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John Lennon, Then And Now

How did you get your news 28 years ago, on Dec. 8, 1980, the date John Lennon was gunned down in New York City?

How did you get your news 28 years ago, on Dec. 8, 1980, the date John Lennon was gunned down in New York City?

I've been pondering that question this morning, the culmination of my week-long quest to somehow tie that infamous event into the world of computers, electronics and IT, about which I'm supposed to blog. So here goes.

The most salient difference between that Monday evening and today is the manner in which news is disseminated.

During the evening of Dec. 8, 1980, news of the shooting trickled out via an information funnel, keying off of an initial one-line wire-service report ("Man said to be John Lennon shot in front of Dakota hotel"). WNEW-FM, then the leading progressive rock radio station in New York City, aired early, tentative reports. For a good half hour, if my faulty memory serves me correctly, it wasn't exactly clear what had happened. However, as news crews from around the city swarmed to Roosevelt Hospital, word came back that Lennon was dead.

In the national media, the first widespread dissemination of the murder probably came via the pained voice of Howard Cosell, on a Monday Night Football broadcast. "An unspeakable tragedy. . .," Cosell prefaced his disclosure.

The rest of that night, radio stations turned their programming into wakes, playing Beatles music as they tried to assimilate and make sense of the senseless. For days afterward, radio in particular but also newspapers (and television, to a lesser extent) became a kind of sounding board for the collective angst of all Americans below a certain age. (Twenty-five years later, the flip side is that the anniversary is today mainly commemorated by those of us above a certain age.)

My use of the terms "information funnel" and "sounding board" above are the keys to the technological contrasts I'm trying to highlight. On Dec. 8, 1980, news was distributed one way, from professional news gatherer to populace, through a thin, initial pipe. Once out of that opening, news gathered steam as source copied source and the information rapidly fanned out, growing with each iteration by the two-to-the-Nth power.

As to the "sounding board" analogy, twentieth-century news organs were famously one-way. Readers could only experience commonality with other readers by inferentially parsing a text or broadcast, bouncing their own assumptions and views off of what they were reading or hearing.

But it worked. We all felt a little bit more connected.

Today, the feedback loop is more pronounced, thanks to blogs. The proliferation of cable television means that the information funnel is now an information wall, and news is essentially disseminated in one fell swoop. Of course, reporters for today's electronically enhanced media have no greater claim to accuracy or to being Johnnies on the spot at an actual news event than did the ink-stained wretches of Sgt. Pepper's time.

Everything boils down to the individual. He or she still has to get the news

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Everything boils down to the individual. No one can make it get the notes, write it up, do the video, create the blog entry. Which brings me back full circle, to the lesson I take from Lennon's life, which is that one person, in whatever sphere of endeavor, can indeed make a difference. We all shine on.

[This post originally ran on Dec. 8, 2005. The date reference in the beginning has been updated from 25 to 28 years.]

What are your memories? Please leave a comment below, or shoot me an e-mail directly at alex@alexwolfe.net.

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