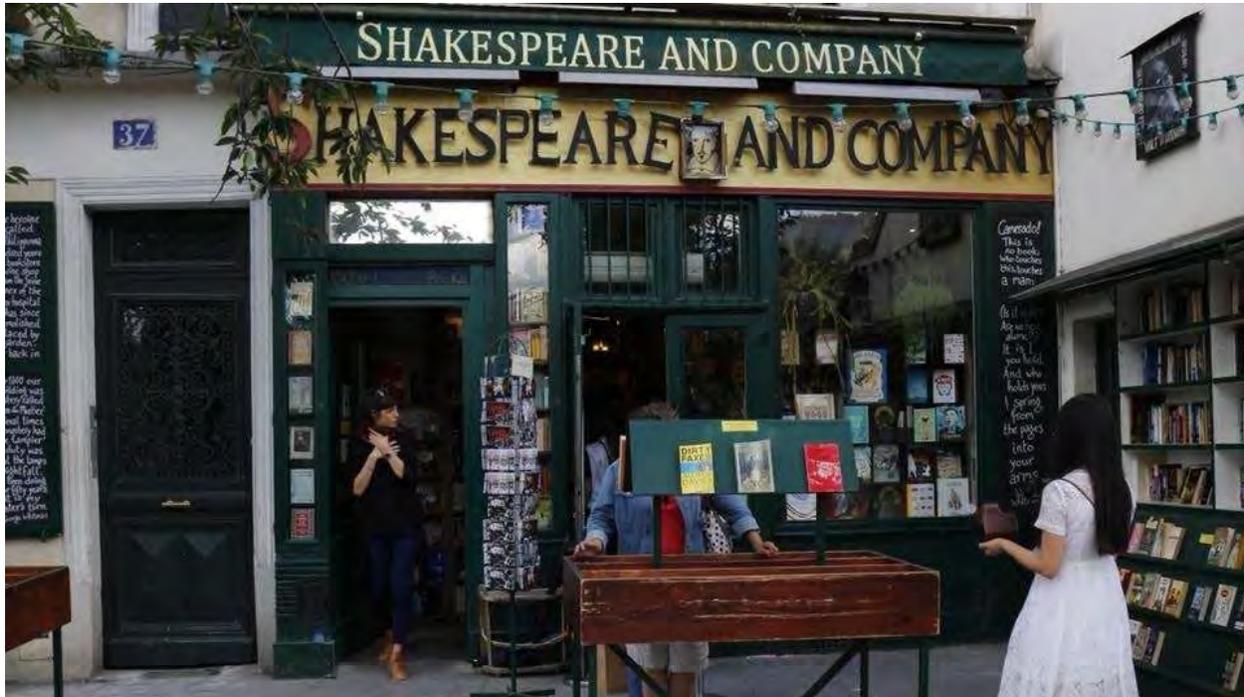


Is the Medium Still the Message?

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The Medium Is the Message -Marshall McLuhan 1964

When I was a kid we watched TV; a lot of TV. My mother called it the 'one eyed monster' because of its power to capture and mesmerize us. It was an old black and white set with rabbit ears with a pair of pliers to change the channels. In Baltimore we had the three networks, ABC, NBC, and CBS. We also had WBAL, a local station that carried the Orioles.

This was the age of broadcast TV. The moving flickering images held the attention of most and the content or message was accepted almost unchallenged. From the war in Vietnam, the assassinations, riots in the cities, to the moon landings we had front row seats and the images of these events were seared into our brains as if we had actually been there. That's the power of the visual track into the brain. Along with the big events, the sitcoms, the commercials, epic sports moments, and various pieces of nonsense were also etched into our shared memories. What a powerful force for shaping who we are.

For a good while, the images we soaked up were there and then instantly gone to be replaced by the new constantly changing images. That was before the advent of the VCR. Such technology took a while for folks to figure out and actually use, Everyone can recall the standing joke about the semi-permanent flashing time light on the box under your TV set. Eventuality some folks figured it out and were able to program their machine to record programs and watch them later. By then it was almost too late because the digital revolution was already bulldozing the analog world into oblivion. The cable pretty much ended the monopoly of the national networks and the age of 210 channels but still nothing to watch began.

Now days the viewing landscape is almost not recognizable by those of us who grew up in the age of broadcast media. Some folks, including me, no longer own a TV set. What for? I can get anything I want

to watch anytime I want to watch it on my array of digital devices. The only limitation is the 'know how' needed to manipulate the various devices, cables, and the Bluetooth. As fast as I scramble to keep up, the faster new technologies appear. Believe it or not, on occasion there is still nothing worth watching.

The invention of movable type and the printing press revolutionized the communication world several hundred years ago. Suddenly books and other printed material became widely available. It almost made learning to read worthwhile. New ideas were spread and new ways of thinking followed. The age of exploration, the enlightenment, the rise of democracy, and other political, scientific, and religious movements set the ball rolling towards what we have been calling the modern world.

The current digital revolution will surely have an impact on the way we think and live just as far reaching and unpredictable as Guttenberg's invention. The most important question is how are we to harness and direct this potential. So far, it seems to be pretty much like a herd of wild charging horses leaving us only two options; get the hell out of the way so not to be trampled or try and grab onto a tail or mane and hang on for dear life.

Most of us will be satisfied with watching YouTube, Netflix, and somehow linking our computers to the big screen TV on the wall. Along the way we'll become reasonably proficient at a couple of social media platforms so the world will know what I had for dinner last night and how cute my cat is wearing pajamas.

Rather than just be passive consumers, some folks aspire to be creators of content. Now days, in addition to social media and regularly blogging on my website, I'm into both podcasts and audio books. For the past year I've been delving into Russian literature. It has been tough going. Guys like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky produced some pretty dense prose. My ignorance of nineteenth century Russian culture and the nightmare of Russian names made it next to impossible for me to slough through. Then I downloaded a few classics as audio books. It was like night and day. I still had to go back to the print form to sort out the names but the narrative was much easier to follow and the message emerged. It was also a time saver because I could listen to the stories while walking or working out. A different medium made all the difference. Now I'm exploring putting my own books into audio form. There are lots of technical issues to overcome but I'm sold on the utility of audio books.

If the medium is still the message, than the explosion of new medium for delivering, receiving, as well as perceiving messages will also make the number and diversity of the messages as numerous as the stars in the sky. How confusing. When we had only a few outlets for news, opinion, and entertainment the medium had the tendency to foster a central narrative that more or less brought us together. Look at almost any social media time line today and it appears much like the 'big bang' with all the planets accelerating further and further apart.

As both consumers and creators of content on the new media we ought to be aware of how the message is effected by the nature of the medium itself. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Skype, Intellectual Dark Web, Instagram, and Zoom are some of the most popular platforms to dance on today. There is also e-mail, websites, Kindle, and blogs. I'm sure there are a bunch more. All of them have their own nature and technical characteristics that undoubtedly impact the narrative.

How is your message being perceived and will a narrative emerge that will move us into the future together?