



Ola Larsmo

The temptations of the dinosaur theory

Does the rise of "new media" signal the death of the "old"? No, writes Ola Larsmo in his cordial critique of this "dinosaur theory", which has been dug up again in the debate about weblogs. What we see in the media landscape is not the survival of the fittest but instead a more and more differentiated media structure, where different types of media find their niche or their own special way to function, writes Larsmo.

1. What the propeller head said

During the IT boom of the 1990s, I used to travel the convention circuit, sometimes as speaker, sometimes as listener. At almost every lecture, I encountered the very same person. The propeller head, so called because he seemed to be floating a few decimetres above the floor.

The message of the propeller head 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 propeller heads concerned the future of the book and/or the newspaper. I remember one instance, when a consultant from a highly prestigious firm showed us a slide of a lady in a recliner, 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 recliners -- but there will be no newspapers!

That was in 1997.

My friend the propeller head was, in my opinion, a victim of the dinosaur theory. Many people are. We will return to that later, but first I will try to say a few words about another friend of ours, Marshal McLuhan, a man whose theories are very present in the debate on digital media -- and, in some cases, very misunderstood.

2. The Gutenberg Galaxy

It is interesting to see to what degree it is possible to apply the ideas of McLuhan to the emergence of the Internet and the World Wide Web. McLuhan died in 1980, well before the Internet was a common instrument, and published his two major works, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and *Understanding Media* (1964).

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 slowly accelerating revolution in how we perceived and used literature. From something that was brought to you by sound, from word of mouth, often in groups, and more often than not in a dimly 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.)

So far I follow him. I think he is exaggerating, but I find his thinking interesting and not so far off the mark.

But in *Understanding Media*, and in his later works, his style is more blurred, and his love for wordplay and puns make it easy to misinterpret him. His argument seems to be: the turn towards "electronic media" weakens the position of visual media such as print (e.g. 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: television 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 put down to some of his disciples and to a general misunderstanding of his ideas. But he does say, in *Understanding Media*, that the effect of television on society does not come from the content. The actual programmes people are watching — documentaries about African animals, stupid soap operas, or ultra-violent action movies — don't 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 medium is the message".

From this you can build a very dystopian model of the future of society, if you wish. The McLuhan perspective seems to be: as print media shapes or thoughts in a linear, logical way, it structures our thinking and makes us rational. Electronic media, above all the devil of television, the evil incarnate of the 1960s and 1970s, 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 primacy of the picture replacing the primacy of text.

It is only fair to point out that McLuhan was not nearly as pessimistic as some of his later followers, such as 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 television, which has turned us into slaves, is the fact that it streams media, you have to watch it as it happens or not watch it at all, whereas the book could be browsed at will. The Web does away with that, as with many other 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 a victim of the dinosaur theory.

3. 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 blogs — the enthusiastic bloggers talk, in a very offhand way, about "new media", that is digital media, vs "old media", that is print media, which they claim is 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 interesting essay in *WIRED* 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.

But if we look at all the media that was born in the last century, we never see a pattern where "new" media replaces "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. Television should have replaced radio. Television should have replaced cinema. The video or DVD should have replaced cinema. Television should have killed 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 their niche or their own special way to function. The challenge for newspapers today is not deciding whether to be printed *or* digitized, but offering 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 thinking is that although 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. But McLuhan's other main point, that the technology of communication governs our way of thinking, might still be

valid and is worth consideration.)

4. 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 landscape, 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 not because something has replaced them, 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 talkies. The VHS cassette is about to be replaced by DVD and Blu-ray, which is something to be grateful for. The vinyl gramophone record has, on the other hand, had a strange revival in recent years. But new media does exactly what the old did — plus one thing 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, and not 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 away at paper, and magnetic markers might fade on any hard drive that is stored too long. One 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 ridiculous 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 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 a "sitman", as opposed to a walkman. That is a funny way to say that the book will stick 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 long while and remaining readable. Whatever wants to replace the book must, by necessity, look very much like — a book.

Published 2007-08-03
Original in English
© Ola Larsmo
© Eurozine