

Why the Medium Is Not the Message

By Om Malik Mar. 1, 2011, 9:00pm PT

Earlier this week, I got a chance to go on Leo Laporte's [Twit.tv](#). We debated the much-discussed [New York Times story](#), which essentially said [blogging is dead](#). It has been more than 10 years since I started to blog, and still, the act of blogging is consistently misunderstood.

It (blogging) isn't a tool. It isn't a product. It isn't a news outlet. Blogging is just that: blogging, a simple act of sharing a part of yourself. You can do that through emotional outbursts, news, links, opinion, photos or videos. You can do it through Twitter, Facebook or a traditional blogging service.

As I argued about this on Laporte's show, I pointed out that the reason we often have misguided theories (such as blogging being on life support) is that we confuse the medium with the message. In doing so, we often forget that the message is what's important – not the medium that the message is delivered through. The message – the act of sharing – is the real product, metaphorically speaking.

Let's look at the example of the news coming out of the Middle East. Just because most of the news alerts are coming from average citizens (as I've said before) and [are coming over Twitter or Facebook](#) doesn't degrade its value as news. The new medium (Twitter, Facebook) has replaced the old medium (newspapers, television.)

For traditional media outlets, this is particularly hard, mostly because

they have a business model built to support distribution via the old medium. It's a big challenge, as illustrated by [Frederic Filloux](#) and [Mathew Ingram](#) in their respective posts on newspapers' ability to make money their web sites. But just because traditional media outlets have issues with their legacy-heavy business models, doesn't mean the demand for the "message" has gone down.

The importance of the message over the medium extends beyond just news. Look at the Kindle. On the surface, it may seem Amazon is selling Kindles. Actually, Amazon is selling books — e-books, which incidentally make Amazon a lot of money. Again, the medium (the Kindle device) isn't as important as the message (written word.)

[Kevin Kelly](#), a well-known technology thinker, recently noted that the Kindle would be free by end of 2011. I would argue that it's already free. Just download it on your iPad or Motorola Xoom, and within minutes, you're busy reading. Netflix, too, has separated itself from the medium by streaming videos to a variety of devices as opposed to delivering DVDs (the medium) and profited from it.

When companies can't really tell the difference between the medium and the message, they get in trouble. Let's look at the much-hyped photo-sharing service [Instagr.am](#) and Flickr, the granddaddy of photo sharing services.

At their core, both these services are about social broadcasting and social validation, not storing photos. But today, Flickr gives an impression of being a staid photo-sharing product. Why? Because mobile has become key component of this sociability.

Instagr.am embraced the medium but focused on what was its core task:

social broadcasting and social validation. At Yahoo, the mobile group made a Flickr mobile app, but they focused on the medium instead. The Flickr mobile app allows you to upload photos, but it barely acknowledges the community and sharing aspects of what makes Flickr tick. It has no way for you to engage with my pictures or even provide social validation by liking them. Furthermore, its user-experience is anti-social. Flickr's own team would have focused almost entirely on what makes Flickr great. ([Kellan Elliot-McCrea](#) has outlined this in a Quora post.)

In all of these cases, the medium — a blog, Twitter, the Kindle, even the Internet itself — isn't the important thing. It's just a way of connecting people with things that matter to them, and with other people who matter to them. That is the real power, regardless of the medium.