

# The book and the reader from a Media Ecology perspective: an interview with Robert K. Logan

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## Abstract

In this exclusive interview, Dr. Robert K. Logan talks about the past, present, and future of the book and the reader from a Media Ecology perspective. He describes the influences that the internet, the *World Wide Web* and social media exert on readers and consequently on the formats of books. The interview is focused on his book *The future of the library: from electronic media to digital media*, which was originally co-authored with Marshall McLuhan in the late 1970s. The work on the book was halted because of McLuhan's death in 1980 but Logan, in 2016, returned to the project retaining what he and McLuhan wrote but updated it with information concerning the impact of digital media on the library.

## Keywords

medium; media ecology; Marshall McLuhan; book; reader

Robert K. Logan (Ph.D., MIT, 1965) is Professor Emeritus in Physics and a Fellow at St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto. He is also the Chief Scientist at the Strategic Innovation Lab, Ontario College of Art and Design (OCAD). He has a variety of experiences as an academic involved in research in physics, complexity theory, information theory, systems biology, environmental science, linguistics, industrial design and media studies. He was also active in the business world operating a computer training company and a web development company. He published with and collaborated with Marshall McLuhan and is an author (or editor) of 20 books, including *Understanding new media: extending Marshall McLuhan* (2010), in which he analyzes the "new media" McLuhan foreshadowed, and published many articles in refereed journals. A new book is off to the publisher entitled a *Topology of the mind*.

This interview is focused on his book *The future of the library: from electric media to digital media*, which was originally written in the late 1970s with McLuhan, who passed away in 1980. The material of the book remained more than 35 years untouched and in 2016 Dr. Logan published it with some updates concerning the era of digital media to address the impact of the internet and other digital technologies on the library.

### **Could you briefly explain the concept of *figure* and *ground* using the object book as an example?**

Every figure has a ground. It's the environment in which it operates. If we consider the object of the book, the figure is the text and the ground is the book itself that operates independent of the content of the book. All books independent of their content have a certain impact on people unlike that of other media such as movies, television, email, or essays. Every figure operates in some environment and that environment is its ground.

### **In your book you say that language serves as a collective memory and also that in oral societies poets passed on from generation to generation the epics and sagas of their people. Can we still say that we are an oral society or have we changed?**

Before there was writing, the culture was purely oral and with writing the society changed. At first, there were very few people that could read and write, so society was basically oral. But once you have universal education there is a change. It only occurred due to the printing press because with this device it was possible to create written texts that were economically affordable. Before that, a book would cost hundreds of times more than it costs today, because it took so much time to copy it by hand. With the printing press, we began to have universal education and universal literacy. Then along comes radio, television, telegraph and that changes the role of both written and spoken words.

With the internet, the *World Wide Web*, and social media, there was a new environment for communication which favored shorter texts with lots of visual imagery. One of the results of this is that young people became too lazy to read extended texts. They prefer using social and other forms of communication that uses a lot of imagery. They do not like to read long texts. They like it when there is a combination of pictures and words. One day I was

walking on the campus of the University of Toronto and I heard one student say to another: “You know, I actually read a book last week”, as though that was something unusual.

You can get so much information from the internet, a lot of which is not just text, so people always choose the easier way because it’s more effort to read something than to watch something. I claim that for young people the internet obsolesces the book. It does not mean the end of the book; it means that it is not as dominant as it once was. It has even affected me. Because of Google and the internet, I do not use the library as much as I used to, because I can find a lot of the information I need on the internet. The only books that I read are the ones that I buy and read to keep up with research in my field. Remember, when McLuhan says “a medium is obsolesced” it does not mean it is the end of it, it just means it is not dominant. So, the dominant media when I do research is the internet, web, Google and the books that I buy from Amazon and the older books I own that I bought in book stores. They dominate over the books that I get from the library, which are usually older ones that are out of print. Sometimes I even get a book from the library that I own because I cannot find my own copy.

**You say that the figure of the library has not changed radically from the ways in which it was first organized, but the ground in which it operates has completely changed. With the coronavirus, virtual book club activities have increased. However, online book clubs are not new. In the past, as you say in your book, the purpose of these societies (literary societies) was to disseminate information and discuss what they had read and the impact it had on them rather than provide a society for the discovery of new information. In your opinion, in what ways can we say that the ground of book clubs has changed?**

Book clubs used to be strictly in person, now they can be online, so that has changed. They have basically the same purpose, but given that the medium has changed it introduces new things that could now happen. The expression “necessity is the mother of invention” could actually be said in reverse: “invention is the mother of necessity”, meaning that once something is invented, all the sudden it becomes totally necessary. So, people find new ways of making use of inventions and they become necessary once they find new ways to enhance our life. So, the invention of the internet, the web and Zoom, for example, enhanced our lives and they are now necessary for many of us for a variety of purposes, such as book clubs are for some readers.

**You also talk about the importance of literacy and media literacy in your book. In your opinion, what is the role of media literacy in today's society, as we do not have only books as a way of acquiring knowledge?**

Let me start talking about the importance of literacy. Without it you cannot use books. The concept of literacy is historically related to the ability to read and write and is derived from the term "literature". With media literacy you do not need any training to use the internet, the web, smartphones just the ability to read. But media literacy is about how to make the best use of the media. It is the ability to access, use, analyze, evaluate and create media in a variety of forms. Media literacy is about learning what is the best way to take advantage of all the richness of the internet, the *World Wide Web*, and social media.

I wrote a paper in collaboration with Eva Berger, Andrey Miroshnichenko, and Anat Ringel called *Mediacy: a way to enrich media literacy* (2019) and its main idea is that media literacy will be enhanced if it includes two basic ideas of Marshall McLuhan: 1) media independent of their content have subliminal effects on their users that impact the way in which we interact with each other and reality, and 2) that the study of media should not consider only communication media but all forms of technology and all human artifacts. All forms of technology are media. A car is as much a medium as a television.

Unlike textual literacy ("literate literacy"), Mediacy is not about extracting or producing meanings just from text. It is also an awareness of the ecology of media, how they impact each other. It is a survival tool for our digitally configured society.

**You say in your book that you have no fear that we will lose the tradition of the physical book, but what do you think is the future of the book in the coming decades?**

They will continue to be published and have a tremendous influence. It is just that not as many people will take advantage of them as was once the case nor will individuals that value books will spend as much time with books as they did in the pre-internet days. There is only so much time in the day.

The future of the book is that there will be more e-books and in terms of scholars the book will not change basically. It was the only medium to which you could do research (I consider journals to be books. It is a new book every month as each article is a short story).

For scholars like us, nothing will change and for the general reading public, there will still be best sellers.

**We live in an era of information explosion. Quoting McLuhan: "Everything is information". What do you think are the challenges that future generations will have to face in relation to communication in different ambiances?**

To answer this question, we have to figure out what ambiances will arise. I would not say challenges. I would use a more positive phrase. So instead, I would say: "What opportunities will arise?" And that is something each of us should consider. Thank you for interviewing me and giving me the opportunity to respond to your stimulating questions. Muito obrigado!

## Referências

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## **O livro e o leitor a partir de uma perspectiva da Ecologia das Mídias: uma entrevista com Robert K. Logan**

### Resumo

Nesta entrevista exclusiva, Dr. Robert K. Logan fala sobre o passado, presente e futuro do livro e do leitor em uma perspectiva da Ecologia das Mídias. Ele descreve as influências que a internet, a *World Wide Web* e as mídias sociais digitais exercem sobre os leitores e, consequentemente, sobre os formatos dos livros. A entrevista é focada em seu livro *The future of the library: from electronic media to digital media*, que foi originalmente escrito em coautoria com Marshall McLuhan no final dos anos 1970. O trabalho no livro foi interrompido por

causa da morte de McLuhan, em 1980, mas Logan, em 2016, retornou ao projeto, mantendo o que ele e McLuhan escreveram, mas o atualizou com informações sobre o impacto da mídia digital na biblioteca.

## Palavras-chave

meio; ecologia das mídias; Marshall McLuhan; livro; leitor

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