“The ‘Expert Paradigm’ Revisited: Media Change and the Consensus Narrative”

Peter Walsh

draft: 5.06.11

This paper is to some extent a sequel for a short talk I gave at the very first Media in Transition conference back in 1999. This talk later became the paper "That Withered Paradigm: The Web, the Expert, and the Information Hegemony," published in Henry Jenkins and David Thorburn's *Democracy and New Media* in 2003[1].

In that paper, I talked about what I called the "expert paradigm" and how it was being broken down by the internet. I also explained the mechanisms of the process how, for example, the free exchange of information across electronic networks thwarted the "expert paradigm"'s traditional distinctions between informed insiders and ignorant outsiders.

The present work attempts to take the argument to another stage, seen all around us in the last several months, explaining how new media tends to break down an established social consensus, which can lead to a breakdown of order and even violence before a new consensus is formed. This is, I maintain, a morally and politically neutral assertion. Breaking down a social order can be positive or negative depending on circumstances and your point of view.

I build my argument on a couple of foundation blocks. The first is that media transitions have taken place a number of times in human history and that they have unfolded in similar ways. Our era, confusing as it may be, is by no means unique. Perhaps the best way to understand it is to look at what has happened in the past.

The second foundation block is that media revolutions are not reversible. Once printing or television or the internet it cannot be uninvented and its consequences, much of them unanticipated, will continue to unfold.

Though the effects of a media revolution may be unsettling for a long period of time, there can be no real counter-revolution.

In this I am influenced a bit by Henry Kissinger's notion of a "second revolution.[2]" Kissinger points out that the first wave of a revolution is usually not the last. A second wave comes along with a different agenda that wipes the cast of the first wave away.

One example Kissinger uses is the Iranian Revolution that began as the moderate, democratic overthrow of the Iranian monarchy and was swiftly co-oped by the Islamic Revolution, which still rules Iran today.

This notion of "second revolution" is a particular concern at the moment, while the entire Middle East is in the throws of a social media-assisted political upheaval, because we can't know at this point where the revolution will finally come to rest.

Similarly, when a media revolution occurs, it is hard to say exactly when it really begins and impossible to predict where it will end. The path a media revolution takes is probably baked into society before it begins. But we can't really trace it except in retrospect.

I suggest here that there are five stages to the process of a media revolution:

1. A technological innovation dramatically lowers the cost of communication.
2. The lower cost increases the speed, geographic extent, and (usually geometrically) the size of the audience the new medium can reach.
3. This great expansion extends to large, new audiences that were not reached before.
4. The new audiences demand new narratives that fit their needs and aspirations.
5. These new narratives conflict with the established consensus narrative, leading to a breakdown in social consensus and even violence.

As an illustration of this process, let me look to the decades leading up to the Civil War. The initiating technological innovation here centered on paper and it unfolded in the very early 19th century.

Since the Middle Ages, paper had been made by hand by screening a pulp made of linen and cotton rags and drying it. This created a medium of high quality but, but by the end of the 18th century, it was in increasingly short supply. Cloth was expensive and there were just not enough old rags around to meet the demand for paper.

Inventers experimented with a vast range of materials in the quest for something cheaper and easier to obtain in large quanities. It was probably this effort that inspired Nicholas-Louis Robert to come up with a mechanized way to produce paper. He developed a continuous web that transformed pulp and water into dried and finished paper in an endless roll.

Robert's invention, patented in France in 1799, was later perfected by two stationers in England, Henry and Sealy Fourdrinier. The machine, known as the Fourdrinier, is still how paper is manufactured up to this day[3].

The Fourdrinier is probably as significant to the development of modern media as the printing press. Up to this point, throughout the entire history of media, the underlying material--- what art historians call "the support" was still made by hand, whether it was formed of clay, papyrus, stone, animal skins, or rags.

Paper manufacturers developed new ways of incorporating ground wood pulp into paper created on the Fourdrinier machine. The vast increase in the supply of paper, coupled with a lower cost, triggered a parallel increase in the production of books and newspapers.

Prior to the Fourdrinier, newspapers were short and expensive, sold by subscription to a tiny elite. They contained little we would consider today news and their circulations were small, no more than a few thousand. They were often supported by political parties and the revolution in paper making helped trigger what was called the "penny press" revolution.

The penny press were newspapers that sold for a penny. Centered in large urban centers like New York, Boston, and Philadelphia, these papers were sold on the street by newsboys. They catered to a new, increasing urban middle class. They were fiercely competitive. Once established, their circulations grew rapidly to tens of thousands.

In the hands of entrepreneurs like James Gordon Bennett, founder of the *New York Herald,* and Horace Greeley, who created the *New York Tribune,* the penny press hired "reporters" for the first time to "cover" local events. In this they created new narratives that would appeal to their middle class audiences, what we would now consider "the news.[4]"

Early on, the new media created scandals along class lines. Aristocrat author James Fenimore Cooper, who frequently attacked the new papers in the law courts, wrote that the new penny press "tyrannizes over public men, the arts, the stage, and even over prirate life." These rising newspapers, Cooper said, were "corrupting" public morals and were leading to "a despotism as ruthless, as grasping, and one that is quite as vulgar as that of any christian [sic] state known.[5]"

But in creating new narratives for new classes of Americans, the penny press gave voice to many that had not had one. What Schank and Abelson[6] have called the "untellable story" plays a key role in all media revolutions, including this one.

"The phenomenon of repression relies upon this idea of the unwanted and untold story." they write. "When we have no listener for a story, we tend to bury it. It may well go away; indeed, without rehearsal, it should go away. Certain events, however, are too important to go away simply because we fail to tell their story.[7]"

Media revolutions always reveal "untellable stories," often to dramatic and unexpected effect. These untellable stories are untellable for a reason: they challenge established elites, power structures, and social cohesion by attacking the prevailing consensus narrative.

In the early 19th century, one of the key untellable stories was that of Southern slave society.

Prior to the 1830s, American Abolitionism was so tiny and isolated a movement that it barely existed. Even rarer were Abolitionists who thought slavery should be abolished immediately, as opposed to those "Gradualists" who felt the process should be slow and evolutionary, perhaps with the slaves returning to Africa.

The prevailing consensus narrative in the early years of the Republic was that slavery was an essential tradition of the South and keystone of the Southern economy, that slaves were well treated, that they were, for the most part, content in their condition, and that, even beyond that, their natural inferiority would not permit them to live on equal terms with white men.

This narrative was dealt a sudden and dramatic blow by the advent, in 1839, of news of the slave rebellion aboard the Spanish schooner *Amistad.*

Captured by slave traders in Sierra Leone, the *Amistad's* human cargo rose up and seized control of the ship off the coast of Cuba, killing part of the crew. They attempted to return to Africa, but they were subsequently seized off the Long Island and imprisoned in the United States. Befriended by Northern Abolitionists, the *Amistad* slaves were, contrary to the wishes of the establishment President Martin Van Buren and the Spanish monarchy, defended in American courts, ultimately, by Massachusetts Congressman and former President John Quincy Adams.

After a lengthy legal proceeding, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1841 that the Africans had been illegally transported and allowed them to return home.

The incident was dramatized in a 1997 Hollywood film which, however, ignored one the key elements of the event: the role of the new media. Accounts of the trial proceedings, with their lurid descriptions of conditions on slave ships, the depravity of the slavers, and the plight of the imprisoned *Amistad* mutineers were made for the penny press's middle class audience. The massive publicity newspapers gave to the incident over many months meant that not only the case but the entire narrative of slavery truly became news for the first time[8]. Slavery was no longer an "untellable story."

Once started, this new narrative could not be stopped. It directly challenged, of course, the old consensus narrative and, as more new inventions like the telegraph created a national press for the first time, spread quickly throughout the nation.

In 1852, Henry Jarvis Raymond, founder of a penny paper called *The New York Daily Times* (now *The New York Times*) commissioned a series of correspondent's

reports on slave conditions in the American South. The freelance reporter was Frederick Law Olmsted, better known for his later career as a landscape architect[9].

Olmsted's reports, later published in book form as *Journeys and Explorations in the Cotton Kingdom* (1861), further exploded the old consensus narrative on slavery. In his vivid accounts and arguments, slavery was not only morally wrong and the conditions of the slaves horrifying, this key Southern institution was economically obsolete. It would soon be swept away, he said, by the rising economic force of industrialization from the North.

Olmsted and other counter-narrators such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) incited anti-slavery feelings to the point where the division of the nation became almost inevitable. The new narrators and activists, in the form of abolitionist publishers and their printing presses, were often physically attacked by pro-slavery elements.

As these diverging narratives solidified, both sides came to conslusions. The North began to believe that slavery had to end for the good of the nation as a whole. The Southern states came to realize that, if they remained part of the Union, their way of life would end.

Moreover, the Southerners saw that their political dominance in the Federal government, which had continued ever since 1776, would soon fall to the increasing populations of the northern states. To prevent all that, they concluded, they had to secede.

A bloody Civil War was the outcome.

Of course, the invention of the Fourdrinier machine did not *cause* the Civil War. The social divisions that created the war had been there in American society since its creation decades earlier. But this technical innovation helped set off a chain of events that made it virtually inevitable.

We can see the same process at work in other media revolutions: in the role of the printing press in the Protestant Reformation, leading to the Thirty Years War, or the dramatic spread of television in the 1950s and the Civil Rights Movement

and war protests of the 1960s, not to mention the role of Twitter and Facebook in the social and political unrest presently unfolding across the Middle East.

In each of these cases, technical innovations set off an entirely unexpected process, leading to division and even violence, that was never predicted, yet seems inevitable in retrospect.

Unfortunatley, once underway, these processes cannot be reversed or even fully understood until after they have unfolded. Technology may not help put society back together again. That we have to do for ourselves.

---

[1] MIT Press.

[2] *The International Herald Tribune,* April 2011.

[3] Bo Rudin, *Making Paper: A Look into the History of an Ancient Craft* (Vallingby, Sweden: Rudens, 1990), p. 45

[4] See Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), Chapter One.

[5] Quoted in Schudson, p. 17.

[6] Roger C. Schank and Robert P. Abelson, "Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story" in Robert S. Wyler, ed., *Knowledge and Memory: The Real Story* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995).

[7] Schank and Abelson, p. 45.

[8] See Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad,* rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[9] See Witold Rybcynsky, *A Clearing in the Distance: Frederick Law Olmsted and America in the 19th Century* (New York, Scribners, 2000).