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Renaissance and the Information Age of the Digital New Media: A Comparison

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Abstract – The period of sixteenth century England can perhaps be observed as one of the most tumultuous eras of all English history which witnessed and consolidated an impressive surge forward. Under the first Tudor monarch, Henry VII (reigned 1485-1509), England asserted itself as a power second to no other power in the world, seizing and establishing a cultural and political dominance over the world for which the reasons assigned are many.

As we look back into the annals of time, in this case, the English Renaissance of the sixteenth century, it is important to contextualise and explicate the enterprise before embarking on the project. I comprehend two reasons for such a venture, that is, curiosity, appreciation, exhibition or examination of an era with its relevance to contemporary times. As my attempt will be to focus on the latter, I shall try to ascertain the impact of the growth of technology in ushering and propagating the Renaissance movement along with the growth of Humanism and try to see a parallel situation in the present epoch.

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Looking back, it is quite evident that the main feature which defines Renaissance is the 'rebirth' of knowledge and learning, which set the grounds for experimentation. My suggestion is that the dissemination of information at such a massive scale in the period identified as Renaissance Period (arbitrarily specified as the period from More's Utopia in 1515 to Restoration of Charles II in 1616) would be impossible without the ready availability of the printed texts accessible to the scholars and the masses alike. This makes it essential to see the role of the movable-type printing press, invented by Johannes Gutenberg (c.1400 – February 3, 1468) in 1439. In Renaissance Europe, the introduction of the above-mentioned printing press can be considered as the first instrument of change. It initiated the world to a practice called mass communication which permanently impacted and altered the structure of society.

Many centuries later, a more massive and intensive communication technology happening in the digital world is making loads of matter, material and information available on the worldwideweb platform. Digital New Media is replacing Mass Media and a lot of effort and time is utilised in developing it. During the course of history, inventions have been regularly changing the world and the way people within it operate. The printing press and digital media can be acclaimed to be two of the most important inventions of their era. The fifteenth-century Printing Press and the Digital New Media revolution of the twentieth and twenty-first century are separated by a massive time gap. Considering that social evolution and scientific advancements have increased manifold, there would be no similarity or comparison between the two. Despite the time gap, it may be essential to note that both the inventions brought in a similar revolution in the field of education and communication. Whether in terms of reach, or in terms of dissemination of information, or even in the way information or education is consumed, all these factors underwent a massive transformation. Whereas the former impacted the spread of the written word, the latter not only consolidated and enhanced that, but also brought in a huge communication revolution with multiple audio-visual aids and created a communication loop available round the clock. Both of these inventions are world-changing and evolutionary during their respective times, making it difficult to ascertain which should be considered to have had a more considerable impact on the world.

The term *digital* refers to signals, information, or data represented by a series of discrete values (typically the numbers 0 and 1) for electronic storage or processing. Technologies and media involving digital signals, information, or data, such as the Internet, are also said to be "digital". New Media is an extremely complex and amorphous concept. In its simplistic term, it refers to "the computerisation of media" as observed and stated by Lev Manovich in his book *The Language of New Media*. "The term New Media is used to describe the relatively recent emergence of digital technologies that have changed the way that content is produced, distributed and

consumed."New Media is a fascinating, engaging and informative field. New Media engagement is dependent equally on the creators and the consumers, who are equal users of the technology. Firstly, it is replete with content, as anyone, anywhere can upload content. It gives a democratic representation to everyone without any bias. Secondly, the content is available on-demand across all time zones on multiple digital devices and at all times to the consumer. Thirdly, it allows users to respond, discuss, add creative inputs, affect changes in content generation and a whole lot of possibilities. In fact, the one-way feedback process is left far behind in favour of an interactive-creative communication, leading to building virtual communities. As a result, participation and interaction add a dimension of democracy to the entire eco-system of New Media. Content is created, posted, distributed and consumed with massive and eager participation not only by the creators, but also the consumers, who also may be part-creators by dint of giving material, feedback and/ or suggestions.

As the Gutenberg press did not predict the growth of Humanism during the Renaissance, similarly, it is too early to predict a second or a digital Renaissance in the Information Age. Still, the parallels here are too many to ignore.The most obvious similarity is the outburst and outpour of content which could be ancient, current or novel. The combined factor of availability and accessibility of content kick-started a newly-generated interest amongst the people in the society. The excitement of creating, consuming and sharing content is the hallmark of both the periods, though separated widely by time. The Digital New Media revolution differs from the printing press revolution based on a mere technological difference. Whereas the former technology can produce and sustain many-to-many communication due to the availability of networked technology, the latter was limited by its reach of one-to-many communication procedure. In either case, the community and the society have been deeply engaged and involved in the sustenance, growth and development of the equation between technology and information.

It may be seen that as society gets more and more involved and engaged with technology, the technology can only sustain if it gives creative space for arts and humanities to flourish and survive. Hence, apart from merely being a carrier of socio-political information, it also begins to affect art, and in turn, art begins to effect technology. The breadth and scope of the outreach of technology to society demands attention. As technology encroaches society, it also positively and/or negatively impacts society, which has been seen in both the eras. An example of this may be seen in the growth and development of Renaissance Humanism due to the availability of Classical learning in print and in multiple copies. It informed, formed and impacted the mind of the readers at large. Similarly, with the outburst of more information and the relative increase in speed, the New Media technology, not only excited the users about the accessibility of content but, overwhelmed them a bit too. One of the significant loopholes, during both the periods, remains the verification of information, which the society is being bombarded with. Sometimes, propaganda and untrue information is also consumed without authentication as is real and genuine information.

As the New Media revolution is current and still underway, it will be a long time since one is able to understand its direct impact on society. Similarly, historians and critics also were either not able to or limited in their quest to establish and ascertain the impact of the printing press totally on society. Whereas the history of the printing press has garnered wide attention, the social impact has received little or no attention. One of the early calls to attention to the impact of the printing press on society was brought to notice by Marshall Mc Luhan (1911-1980), the Canadian philosopher, educationist and media expert. He emphasised the impact of the technology, rather than the content carried in it. He explained that the Industrial Revolution was an outcome of the printing press. He was also instrumental in bringing to attention the concept of the 'global village' and also the fact that the 'medium is the message'. His attempt was to trace the individual and the psychological; social and cultural change that the technology could bring. His approach was technological determinism. Before him, historians, philosophers and analysts had merely attributed the descending power of the medieval church to the role and impact of the printing press. Beyond that, they nominally conceded to attribute the Protestant uprising and Reformation under Martin Luther to the impact of the printing press. It was only in 1979 that the book by Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* took up the project to look deeply into the impact of the printing press on society. She did an extensive survey which magnified the breadth and the depth of the impact of the printing press on the major movements of that time. Elizabeth Eisenstein persuasively implicates the printing press's role in Revolutions like the Renaissance, Reformation and Scientific Revolution of the fifteenth century and beyond.

Einstien, like Luhan, recognised the difficulty and magnanimity in reducing the impact of the printing press to a direct cause and effect pattern. She points out, "the first century of printing produced a bookish culture that was not very different from that produced by scribes," and "one must wait until a full century after Gutenberg before the outlines of new world pictures begin to emerge into view."

It may be noted here that Marshall McLuhan's concept that the printing press was a significant phenomenon in promoting and propagating change in society at a massive level is very strong and aptly reflected in Elizabeth Eisenstein's work. Inspired by a similar perception, Eisenstein took

forward the idea with enormous research and arguments. Like Luhan, she perceived change to be multi-causal, yet they both recognised the role that the printing press played as an agent in effecting the changes in society and the movements, was massive. She argued that the printing press changed the conditions under which information was collected, stored, retrieved, criticised, discovered, and promoted.

As Rosaldostated in a way that might resonate even more firmly today in the information age:"...roughly during the first century after Gutenberg's invention, the print did as much to perpetuate blatant errors as it did to spread enlightened truth." What he stated, may be noted with greater concentration, as it not only reveals hidden realities of the time but also applies strongly to the New Media and Digital revolution, which the current times are witnessing. Rosaldo noted a cultural explosion was taking place by putting into print the previously existing scribal matter and making it readily available to the society. Similarly, in the current times, we see previously existing printed matter being reproduced and made available on the digital and networked cosmos. As the current New Media has a wider scope, even previously existing audio-video content is also being made digitally available and circulated widely. Extending even further, the newer and modified content is also possible to get in this digitally revolutionised community of the current times. A plethora of words, images, and diagrams were readily made available to the public with the intrusion of the printing press in the society, just like an overabundance of a variety of content on the digital platform. Just as Classical and Medieval learning was available with the progressive scientific and Copernican views to the society undergoing a print revolution, similarly archaic and contemporary, authentic and inauthentic, progressive and regressive, matter and material are flourishing and co-existing in the digital world. Not only is the matter available, but it has the capacity to be readily and instantly be circulated to form an opinion and promote thought pattern or ideologies. With diametrically opposite content in ideology and veracity co-exist in the same space, it makes for an uncomfortable study by an unbiased researcher or scholar. On her observation of this paradoxical and contradictory co-existence, Eisensteinhad very prosaically asserted that things simply had not yet been sorted out. She was referring to the one-sided celebration of the spirit of enquiry, desire to explore and know more, existing side-by-side with impatience with historical facts, impatience for verification of content which had not yet been sorted out.

This long gap between the cause and "sorted out" effect is not surprising when the results are cultural and profound. It, however, complicates the establishment of a cause-and-effect relationship. Given the difficulties, the strength of Eisenstein's work is her careful argumentation about the connection between a given cultural change—seen clearly only many decades after the invention of the printing press—and the more tangible changes which the printing press brought about in the society.

Observations made by academicians on Eisenstein's arguments on each of the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the Scientific Revolution, draw deeply on the summaries made in the several reviews of her book.

Summarising the impact of the printing press on the uprising and establishment of the Reformation movement, Kingdon makes a very valid observation. He notes that Luther himself had acknowledged the invention and hence, the role of the printing press in the spreading of the reformation movement and thought. Historians and scholars too, have made the same observation on many occasions. Luther goes a step further to acknowledge the hand of God in presenting the printing press to humanity for encouraging the reform movement. He further refers to Eisenstein's deeper analysis of the reality where she notes that the printing press not only was instrumental in spreading the Protestant Reformation but was rather the cause of the birth of the Protestant Reformation.

Her logic was that Luther could only develop his thoughts and dissent towards the older theology by getting access to the printed texts of the Bible, the writings and sermons of the church fathers containing dogmatic ideas. She mentioned that the stimulus for change came to Luther's thoughts only after getting easy access to the previously existing matter. By that, he could read, analyse and think further about the reforms that he believed in. Therefore, had he not access to the aforementioned matter, he would not have been able to contemplate, then reformulate and finally, spread his reformed vision and thoughts across to the multitude of the reading public.

A similar and more complex pattern may be available in the New Media context with digital technology and wired environment prevailing currently. With multiple and conflicting thoughts and ideologies spreading wide and fast, consumption is prime. With lesser time for analyses and assimilation, older ideas and conflicting thoughts of past co-exist, and the users gravitate to their own previously held beliefs. Therefore, instead of the development of new ideas, it is interesting to see dogmatic defending of previously held beliefs. What the future holds, though, is a matter of time to reveal.

The second socio-cultural movement discussed by Eisenstein is the Renaissance. It is a commonly accepted fact 'renaissance' or 'rebirth' is a movement leading to the revival of classical learning. More specifically, it refers to an interest in

the knowledge of classical Greek. Additionally, 'renaissance' occurred much before the advent of the printing press. In Italy, the sweep of 'renaissance' is recorded as early as the fourteenth century. She goes further to suggest that 'renaissance' is not a unique or one-time event. The Carolingian Renaissance of the ninth century and the twelfth century is also well-known. Marvin points out,"throughout the Middle Ages periodic revivals of classical interests at different cultural centres were normally ended by war, famine, and other adversities that drew energy and attention back to more pressing problems of survival."

Therefore, to remove the confusion associated with 'renaissance'which is a periodically repetitive movement, Eisenstein attempts to differentiate between the pre-print 'renaissance' and the post-print 'renaissance'. She noted that the latter period differed from the former becausethe printing press permanently 'fixed' the created matter with the technology available. The changes and challenges of time would be less effective, as the matter could now be retrieved later. Moreover, it could also be spread and passed around geographical locations. This preservative power of print technology was referred to as 'typographical fixity'. Thoughts, beliefs, and ideas generated by the intellectual community got a fresh and a longer lease of life. The reproductive capacity of the printing press and the speed of recreation became a lethal combination in spreading intellectual thoughts. It was for this reason that the'renaissance' after the fall of Constantinople, which coincided with the invention of the printing press. It was precisely due to this invention that the 'renaissance' of the fifteenth-sixteenth century had a lasting impact than the previous ones. Without the printing press, the fate of all classical texts and manuscripts would have been similar to the ones that happened during the earlier revival of learning. Further, civilisation would have never experienced the impact of Humanism, as experienced by society today.

If we compare the advent of Humanism as experienced by New Media culture in the current times, one may notice that there has definitely been a ready availability of matters from the past as well as remote past. Beyond that, there hasn't been any rediscovery of knowledge or philosophy that has brought about a shift in society and its ways. On the other hand, information has now percolated deeper and wider into the society. As a result, people are empowered with information-upload which is nebulous, various and fast-moving, which changes opinions and ideas fast, without a longer stay. Moreover, as the entire society is not trained to process and analyse information, it is creating havoc with the readers' minds and making them volatile and moving them towards directionless destinations.

The third aspect of Eisenstein's observation was regarding the Scientific Revolution. Mander observed that "Scribal culture revered the ancients because they were closer to uncorrupted knowledge—that is, knowledge not yet corrupted through the process of scribal transmission... Print culture, because it allows for cumulative advance of knowledge, views the past from a fixed distance." Therefore, one may ascertain that as ancient knowledge came closer and closer to the public, the perceptual distance between the ancient intellectuals and the contemporary reader reduced. Psychologically, it may be interpreted as a removal of the wall or time lapse between the past and the present. That led to a lesser reverence for ancient knowledge. It was treated more like data. Moreover, Eisenstein observes that 'scientific data collection' was born with printing. Newer discoveries and analyses could be recorded, stored and retrieved and freed from the 'cycle of rapid decay and loss'. This gave birth to cumulative and progressive knowledge. Moreover, with access to old data, a pattern of compare and contrast started to emerge. This led to the approach of verifying, correcting and challenging much older knowledge, which was limited by technology and understanding during the older times. *De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium*, written by Copernicus in 1543, followed the pattern mentioned above to compare and contrast observations and theories propagated by Ptolemy, Aristotle and the rest, which revolutionised scientific enquiry. Unquestioned reverence and distant respect for the past faded and a questioning approach emerged. A significant shift in cultural approach could be noted. The concept of the 'original' was replaced by 'novel'. 'Original' referred to something closer to the origins or the cosmos, whereas, 'novel' referred to a disjunction from the preceding knowledge.

If we compare the great scientific revolution brought by the availability of information and data due to the print culture and a similar tendency in the New Media culture, there is a vast difference currently. The scientific progress in technology is moving at a fast pace, enhancing the performance and the use of New Media. Still, newer scientific discoveries of the physical world are less visible as free matter available on New Media lacks authenticity and credibility.

Finally, what we observe from Eisenstein's research is that the printing press impacted society very deeply and broadly, the impact of which had not been investigated for long. Though a rational and broader vision argues for the fact that the fifteenth to the seventeenth century was not only under the impact of the printing press, and neither was it the only occurrence to impact the overall transition of the medieval world to a modern world. Despite that, one cannot overlook or underestimate the profound impact of the printing press on the progress of human society.

Similarly, multiple and multi-dimensional movements are the hallmark of current reality. Therefore, all movements and its impact cannot be attributed to the New Media revolution. Still, a

significant effect of the same can be ascertained in the daily life of the society today.

Therefore, having analysed Eisenstein's approach and analyses of the impact of the printing press on the age of Renaissance, we could use a similar and comparative trope to assess the impact and similarity between the two different inventions - the printing press and the networked computers - across two widely separated time periods. As books were not created by the print culture, they were given a unique and distinctive character from the books or manuscripts written by the scribes. Similarly, the digital content further enhanced the uniqueness of content in the networked cosmos.

Scribes wrote limited texts with hardwork and time, and wandering scholars travelled with the manuscript. They might have noted errors and/ or suggestions along the margins of the manuscripts or may have been ignorant of some mistakes. Copies were sometimes made where the errors were carried forward and oftentimes, newer errors crept in. Knowledge or information had limited circulation and limited accessibility.

Then came the printing press, which dramatically changed the situation. The production and dissemination of knowledge and information started happening at a faster and a larger scale. As books reached a wider audience, it not only increased consumption by the reading public but enhanced the feedback process too. As the standardised book travelled to many and unknown people, anyone could verify the information or update the information, which could be later corrected in the subsequent prints. According to Eisenstein, this scope of wider public participation was the basis of the scientific revolution. It began the process of accumulation of data by which zoologists, botanists, geographers and astronomers could expand their base of information. Based on this, they could develop, test or build concepts of knowledge. This ushered in a period of pursuit of knowledge beyond any perceivable limits. The closed domain of knowledge expanded and gave way to an open realm on which newer findings could be built and established.

What the many-to-many communication on the digital New Media platform has done, is more advanced than the previous technology. Uploading content, preserving and circulating has increased manifold in its scope of reach and speed. Moreover, updating knowledge and cross-reference by hypertext has hastened the process of consuming and creating knowledge. For a reader with a further wish for enquiry, hyper-texting provides a fast and immediate solution at the click of a button making research and interpretations possible. Knowledge now can be pursued more comfortable, as opposed to previously. The collective community of knowledge creators, for example, on a platform Wikipedia Retrieval of the vast repertoire of knowledge has also hastened tremendously.

Finally, it may be noted that the networked environment has not only added speed, accuracy and a better feedback mechanism as compared to the print technology, but it has also impacted life in more ways than the printing press. It has broken all limitations and barriers of the previous technology.

As the printing press had a long and a deep impact on the society, in comparison, the digital and network technology has a wide-reaching impact on the educational, professional and even the personal space of the creators and the consumers, which does seem to be stopping soon.

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