

Sunday January 29, 2012

New technologies upset the status quo

By Jim Taylor

On Wednesday January 18, Wikipedia walked out. Some saw the blackout as political protest; I think it may mark a milestone in labour/management conflicts.

Wikipedia itself is a kind of technological milestone. Traditionally, encyclopedias solicited articles from recognized experts; then professional editors rigorously scrutinized those articles for accuracy and clarity. By contrast, Wikipedia invited anyone to contribute – whether cranks or experts – and then allowed readers to edit the text.

Everyone expected Wikipedia to disintegrate into chaos. Instead, it has proved as accurate as the venerable *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

Wikipedia illustrates the universal trend of new technologies.

Specialized skills

Each new technology takes a skill that once belonged to a select few, and makes it more widely available. In general terms, steam engines rendered human muscles irrelevant. Acetylene welding transferred blacksmith skills to lesser mortals. Computers rendered linotype operators redundant. Home washing machines obsoleted washerwomen.

Luddites responded by attacking machines of any kind.

On January 18, Wikipedia and an estimated 7,000 other websites voluntarily blacked themselves out, in protest against two pieces of legislation in the U.S. Congress -- SOPA and PIPA. (Don't even ask what the initials stand for -- PIPA is an acronym of an acronym!)

I write a blog. Readers respond. If one of those responses has links to a webpage that someone else believes may have copied – or quoted – material in violation of U.S. copyright laws, a U.S. court could shut down my puny little blog.

Yes, even outside the U.S. The legislation treats any domain name acquired through a U.S. agency as U.S. jurisdiction. This would include, for example, canada.com, the website for Global TV and Canada's largest chain of newspapers.

It's not an idle threat. The day after Wikipedia's blackout, the U.S. seized the domain and assets of Hong Kong-based Megaupload, arbitrarily shutting down the world's 12th-busiest website.

Now imagine how vulnerable Wikipedia would be, with millions of volunteer contributors. Or Facebook. Or Youtube.

Service disruptions

So Wikipedia went on strike. Or maybe it was a lockout. Typically, workers strike, and management locks out. But both groups can be equally reactionary, in protecting their privileged status. Also, strikes and lockouts share a common victim – they triangulate their conflict by denying services to customers and consumers.

The first strike, according to Wikipedia itself, occurred in 1152 B.C., when Egyptian stone masons walked off the job. But before that, you may recall, Moses led Hebrew brick-makers on a walk out.

Wikipedia's blackout fits into this long tangled history of labour and technology.

Before printing presses, you see, the only way to get a book was to copy it. Nameless scribes and monks laboured in a scriptorium, copying more or less accurately a variety of texts -- most often the Bible.

Writing itself was once a new technology, which transferred the skills of traditional storytellers to scribes.

After Gutenberg, anyone could own a book. Unscrupulous printers pirated texts wildly. Copyright law evolved to protect authors' and publishers' investment in their intellectual property.

For a relatively brief period, the producers of words (and later of music and movies) enjoyed absolute control. The average person did not have the technology to duplicate a book, an audio record, or a movie. Then photocopying machines made it as cheap to copy a book as to buy it. Audio cassettes enabled people to swap music freely.

Freezing an aberration

These new technologies took the skills that privileged producers thought of as their birthright, and made them available to the public.

COPA and PIPA attempt to freeze-frame that short period when publishers exercised absolute power over their product.

As a writer, I have a stake in that system. I don't get paid unless my writing helps a publisher make money. If anyone can grab my words, my thoughts, for nothing, the publisher and I both suffer.

On the other hand, I see the present system as an aberration, not the norm. For most of history, storytellers and minstrels were paid directly for their songs or stories. By wealthy patrons, for whom they performed like obedient pets. Or by collecting coins in a hat in the village square.

But neither way did they pass through the bowels of a corporate entity that controlled the distribution and consumption of their creativity.

Wikipedia – like Facebook, Mozilla, Craigslist and other Internet organizations that joined the blackout – represents a seismic shift in that hierarchy of power. The producers are losing their control. SOPA and PIPA were designed to preserve privileges that the elite feel slipping away.

Those who benefited most from new technologies now find themselves sidelined by newer technologies.

And when these modern Luddites attempted to enforce their prior privileges with a blunt object – federal legislation – the new technologies staged a walkout.

The pattern will recur. The next technology will shift power yet again. We don't yet know from whom, to whom. But it will happen. And given the pace of change, probably sooner than you, or I, or Wikipedia, imagines.

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YOUR TURN

Fran Ota turned out to be a fount of information about cruise ships and ocean liners.

“Concordia is not, technically, a liner but a cruise ship. Queen Elizabeth is a liner -- narrower hull, different bow. Cunard will tell you their ships are 'liners' - as opposed to say Oasis of the Seas which is a cruise ship.

“Ships which do crossings of Atlantic and Pacific have a double hull. Ships which do not have only a double bottom. All have watertight compartments. Concordia should have been able to remain upright. The fact the she heeled as far as she did, to the opposite side from the visible damage, would seem to indicate damage on the other side, although that isn't clear yet.

“Concordia was on what is called an ‘open loop’, meaning people can get on at any of the ports. Drills had been conducted for all the people who got on at Rome, for instance, but the next drill was scheduled to take place within 24 hours for those who boarded in Savona.

“The line on which I usually sail is required to drill before the ship leaves port. We go directly to the muster station, where instructions are given. Virtually all of their voyages are either trans-ocean or ‘closed loop’ -- one boarding point, and get off at the same point. The ship cannot sail until drill is done.

“A couple of years ago it was decided that wearing life jackets to the drill was becoming too dangerous, as many elderly people were tripping on the straps. In a real emergency they would then not even know how to put the jackets on. I would be willing to bet there will be a re-vamping of drills on all cruise lines. In all cases, passengers are instructed to go straight to muster station if an emergency arises, NOT to go back to the cabin for the jacket. I would bet there will also be a re-training of crew, since many crew nowadays are not seasoned sailors.

"In the case of Concordia, so many things went wrong. The Captain was dumb, yes, but he could not have made that course change without permission, so someone goofed up somewhere higher up. The crew was unprepared, and clearly also panicked. Yet there was one incredible young man of 19, a dancer on board, who allowed himself to be used as a human bridge so people could get into the lifeboat. It also struck me as important that the people who **were** helping were the cabin staff and dining room staff -- while the crew were busy getting off first.

"Lots of lessons in this mess."

Fran will be sailing this month with a captain who is an old friend. "I can hardly wait to ask him about this," she concluded.

Isabel Gibson felt I might have overstated the lack of emergency preparedness in most organizations: "When working in an office environment I was impressed with some former CN employees. We were in temporary quarters and they started every meeting with a review of the evacuation procedure -- it was part of their safety culture."

Isabel picked up my closing point: "*Persons in positions of responsibility must not allow personal concerns to affect the performance of their responsibilities.*"

"An insightful extrapolation from this specific event," she commented, "and an exceedingly high standard of behaviour. I'd like to think I meet it, but am sure I don't."

Allan Baker assured me that VIA Rail staff DO instruct passengers on safety procedures, at least on the Toronto/Montreal route.

Art Gans comes from a tradition where taking responsibility is taken seriously: "Harry Truman had a sign on his desk saying 'The Buck Stops Here.' That is a statement that every person with responsibility of command should heed.

"The first thing I learned as an officer in the Army (I served in both the U.S. and the Canadian Forces) was that the commander, or whoever was the senior person, was always responsible for whatever happened.

"In my opinion, the Captain [of the Costa Concordia] failed both those tests."

Alan Longworth shared a long list of problems that he and his wife had with a different cruise line, Princess. I won't go into detail. But he's not going on any cruises, anywhere, as a result.

Denise Richter, on the other hand, is looking forward to more cruises: "We've just returned from a pleasant 25 day cruise to Australia. I'd like to know the name of the small ship you were recently on. We've never tried one that small but have heard good things about them."

The cruise ship Joan and I were on belongs to the Silverseas line. They have, I believe, six ships, all carrying 500 or fewer passengers. I haven't been on Crystal, but I'm told it is comparable.

The Northern Gateway Pipeline continues to generate some mail.

Jim Johnson, in Salmon Arm, BC, wrote, "Cameron Baughen's comment gave me a whole new perspective. This is the first I have heard on any media about 'diluted-bitumen' and the elevated danger of shipping as compared to crude. Why don't we process the product before shipping to Asia (or anywhere) as we do with logs into log homes?"

James Russell, who operates his own mailing lists out of Ottawa, also found Cameron's information valuable, and sent it out to his readers. Like both Jim and James (hmm, is there any significance to the run on names?) I too wonder why the media have utterly failed to acknowledge the nature of this pipeline.

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

I have a few copies of a book my father wrote exploring Christian theology through Christian art.

The problem with art, of course, is that it cannot put an abstract concept on canvas. An artist cannot paint an Incarnation or a Resurrection without putting real humans, in real situations, into the picture. The expression,

therefore, has to be grounded in a particular culture and society; the infinite and universal has to be represented in finite terms.

My father – who once took art lessons from members of Canada’s Group of Seven – spent much of his life after retiring as principal of the Vancouver School of Theology, seeking out the ways artists through the centuries had attempted to deal with this dilemma. I’m probably biased, but I think that in examining the ways art portrays theological concepts, he explained those concepts better than most theological texts.

The book is *Seeing the Mystery: Exploring Christian Faith through the Eyes of Artists*, by William S. Taylor, 94 pages. There are only about 20 copies left in the world. Most of the illustrations are in full colour.

If you would like a copy, write to me – Jim Taylor, 1300 6th Street, Lake Country, BC, Canada, V4V 2H7.

Unfortunately, I can’t send these out on the honour system, as I do with my biblical paraphrases. I will have to charge \$30 Canadian to include postage, paid in advance.

TECHNICAL STUFF

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called *Soft Edges*, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for *Soft Edges*, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don’t think I’m sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating’s “SeemslikeGod” page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold’s weekly musings, punningly titled “Reynolds Rap” -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson’s thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin’s “Model T Websites.” a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood’s satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
