



Editorial

The Medium and the Message

Gideon Arulmani

“Are you here?”
“Make a sound if you can hear us?”
“Is anyone else with you?”
“We can’t see you...can you hear us?”

Are these ethereal dialogues from a space ship or perhaps a séance? As an Indian newspaper joked in a recent cartoon (“GoodRiddance 2021”, 2021), these phrases have over the last few months become part of our everyday life of virtual meetings! Indeed, the tools of the internet have more than ever before enmeshed with our personal, educational and work lives. Some of us were already acquainted with virtual ways of communicating but for many of us these tools were in the periphery of our lives, used as an adjunct to face-to-face forms of engagement. This has changed over the last few months. Little five-year-olds attend classes online and working adults WFH (work from home). The internet and the broadcast media have almost become the primary medium and communication tool for so many of us.

Over the ages, tools have characterized human engagement with the world around. The history of work, beginning with the Neolithic revolution, has been punctuated by new tools forcing departures from established methods of tool use: flint was knapped to give a lump of rock an edge, flowing water was directed to turn wheels, and steam was controlled to drive machines. A feature of tool creation until the end of the first industrial revolution was that the worker was the master of the tool he/she created. Human-tool engagement was direct and physical. This pattern has changed and over the last two decades we have moved ourselves to the autonomisation of work tools and work processes, for example with robots and driverless cars. Technological developments of the recent past have introduced and set us on a path whereby human leadership in tool use is gradually decreasing. Learning to work to the algorithms of a tool has become a task over which the human being has perforce to gain mastery. A mechanical voice intoning into our ears, “Press 1 for English”, “Press 3 for customer service”, “Press 7 for credit card queries”...“Sorry you did not respond in time”, has become a daily reality. While this tool-centered, rather than a human-centered, way of engaging with the world was set in motion nearly two decades ago, the conditions of the last few months have sharply brought forward, to our immediate present, the necessity of gaining mastery over the virtual medium. What was entering our lives surely but gradually, has zoomed (pun intended!) into our here and now.

Today an important question faces the guidance and counselling fraternity. Where should our emphasis lie: on the content to be communicated or on the channel through which the communication is facilitated? For Marshall McLuhan, the Canadian communication theorist, the communication medium, not the message it carries, should be the primary focus. Hence was coined the phrase, the medium is the message (McLuhan, 1964). Over the recent past, when schools shut down and the location of work changed from “office” to “home”, we were left with the online, virtual medium as the, almost only, tool with which to continue to learn and work. This has its tremendous benefits. Geography can become history and locations, distances or time zones need no longer matter. We have very quickly realised, however, that in order to be transmitted, the message has to be formed, shaped and fashioned into the limitations of the mould offered by the virtual medium: a medium wherein images by default are two-dimensional, touch-and-feel is relegated to emoticons, personal attention to an individual in a group is constrained and indeed holding the attention of an audience is titrated differently. We further realised that merely broadcasting something or placing it on the internet does not mean that the target audience will automatically benefit from the resource. Bandwidth and hardware have to be available if this medium

Gideon Arulmani, Co-Editor, IJCLP, Director, The Promise Foundation. email: garulmani@t-p-f.org

is to be an effective vehicle for our messages. Assuming that these access issues are adequately attended to, outcomes can still remain poor if the transaction between the individual and a television broadcast or an internet resource largely remains at the spectatorial level. A common proposal I encounter about bringing careers programmes to scale is to deliver career guidance through the broadcast media or online (e.g., television, internet channels). Internet portals today offer thousands of units of information. Yet, the person for whom this information is intended has not been given the opportunity to learn how to navigate these oceans of data and is often left bewildered and more confused.

Against this background, is the proposition that the *medium is the handmaiden of the message*. Going online has become a necessity but every effort must be made to ensure that our thought processes do not fall victim to and become subdued by the medium. Captain Sir Tom Moore's 100 laps is a wonderful example of a person-led engagement. His fundraising walk in his English garden began with the target of raising 1000 pounds for the NHS Charities Together. In time, over 30 million pounds were raised. Certainly, social media facilitated this tremendous amplification. But at the heart of Moore's walk, in the midst of a bleak pandemic, lies human intention, effort and fortitude. We have named ourselves homo sapiens – Latin for "wise man". Accordingly, both the creator and user could view what the virtual medium has to offer as just another tool, just another human invention, the effectiveness of which can best be optimised by a thoughtful human user.

This issue of the IJCLP opens with Mary McMahon's interpretation of her Systems Theory Framework into the Covid-19 context and she describes a systems thinking and systems mapping approach to finding our way through this global disruption of our lives.

Iwamon Laloo and Glenn Kharkongor respond to the call for teacher upskilling and point to what the content of such training could be through a teacher survey they conducted at the peak of the pandemic in India.

Kiyomi Banda discusses the Japanese reality of university ranking and how this affects the career development prospects of students graduating from universities of varied ranking. Of particular interest is her description of the Japanese notion of loneliness as individuality.

A reminiscence by Tony Watts of his visit to South Africa under apartheid in the late 1970s and subsequent visits shifts our preoccupation with the crises of the present. Although through this note Tony reflects upon events that occurred some time ago, it serves to draw our attention to the issues that surround justice and equity even today.

One of the objectives of the IJCLP is to offer young writers the opportunity to present their ideas and research questions. This issue carries brief notes from two scholars who have just embarked on their doctoral studies in career development. Joseph Chakma writing from the perspective of indigenous peoples, describes the importance of traditional occupations for sustainable livelihood practices in Bangladesh. Viewing the family as an integral part of the career development process Rayan Miranda introduces home career learning environments as a topic for research.

I end this editorial on a sorrowful note. Last July the fates conspired to take Helmut Zelloth away from us. It is hard to visualise the world of career guidance and vocational training without his presence. Ronald Sultana draws from his memories, giving us words and images whereby we can always remember dear Helmut and how he contributed to our lives. We dedicate this issue of the Indian Journal of Career and Livelihood Planning to his memory.

References

- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York: McGraw Hill.
- GoodRiddance 2021. (2021, February 16). *Times of India*, 3.