


When News Was Illuminated: Media Innovation In The Manuscript Era

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I spend most of my working life thinking about media futures and what happens when media changes. But sometimes it is good to look at what went before.

I've just been reading Elizabeth Eisenstein's classic account of the [Printing Press As An Agent Of Change](#) which shows how Gutenberg's innovation helped shape profound transformations in religion, science, politics and art in the Middle Ages. But a wonderful new exhibition of illuminated manuscripts from the Royal collections shows that there was also incredible diversity, imagination and craft in communications before the advent of movable type.

To be honest, you should just go and see '[Royal Manuscripts: The Genius Of Illumination](#)' at the British Library because it is so beautiful. Gorgeous gilts, luscious colours, divine detail, inspirational design and some exquisite marginalia make art out of the bibles, psalters, royal charters, genealogies, maps and other documents that a medieval monarch needed to service their political, economic and spiritual lives.



Printing swept this all aside. I am not about to wallow in some kind of 14th century nostalgia. The ability of printing to produce cheap, standardised mass communication helped bring about the modern world of progressive politics, investigative science and accessible art.

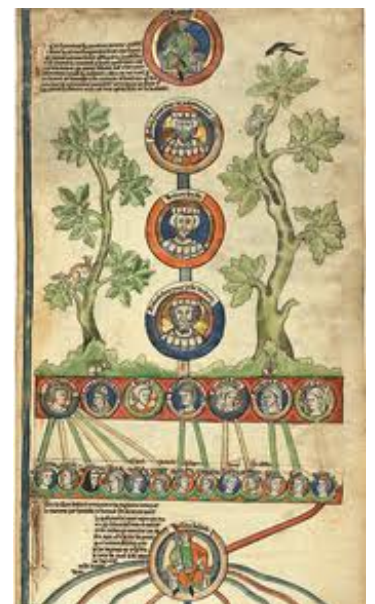
But when you visit the British Library's show you realise that there was more to the pre-printing age than just some prettily decorated Latin Bibles.

As [I have written about before](#), Medieval monarchs drove media innovation because they needed to communicate to wage war, raise taxes and save their souls.

This (very big) exhibition displays a wide range of data visualisations. There are even illuminated encyclopedias. These treat facts in quite a 'creative' way, but what is fascinating is seeing how they use symbolism, metaphors, illustrations and text in weird and wonderful attempts to convey meaning.

Even the languages used are varied. French is the main language of our ruling classes at that time, as well as Latin, and a surprising amount of old English, too. The texts range from tightly packed Gothic to minuscule scribbled italic corrections.

The illustrations also vary in form from Flemish interiors to rocky landscapes. On the same page you have charming fauna and flora mixed up with coats of arms and satirical, even lewd caricatures. Divine abstractions jostle with imagined history and depictions of real weddings, ceremonies and wars.



All of this is packed full of meaning and narrative. In that sense, it was the journalism of the age. It told people stories about power. Indeed, one lovely manuscript is actually a report back to the French courts about what was happening in London. It refers to 'nouvelle de Albion'. My French is not great, but it seems that this painstaking piece of craft – that probably took weeks to create – was claiming to tell the news.

News was never again so elegant. Never again would the platform be such an exquisite artifact in itself.

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