

## **Reimagining Communication In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Brief History Of Media From SITE To AI**

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I would like to present a brief historical background to the present scenario we witness today in the information, communication and entertainment landscape. For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, people and their cultures were boxed in by their dominant media channels and sources in an information world where top-down communication flowed from a dominant source to a passive public. However, in the past 45 years, i.e. in the waning decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, we saw media systems transform from predominantly national systems to global institutions and networks where the media are multicultural and global in character. Today, we see the domination of the communication and information landscape by social media that are global in character and the emergence of AI in media information and entertainment.

How did this transformation occur, roughly after the mid-1980s? While the reasons may be many, I will focus on the changes in media technology as a prime mover and influencer. I will briefly address how the impressive developments in media technologies, starting in the 1990s, laid the groundwork for a multicultural and global media-technospace that we witness today.

I acknowledge the complexity of analyzing the growth of media in the context of globalization for the following reasons: a. the invention of ever-newer information and communication technologies (ICTs) characterized by the convergence of various media; b. the rise of mobile and social media, plus their ever-increasing flexibility and accessibility; c. the ready and easy circulation of information via digital and social networks; d. the “shrinking” of physical space; and e. the ‘glocalization’ of foreign formats to fit local needs and interests. These realities pose both opportunities and challenges for social change, empowerment and social justice.

### **Brief History: From legacy to fantasy media**

When I was in college in the 1970s in India, we were ruled by the legacy media such as the newspaper, magazine, radio, and television. They served as our eyes and ears to the world outside. In India, the SITE experiment was conducted in 1975-76. This involved using television, especially satellite-based television, to beam educational and instructional content to 2400 remote villages. The SITE was largely a success, especially in software development for television programs. The main emphasis here was to use the media to transmit top-down content to villagers who lacked that information. While the information transmitted was valuable, the feedback loop from the audience was weak.

This reminds me of Marshal McLuhan's pithy but nonetheless a deep explanation of the nature of every medium: "The medium is the message." In just five words, McLuhan neatly predicted that all media, simply because of their structure, exhibit certain biases. So, what were the common biases these legacy media shared? The flow of information was one-way, from a dominant source to a passive receiver; was curated according to rules and conventions dictated by professionals and bureaucrats; it was authoritative in its content; and it inhibited interaction with the audiences. Since there were no pathways for the audiences to interact with each other, we essentially had countries with 'captive' media audiences within national borders or linguistic groups. The idea of powerful mediated social networks among the people existed only in sociology texts.

### **Newer Information and Communication Technologies (ICT)**

As we moved into the 1980s, I started encountering ever newer media. First, I want to address McLuhan's statement again: the medium is the message. So, what are the biases of the newer media of information and communication? The flow of information is not one-way nor dominated by a powerful source; the information/communication is curated by the user; the information flow encourages interaction and the formation of strong social networks.

Digitization of information and communication was a gamechanger. Digital communications technologies made their entry in a dramatic manner in the 1980s leading to the gradual decline of analog technologies. Here's an anecdote from my experience: In 1981, I was the first student to exclusively use a word processor (using a mainframe computer) when I wrote my MA thesis at my university in the US. A mere three years later almost all theses were prepared digitally! Yes, the digitization of information and communications had fully arrived. A few years later, I had access to a desktop computer with floppy data disks. Online communications through e-mails followed quickly thereafter. Digitization helped the consumers/audiences like me to create, store and easily disseminate information. It started the process of the formation of mediated social networks.

The inventions in the 1990s literally introduced a new paradigm in ICT. Around 1994 we got the world-wide-web (www) and Windows 95, a point and click mouse serviced by powerful browsers. Now I could operate in the online world, receive information from global sources, share large files, etc. In the Web 1.0 world, the empowerment of the user in the communication chain had significantly increased. Web 2.0 soon followed. This gave the freedom to receive information and communicate with others at any place and time, which was never available to humanity earlier. It provided a further fillip to the formation of mediated social works.

It was in 2007 when Apple cell phone, the great accelerator to the present social media world of today, was born. With smart features to receive and send information/ communication on the go, the electronic mobile phone was truly a game changer. The integration of the smart phone within e-commerce as well as the social development sectors has greatly empowered users/consumers/communicators around the globe.

None of these highly impressive developments would have been possible without the dramatic increase in bandwidths. The arrival of 2 through 5 gig broadband in the last couple of years truly have helped us become active participants in a global space. At this juncture, it is wise to reflect on

the fact that generations of humanity in the last millennium have attempted to be emancipated from the twin tyranny of two ontological factors: time and space. Our generation is literally the first in the history of humankind using media technology to annihilate space and time.

### **Future is here: the emergence of “fantasy” media**

All of us have read about the future world where intelligent machines start to supplement our activities. That has already been happening in the last decade. However, in 2024 we were introduced to artificial intelligence (AI), an iconic representation of the future.

According to the IBM.com web description: Artificial intelligence (AI) is technology that enables computers and machines to simulate human learning, comprehension, problem solving, decision making, creativity and autonomy. Applications and devices equipped with AI can see and identify objects. They can understand and respond to human language. They can learn from new information and experience. They can make detailed recommendations to users and experts. They can act independently, replacing the need for human intelligence or intervention (a classic example: self-driving car).

### **Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to reimagine communication in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that includes emerging media technologies as well as AI. Our task now is to harness the old and new communication channels to tackle new challenges, namely media in contemporary political settings, esp. the role of media in political polarization; media economics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, esp. the issue of digital inclusion and economic development; the promises and challenges of harnessing AI in a digital landscape; media ethics and regulations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; and cultural hybridization and communication trends in social change.