Herbert Marshall McLuhan, born and raised in Edmonton, Canada – 1911, was a professor of English and philosopher of communication. His work is considered one of the cornerstones of media theory, amongst having practical applications in the advertising industry.

McLuhan had particular interest in structure, utility, function and experimentation within functional environments, as well as how technology drives different cultures and their ideas.

His key theme is about how technology affects the forms and scale of social organization and individual lives.
This theory popularized upon the release of his book (1967) 'The Medium is the Massage' (McLuhan was aware of this typo, he wanted to keep it) is arguably what he's most famous for. To McLuhan, a medium (often being a new technology) is any extension of our bodies, minds, or being.

McLuhan makes us re-analyse what we know by “medium” and “message”. “message” can be defined as “information” or “content”, however, McLuhan believes that we neglect one of the most vital components of media: their ability to alter the course and function of human relations and activities. McLuhan therefore re-defines the “message” of a medium as any change in pattern, pace, or scale that a medium causes in cultures or societies.

- The wheel is an extension of the foot
- Clothing is an extension of the skin
- Housing is an extension of the body’s heat control mechanism
- The computer extends our central nervous system
  - The book is an extension of our eyes
  - The radio is an extension to the ears

With this new definition “content” becomes a mask for how media interact. These work in doubles, whereby one medium holds another within (and another can be contained within that one, etc.). For example, a book contains the printed word, which contains writing, which contains speech. The contained medium becomes the message of the containing one!
There are however two exceptions to this idea of pairs which are message free mediums, or pure processes:

1) Speech – the chain of media would go like this: writing > speech > thought, ending with thought as this is a pure process, and non-verbal.

2) The electric light – this light source allows for activities that would otherwise not be performed in the dark. You can consider the activities themselves to be the “content” of the light, though the light alone contains no other medium.

As well as gaining an extension to ourselves with these mediums, we are just as well amputating it in some way, by isolating/separating the function of the body part from other body movements. An example of this is the wheel, in the context of a car; you’re unable to perform the basic ability to walk, due to its specialised task at that particular moment.

McLuhan spoke of this ‘Global Village’ where there is an interconnection with everything; the globe’s been shrunk into a village by electrical technologies, allowing for instantaneous movement of data and information from every corner of the world.

There is a sort of smoke signalling effect (this being the first way to communicate at distances), this is amplified by all these broadcast technologies—television, telephone, Internet—all shrinking distance gaining a mass worldwide community that’s interrelated.

This theory is a big contrast in comparison to his theory of the extensions of man, where everything seems more intimate; this global village theory has the opposite effect.
McLuhan viewed every type of media using the categorisation of “Hot” and “cold”; these refer to the different sensory effects affiliated with media of high and low “definition”, borrowing the term from the technical terms of television.

High Definition

“High-definition” media are sharp and detailed images, McLuhan states that maps, photographs and the letters of the alphabet are high definition, or “Hot” media, providing us with lots of information and leaves us with little to do.

Low Definition

Forms that are indistinct, such as cartoons, sketches and television are “low-definition”, or “cool” media, for this type of media we must examine what is visible and then fill in the gaps to attain the full picture. With “cool” media we are given only a small amount of information making the user study to fill in what is missing.

McLuhan asserts the idea of our perceptions and physical senses being related to media, here we see that “cool” media are high in participation, and “Hot” media is low in participation. By this, McLuhan isn’t referring mainly on our intellectual involvement, but rather to how engaged our physical senses are with various mediums, such as with “definition” and “information”.