

COLUMN | VIKRAM SAKHUJA

Beware of tech controlling your choices

If Rip Van Winkle had woken up in 2021 after 20 years, at first glance, people would look the same.

Only exception being a mobile phone as an appendage to their body through which they consumed content, chatted, searched, shopped and ran their lives. However, looking closely, he would have seen that societies had also become more polarized, less liberal, with relationships being nurtured more through virtual rather than physical contact. And human thumbs were more developed than the index finger.

And all this because of how Media was being consumed.

After one bust, dot coms had boomed, and spawned the Digital age. In these 20 years Advertising grew at 12% CAGR. TV held its own and even grew share to 40%. Print share crashed from 54% to 22% and Digital filled the void with 31% share. E-commerce catalysed by the pandemic also boomed. Video content consumption increased across all strata, and media became personalized, on demand.

Media addressability made strides. We captured consumer data and used it for targeting. That said, we are far from targeting 1.4 billion Indians one at a time. And even as marketers were licking their chops about building audience profiles at scale, data privacy concerns are threatening the demise of the most prevalent identifier – the cookie. Two steps forward, one step back.

In 2041, more Media will be consumed. Western countries already consume 12+ hours of media daily – much of it concomitantly. In India the current number is probably half that. For the foreseeable future media consumption will not be a zero-sum game and each medium has the opportunity to grow its user base.

The way one has defined Mediums i.e., video, text, image, sound, experiential; all will thrive. Experiential will be the dramatic change versus today. AR/

VR will gain mass acceptance, and like thumbs are overworked today, eyes will be exercised more in the future.

The delivery of most Mediums will be on a Digital platform. In a subscription and advertising led Media business model, attempts to grow subscription have had muted success in the past 20 years and advertising will drive business for the next 20.

Video will be split between on-demand and linear TV. Linear TV (which will be on a connected TV) will be the medium of choice for tribal moments – the big shows that families like to watch together, live sports and live news. Other entertainment will move to on-demand AVOD platforms.

Text will move overwhelmingly to digital, but print will continue to find takers. Consumers will snack on news on their phone and will read the paper for fact checks and analysis. There will be a desire to escape the obsessive tyranny of the small screen and take refuge in *hygge* experience of newspapers.

Sound will be delivered digitally, but formats of radio, music streaming, podcasts, virtual assistants will all persist. Monetizing this medium will be challenging.

Social Media will be bridled. Regulation will demand that free speech be tempered with accountability. But even if the stridency and lies are reduced, we will inexorably perpetuate many small tribes internally drawing energy from each other, which reduces inclusion and increases polarization.

Data privacy concerns will slow down the addressable / targeting capability of digital. Brands will need to build stronger first-party, data-led data architecture. That said, our ability to build and target audience profiles will improve, but mass media and CRM / Direct Marketing will not merge. More importantly, without regulation, technology will insidiously



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make choices for you. Vance Packard in 1957 in his prescient book *The Hidden Persuaders* emphasized the dangers of consumer analysis that plays on people's hidden fears and anxieties to drive their buying impulses. Technology majors do real time consumer analysis with your internet data and influence your buying impulses without you realising it.

Which takes us to the future of Media monopolies. The dynamics between content, distribution and platform will decide that. Today platforms like Google, Facebook and potentially Amazon call the shots since the business model is ad driven, and they can help monetize the content best. Killing the identifiers – like cookies – serves to further strengthen these giant walled gardens. However, the last word has not been written.

In conclusion, the last 20 years in Media were about discovering the joys of the forbidden fruit called Digital – mostly good, some bad. The next 20 years can go in two ways. Either like the frog in the pot of water that is put to heat, slowly becoming soup, we can also be the unsuspecting human race whose behaviour is controlled, yes controlled, by technology. Or else we resist becoming slaves to the device, and open ourselves to fresh narratives and purpose. **■**