

## Original Paper

# The Reconstruction of Literary Theoretical Paradigms through Media Studies

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Received: May 22, 2025

Accepted: July 11, 2025

Online Published: July 29, 2025

doi:10.22158/assc.v7n4p59

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/assc.v7n4p59>

### **Abstract**

*In the era of rapid media evolution, literary theory is undergoing a paradigm shift. This paper explores the development trajectory of modern media theory through the lens of "Is media text?" by focusing on Marshall McLuhan's Media as Texts theory. It examines how this framework challenges fundamental assumptions in literary studies—including traditional linguistic centrism, authorial autonomy, and textual autonomy. The media have transformed from being a passive carrier of literature into a dynamic force in meaning production. The convergence of communication patterns, technological integration, and evolving audience perceptions has rendered the concept of "literature" inherently dynamic and open-ended. By analyzing media studies through three dimensions—communication, text, and reception—the paper demonstrates how these developments have driven literary theory toward comprehensive analyses of sensory structures, interactive relationships, and cultural contexts, thereby redefining both the research boundaries and methodological foundations of literary studies.*

### **Keywords**

*media extension theory, literary theory, media research*

## **1. Introduction**

Since the 20th century, the media has transcended its role as a neutral conduit for literary creation, evolving into a pivotal lens for understanding literary production mechanisms, communication paradigms, and reception frameworks. The advent of television, cinema, digital networks, and digital technologies has fundamentally transformed human perception patterns, cognitive structures, and modes of expression, challenging the traditional literary theory paradigm centered on language and anchored in printed texts. Media now function not merely as information carriers but as forces that

shape the form and structure of communication—As Marshall McLuhan famously stated, "The medium is the message." Against this backdrop, the "media turn" has become an underlying trend within literary theory. From cultural studies and critical theory to media ecology, growing numbers of scholars recognize media's decisive influence on constructing cultural experiences and ideologies. Literature is no longer seen as a purely linguistic act divorced from technology and social structures, but rather as a composite practice embedded within a mediatronic-cultural system. This paper responds to this theoretical shift by exploring how literary theory has transitioned through perspectives of communication, text, and reception in the context of media transformation, revealing the deeper logic behind the proposition that "the medium is the message."

## **2. From Cultural Research to Media Theory: The Awakening of Media Consciousness in Literary Theory**

Even before media emerged as an independent theoretical category in literary criticism, the development of modern communication technologies had already sparked cultural vigilance and reflection. Particularly since the 19th century, the rapid expansion of mass media such as newspapers, radio, and film brought intense challenges to existing cultural discourse systems. This transformation initially did not lead to the establishment of media theory, but manifested through internal anxieties, critiques, and rejections within literary and cultural theories. As a transformative force in perceptual structures and social mechanisms, media became a target of criticism before it was truly "recognized."

In the earliest voices reflecting media culture, British humanist scholars formed the conservative camp. From the standpoint of defending cultural purity and civilizational traditions, they criticized the "mechanized faith" and sensory culture proliferation brought by industrial society. Matthew Arnold proposed that the "faith in tools" concealed spiritual poverty, where people overtrusted technological means while neglecting the ultimate purpose of cultural pursuit—human perfection and spiritual harmony—. He regarded culture as a transcendent path to fulfillment beyond religion, emphasizing the core role of classical education and aesthetic cultivation in maintaining social order. Building on this stance, Lewis further proposed the binary opposition between "minority culture" and "mass culture," pointing out that mass media represented by radio, newspapers, and films were eroding the aesthetic standards and moral judgments of elite culture. In their view, media was not a neutral technology but a force disrupting existing cultural hierarchies. Although this critique still rested on literary centrism at the time, its "hostile response" demonstrated that media had quietly rewritten cultural production methods and reception pathways.

Unlike cultural conservatism, the Frankfurt School represented a more systematic critical stance. Grounded in Marxism and psychoanalysis, they developed structural critiques of the "cultural industry." In their work, Horkheimer and Adorno argued that modern capitalism no longer relies on violent suppression of individuals but achieves ideological homogenization through media and technological systems. They contended that "instrumental rationality" operates under the guise of

efficiency, norms, and science, with media serving as the critical conduit for this governance logic. Television, radio, and film are not merely information channels—they cultivate compliant subjects through repetition, entertainment, and pseudo-needs, reducing culture to consumable industrial products. Marcuse extended this critique in *One-Dimensional Man*, noting that under technological rationality, culture ceases to be a heterogeneous and critical synthesis but becomes an extension of institutional reproduction. Art, philosophy, religion, and even rebellious discourse are transformed into commodities under mass media integration, their inherent critical edge dulled. Once culture loses its "transcendental quality," it circulates within the logic of exchange value, leaving literature equally trapped within this system.

However, the Frankfurt School did not entirely dismiss the cultural potential of media. Walter Benjamin's theoretical stance was complex and profound. While warning against the destruction of "aura" by mechanical reproduction, he keenly recognized the democratizing opportunities brought by media technology. He argued that photography and cinema had overturned the exclusivity of traditional art, enabling broader public participation in artistic experiences. Benjamin proposed a dual aesthetic framework of "shock" and "flavor": the former representing the immediacy and fragmentation of modern perception, while the latter preserves the contemplative, reflective, and meditative dimensions of traditional art. This analytical perspective essentially transcends the role of media as mere "obscuring agents," instead revealing how media constructs entirely new perceptual frameworks and aesthetic experiences.

Unlike the Anglo-American aesthetic school, American media theory is rooted in its pragmatic tradition and communication system construction. Although initially leaning towards empiricism, it later gradually integrated with critical theory, developing a media cultural studies with local characteristics. The Chicago School represented by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead emphasized the importance of communication for democratic societies. They believed that media could facilitate the establishment of shared social experiences, serving as a crucial mechanism to maintain public life and individual participation. While still theoretically belonging to the empiricist lineage, their emphasis on "communication as social construction" laid the ideological foundation for later media constructivism. James Carey proposed the "ritual view of communication" to counterbalance the mainstream American "transmission view," emphasizing that communication is not merely information transmission but also a cultural symbol-sharing behavior. He advocated understanding communication activities from a cultural perspective, viewing them as key processes maintaining social meaning communities. This interpretive approach has gradually been applied to redefine the functions and forms of literature: literature is no longer just text production but the dissemination and re-encoding of meanings. Douglas Kellner and Lawrence Grossberg represent the trend of further integrating American cultural studies with communication political economy. They advocate combining media constructivism with economic considerations. Structural criticism posits that contemporary media constructs human history, identity, and behavior—all embedded within capital logic and cultural norms. Grossberg particularly

emphasizes how people increasingly "understand themselves and history through media," a phenomenon that has directly influenced literary theory's reevaluation of "narrative power," "discourse of identity," and "media representation."

Driven by cultural critique and academic theories, media consciousness has gradually become prominent, transforming the foundational perspectives upon which literary theory is built. From initial resistance to mass culture to cultural studies' redefinition of audiences, communication forms, and ideologies, and further to systematic frameworks of media-society relations developed by American academia, media studies have not only broadened our understanding of literary and cultural production but also prompted literary theory to consciously reflect on its own communication mechanisms and media technologies. (Lisa, Wu, & Huang, 2005) As this awareness gradually emerges, people increasingly recognize that media are not merely tools for content transmission, but rather a deep structural element that shapes cultural meaning and values. This structural shift has become a crucial driving force behind paradigm shifts in contemporary literary theory. Following the formation of media consciousness, philosophical reflections on media essence have unfolded, making Marshall McLuhan's Media Theory of Extension a pivotal turning point in modern media studies.

### **3. "The Medium Is the Message": The Enlightenment of McLuhan's Extension Theory to Literary Theory**

In the mid-20th century, the rapid development of electronic media such as television and radio sparked an unprecedented wave of communication transformation in American society. Media technology not only reshaped the flow of information but also profoundly altered human perception, behavior, and cultural life. Against this backdrop, while critical scholars like the Chicago School, Political Economy School, and Cultural Studies School observed media society from a critical perspective, another group of researchers turned their attention to the cultural significance of media itself, attempting to reinterpret its impact on humanity through technological and perceptual dimensions. Among them, Canadian scholar Marshall McLuhan stood out as the most representative figure. His groundbreaking proposition "the medium is the message" shattered the entrenched notion of "content supremacy," proposing revolutionary theories like "media as an extension of humanity," "the global village," and "hot media versus cold media." These ideas profoundly influenced subsequent media and cultural studies. McLuhan argued that with the rise of electrical technology, the world entered an era of "inner explosion" characterized by rapidly changing information patterns and perceptual structures, where human living environments and social organization were being reshaped by media. He emphasized that technology is not a neutral tool but an extension mechanism embedded in human perceptual frameworks: while printing mechanized visual perception, electronic media transformed humanity's understanding of time, space, and its own nature. (McLuhan: *Understanding Media: On the Extension of Man*, 2000) Methodologically, McLuhan transcended disciplinary boundaries by synthesizing resources from psychology, anthropology, and art studies. His texts, brimming with aphorisms,

metaphors, and visual-textual structures, exhibit distinct postmodern characteristics. McLuhan emerged as a pivotal figure precisely during the Americas media-centric transition in the 1950s-60s: Television became the central medium, transmitting major events and news through screens; meanwhile, the advertising industry skyrocketed, immersing the public in visual-sensory information overload. Amid this media landscape evolution, youth grew skeptical of traditional systems and mainstream values. The "silent generation" and "Beat Generation" emerged, sparking anti-cultural movements that reshaped societal discourse. It was within this context that McLuhan, through his unique philosophy of perception and technological media analysis, ushered in a new era of modern media theory, profoundly influencing literary theories paradigm shift regarding media studies.

McLuhan's "media extension theory" emerged not in isolation but through the convergence of multiple philosophical traditions. In classical thought, Aristotle proposed that "tools are extensions of the body and soul," defining the relationship between humans and tools as externalization of bodily functions—a concept that laid the groundwork for media as an extension of the human body. 19th-century Marx, when examining the relationship between humans and machines in industrial society, noted that while technology extended natural organs, it could also alienate human activities, revealing the counter-effect of extension. In the early 20th century, technological philosopher Kap further proposed that "technology is a projection of organs," comparing telegraphs to extensions of the nervous system and railways to expansions of the circulatory system, systematically articulating functional correspondences between media and bodily senses. From the perspective of media extensions developmental logic and life dynamics, French philosopher Bergson's concepts of "life impulse" and "duration" also provided crucial intellectual resources for the extension theory. McLuhan inherited Bergson's understanding of individual creativity, diversity, and multiplicity, emphasizing that media evolution stems from internal drivers of human perception and experience rather than mere responses to external environmental changes. Essentially, McLuhan transformed classical philosophy and political.. The integration of diverse ideas of economic governance and life philosophy into the overall consideration of media technology establishes its highly original media theoretical position. (Wu, 2015)

The theoretical cornerstone of Marshall McLuhan's Media Extension Theory lies in his seminal proposition "the medium is the message". This perspective transcends traditional communication paradigms that view media as neutral information carriers, instead emphasizing how media fundamentally transforms human perceptual frameworks, psychological experiences, and social organization. McLuhan posits that any medium is not merely a tool for content transmission but constitutes an "environment" and "structure" shaping human experience. The transformative effects of media do not primarily manifest at the ideological level, but rather reside in reshaping sensory proportions and perceptual patterns. This constitutes what he termed "human extension" . Media becomes information precisely because it extends certain human capabilities through technological means, thereby altering our interactions with the world. Influenced by Erving Innis, McLuhan regarded writing systems, language, digital technologies, clothing styles, and transportation routes as media, as

they all carry information and, to some extent, shape human social organization and cognitive frameworks (Regis, 2016).

According to McLuhan's classification, different media extend various human senses and bodily structures. Traditional media (such as writing and machinery) enhance specific organs, while electronic media (like television, telephones, and the internet) more profoundly externalize the central nervous system. He particularly emphasized that the shift from oral to written language marked humanity's first systematic structural "cutting" and "reorganization" of sensory systems. The emergence of writing suppressed auditory dominance, shaping a visually-oriented linear thinking pattern. In contrast, electronic media exhibit a trend toward holistic perception, activating multisensory coordination and reintroducing humans to a "resonance between hearing and speaking" perceptual ecosystem. This profoundly transforms cultural production, circulation, and reception mechanisms. Regarding linguistic media, McLuhan proposed that language is essentially an extension of sensory perception—products of coordinated visual, auditory, and tactile interactions. He stressed that language is not merely a product of a single sense but rather an externalization of human bodily senses and cognitive abilities at the symbolic level. This externalization not only shapes communication patterns in human society but also provides foundational frameworks for cultural memory and abstract thinking. Thus, language becomes the primordial form of extension theory, serving as the root of all technological evolution. In terms of technical media, from wheels to roads and tools. From mechanical technologies like telephones and television to electronic media such as the internet, all demonstrate a developmental trajectory evolving from localized extensions to central extensions. McLuhan posited that this progression from physical to neural systems has transformed human interaction from physical contact to real-time connectivity, ultimately establishing a globally interconnected "global village" where all entities share identical structures.

Furthermore, McLuhan's proposition that "the content of a medium is another medium" reveals the hierarchical structure and dynamic interplay among media forms. For instance, while books represent the content of print media, they themselves evolved from handwritten texts. Television programs, for example, integrate various media formats including radio dramas, theatrical performances, and news footage. Building on this framework, he constructed a nested, mutually reinforcing media ecosystem model. This model emphasizes that no new medium emerges in isolation but develops within the boundaries of existing media, thereby reshaping the entire cultural and cognitive framework.

In summary, McLuhan's Media Theory of Extension, rooted in the core premise that "the medium is the message," revolves around the triad of "body-sense-technology." Its profound significance lies not in the physical description of media tools, but in revealing how media permeates human perceptual systems and reshapes cultural structures. This theory not only expands philosophical contemplation on technological influence, but also provides a fresh perspective for reinterpreting the intrinsic mechanisms of literature, art, and communication.

#### **4. Theoretical Turn of Literature under Media Change: New Paradigm of Communication, Text and Acceptance**

McLuhan's propositions "the medium is the message" and "the medium is an extension of man" have provided profound inspiration for the transformation of literary theory. Traditional literary theory has long focused on the internal linguistic structure, narrative logic, and symbolic meaning of texts, tending to view literature as a content-oriented artistic expression. However, the extension theory of media breaks down the boundary between "form and content," pointing out that the meaning of any literary expression not only comes from the text itself but also from the media environment it relies on. The text is no longer a "transparent container" but a generative process shaped by media forms. This concept directly challenges the linguistically-centered paradigm of literary studies, guiding theorists to focus on sensory structures beyond words, media forms, and their profound shaping of literary reception methods.

According to Marshall McLuhan, the printing press not only transformed text production methods but, more crucially, fostered cultural patterns such as "linear logic," "individualized thinking," and "isolated reading experiences." These cultural patterns in turn shaped literary writing techniques, textual structures, and readers' aesthetic expectations. The emergence of novels, the strictness of paragraph structures, and the fixation of narrative perspectives—all these are profound outcomes of the printing medium's deep influence on literature. Therefore, McLuhan's media analysis demands a re-examination of the media forms that underpin literature—From parchment and movable type printing to electronic screens, each media innovation has accompanied changes in literary forms, styles, and even the definition of "literariness." Literature is no longer a spiritual existence transcending material media, but rather a cultural configuration that evolves through specific media technologies.

The rise of electronic media has fundamentally transformed the dissemination, textual composition, and reception of literature. In this digital age, texts have evolved from "fixed objects" into "fluid streams," blurring the boundaries of literary discourse. Emerging forms like sound literature, visual poetics, and interactive narratives compel literary theory to transcend traditional writing-centric frameworks, evolving into cross-media, multisensory aesthetic theories. McLuhan's distinction between "cold media" that stimulates audience participation and "hot media" emphasizing passive sensory absorption foreshadowed the later emergence of "reader-response theory" and "sensory poetics." More crucially, McLuhan's revelation of media perception structures compelled literary theory to integrate human bodies, senses, and media technologies into analytical frameworks, re-examining how perception shapes meaning. Essentially, McLuhan's Media Extensivism fundamentally expanded the frontiers of literary theory by situating literature within a broader media ecosystem. It demands researchers to focus not only on "what the text says" but also on "how it exists." Against the backdrop of emerging research paths like digital humanities, media archaeology, and image-based storytelling, McLuhan's theories continue to provide a foundational framework for literary studies. The research perspective starting from the material form and entering into the perceptual structure not only transcends the traditional

humanistic literary view, but also indicates a profound shift of literary theory towards the comprehensive research paradigm of media.

From the perspective of communication, traditional literary studies often treat dissemination as a post hoc circulation process—that is, the diffusion phase following text completion. However, within cultural structures dominated by media logic, communication has long served as a prerequisite mechanism for textual creation. Media methods of capturing attention and their capacity to shape discourse patterns profoundly influence the initial stages of literary production. (Liu, 2025) Works are no longer isolated aesthetic entities but multifaceted conglomerates embedded in platform logic, user behavior, and symbolic strategies. This transformation has driven literary theory to shift from "text-centric" perspectives toward theoretical reflections on "communication mechanisms," focusing on how works are organized, directed, and received through media frameworks.

Secondly, the boundaries of textual content are continually being blurred and expanded within digital media environments. While traditional texts were viewed as finite combinations of linguistic elements with meaning generated through rhetorical devices, structural frameworks, and stylistic conventions, the nature of texts as carriers of meaning has fundamentally transformed in online cultural production. Elements like comments, bullet chats, recommendations, visual content, and interface structures—collectively termed "quasi-texts"—now serve not merely as supplementary information but as integral components of the textual network. This evolution has turned texts into dynamic processes of continuous emergence, extension, and reconfiguration, fundamentally challenging literary theory's "textual centrism". The subject of textual analysis has shifted from isolated linguistic units to embedded multimodal information fields within media mechanisms.

More crucially, the paradigm shift in the "reception" framework has become the pivotal axis for reconstructing literary theory in the media age. In traditional reception aesthetics, readers were positioned as primary interpreters, yet this process remained text-centric. Within contemporary media ecosystems, readers not only receive meaning but also actively participate in its construction through media mechanisms. (Gan, 2009) Behaviors like commenting, sharing, imitating, and re-creation place original texts within open processes of meaning negotiation, transforming the "reader" concept into "user" or "co-author". The transmission pathways of literature, reception feedback, and regenerative mechanisms mutually reinforce each other, collectively forming an "interactive textual existence" embedded within media networks.

This structural shift in literary theory essentially points to a new paradigm shaped by media composition. Communication mechanisms now serve as mediating systems between textual creation and reception feedback, with text structures evolving from closed to fluid states and reception behaviors transitioning from passive perception to active engagement. This transformation not only expands the scope of literary theory's research but also reshapes the ontological logic of literary practice. Under the contemporary proposition that "media equals text," literary theory must immerse itself in the deep media context woven by technology, form, and perception to respond to the new



realities of textual production and meaning-making.

## 5. Conclusion

Media is not merely an external tool for literary creation and criticism, but an integral component of the intrinsic structure of literary activities. As media forms continue to evolve, the fundamental logic of literature undergoes restructuring: from a language-centric textual perspective to multimodal perceptual construction, from unidirectional communication models to interactive network architectures, and from individualized reading experiences to community-based reception feedback. McLuhan's Media Extending Theory provides an effective interpretive framework that emphasizes how media shape perception and behavior, while also revealing how literature becomes internalized as a cultural mechanism within media structures. Under the theoretical vision of "media as text," literature ceases to be a purely spiritual expression transcending materiality, form, and medium, but instead emerges as a dynamic entity embedded in social-technical networks, sensory channels, and communication mechanisms. This paper traces the developmental trajectory of media theory, interprets McLuhan's core perspectives, and examines contemporary examples of literary transformation in digital media environments, attempting to demonstrate an internal paradigm shift in literary theory. This renewal demands that researchers confront the practical logic of media technologies while redefining the existence modes, dissemination pathways, and reception mechanisms of literature. Future literary theories will inevitably need to redefine their boundaries within the reality of media interweaving. Define the problem awareness, method path, and critical perspective.

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