

The Media Matrix

[The Media Matrix](#)

by [James Corbett](#), [The Corbett Report](#)

July 18, 2022

Media. It surrounds us. We live our lives in it and through it. We structure our lives around it. But it wasn't always this way. So how did we get here? And where is the media technology that increasingly governs our lives taking us? This is the story of **The Media Matrix**.

Part 1 – The Gutenberg Conspiracy

Watch on [Archive](#) / [BitChute](#) / [Odysee](#) or [Download the mp4](#)

TRANSCRIPT

In the beginning, there was the word. The *spoken* word, that is.

This word, the written word, didn't come along for countless generations.

And *this* word, the printed word, didn't come along for thousands of years after that.

In fact, we've only had the movable type printing press for about 600 years, but without it our world would be unrecognizable.

From the Renaissance to the Reformation, from the fall of feudalism to the rise of capitalism, from the Scientific Revolution to the Industrial Revolution, from the way we order our thoughts to what we choose to think about, *nothing* survived the printing revolution intact.

Our world is the world that the printing press has created.

And that world started with *this*. [Holds up mirror.]

VOICEOVER: Media. It surrounds us. We live our lives in it and through it. We structure our lives around it. But it wasn't always this way. So how did we get here? And where is the media technology that increasingly governs our lives taking us? This is the story of **The Media Matrix**.

PART ONE: THE GUTENBERG CONSPIRACY

You see, in the Middle Ages, mirrors—especially curved mirrors—were fiendishly difficult to make.

And pilgrim badges—elaborately designed lead or pewter plates with a curved mirror in the middle—were even *more* difficult to make. But in fifteenth-century Germany, they were in hot demand.

It all goes back to the year 800, when Emperor Charlemagne gifted four holy relics from Jerusalem to the Cathedral in Aachen in modern-day Germany: the swaddling clothes and loincloth of Jesus, Mary's robe, and the cloth that held John the Baptist's decapitated head. The relics were thought to have miraculous restorative powers. And so, after the Black Death of 1349, they were removed from the Cathedral's golden shrine and put on display for the public once every seven years, attracting tens of thousands of pilgrims from across Christendom.

Soon, the belief developed that a curved mirror could be held up to the relics to capture their miraculous powers and bring them back to the pilgrims' home in whatever far-flung land they hailed from.

Now, the mirror was not a mirror like the ones we're used to today. It was a [pilgrim badge](#) and it was one of the few mass-manufactured items of the Middle Ages. They were lucrative products to make. So lucrative, in fact, that the goldsmiths

and stamp cutters of Aachen couldn't keep up with the demand.

Enter Johannes Gutenberg. Born around the turn of the fifteenth-century to a wealthy family in Mainz, in modern-day Germany, Gutenberg—whose father was a companion of the ecclesiastical mint—had a background in goldsmithing, coinmaking and metalwork.

Arriving in Strasbourg in 1434, he thought to put his skills to work on a profitable venture: creating badges for the next Aachen Pilgrimage in 1439. There was only one problem: he didn't have the capital to make the badges himself. So he entered into a cooperative with three business partners, each of whom ponied up a portion of the money required for Gutenberg to start producing the mirrors.

But just as the pilgrimage approached and it looked like the inventor was going to make a tidy profit for himself and his business partners, the Black Death struck again. An outbreak of the plague ravaged the Upper Rhine Valley in 1438, postponing the pilgrimage by a year. Gutenberg had already produced a number of the mirrors, but his capital was running out. And so he set his sights on a new venture—one so audacious, so revolutionary that he made his partners sign a contract swearing them to secrecy before he would let them in on it.

In fact, so secret was this project that the only reason we know anything at all about it is because one of the business partners died and his brother tried to take his place in the cooperative. But after the surviving partners refused to let him in on the plot, the would-be co-conspirator sued Gutenberg in Strasbourg court.

The [court documents that survive](#) are themselves cryptic—referring to the “adventure and art” of “the work” that Gutenberg and his partners were engaged in, but never specifying what that work was, exactly. We know that it

involved presses fastened with screws and engraved “forms” supplied by a local goldsmith, that some quantity of metal had been purchased for the venture, that the work was expected to take five years and—above all—that the object of this undertaking be kept a secret.

Gutenberg and his partners had quite literally entered into a conspiracy.

And *that* conspiracy, resulted in *this*. Now this may not look like much to you . . . and you’d be right. *This* is a pencil sharpener. But the [Gutenberg movable type printing press](#) that it’s modeled after? Now that truly was a work of art. In fact, there’s a solid argument to be made that it was one of the most important inventions in human history.

There were many existing ideas and technologies that went into Gutenberg’s creation: the screw press, the manufacture of paper, the idea of woodblock printing, the development of ink. But it took years of careful experimentation to solve the puzzle of how to create a perfect print every time.

At first glance, it [seems straightforward](#). The type is arranged in a rectangular container and then beaten with ink balls. The paper is placed in a leather-covered frame called a “tympan” and covered by a frisket. The tympan is then laid on the type and fed into a screw press, which is turned to press the type onto the paper.

Simple, right? Hardly.

In fact, every part of the printing process involved years of laborious experimentation: finding the right paper to print on, finding the right moisture levels for the paper to absorb the ink, finding the right way to dry the paper, [finding an ink](#) that wouldn’t run off the metal type, finding the right alloy for casting the type, and on and on and on. Each problem tested the limits of medieval technology and the limits of Gutenberg’s own skill and ingenuity.

And the result was nothing short of a revolution.

How so?

Here, look at this manuscript. What do you see?

If you lived before Gutenberg, you saw a page of text. A totality. A clump of information. But Gutenberg saw something different. His core insight was that a page of text was *not* a thing in itself, but a collection of letters that could be broken apart and rearranged into any other collection of letters.

From *that* deceptively simple observation came *this*. The printed page. Mechanically produced, perfectly identical characters that could be arranged into *any* configuration the printer desires to create any text imaginable.

And *that* insight birthed the modern world.

It birthed the era of mass communication. Pre-Gutenberg, there were no books, no pamphlets, no newspapers. In fact, in the 50 years before Gutenberg, all the scribes in all of Europe struggled to produce 20,000 laboriously hand-copied manuscripts. In the 50 years after Gutenberg? The printers that sprung up around the continent churned out 12 million printed books.

It birthed mass manufacture. Beyond pilgrim badges, there were very few mass-produced items in medieval life. Clothes, tools, shelter, manuscripts—everything was handmade. The book accustomed the medieval mind to the idea of identical, mechanically produced objects. And the printing press—with its mechanically perfect type—prefigured the advances of industrial production.

It birthed the Scientific Revolution. The widespread publication of data, the collection of knowledge in widely available reference books, the ability to exactly reproduce

illustrations—things that we take completely for granted today—were a revelation when they appeared in the fifteenth-century and created the conditions for the rise of the empirical method.

It birthed the Reformation. We all know it was Luther and his 95 theses nailed to the church door that launched the Reformation, but it was the [printing press that allowed Luther's ideas to spread so far, so fast](#). (And, bonus fact: Those theses were addressed to the Archbishop of Mainz, birthplace of Gutenberg's press.)

The printing press even birthed the nation-state.

***INTERVIEWER:** Yes, now how would you describe the the impact of the invention of the printing press? Give us some instances of what happened as a consequence of this*

***MARSHALL MCLUHAN:** It created almost overnight what we call a nationalism, what in effect was a public. The old manuscript forms were not sufficiently powerful instruments of technology to create publics in the sense that print was able to do. Unified, homogeneous reading publics.*

Everything that we prize in our Western world in matters of individualism, separatism and of a unique point of view and private judgment; all those factors are highly favored by the printed word and not really favored by other forms of culture like radio or earlier even by manuscript.

But this stepping up of the fragmented, the private—the individual, the private judgment, the point of view—all in fact our whole vocabularies underwent huge change with the arrival of such technology.

***SOURCE:** [Marshall McLuhan 1965—The Future of Man in the Electric Age](#)*

The world that Gutenberg was born into was *this* world: the

real world. If you learned anything at all about this world, you probably learned it from experience, or at least from someone who had that experience.

But the world that Gutenberg left behind was a world of mass communication. Books were no longer a rare and valuable thing, and it was increasingly likely that your information about the world came from someone you never met, someone who may have been long dead.

The movable type printing press didn't just change the way people communicated; it changed what they communicated about.

In a very real sense, the printing press invented "the news."

Before Gutenberg, "the news" was whatever you managed to gather from your neighbours, what you learned from travelers passing through your village, what you heard the town crier yelling through the streets or, at best, what you yourself read in the occasional proclamation or edict from the authorities.

But *after* the printing press, the news was for the first time collected, organized, printed on a regular basis and distributed far and wide.

In 1605, the [world's first newspaper](#) was published in Strasbourg—the same city where Gutenberg was making his mirrors for the Aachen pilgrimage a century-and-a-half prior—and soon everyone and their dog was printing a newsletter or a pamphlet or a newspaper or a tract. And these ideas were spreading around the world like they never had before.

For the first time, someone could be reading the exact same news as someone in the next town over . . .

JAMES EVAN PILATO OF [MEDIAMONARCHY.COM](#): . . . or someone on the other side of the planet . . .

. . . at the exact same time.

The printing press united people like never before and the result was an explosion in the spread of ideas, the likes of which would not be experienced again for centuries.

But not everyone was excited about this free flow of information. Entrenched power structures of medieval society—the crown, the church, the feudal lords—had persisted for centuries by controlling information and suppressing dissent. But as the barriers to new ideas collapsed, so did the old feudal order.

It's no surprise, then, that wherever the printing press traveled, wherever the new cadre of printers and booksellers set up shop, the censors were not far behind. When Lutheran books began appearing in England in 1520, Cardinal Wolsey was quick to declare that anyone caught with the texts would be subject to heresy laws. Not to be outdone, King Henry VIII's proclamation "[Prohibiting Erroneous Books and Bible Translations](#)" of 1530 afforded him the power to try readers of these "blasphemous and pestiferous" books in his own dreaded Star Chamber.

Parliament dissolved the Star Chamber in 1641, but they weren't about to give up censorship of the press. They just wanted to take the power for themselves, and that's exactly what they did. The [Licensing Order of 1643](#) outlawed the printing, binding, or sale of books, except by persons licensed under authority of Parliament.

This prompted John Milton to write the [Areopagitica](#), still recognized today as one of the most influential and passionate defenses of freedom of speech in history:

"Who kills a man kills a reasonable creature, God's image; but he who destroys a good book, kills reason itself, kills the image of God, as it were in the eye."

But even the loftiest language of Milton had little effect in swaying the censors. The Licensing Order was not overturned for half-a-century, when the Parliament chose not to renew the act.

Those in positions of power had good reason to fear the printing press. Gutenberg's invention turned their world on its head. Suddenly, people who had been kept apart and largely in ignorance of the world around them had been brought into a community of readers; a gigantic societal conversation began, empowering radicals who sought to overturn the order that had existed for centuries and helping them to spread their dangerous new ideas faster and farther than they ever could have with pen and paper.

Perhaps it's no surprise, then, that these new ideas would come to their dramatic fruition in one of the most literate places on the planet: colonial America.

By the end of the 18th century, literacy rates in the colonies were upwards of ninety percent, and there were 180 newspapers being published on the Eastern Seaboard, twice as many as in England, a country with twice the population.

The colonists' appetite for books and learning was celebrated far and wide. In 1772, the Reverend Jacob Duché [wrote of the colonies](#): "Almost every man is a reader. [. . .] The poorest laborer upon the shores of the Delaware thinks himself entitled to deliver his sentiment in matters of religion or politics with as much freedom as the gentlemen or scholar [. . .] such is the prevailing taste for books of every kind."

Just four years later, in 1776, Thomas Paine would publish *Common Sense*, a 47-page pamphlet that was to take those colonies by storm. In the first three months of its publication, a staggering [120,000 copies](#) of the book had been sold; by the end of the year, it had sold 500,000 copies, or one pamphlet for every five men, women and children in the

colonies. To put that in perspective, adjusted for population, *Common Sense* would be the [thirteenth best-selling book of all time](#).

But this wasn't any ordinary bestseller. This was a revolution.

At the beginning of 1776, before *Common Sense*, the average colonists believed themselves to be Englishmen engaged in a civil war; after *Common Sense*, they were revolutionaries engaged in a War for Independence. And that war was waged on the power of the printed word. *That* is the power of print.

The pen may be mightier than the sword, but the printing press is mightier than entire armies.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a new creature had emerged to capitalize on this new instrument of power: the press baron.

In America, [William Randolph Hearst](#) . . . that is, William Randolph Hearst inherited the *San Francisco Examiner* from his wealthy father, built it up into the biggest paper in town and plowed the profits into the purchase of the *New York Journal*. With the *Journal* and a growing number of dailies across the country under his belt, Hearst became a full-fledged press baron, taking on Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World* in a circulation war, pioneering the eye-catching layouts and sensational stories that would come to define his brand of yellow journalism, and helping to gin up support for the Spanish-American War, among many other dubious causes.

In England, Alfred Harmsworth picked up the yellow journalism idea from Hearst and Pulitzer and used it to build his own press empire around *The Daily Mail*. From a lower caste of British society, Harmsworth found himself in the center of political power in Britain, using his influence to gin up public hatred of the Huns ahead of World War I, becoming director of propaganda for the government in 1918 and earning

himself the title of Lord Northcliffe in the process.

In a sense, the Lord Northcliffes and the William Randolph Hearsts and the other press barons of that era were the end stage of the Gutenberg Revolution. The invention that had given a voice to the masses and started a conversation that would topple institutions, dethrone monarchs and reorder empires had now catapulted people at the fringes of power into its very heart. With the power of the press, these men were able to sway the minds of entire nations of people.

Naturally, the old tension between the ruling elite and the masses, empowered by the press, was still there. But censorship hadn't proven to be an effective tool for keeping the masses in ignorance. There had to be another way.

That way, it turned out, was another conspiracy.

On February 9, 1917, Oscar Callaway, a US Representative from Texas' 12th District, exposed that conspiracy [in the Congressional record](#):

"In March, 1915, the J. P. Morgan interests, the steel, ship-building, and powder interests, and their subsidiary organizations, got together 12 men high up in the newspaper world and employed them to select the most influential newspapers in the United States and sufficient number of them to control generally the policy of the daily press of the United States. [. . .] They found it was only necessary to purchase the control of 25 of the greatest papers. The 25 papers were agreed upon; emissaries were sent to purchase the policy, national and international, of these papers; an agreement was reached; the policy of the papers was bought, to be paid for by the month; an editor was furnished for each paper to properly supervise and edit information regarding the questions of preparedness, militarism, financial policies, and other things of national and international nature considered vital to the interests of the purchasers."

The news was extraordinary, but it almost didn't get reported at all. Callaway had not been given time to make his charges on the floor of the House; instead, they were "buried in the Record." It wasn't until another congressman demanded a full congressional investigation into the charges that the newspapers even bothered to [cover the story](#) at all.

Perhaps it is no surprise that the Gutenberg conspiracy ended up here, at the Morgan conspiracy. That a revolutionary step toward freeing man from the bonds of ignorance was met with a revolutionary counteraction designed to place those chains around him all the more tightly. That, at the zenith of the print revolution, the oligarchy finally found a way to control the free flow of information.

Ironical, then, that within the space of a few short years, the print revolution that Gutenberg had started was about to be overturned by another technology.

[Connect with The Corbett Report](#)