

The Temptations of the Dinosaur Theory

Ola Larsmo

Swedish author, details at
<http://www.olalarsmo.com/>

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Abstract

Does the book have a future? Ola Larsmo firmly discards the common theory that a new medium makes its predecessor obsolete, terming it 'the temptations of the dinosaur theory'. This has never happened, he argues. The radio did not replace the newspaper, the television did not replace the radio and the cinema, and so on. There always remains a form of coexistence when the new medium can do something in addition to the previous medium; he terms this 'x plus 1'. Ola Larsmo concludes that the book in its present form will be with us for many years to come, despite of, and as well as, the tremendous growth of digital information.

Key Words: Future of the book; McLuhan; Dinosaur theory

What the Propellerhead Said

During the IT-boom of the nineties I used to travel the convention circuit, sometimes as speaker, sometimes as listener. At almost every lecture I encountered the very same person: the Propellerhead, so called because he

seemed to be floating a few decimetres above the floor. The message of the Propellerhead was always the same: beware, everything is going to change so fast you'll never know what hit you.

One of the recurring prophecies of the Propellerhead's concerned the future of the book and/or the newspaper. I remember one instance, when a consultant from a prestigious firm showed a slide of a lady in a reclining chair, reading a newspaper. As the lecturer said: imagine that this picture is taken five years into the future. Now, what is wrong with it? And he answered his own question: Five years from now, there will be ladies, there will be reclining chairs — but there will be no newspapers! That was in 1997.

The Propellerhead was, in my opinion, a victim of the Dinosaur Theory. Many people are. We will return to that theory, but first of all I will try to say a few words about Mr Marshal McLuhan, a man whose theories are very present in the debate on digital media — and, in some cases, very misunderstood.

The Gutenberg Galaxy

It is interesting to see to what high degree you can apply the ideas of McLuhan on the emergence of the internet and the World Wide Web. McLuhan died in 1980, well before the internet was a common instrument. He published his two major works, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* and *Understanding Media* in 1962 and 1964, respectively.

The central idea in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is that the technology we use to communicate determines the *way* we think and what we *can* think. McLuhan traces the source of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment to Gutenberg's invention of movable type in ca. 1440. It was not the new ability to reproduce text in high quantities, and therefore the possibility to access the classics and new philosophical writings that brought about the changes in society, McLuhan argues, but the new ability to think with your eyes instead of your ears. McLuhan's observation is in many ways correct. The distribution of print media in wider and wider circles brought about a slow but accelerating revolution in how we perceived and used literature. From something that was brought to you by sound, from mouth to ear, often in groups, and more often

than not in a half-lit room, the peasants kitchen or by the bonfire, literature mutated into something that you viewed with your eyes, as an individual, alone and in a lit room. McLuhan argues that the way we used the new print media is an important aspect of the birth of the modern individual (ideas that have been expanded in interesting ways by his pupil Walter Ong).

In *Understanding Media* and in his later works, his style is more blurred, and his love for wordplays and puns makes it easy to misinterpret him. He seems to be arguing that the turn towards 'electronic media' weakens the position of visual media like print, books, magazines and newspapers. The rise of electronic media — and even the computer, as McLuhan understands it, around 1965 — is a shift away from the technology that created the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. To cut it short: TV makes us stupid. McLuhan never stoops to such easy remarks, but this is in many ways his legacy, misinterpreted or not.

McLuhan tended towards pessimistic and somewhat apocalyptic ideas, more so in his later books. I might be doing him an injustice, and many of the more cynical remarks on the development of modern media and modern culture that are usually attributed to him should perhaps be attributed to some of his disciples and to a general misunderstanding of his ideas. But he does say, in *Understanding Media*, that the effect of TV on society does not come from the content. The actual programmes people are watching (nice shows about African animals, stupid soap-operas or ultra-violent action movies) do not matter, he says — what matters is the technology by which we access the world. The technology shapes our models of thinking. That's how we should understand his famous sentence 'The Media is the Message'.

From this you can build a very dystopian model of the future of society. The McLuhan perspective seems to follow this course: as print media shape our thoughts in a linear, logical way, they structure our thinking and make us rational. Electronic media, above all that devil TV, the evil incarnate of the sixties and seventies, makes us think in pictures, in a more unstructured and therefore more anti-intellectual or even stupid way. In a more philosophical language we would say that we talk about the primate of the picture replacing the primate of text.

It is only fair to point out that McLuhan was not by measures as pessimistic as some of his later followers, for example Neil Postman. But this dystopian

idea of the death of print and the dumbing down of the general public by means of television traces its roots back to McLuhan.

It is also very interesting to note that many of his ideas have been turned upside down by the way the web functions. One of the powers of the television that turned us into slaves, was the fact that it was streaming media, you had to watch it as it happened or not watch it at all, whereas the book could be browsed at will. The web does away with that, as with many more of the limitations of streaming media.

I think McLuhan is right in one way: the medium is in a way the message, and our technologies of communication shape our modes of thought. But he is also, in a way, a victim of the Dinosaur theory.

The Theory Exposed

The Dinosaur theory is quite simple. In short, it says that when something new emerges, something old will have to become extinct. It is, of course, borrowed from Darwin and early biology. We tend to think of different types of media as living things, different species or different varieties of the same species. We think of the media landscape as if it was a drama of evolution, where old, big, wheezing lizards of print media are being overrun by small, smart, furry mammalian media with sharp digital teeth.

I think this is a misconception. It is an idea that is rampant in the debate over the blog media. The enthusiastic bloggers talk, in a very offhand way, about 'new media', that is digital media, and 'old media', that is print media, about to die.

But if we turn our eyes towards the factual history of media, we see a very different picture. As Jon Katz pointed out in an essay in *WIRED Magazine* as early as 1994, newspapers had been outrun as the fastest news media already at the turn of the last century. The advent of radio should, in a way, have made newspapers extinct.

If we look at all the media that were born in the last century, however, we never see a pattern where 'new' media replace 'old'. Newspapers were not the fastest source of news anymore, but they could do other things. They could be stored. They could offer in-depth analysis or plain recreation. Instead of fast media, they became deep media. All through the twentieth century, we see a lot of media that *should* have been replaced. TV should have replaced radio. TV should have replaced the cinema. The video or DVD should have replaced the cinema. TV should have killed the stage theatre. And so on. But none of this has happened. There has been a fight, alright, and there still is a fight. But what we see in the media landscape is not the survival of the fittest. (Darwin never used that phrase, by the way.) What we see is a more and more differentiated media structure, where different types of media find a niche or a special way to function. The challenge for newspapers today is not to be printed *or* digitised, but to offer the in-depth analysis and/or recreation people need. (Another interesting aspect of the web that is very hard to fit in the framework of McLuhan's thinking is that it incorporates all kinds of media — written, film, music, still pictures and so on. We cannot see any mechanism of replacement in the growth of the web. McLuhan's other main point, that the technology of communication governs our way of thinking, might still be valid and is worth every consideration.)

The Book, Off the Hook

What does this mean for the printed book?

To begin with, I think we can be quite sure that the printed book will be among us for many years to come. It will play a less dominant role within a more complex media situation, but I cannot see any reason why it should become 'extinct' like some sort of Librarius Rex.

But there is a pattern to be found in the way new media develop. It is true that some types of technology become defunct, but that is not because something has replaced it, but because something does exactly the same thing, *and* adds another function. The standard example here would be silent movies, which in a way were replaced by movies with sound. The VHS cassette is about to be replaced by DVD and Blu-Ray. The vinyl gramophone record has,

on the other hand, had a strange revival in later years. The new media do exactly what the old did *plus* one ability more. It is tempting to write this out as a formula: $x+1$.

The dangers facing the book do not come from a sudden slump in literacy or from the digital domain. Literacy is on its way up on this planet, and one of the reasons is the rapid expansion of the net in countries like India, China, South Africa and Brazil. The dangers are the same that face other media: the threat of degradation. Acid eats paper away, and magnetic markers might fade on any hard drive if it is stored too long. One important way to store text is of course to print it out on acid-free paper and store it underground. Or engrave it in stone.

One very important debate we are facing is the one over open standards and open formats. It is unreasonable to think that one digital format, owned by one software company, should be the only format open to future users. Open standards, open source and a free flow of digital data is, in my opinion, the best way to ensure that information is kept safe for the future. That plus the use of several different media for storage.

When Gutenberg printed his famous Bible, he took some pains to make it look like a hand-copied 'original' because that was what a real book looked like, and a book was an expensive and prestigious object, worth several years' wages in his days. In one of his novels, the Norwegian novelist Kjartan Fløgstad renamed the book and called it a 'sitman' as opposed to a walkman. That is one, funny, way to say that the book will be around, even under another name. And if we apply the formula of $x+1$ to the book, we see that whatever wants to replace it must be able to do everything a book can, including standing around for a great while and still be readable. Whatever wants to replace the book must, by necessity, look very much like a book.