



Too cool for video

Description

The camcorder was the quintessential consumer product of the 1980s. I recall the presence of this compact video recorder at a friend's wedding. People would glance nervously at the camera when it aimed in their direction. Only later when we played the tape did we notice a curious behaviour. People would flick a hand in front of their faces. That was not protest or modesty. It was summer in the Dandenongs. The flick of the hand was the Aussie salute to shoo away a fly, a practice so embedded into everyday life that we didn't notice it until it appeared on a screen. The grainy video image had the capacity to reveal something unusual about everyday situations.

That's happening now, as people required to work from home conduct video meetings. For some participants at least the medium directs attention to mannerisms, setting, framing, sounds, camera position and angle, not to mention grooming and dress. It also encourages comparisons. I've met with groups of students online some of whom won't turn on their camera, even when it's their turn to speak. They say they don't want others to see their living conditions.



Presentations of self

Professional vloggers and live streamers choose to make a living out of being personable, animated, controversial, casual, interesting, *cool*, and sometimes weird onscreen. The rest of us are not so used to this. We have to adapt to new modes of personal presentation, i.e. revisions to "the presentation of self in everyday life," in the words of Erving Goffman, pioneering ethnographer of the ordinary. The presentation aspect comes to the fore when we notice that we also see ourselves in these media, as if in a mirror beamed into the array of onscreen interlocutors.

The other early theorist of presentation is Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980). At the time of his writing, instantaneous video transmission was confined to professional broadcasters (or to science fiction), and it seemed unlikely as a medium for everyday communication.

Early television was a little blurry and in low definition, especially when compared with movies as seen at the cinema. Tv left more to the imagination than film. It demanded greater participation if the audience was to engage with the content. Film on the other hand was so sensorily explicit that the audience could just sit back. Film ladled its content into audiences who needed to expend little cognitive effort in return.

What's hot?

Therefore, tv was a better medium than film for riling an audience and fomenting action – a good medium for activists and rabble-rousers. He labelled film as "hot," meaning sensorily rich, so audiences didn't have to generate their own heat. Tv was "cool" – demanding that audiences agitate themselves to keep warm. (That's my way of describing his use of "hot" and "cool.") McLuhan applied his hot-cool distinction across a range of materials, media, and technologies. Stone is cooler than paper for example.

The heavy and unwieldy media, such as stone, are time binders. Used for writing, they are very cool indeed, and serve to unify the ages; whereas paper is a hot medium that serves to unify spaces horizontally, both in political and entertainment empires. (23).

He also referenced [Lewis Mumford's](#) characterisations of urban living in hot-cool terms. Casually structured towns where citizens must make something of the place themselves are cool, whereas "intensely filled-in cities" are hot, demanding less initiative from their citizens (29). (Now high-density cities are also pandemic hotspots. See [NY Times article](#) by Richard Williams.)

What's cool?

Much has been written about McLuhan's distinctions, and their validity and relevance, especially as we now have extremely high definition television broadcasting, and HD desktop and smartphone cameras and screens. At best, we can say that his distinctions are relative: the narrow bandwidth video conferencing of the 1990s was cooler than the broadband, high definition medium we have now. A glitchy, blurry, frustrating, poorly-connected video link-up is cooler than a high definition, seamlessly hot connection. The former certainly demands more attention, as long as we don't give up on it.

McLuhan also applied the hot-cool distinction to people and their suitability for television. In the US presidential election of 1960, it was John F Kennedy, undoubtably cool, against the more established and well-known Richard Nixon. Kennedy matched the medium of television, whereas Nixon apparently

tried too hard, leaving nothing to the audience's imagination. Nixon of course won later elections, and Trump, the ultimate political hot-head, is currently in the same office. So there are many factors in play.

• Cool implies artless, casual, unaffected, unselfconscious. It's as if the skill in contemporary video presentation is to present as if not presenting at all. See posts: [We are all entertainers](#) and [Audience disengagement](#).

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