

Finding our News Niche

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The late Daniel Moynihan once reprimanded a colleague with the statement, “You are entitled to your own opinion, but you are not entitled to your own facts.”

It was a late afternoon in my hotel in Beijing, and as I often do when I’m away on business, I plugged in my laptop, went online and put CNN on the TV as background. On this day, the words “A chemical spill in China. . .” were immediately followed by silence and a blank television screen. The government had determined that I was not entitled to those facts. How nice that a third party could remove from my shoulders that burdensome responsibility of divining the truth!

Although we can be grateful that such heavy-handed censorship is not the American way, that does not mean our system lacks in its ability to obscure the truth. On this side of the planet, we simply use a different method; whereas in China they control the flow of news to their population through the absence of facts, we rely on the far more subtle, *multiple versions of facts* to meet demand.

Yes, the new millennium has witnessed our descent into a world that now entitles us to our own facts. The concept of *truth* is less relevant to us – a reality made obvious by the continuous supply of its multiple versions from a vastly wider range of media sources. Somewhere within the fog of war and fear, we became unmoored from our reference points of credibility, from our Cronkites and Brinkleys, and other accepted sources “of record.” Any responsibility we might have once had to shoulder the burden of finding the singular truth among disparate sources has been overwhelmed by that latest opium of the masses: *breaking news!*

What’s really going on around us? It is I believe an unfortunate convergence of fear, money and weakness.

Let’s begin with fear. Our shared trauma of 2001 set in motion a collective need for security. *Security* has two distinct components: the physical component, which is concerned with *safety*, and the mental component, which is fulfilled by *certainty*. The political and economic forces within our society are disproportionately concerned with the mental component because that is the one that drives revenue and wins (or loses) elections. Whether or not we are physically safe is much less relevant than whether we *think* we are, and so the manipulation of that state of certainty is focused on what will make us *think* we are more or less safe rather than actually improving safety. This is why the highly visible kabuki dance of frisking grandmothers and taking away our toothpaste at the airport is more relevant to our collective psyches than establishing a legitimate

security process for the millions of tons of cargo that float into our harbors each day, or having what's left of the National Guard protect our chemical plants.

Even on the most innocuous level, we live in a world that craves a much higher degree of certainty in our lives because uncertainty equates to insecurity – a premise that is true for everything from suicide bombers to gingivitis. But the most disturbing byproduct of our recent hunger for certainty is that it has superseded our demand for truth.

Of course, this is not a conscious act. Like the detective who thinks he's found his murderer, our minds will eagerly make the leap from circumstance to certainty simply because the desire for security in times of fear is so powerful. It is not a screaming-in-terror type of fear that I am talking about, but rather a low-level state of discomfort that continuously prods us toward that which will make us feel more secure. And in our day-to-day, let's-go-shopping-while-our-soldiers-die culture, there is no longer as great a need for any connection between truth and the messages that will fulfill the mental component of security. As long as the information being fed to us is presented as fact, our behavior can be easily manipulated to support the political or economic interests that claim they are either preserving us from harm or warning us of its impending onset.

This brings us to money. There was a time when the news media served us by providing what was essentially the same product: *Facts*. Our narrow range of pre-internet media sources differentiated themselves based on a small set of rather trivial elements, such as how quickly they could get those facts to us and the gravitas of their anchor men. Add to that constraints such as the anachronistic Fairness Doctrine, and you had a small band of news sources that at least made up for their considerable blandness by giving us a sense of certainty through consensus.

Inevitably, the act of distributing news evolved into a different kind of business. It was a slow process at first, in which the bureaus were somewhat insulated from their newly profit driven leadership within their large conglomerates. In the beginning, there was an understanding that the value proposition of a news organization was its credibility - a so-called sacred trust with its readers, listeners and viewers. There was little competitive differentiation because the product of fact-distribution was the same. These were the people who we could "trust" to tell us what was going on. But when facts began to fade into irrelevance, the dynamics of the business changed, and the doors opened for corporations to differentiate their news product in the same manner that they would any of their other products.

Enter *Diversification*. Like so many businesses, if there is an opportunity to diversify and create separate revenue streams based on personal preferences and demographics, then that business has a profit-driven obligation to do so in order to compete effectively and stay in business. From the days of Henry Ford's singularly black Model Ts, we now have the broadest myriad of choices configured to our tastes. There is regular, and then there is menthol. There is spearmint and peppermint flavored. There is two-door and four door; mild, medium and five alarm; classic and lemon scented, sugar-frosted and very berry, frappuccino and cappuccino, etc. Businesses have long responded to their

consumer markets by diversifying their products in a manner that will both generate new demand or meet existing demand. And because the market now demands certainty over truth, and constraints such as the Fairness Doctrine have been flushed down a memory hole, the media, like any business, has diversified their product line into multiple versions of the *truth*. Now we have the Fox truth, and the MSNBC truth, the New York Times truth and the Wall Street Journal truth, the Rush Limbaugh truth and the Air America truth. Yes, there is some overlap, but where exactly is it? Or more importantly, does it matter? Not if the product in demand is *certainty* rather than truth.

The end result is a purely profit driven market for “news” in which credibility is no longer the core feature of that product. Because the inflexible product of *facts* has been replaced by the highly flexible product of *certainty*, profitability has moved into the forefront as the conventional measure of success, and this success need only have a peripheral relationship with that very inconvenient concept we know of as the truth.

And that brings us finally to weakness.

Fear creates weakness, particularly in our ability to distinguish truth from fiction among the flood of information that bombards us. As the demand for truth continues to wither, and the demand for certainty increases, our needs are very efficiently catered to by profit driven forces, and this has given rise to another core principle of market dynamics: *the niche*.

News sources have now adapted to niche markets across the political spectrum, serving up a variety of red meat that will capture brand loyalty in much the same way that a company sells cars or an airline sells tickets. From a profit driven standpoint, it no longer makes sense to be all things to all people because such an irresponsible lack of focus (on facts, no less) will only serve to erode market share. In the end, there is no mainstream, there are only revenue streams.

One of our nation’s foundational ethics is that of personal responsibility, an obligation that must go hand-in-hand with the freedom granted by our constitution if we are to maintain a civilized society. A critical part of this responsibility is the obligation to make informed judgments within a world of cacophonous and contradictory free speech. But we have forsaken this responsibility – we would select a designated truth-teller for our niche so that we can focus on important issues like Britney Spears’ driving habits or Paris Hilton’s once-claimed humanitarian work with drunken elephants.

Somewhere deep within the money chasing maelstrom of messages is the truth, but the cumulative effect is, in many ways, no different than the intervention I experienced from the Chinese government. Like our Chinese counterparts, we no longer require an objective, unequivocal truth, stripped entirely of its political and economic interests.

And so naturally, we will only be given the facts we are entitled to.