1999 Historical Communication and Lifespan Cohort

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I was born in Oak Lawn, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, on February 22, 1999. I soon found myself in a suburban household with an older brother and tightknit Italian and Irish family. More broadly, 1999 was also a time full of excitement and nervousness in North America. The country was prospering after the end of the Cold War, and events like 9/11 and the recession that would shape the early 2000s were still years away. Lots of popular movies and television series were debuting or making their grand return around this time. Still, Y2K paranoia was freaking people out prior to the turn of the millennium, as technological things like the internet were relatively new and untamed at this time. Shows like The X-Files and movies like Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace would go on to impact my communication world, as would films for kids I watched like Thomas and the Magic Railroad. And in general, I lived in a household that prioritized family and food.

After speaking to my parents about this time period I was born in and doing further research into communication at the turn of the millennium, it's clear that all of these elements played a part in shaping me and how I communicate today.

The new millennium approaches

One of the biggest communication-related events to happen in 1999 was the Y2K scare. As computers made the transition from 1999 to 2000, there was worry that a "Millenium" bug would negatively impact the computer systems across hospitals, banks, militaries, and other critical parts of life, which caused panic as people were worried about an apocalyptic event come January 1, 2000 (Nossek, 2006). My father was one such person, even though he was an early adopter to the internet and typically stayed on the cutting edge of technology. My mother (J. Franzese, personal communication, September 29, 2024) says my dad was "fully bought into Y2K" and was "fully ready to go into survival mode when it happened." Thankfully, my mother was never too worried about it as she thought the scare was "silly" and just continued to raise her two children as usual.

Nossek (2006) explains that “people felt powerless to control the Y2K bug threat or to reduce their feelings of ambiguity and uncertainty as in the case of personal risk,” (p.9) so in retrospect it’s understandable why my father still fell for the Y2K scare even though he was relatively smart with technology. When the supposed date of Y2K came to pass and nothing happened, she was vindicated in her skepticism while my dad learned a hard lesson.

Still, I think it was important that my dad learned about internet conspiracies with Y2K because it enabled him to teach my brother and I to use the internet more responsibly as we got older. I was taught by my parents to not take everything you see on the internet at face value and encouraged to do deeper research into things that interested me. Ultimately, this all laid the very early groundwork for what eventually enable me to become a successful journalist.

Media takes hold

While my parents were busy with my older brother, they still found time to occasionally watch TV or go to the movies. My parents were fans of The X-Files and Star Wars. My dad told me (J. Franzese, personal communication, September 22, 2024) that he “didn’t get to watch many movies or TV as a kid, but always like superheroes and sci-fi.” Superhero movies were at a bit of a low point at this time, as Batman & Robin had a disastrous critical reception years prior and the release of Sam Raimi’s Spider-Man was still years away. So instead, my parents were drawn to the popular sci-fi media of the time. As I got older, I would eventually become a fan of superheroes and Star Wars because my father exposed me to the movies and comics based on those concepts.

When it came to my early childhood tastes in media, though, that came from Thomas and the Magic Railroad. That film was released in theaters in July 2000, and it was a box office and critical bomb that ultimately caused its director to step down from the production company that she founded (Cassey, 2000). As a one-year-old child, I had no idea about any of that and utterly adored the film. Something

about the trains and characters from the Thomas the Tank Engine universe enthralled me, and from the moment I saw that film at one year old it became an instant favorite of mine. My mother tells me that the only toys and books that I ever wanted were growing up were related to Thomas the Tank Engine and that I was "obsessed" with it until I was about 10 years old (J. Franzese, personal communication, September 29, 2024). Technically, this is an example of really successful product placement.

Thomas and the Magic Railroad was made to promote the Thomas the Tank Engine brand and hopefully sell lots of toys and books related to the IP. While that didn't work on a mass scale, it succeeded with me. Even though I wasn't really at a stage to think about movies that deeply at one year old, I still managed to create a positive association with watching the movie at a young age and continued to watch it repeatedly as I got older. Naderer et. al. (2017) argues that if a "brand is repeatedly associated with a positive context, the evaluation of the positive context will be transferred to the brand," (p.4). From an early age, I associated Thomas the Tank Engine with positive emotions and happiness, and for the next decade of my life it became a huge part of my personality. I used Thomas the Tank Engine to make and play with friends, learned life lessons from it, and learned what it was like to be a true fan of something. As such, I think Thomas and the Magic Railroad, a movie that was released just over a year after I was born, had as significant, if not greater, an impact on my communication upbringing as shows my parents enjoyed.

A tight knit family

The media my parents and I consumed and worldwide events like Y2K did play a part in the creation of the communication world I was born into. Thankfully, I was born into a family that oftentimes was able to block out a lot of outside vitriol and focus on family. My dad reaffirmed to me during our interview that "family is the most important thing in life, that's just how my parents raised me," (J. Franzese, personal communication, September 22, 2024). He was the firstborn child of Italian immigrants and English was his second language as a child, so he was very close to his parents growing

up. In turn, he was also a very hands-on and involved parent as well. Another aspect from my dad's upbringing that applied to my childhood was an emphasis on showing love through food.

My mother tells me that as soon as I moved off baby food, I was given full home cooked meals and not just simple dishes like white pasta; she says that cooking for others is one of the main ways that my father shows his love for others (J. Franzese, personal communication, September 29, 2024). That all remains true to this day. Costantini (2018) writes that "food, cooking, and family are considered central components of Italian lifestyle: a matter of pride, a piece of identity, and a gathering point of community," (p.41). From my experiences with my father and Italian grandparents from the moment I was born, that's been proven true to me again and again. I'd also agree with the assertion that "the culinary aspect of this ethnic group has deep roots that have not been cancelled during the years of social changes and globalization," as food is the main thing that I feel connects me to my Italian roots nowadays, (Constantini, 2018, p.51).

Although she's Irish, my mother also reflected a lot of the same familial values as my father, which I think resulted in an overall very safe and positive upbringing for myself. I was certainly born into an interesting time when it came to communication. Within a year of my birth, one of the first big internet conspiracies happened with Y2K, and that informed how my parents introduced me to the internet. I saw Thomas and the Magic Railroad at a very early age, and that would influence the kind of media I consumed for a decade. And I was raised in a household that prioritized family and food, and those are core values I still hold dear to this day. Looking back upon the earliest years of my life, I've been able to paint a much clearer picture as to how I became the person I am today.

References

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Appendix

Notes from interview with my father, Joseph Franzese:

- English was not his first language growing up, so until he learned English he mainly communicated with his parents
    - This is why he thinks family is so important
- Admits he believed Y2K but downplays how convinced he was by it
    - Reiterates that's why he taught me to be cautious about what I read on the internet
- His mother always showed him love through food, which is why he always shows love through food
- He really liked The X-Files, Star Wars, and Batman when I was growing up
    - The X-Files was what he was able to watch most consistently because my mom liked it and it was on TV, not in theaters.

Notes from interview with my mother, Joyce Franzese:

- Grew up as the youngest child in an Irish family of six, so she wanted to give her kids more attention that she got.
- Already had her hands full with my two-year-old brother when I was born
- Emphasized that my father really believed in Y2K and was stocking up on supplies for survival ahead of January 1, 2000.
- Like The X-Files because of David Duchovny, watched it a lot with my dad
- Was not a huge Star Wars or superhero fan before meeting my dad, but now know about it because he got us into it.
- Always supported my dad's cooking because she couldn't cook that well.