



WWW at 30 Postscript: Desperately Seeking ‘Woke’

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The World Wide Web had its 30th birthday a couple of weeks ago. And in its time it’s brought massive change to all aspects of our lives. I commented on the fact in an Opinion piece for 7DNews that touched upon the veracity and trustworthiness of news sources in the age of the Internet. And ended with the question: Who and what do you trust when it really counts?

Yet, given that “the only constant is change” and that change never occurs in a straight line, but always exponentially and in all directions; and with so much happening, all at once, it’s hard to keep up with, let alone grasp. It does beg the question: Can you even trust yourself anymore?

All of which strongly suggests we could all well do with a mental wash and brush up, every now and then, to keep ourselves on track. Just like the tune-ups we give our automobiles at regular service intervals to ensure everything continues to run properly.

Or, as occurs, more randomly, but with ever increasing frequency, the procedure we blindly follow every time our computer slows to a snail’s

pace or stops working altogether. Switch off. Unplug. Wait thirty seconds. Plug back in. Turn on. Hopefully, the gentle 'shock to the system' enough, then, for everything to revert back to business as usual.

The 'whack to the side of the head' tactic, I find, I need apply more and more to the mind-set I've so assiduously contrived to create or, some might argue, cement for myself these past 50-plus years. By which I mean all the mental models and frames that continue to shape my world-view.

The birth of the World Wide Web in 1989 the perfect mid-point to mark the 'before and after' divide of the analogue and digital worlds.

As you'll no doubt recall, 1989 was the year the Berlin Wall came down and UK Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, American president, George Bush, and Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, all declared that, after 40 years, the Cold War had finally ended.

It was the year the tanker 'Exxon Valdez' hit Bligh Reef, in Prince William Sound, off the coast of Alaska, and spilled an estimated 30 million gallons of oil into the sea. Oh, yes, how could I ever forget, a magnitude 6.9 earthquake hit the San Francisco Bay Area.

To keep us on a more sound footing: the Sony Walkman was 10 years old, the Compact Disc, but five, and the DVD still 10 years in the future.

Among the top-grossing films: 'Batman' (the one with Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson); 'Back To The Future II'; 'Indiana Jones And The Lost Crusade' (the one with Sean Connery as Indy's Dad); and 'When Harry Met Sally'. It was also the year the world first met the wondrous Wallace and Gromit in Aardman's 'A Grand Day Out'.

And all very wonderful it all seemed at the time, but ponder for a moment, if you will, a world without Google or Facebook or Amazon. A world without email or texting or 'Tweeting.' With no Netflix and no streaming. And no Skype, Snapchat, or WhatsApp. No Airbnb. No Uber. Such was the now seen to be very archaic analogue world before the World Wide Web was born.

Which put me in mind of how the world is framed differently by each generation and the resultant mind-sets that follow. The different worldviews, the reason why different age groups always find it so hard to reason with one another, let alone relate to each other. Arguably, the reason each generation sees the next as unable to “get it” or “get with it”.

Thomas Kuhn, in his 1962 ground breaking study of paradigm shifts; how and when one conceptual worldview is replaced by another (‘The Structure of Scientific Revolutions’); posited that people hardly if ever change their minds, let alone their mind-sets. The world and any newly emerging theories have to wait for the previous generation, and any and all of the theorems they’ve long espoused, to ‘leave the building’ as it were. For, as with old soldiers, each and every generation must, in its turn, fa-fa-fa-fade away so as to make room for all those who follow.

And, yes, I’m talkin’ about my generation. I’m a little more than twice the age of the World Wide Web. The post-war world I was born into fading ever more away. Ever more and more reason, then, to try and stay ‘woke.’

‘Woke’ yet another slang term appropriated, as were “jazz” and “cool” and “rock ‘n’ roll”, from what’s now called African American Vernacular English. ‘Woke’ increasingly seen as a watchword for one’s ‘social awareness’. Even as a direct call to action against perceived social injustice. Which is why if you do happen to frequent social media platforms, you may well have seen posts or tweets about current events that cue themselves as “hip” to what’s happening in the world by being tagged #staywoke.

Perhaps, one of the most difficult terrains for my generation to traverse: the differing attitudes to privacy. I’m loath to broadcast anything about myself, other than when writing opinion pieces or writing historical fiction that reflects my own point of view of the England that made me. All, no doubt, to do with a British upbringing of lingering Victorian moralities and social norms; with everyone schooled to know their proper place and mind their Ps and Qs; and always and forever after to “keep calm and carry on.”

And yet privacy or lack of it is something my nieces and nephews, and the sons and daughters and, yes, grandsons and granddaughters of friends seemingly have no trouble with at all.

One such case in point: the craze for 'selfies'; with or without attendant plates of artfully arranged food or latte-art embellished cups of cappuccino; that can all too readily be seen by these old Twentieth Century eyes as being nothing more than an incipient form of narcissism. OMG! LOL!

Yet, when it was gently put to me that I should perhaps step back and reframe the situation, it became apparent that all those self-portrait snaps weren't merely attempts to broadcast how truly 'unique' any particular individual was, it was more that the purpose of all the 'selfies' on all the Twitter-fed, hashtag-led, Facebook or Pinterest pages was they be seen and "liked" by as many other people as possible, as many times as possible. With more postings; updated almost by the minute; embellished with photos, text, drawings, emojis, cartoon-inspired paraphernalia, even videos.

And whereas, at first, I only saw 'selfies' as being nothing but countless unknown individuals desperately seeking their brief moment of "15 minutes of fame," I've since come to understand that it's in the very act of sharing that those images become truly meaningful. And, more, that they really do give meaning, even affirmation of 'being', to each and every 'selfie' taker that shares their 'life' with those of like-life and mind over the Internet. All, of course, courtesy of the WWW and all entirely valid and purposefully so, even if, as with of course, Snapchat, "this message will self-destruct in 10 seconds."

The ability to hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity for three-hundred-and-sixtieth of an hour: nothing, to be sneezed at.

And even if, still, not exactly my cup of Twentieth Century English breakfast tea, it makes the whole issue of 'selfies' eminently reasonable, even laudable: the wisdom of crowds, wonderfully repurposed for the Twenty-First Century.

Who knew? Not me. Not until a switched-on Gen-Xer; infinitely more 'woke' than I'll ever be; took time out of his ever faster changing world to help enlarge my awareness of how things really are today. And in that, very much like a Boy Scout doing his good deed for the day by helping a blind man across a digital highroad; and, me, very thankful for the assistance.

Ergo: my ever more desperate need to stay 'woke'.

Watch this space.

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