

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Rewiring Ourselves to Find the 'New Next'

Peter Dekom · Wednesday, February 26th, 2014

What's the new next?

Sometimes we get so caught up in hardware and software tools, technologies and social media, that we lose the 30,000-foot view of what is really happening to our brains and how we are grouping ourselves. If you don't understand the changes at this macro-picture level, you probably cannot effectively reach your audience/market at a grassroots effort either.

However, to believe that all is vastly better in the more technologically-advanced nations is to miss the impact on how brains in such societies are being rewired to cope with the massive deluge of information. Inventor and futurist Raymond Kurzweil has applied the mathematical concepts in "singularity theory" to the exponential growth – between our own mental processing of massive amounts of newly generated information to data generation from digital processors – of information that is generated every day.

In Kurzweil's analysis, the greatest change in humanity in the last thousand years has been the acceleration of the rate of change itself. Machines will eventually outrun the human ability to reason and invent, according to Kurzweil, and human brains are being rewired to anticipate change and expect the new next as inevitable. "So we won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century—it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today's rate). The 'returns,' such as chip speed and cost-effectiveness, also increase exponentially. There's even exponential growth in the rate of exponential growth. Within a few decades, machine intelligence will surpass human intelligence, leading to The Singularity." Living for the next suggests a diminishment of the past and present, but there are others who explain this brain rewiring phenomenon – at least in those aspects of society that are fully immersed in technology – from a different perspective.

Presentism

There is a countervailing theory – "Presentism" – that suggests that we are so overburdened with digitally induced sensory overload that we are incapable of living anywhere but the present, having lost the time-linked narrative among past, present and future. With instant and massive electronic communications in the now, the focus on anything else has vaporized, says theorist Douglas Rushkoff. People are so presently-focused that they even forget about the future consequences of their online posts. Rushkoff notes: "Our society has reoriented itself to the present moment. Everything is live, real time, and always-on. It's not a mere speeding up, however much our lifestyles and technologies have accelerated the rate at which we attempt to do things. It's more of a diminishment of anything that isn't happening right now—and the onslaught of everything that

supposedly is.”

Rushkoff’s analysis digs one level deeper: “[He] breaks down other symptoms of our current condition. They include: Digiphrenia (‘the tension between the faux present of digital bombardment and the true now of a coherently living human generates... digiphrenia–digi for ‘digital,’ and phrenia for ‘disordered condition of mental activity.’); Fractalnoia, dealing with how the volume and now-intensity of information causes us to create patterns that don’t exist; and Apocalypse, ‘a belief in the imminent shift of humanity into an unrecognizably different form’...”

But are Singularity and Presentism theories that divergent? Aren’t these simply two views of the same phenomenon? Perhaps the current generation’s obsession with searching for the “new next” is really about disavowing the icons of the past and bringing the cool new into the present.

Defining a generation

And what is a “generation” anyway? Does that term hold any relevance for marketers anymore? If the underlying theme that defines a generation is a commonality of culture and shared history, once thought to be a 20-25 year cohort, doesn’t this acceleration of events effectively shorten that commonality of culture into decreasingly defined cohorts?

While a fifty-year-old may feel culturally linked to a seventy-year-old, among younger technologically sophisticated ages, the relevant cohorts would seem to be defined by a decade or substantially less for everyone born after 1980! What, after all, would a thirty-year-old have in common with someone a decade or more younger?

And if there are more such cohorts as a result, there would seem to be a parallel increase in the cost of mass communication. Each such group, needing its own tailored message (or invitation to communicate), has its own methodology that would be delivered by means of its preferred technology. Mass communicators must understand the moving target of reaching such diverse segments of our society with constantly changing campaigns and metrics.

What’s more, the instantaneous feedback loop has indeed changed everything from storytelling to marketing, particularly in the younger generations – cohorts – who have lived during the most exponentially-accelerating times in human history, at least as to change and body of available information. Anyone who believes that they have it “all figured out” will meet obsolescence almost instantly. Grappling with the now in a rapidly-changing universe is the ultimate challenge for mass communicators.

*This article is adapted from the author’s book **NEXT: Reinventing Media, Marketing & Entertainment**.*

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