Today's 'New Renaissance' — Good News and Bad News

By Dan Sapone

By Papa Dan

"Eppur si muove" (and yet it moves)
– Galileo Galilei

"There must be some kind of way out of here,
said the joker to the thief."
— Lyrics by Bob Dylan ("All Along the Watchtower"
sung by Jimi Hendricks)

"Is it possible for 'progress' to be a good thing
and a bad thing at the same time?"
– PapaDan

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In their book "The Age of Discovery," published in May, 2016, Ian Goldin and Chris Kutarna defined our current age as a "New Renaissance." They observed that the forces at work during the period 1450-1550 in Europe (i.e., the "original Renaissance") were very similar to the forces that are shaping our own time here in the 21st century.

During the "original Renaissance" (the one we learned about in school), Da Vinci, Brunelleschi, Columbus, Copernicus, the Medici, Galileo, Michelangelo, Luther — just to name-drop the top level of superstars of the time — shaped the western world's understanding of, well, everything. Newly acquired knowledge and capabilities changed the world through:

  • scientific discovery,
  • advancements in art and architecture,
  • observations and predictions of the behavior of the universe,
  • unprecedented global navigation,
  • and new views of the relationship of humans to ""the church" (and, therefore, to God).

All these had significant effects on employment, manufacturing and distribution, wealth and poverty, political power, belief and behavior, health and longevity, life and death, and the structure of society.

Oh, yes, and one more thing — *arguably the most significant thing* — Gutenberg's printing press. This invention made it possible for people everywhere to KNOW about all of those 'Renaissance' effects more quickly and cheaply than ever before and to acquire that knowledge UNFILTERED. Before the use of those small metal letters, oil-based ink, and flat white paper, knowledge was the primary possession of The Church, since it alone had access to The Bible and whatever other knowledge that could be transmitted by written language. Before that time, The Bible and other documents were produced slowly and laboriously in rooms full of monks who copied the text by hand with quill pens, creating the only copies of existing knowledge. Church leaders decided who could see those documents *and* controlled their contents. Gutenberg's gizmo changed pretty much everything. The centralized ability to control knowledge and, therefore, to control people, began to diminish dramatically.

Looking back, most people have agreed that these developments — this rebirth and dramatic expansion of knowledge to "the masses" — represent the single greatest combination of human advancement and improvement in the lives of real people in the history of civilization.

Right?

And, of course, as the distribution of paper with little squiggly marks on it increased, it also enabled a dramatic increase in education of all kinds AND an expansion in the ability of people to participate in their governance and political decision-making. Those are good things.

Right?

The Rest of the Story (as Paul Harvey used to say)
During the first week of last fall, a column appeared in the Washington Post, written by David Von Drehle.   In that piece, he made some simple observations and obvious comparisons that led him to a startling conclusion. He started with our Gutenberg story — how a goldsmith in Germany found a way to reproduce identical copies of important information and distribute that knowledge cheaply and quickly across the world without the control of the "main-stream media" of the time. He observed that nothing was ever the same after that invention.

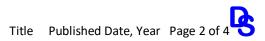So, what specific outcomes happened as a result of the use of the printing press? He reminds us:
- Lay people could own and read their own Bibles,
  → the result was the Protestant Reformation
- Scientists could record their observations to share with other scientists
  → the result was the Scientific Revolution
- Inventors could share their innovations with other inventors
  → the result was The Industrial Revolution
- Philosophers could spread their ideas to activists
  → the many results included one particular document written in a distant European colony that begins, "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union …"

So, does any of that sound familiar to those of us who are paying attention here in the 21st century? The comparison? Von Drehl asserted, "When Apple unveiled its first smartphone in 2007, the company sparked a communications revolution likely to be as transformative as Gutenberg's. It's the nature of such seismic change to shake the institutions of culture and society to the ground."

So, what happened? *The election of 2016 happened*. Von Drehl observes that 2016 was the first American election truly dominated by mobile communication and social networking. As a result, information, the ideas that follow from that information, and the conclusions drawn from them were "set free." This development has made the world a much tougher place for people who have derived their power and influence from an ability to control information, ideas, and opinions, — like the leaders of political parties. So, here comes Von Drehl's dramatic conclusion:

Steve Jobs Gave Us President Trump
https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/steve-jobs-gave-us-president-trump/2017/09/05/f4f487e4-9260-11e7-aace-04b862b2b3f3_story.html?utm_term=.f61b89c59bd2

WHAT??!!!

Did Anybody Warn Us?

Anyone who makes even a cursory study of the process and logic that led up to the writing of the US constitution, finds some awkward words coming from the Founding Fathers. Much of the intent of the constitution derives from ideas found in The Federalist Papers, written by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, with some help from John Jay, and the discussions that took place during the Constitution Convention of 1789. Much discussion at that convention centered around the need to avoid the pitfalls that had caused previous attempts at democracy to fail by giving too much power to "the people.". Here are a couple of excerpts:

• James Madison wrote in Federalist Paper No. 10: "In a pure democracy, there is nothing to check the [influence of] the obnoxious individual."
• At the 1787 Constitutional Convention, Edmund Randolph said, "... in tracing the causes of past failures to their origin, every man had found [the causes] in the turbulence and follies of democracy."
• John Adams said, "Remember, democracy never lasts long. It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There was never a democracy yet that did not commit suicide."
• Chief Justice John Marshall observed, "Between a balanced republic and a democracy, the difference is like that between order and chaos."

In summary — the framers of the constitution were *afraid* of democracy, the extent to which it gave power to "the people." As a result, they wrote a number of provisions into the constitution to protect the government from the ignorance and poor judgment of "the people." The electoral college, for example, was designed as a layer of protection to ensure that the people will not be able to directly elect a president, without the guidance and restraint provided by an elite group of leaders (like themselves). The reasoning — in the words of John Adams, "the people are likely to be easily brought under the influence of a demagogue if given unchecked power." Wow, did THAT ever backfire! Similarly, the constitution, as originally adopted, provided that members of The Senate would be selected by the State Legislatures for that same reason — that the people are likely to make rash choices in difficult times without "adult supervision." Similar features are found throughout the document, some of which were later amended.

So today

The mobile communication and social networking made available by the innovations introduced by Steve Jobs (and others) made it possible for "the people" to access unfiltered information — regardless how wise or spurious it may be — to persuade each other in ways that appeared authoritative, and to make decisions that may or may not be in their own best interests or in the long-term interests of the republic. Sounds like that is exactly what the founders feared.

So, here we are.

What do we do? Does this mean that we have overdone this 'democracy' thing in America? Is there something we should do to try to reverse some of its effects? If history is a guide— and it usually is — I'd observe that the effects of the "original Renaissance" were more or less permanent. So, perhaps, there's no going back to a time when information could be owned and controlled? AND I think most of us would agree that we would not want to return to a time when an "establishment" could control information and knowledge — even if WE were part of that establishment. On the other hand, in a world of uncontrolled information, is there a way to

give Americans the tools to recognize truth and wisdom when they see it and distinguish that from lies and foolishness? Well, on another "other hand," is it possible that "the people" stumbled on some wisdom in the Election of 2016 that some of the rest of us are just slow to recognize? Is throwing out conventional wisdom and starting over a good idea? We look back fondly on that achievement when they did that during the "original" Renaissance — back in the 15th century and the times that followed, right? They overturned an oppressive and ignorant time and replaced it with some useful ideas. In the long run, it turned out pretty good for us, here in the future. Of course, it was pretty traumatic at the time for those who had to endure dramatic and disruptive changes, eh? There was a period of pretty serious disorder.

So, was *THAT* Renaissance a good idea?   What about *THIS ONE*? Is it merely a difficult time we must endure to get to a better time? Can we predict the long-term effects of the changes we are noticing today? What will "the future" think of what we have done? What will our grandchildren say when they are our age? Will they be proud of us?

What do you think?

So, I guess we're still working on it. We'll see.