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## The Sixth Language: Learning a Living in the Internet Age

Robert Logan

Although *The Sixth Language* does not employ the term "medium theory"—often used when discussing the possibility of extending the legacies of H. A. Innis (1894-1952) and Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980)—the book definitely falls within its purview. Medium theory argues that each medium of communication has unique properties that must be understood apart from its content. Innis referred to this as the "bias of communication." McLuhan drew our attention to the concept with what remains his most grandiose and contentious aphorism, "The medium is the message." He also noted that each medium, be it print or television, is analogous to language in that it has its own grammar—a kind of deep structure that although it does not determine content, profoundly influences the way it is configured. Adapting this notion, Robert Logan argues that computers and the Internet are the two most recent "languages" in an evolutionary chain comprised of six links, the first four being speech, writing, mathematics, and science.

An insistent pedagogy drives his argument. Computers have created an information revolution, and the Internet now enmeshes us in a knowledge archive of global proportions. The ability to navigate comfortably this terrain is essential and should be part and parcel of even a back-to-basics educational curriculum. The book claims to balance optimism regarding where the fifth and sixth languages might take us with cautionary observations regarding their limitations and dangers. However, Logan leans—or errs, depending on the reader's attitude—toward the infotech tsunami we now face, on the side of optimism. No matter. The book presents arguments, not pontifications, and does so with numerous examples and an engaging style.

Situating himself in what has become known as the "Toronto School of Communications,"<sup>1</sup> Logan gives just due to this patrimony in the first part of the book. Although key notions of both Innis and McLuhan are explicated, it is the latter, with whom Logan once enjoyed a collegial collaboration at the University of Toronto, who receives more extensive treatment. His prescience was uncanny, especially when we consider how the fifth and sixth languages, to use Logan's terms, developed in the decades following McLuhan's death. For good or for ill, the once-derided McLuhanism "global village" has wider cachet in today's Internet world—*Wired* magazine embraced the term when declaring him a patron saint—than it ever had during his lifetime.

One McLuhan notion that is given pronounced emphasis is how the content of a new medium is usually that of the medium that preceded it. The first printed books, for example, in subject matter and form, replicated the earlier manuscripts; early television cannibalized radio (some radio shows were even simulcast for the newer medium); and as Logan observes, early computers sourced print, mathematics, and science. After this initial conservative phase, the new medium eventually establishes unique formats, often unanticipated during its inception, and the world is forever changed. This is, I feel, one of McLuhan's most profound insights. It even has parallels in evolutionary biology through what is known as Romer's rule, which states that an evolutionary adaptation is usually conservative in that it tends to help an organism maintain its existing lifeway in the face of changing environmental circumstances rather than immediately enabling it to exploit fully a new niche. When lungfishes emerged during the Devonian period, for example, the new adaptation did not initially establish the terrestrial mode, although it eventually would. Instead, it allowed organisms to get from one diminishing body of water to another, thereby helping them maintain the status quo.

En route to considering the fifth and sixth languages, Logan comments on earlier forms of communication by building on and updating observations from his previous book, *The Alphabet Effect*. The sections on ancient writing, numeration, and the evolution of phonetic literacy consider their cognitive as well as historical implications and serve to ground the programmatic formulations of Innis and McLuhan in substantive contemporary research. To make accessible and relevant for lay readers this important area is no mean feat. Logan has succeeded admirably where more specialist writers have failed.

The cognitive implications of mathematics and science are also assessed, especially insofar as they lead to the world of computers and the Internet, the main thrust of the book. Since much of the later sections is devoted to pedagogical advocacy, Logan prefaces the case made for computer literacy in the classroom with a brief history of schooling and teaching methods. Few would argue against a high-tech component to education. But such insistence needs to be tempered. There is a cost, along with *the* cost. A line needs to be established or, to use Innis' term, a "balance." Even *Time* magazine recently noted that as poorer schools become wired and students gain access to computers and the Internet, they lose what wealthy institutions get: more teachers and smaller classes. Often music and art programs are cut to feed the Golem-like infotech industries' latest upgrades.

One must also be leery when high-tech solutions are seen as an answer to low-tech problems. (Not surprisingly, a number of academic conferences are now banning PowerPoint, given the time-wasting glitches it has caused.) In fairness, knowing *when* to use a computer is on Logan's list of 17 stages of computer literacy, but it ranks 16th. It should perhaps be number one, ahead of the current leadoff, turning on the computer. I would also add to the list a dash of cautious pessimism currently absent: knowing what to do when the computer freezes up, crashes, or causes files to vanish.

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The book also seems to dismiss television as an educational tool because of its alleged non-interactivity. Yet McLuhan, who advocated the use of multimedia in education, had more to say regarding it than any other medium save print. The 500-channel universe offers a plethora of documentary and dramatic material students are unlikely to view on their own, but which they could be assigned to watch, assess, and deconstruct in an interactive classroom context as they are taught aspects of media literacy, visual communication, and textual analysis-at a minimal cost. In seeing television as inherently passive and an enemy of education, Logan overlooks a more indictable and truancy-producing culprit, which is, ironically, intimately tied to the computer-the video game.

Eventually, Logan fesses up to being a computer and Internet enthusiast (p. 254). But he remains a humanist, distrustful of the claims of artificial intelligence and committed to using the technologies he lauds as tools, not subjects or ends in themselves. Much useful information is presented on how these new languages can help and inspire learning. The argument is forceful but never dogmatic. Consistent with what he sees as a bridge between the oral tradition and the Internet, Logan regards the book as his ante in a dialogue with the reader. He willingly provides his e-mail address and encourages his readers to respond. It is an invitation they should accept. I know I will.

#### Note

1. Sometimes contentious, this term refers not to an actual school, but to a tradition of communication scholarship that draws sustenance from the legacies of Innis and McLuhan. Many in the tradition, such as classicist Eric Havelock, had a definite connection to Toronto at some point in their careers, while others, such as Cambridge-based anthropologist Jack Goody, see themselves as part of the "Toronto School" through their contributions to its communications-research agenda.

#### Reference

Logan, Robert. (1986). *The alphabet effect: The impact of the phonetic alphabet on the development of Western civilization*. New York: William Morrow.

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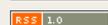
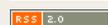


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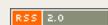
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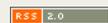
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in the Internet Age which deals with the hypothesis that speech, writing, math, science, computing and the Internet form an evolutionary chain of languages; The Extended Mind: The Emergence of Language, the Human Mind and Culture develops a model for the origin of language, the human mind and culture using ideas from The Sixth Language. The Sixth Language won the Suzanne K. Langer Award for Outstanding Scholarship in the Ecology of Symbolic Form in 2000 from the Media Ecology Association,[4] and in June 2011 Logan received the Walter J. Ong Award for Career Achievement in Scholarship from the same Association.[5]. The Fifth Language: Learning a Living in the Computer Age. (1997) Stoddart Publishing. with Louis W. Stokes.

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