignorance as a product of the medium itself, rather than a personal or institutional failing, opens the possibility of creating new media, new discourses, new environments where the failures we do not name might finally find their voice. Only then can higher education develop the wisdom needed to navigate the transformation AI brings-a transformation happening whether we can see it or not.