

Chapter One: Change the Medium

Transitioning AI Use to Familiar Ground

"Indeed, it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium." ~ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, 1964

GenAI platforms such as ChatGPT and Claude represent entirely new mediums with which we as human beings have no established frame of reference. Attempting to analyze AI transcripts “on-platform” often leads to misconceptions, confusion, and cognitive roadblocks due to our inability to grasp the impact that the medium has on our ability to properly process and engage with the content.

This chapter will instead focus on the idea of the value of viewing our AI usage through mediums that are more familiar to us, like printed out paper or a Microsoft Word document. Changing the medium, in other words, acts as a lever to shine a new light on the principles of safe and effective use.

This concept is influenced heavily by the work of Marshall McLuhan, who famously dictated that “the medium is the message” in his groundbreaking 1964 work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. Put simply, McLuhan argues that the form or medium through which a message is delivered has a greater influence on society and the way we perceive information than the actual content of the message itself. McLuhan was not arguing that content is irrelevant, but rather that the way content is communicated reshapes our understanding of the world, often in ways that are more impactful than the content alone.

Based on this idea, this book argues that **removing examples of AI use from its existing medium into one with which a user is more familiar can help the user themselves and the broader community better understand what a “good” interaction might look like.**

While the concept of printing out an interaction between a person and AI for critical analysis might seem either obvious or inefficacious, the opposite is actually true. Below are a series of quotes from established researchers that emphasize the impact that technology platforms have on the way we think, coupled with a recognition of the value that extracting interactions from their native environment into a different medium provides to a user or student.

“We shape our tools, and thereafter our tools shape us.” ~McLuhan

This reinforces the idea that AI platforms, as tools, shape how people and students perceive and interact with AI-generated content. By changing the medium, you allow users - whether adults or students – to step back and rethink their relationship with the tool, which can offer fresh insights.

“There are only two industries that call their customers ‘users’: illegal drugs and software.” - Edward Tufte, Computer Scientist, The Social Dilemma, 2020

This quote highlights the sometimes passive relationship people have with technology. Changing the medium of AI transcripts helps break that passive relationship, putting the user in greater control of their interaction with AI content by analyzing it critically in a new format.

“A medium is a technology within which a culture grows; that is to say, it gives form to a culture’s politics, social organization, and habitual ways of thinking.” ~Neil Postman, Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology, 1992

If we continue to rely on analysis of AI interactions to develop safe habits within their native environment on a cultural level, our habits will be dictated to us by the medium rather than formed by our own existing cognitive principles and habits. By changing the medium in which users and students encounter AI transcripts, we help our culture develop new habits around AI use—one rooted in critical thinking rather than passivity.

Changing the Medium in *The Field Guide*

In this vein, *The Field Guide* seeks to change the medium. Each author pulled their own transcripts out of their chosen LLM platform and placed it into a context with which they are familiar - often Google Docs or Microsoft Word. From there, the theory goes that we as analysts are more able to objectively view our own usage and comment on the safety and effectiveness of our approaches.

Separately, this more familiar medium also increases critical capacity and cognitive availability, a key element of analyzing these entirely new engagements and interactions.

A deeper rationale for this approach can be established through a number of established practices for teaching and learning, as well as through our research-based



understanding of cognitive science. The below list leans heavily on McLuhan's conclusions.

1. **Enhances Clarity and Reflection:** When you shift the transcripts into a medium students are more familiar with—like a printed handout—they detach from the novelty of the AI interface. McLuhan's theory implies that this shift removes the "noise" or bias associated with the AI platform, allowing students to focus more on the content itself. They can better engage in critical reflection because they are no longer distracted by the interface through which the content was originally created.
2. **Promotes Active Engagement:** Familiar media encourage more direct and hands-on engagement with the content. For example, students might annotate printed transcripts, highlight patterns, or add comments. This tactile interaction aligns with McLuhan's idea that different media engage users in different ways, affecting how deeply they process information. By placing the transcripts in a familiar medium, you're inviting students to interact more thoughtfully and critically.
3. **Creates Context for Deeper Learning:** The shift in medium allows students to examine the AI interactions in a new light. McLuhan's theory would suggest that moving the transcripts from their original digital medium to something physical or more familiar makes the "message" (the effectiveness or safety of the AI use) more apparent. The new medium might reveal patterns or nuances that were not visible when the transcripts were viewed in the original platform.
4. **Medium-Dependent Interpretation:** McLuhan famously argued that media are extensions of ourselves and our sensory experiences. By changing the medium, you're helping students reinterpret the information using tools and contexts they are comfortable with, fostering greater comprehension. For instance, reading a transcript on a printed page is cognitively different from interacting with it on an AI interface, which tends to promote speed and surface-level engagement.
5. **Reduces Cognitive Load:** Shifting tasks to external mediums (such as a printed transcript) reduces cognitive load, allowing for deeper analysis and critical thinking. Students may recognize subtleties in the AI interaction that they wouldn't have seen within the original context, promoting a better understanding of safe and effective AI use.

As you engage with each author's transcripts, consider the objectivity they aim to bring to their annotations. Ask yourself whether this could be a useful practice for faculty around the world, or, even more broadly, all AI users in general.

In that vein, it becomes important to consider how research in the field of cognitive science can contribute to the development of mechanisms that increase objectivity as it pertains to analysis of AI use. For this question, we can lean on research from researchers like Daniel Kahnemann and Amos Tversky, among others, who have paved the way for the further understanding of our intellectual processes.