

# Editorial

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Gutenberg made everybody a reader. Xerox makes everybody a publisher.

Marshall McLuhan (1911-80) Canadian communications scholar

A disruptive technology is usually defined as one that is initially inferior and serves a different set of customers, but that then develops and re-defines the market so that it takes over what had been dominant. Think personal computers: they started as almost a toy for geeks, and were considered a joke by the mainframe computer manufacturers, but in time they changed the market, and the world.

While the concept of a disruptive technology is well established there does seem to be one aspect of them that has been less discussed. It is not just the technology that changes: the new developments also put quite different people into positions of influence. The geeks building their computers are suddenly driving the business. They think differently. They act differently. They come from quite different backgrounds and see the world quite differently.

When Gutenberg invented his printing press in the 1440s it may not have been a disruptive technology as such but it did change more than just the price and availability of books. In a stroke, the printing press handed the power that had been wielded by the priests, dispensing the written word to their congregations, and gave it to the publishers – a quite different group of people, with a quite different agenda.

Academics in universities have, until now, been the high priests of learning. Knowledge and facts may have been set out in books, but the universities have been in the position to dispense the formal acknowledgement of learning: the degree, and all that that entails. The ivory towers have been run as a closed shop but MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) are about to change all that<sup>1</sup>. MOOCs are a disruptive technology and only a fool would ignore them or assume their apparently inferior products will not change the world *and those of influence in it*.

It's about to get interesting.

**David Walker**

Editor

<sup>1</sup> Kop, R.; Fournier, H. and Mak, J.S.F. (2011) A Pedagogy of Abundance or a Pedagogy to Support Human Beings? Participant Support on Massive Open Online Courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning*, 12(7), 74-93.