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<th>The impact of new technologies on the mass media</th>
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<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1996</td>
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While we stand on the threshold of the next century, we often wonder what was the biggest story of our era? The two world wars? The atomic bomb? The rise of communism, or its fall? The aeroplane? Human footprints on the Moon? I think the real story of our times has been the development of transportation, communication systems and technologies. This is probably the foundation on which all of the rest has been built.

The revolution in the transportation and communication systems and technologies have completely transformed the world. It has brought us much closer to the concept of the "global village". We can no longer afford to live in isolation.

Only a few years ago when satellites began beaming television programmes direct-to-home (DTH), our national boundaries almost vanished. They were seen as a threat to our cultures, norms and social values, but it was still possible to "curtail" this "cultural invasion".

The introduction of personal computers a decade ago and its acceptance, popularity and availability has been increasing in exponential terms and has opened new vistas — not only in the realm of mass communication, but in the manner in which we communicate and interact with each other.

The digital future is upon us with all kinds of threats and opportunities beyond anything we might have imagined only a few years ago.

Mass communication, which in itself a relatively new phenomenon and dates back to about 500 years ago with Gutenberg's invention of the moveable type, has always involved controlled broadcast to passive audiences. The mass audience
has never had any significant input, or control, over the content of mass communication. With the Internet, these characteristics of mass communication have forever changed. In cyberspace, massive numbers of people communicate with massive numbers of people.

The newer information and communication technologies are threatening even the survival of such mass media which to a large extent have remained unidirectional. The offshoot of the digital revolution, which we often refer to as Internet is here and revolutinizing the whole process of communication and has much larger implications then we could ever think of.

The improvement in technology has been affecting all the three mass media in one way or the other. From the flatbed technology to rotary press and then to offset multicolour process enabled the newspapers not only to improve their quality but speed too. Similarly, television became more interesting and lively to watch when it transformed from monochrome to colour.

All these developments were very gradual and spanned over a long period. However, the development of newer technologies has picked up a greater momentum and speed. The obsolescence time of any new technology has been reduced to about three years on an average. This has particularly happened in the field of computers and digitalization.

The earlier innovations and improvements in technology brought some welcome changes and were readily accepted by the consumers of these media and were not seen as a threat to the survival of individual medium. However, when radio came on the scene, some people had predicted the end of newspapers and similarly at the introduction of television, the doom of radio was predicted. But nothing like that happened and all mass media in fact not only thrived but improved their circulations multifold and widespread increase in their consumers.

Until now, the computer and digital technologies have significantly helped the print media in the editorial and production processes, and radio and television in terms of quality and speed of production and transmission. But now the offshoot of computer and digital technology -- Internet and WWW-- is threatening to become a mass medium in its own right. At the same time we are now talking of digital convergence and convergence of all media on one single platform. The fad is catching up fast to the extent that many international and important new
newspapers have also gone on-line on Internet.

Is the Internet a new mass medium?

Internet, which owes its existence to the "cold war era", satisfied the need for collecting, processing and distributing rival's defense data for counter offensive measures. Since the threats of the cold war era are no more in existence, Internet was developed as an information tool and provider. The basic reason for the phenomenal increase of Internet users is the human need to communicate. It has also become affordable since it is widely available on computing platforms.

Internet can be either a very passive or interactive medium and that basically depends on the user. Convergence is bringing together print and electronic media and viewer softwares are making it possible, since information now is all stored in bits and bits are easy to manipulate. Internet is, therefore, capable of merging print and television together. Convergence thus promises a richer medium for the consumers, though more work for producers.

If all the technological predictions come true, they will change the way news is currently gathered, produced and disseminated, as well as it will also change the way news is currently consumed. News will become anytime, anywhere the consumer wants it to be. It may take a form of dialogue between the viewer and the producer or we may want to learn from a variety of producers. It may blur or even change the definition of news altogether.

Time, in the case of radio and television, and space, in the case of print media, are the two biggest constraints and thus justify the need for gatekeepers (e.g., editors, programme producers, schedulers, policymakers, etc.) who decide what to provide, how to provide and when to provide the news, information or entertainment within the limits of time and space.

Censorship or the role of gatekeepers, be they governmental institutions or media barons, has shrunk as they are not able to perform the functions they were used to, since Internet is truly a bi-directional medium, more often it could be omni-directional. This could not be achieved by the mass media such as radio and television even. They remained uni-directional in the way that a message could be received by a large mass passive audience without an iota of participation.
The mass media as we are experiencing today caters to the tastes of much larger groups and, therefore, does not necessarily meet with the individual requirements or what they need to know in their pursuit of knowledge. It usually has the constraints either of time, in the case of radio and television, and space, in the case of newspapers. Hence, the controllers of these media have to decide as to what should be provided to their audiences.

Internet provides and caters to the needs of individuals and cuts across the barriers of space, time and convenience. Though with this facility the existing mass media should not worry about the competition and the usual fear of extinction, a threat which has always been felt with the introduction of a new medium.

The recent history of mass communication tells us that in times to come all media not only have survived the introduction of a new medium, but in fact have prospered to a great extent.

The only thing that we have to consider here is that with the introduction of any technology the context has to change. Many distinguished international and national newspapers and journals all over the world have joined the bandwagon of Internet and one can browse them on his or her personal computer today at their preferred choice of time and can get much detailed information on the subjects of individual's personal interests. Perhaps in time to come the role or context of the newspapers will change and they will only provide a list of contents and from this an individual will select, and from the personal computer read the "stories" of his or her choice in as much detail as one would wish to.

"Media convergence", as this new phenomenon is called, is going to change the context of the mass media. Newspapers have already adopted digital technology in most of their production processes. Once their distribution goes "on-line", it would become possible for their readers to "talk back" to journalists and get more information.

Similarly, once the television signals are available in digital form and be delivered "on-line", they can be accessed by people on their personal computers and the television will also then become interactive and participatory.

However, some people see this phenomenon as an uncontrolled dissemination of information of which some may be undesirable. But who is going to be the
arbiter of that.

With convergence, time and space will no longer be constraints as the consumers will be in full control and will pay for what they want to see, hear or browse through at their own convenience. But this raises the crucial issue -- there will be no control or censorship on what is produced and distributed since the gatekeepers will vanish in the new scenario.

How far the competition will go? Will Internet and the coming convergence make television and the print media obsolete? Yes and no! Technology is there and it is possible to combine all media. But are the consumers ready for it and would want it? Is it economically viable?

We still prefer to read newspapers since screens are not that friendly and sometimes difficult to read through. Some of us still prefer to be passive viewers of television rather than would wish to be interactive. But one thing is certain that the consumer will be in the driver's seat and the competition for attention will become very very tough.