
Perils of the Junk Information Age

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Society today is awash in junk information that is contaminating not only responsible journalism but also the very ability of democracies to make sound decisions in their own best interests.

Few disasters are quite so telegenic as an oil spill: the broken-backed leviathan, its black lifeblood oozing into the pounding waters; the brightly suited members of the clean-up team in their orange and yellow emergency garb; the pallid, blustering company executive; the indignant green spokesperson; the iconic oil-soaked shag. It's tailor-made for TV.

Of course, it doesn't have a lot to do with reality. But it's great television.

In the real, scientific world, the spilt oil will gradually disperse into the ocean where it will be quietly digested by billions of microbes and algae over a period of weeks or months, entering the eternal food chain.

The megabytes of digital vision files, too, will sink into innumerable media archives where they become part of the multimedia food chain to be endlessly regurgitated, re-cut, re-edited and re-broadcast.

In the real world, an oil spill hardly rates a 1 on the Richter scale of human disasters – earthquakes, bushfires, floods, famines, volcanoes, air crashes, plagues and wars.

Compared with the three million who perish from malaria every year, the four million who die from polluted water, the 400 children who die of malnutrition-related disease every 15 minutes or the billion forecast victims of the AIDS pandemic, an oil spill is a comparatively minor tragedy.

What sets it apart is its televisuality, its capacity to entertain.

There is nothing entertaining about watching a child dying of starvation, or AIDS victims suffocating on the solid mass of parasites in their lungs. These are real human tragedies where the TV camera finds no place. That being the case, it is often necessary for this powerful medium to forge its own, more stereotypical, icons of disaster.

The oil spill is riven with drama. For a start, it symbolises the unending battle between man and nature. It also has the fundamental element of Greek tragedy: hubris, or human arrogance, defying nature. The insolent humans who built this giant ship or rig have been exposed as stupidly fallible.

It has excitement, exemplified in thrilling attempts to rescue the crew or staunch the haemorrhaging crude. It has pathos in the pitiful images of dead and dying wildlife and the desperate, often futile endeavours of their rescuers. It has anger in the snarling confrontation between the industry and its critics.

It has heroes and villains: the intrepid clean-up squad and the corporate executive on whom, like the witch trials of old, public opprobrium can be heaped. It has politics because the responsible government is quickly rounded up and charged with failing to properly safeguard the environment.

It has the satisfying confrontation between polarised viewpoints that is essential to TV, but

conveniently ignores the wide spectrum of fact and opinion. And it ignores the fact that everyone depends on fossil fuels to live their daily lives and therefore is complicit in the oil industry.

Where do you find such a combination of theatrical elements in a single issue? In few other places. Because this is not about news, or science, or fact. It is about entertainment. People who work in science need to appreciate that today they are, like it or not, conscripted into the entertainment industry.

They are part of a process that, worldwide, is gradually subsuming reality with a fantasy conception of the world engendered by media executives. A world where real tragedies are overlooked or downplayed because they are too distasteful, too complex, too difficult to explain. Or because there is no convenient scapegoat. A world in which pseudo-tragedies receive prominent coverage because they have the right theatrical ingredients and, especially, imagery.

This world is fuelled by emotion, not always enhanced by fact, logic or objective discussion.

It is a world where the re-framed questions of the TV reporter are intended to extract not factual answers from the interviewee but an emotional response from the audience: fear, wrath, indignation, vengeance.

Some years ago a Greenlander and European MP called Fynn Lynge wrote a book called *Arctic Wars*. It tells from the Eskimo perspective how the urban green movement set out to destroy the livelihoods of the hunting and gathering peoples of the Arctic after they had existed for 5000 years or more in balance with their environment and its resources.

The icon of this campaign was one of the world's most beautiful women, Brigitte Bardot. She was clutching a tiny blue-eyed baby seal. She was surrounded by snow besmirched by the red blood of the seal slaughter. Such a talismanic image – the ethereal woman, the baby, the blood, the virginal snow – hardly needed words.

Practically overnight, the meagre incomes of Inuit people fell from US\$2000 per year to US\$400 while those of leading environmental executives tripled. The environmental movement had made a profound discovery not unknown to Hollywood: that emotion equals cash.

Ever since those days of the Arctic wars, emotion has been the oil well on which many lobby groups and the international media have drawn.

This is not in any way to denigrate genuine environmentalism, which is often noble, idealistic and important to our future. Rather, it is to explain why campaigns founded on emotion seize the limelight even when they are in apparent contradiction to scientific evidence and common sense. And why they so often overwhelm issues of genuine import.

The reason is they thrive upon the medium of television, which is propelled by emotion rather than logic, by drama rather than fact, and which has sucked all the other media – radio, newspapers and the web – into its wake.

Emotional impact is now the yardstick by which that ineffable quality, newsworthiness, is being defined.

Truth ... or Conflict?

At one time, journalists were taught to accept a statement from a source only if they could validate it from at least two other independent sources. That, you may recall, was the basis of the *Washington Post's* Watergate investigation. Nowadays that sort of journalism is rare. Many reporters will broadcast any claim at face value in order then to broadcast its contradiction in their follow-up.

News today must embody conflict. It must have two people screaming from opposite poles of an issue rather than present objective and often rather dull facts. The old journalistic saw “never let the facts stand in the way of a good story” has, by a mournful irony, become the industry standard.

The reasons for this rest more with the owners and editors of the media than with reporters themselves, who are under constant pressure to dish up what their superiors demand.

Reporters, even if they wish to, are seldom given the time or resources to verify the claims of various interest groups and lobbies. They are forced to take many of them at face value.

If a reporter is scrupulous in verifying facts, and in doing so discrediting claims made by various sources, chances are that reporter will have their backside kicked by the editor for producing a story less colourful and “beat-up” than the opposing network or paper. In other words, journalists today may sometimes be punished and their career may suffer for trying to establish the truth. The “lazy” story becomes more attractive than the well-researched one.

Even if journalists want to check their facts there are difficulties in their path. Many media archives consist of old news reports, not original source documents. These news reports contain errors that thus are incorporated into the public record and periodically regurgitated, producing a permanent distortion of history.

Another factor is that today's media proprietors have found it more profitable to shed highly experienced senior (and therefore expensive) staff and substitute callow and inexperienced young reporters. They have replaced local journalism with imported, and often irrelevant, syndicated articles from their other media holdings round the world.

And the internet, for all its many virtues, is a quicksand of information of often highly dubious provenance.

A free and fair press has for centuries been a cornerstone of democracy. A democracy without access to the truth is in no better position to rationally decide its future than a dictatorship, where truth is deliberately distorted to protect and serve the dictator.

Impact on Science

A democracy that bases its decisions on junk information and emotion will rapidly decay, socially and economically. A democracy that cannot discern the difference between well-reasoned and substantiated argument and shallow, fact-free media grabs is in a lot of trouble.

Science is of necessity caught up in this world in which fantasy now fetches a market premium over fact. Major scientific questions and issues are being fought out and decided on emotional rather than factual grounds.

Today's media makes little distinction between the quality of a well-researched "fact" and its critic's wild and baseless assertion. Worse still, it places them on an equal footing. It takes about 10 seconds to make a wild claim but usually a great deal longer to refute it with scientific data. The trouble is that 10 seconds is all the scientist is given to reply.

Thus the media has made truth and garbage equally valent so far as the viewing or listening

public is concerned. Also, generally, it is prejudiced in favour of the more theatrical or sensational claimant rather than the sober, measured and therefore more "boring" respondent.

Media managers sometimes assert, in tones of injured self-righteousness, that they give the public "balanced reporting". In actuality they give us nothing of the sort, as they themselves well know. They usually know or strongly suspect that at least one side is lying or exaggerating but since

that feeds the drama, and hence the ratings, little effort is made to exclude the claim on the mere grounds of dishonesty or untruthfulness.

Today's lobby and vested interest groups thrive on the media's lack of discrimination. This is what makes it possible for groups consisting of a handful of people to sway national debate and influence policy affecting tens of millions of ordinary people. This is prejudicial to

democracy and sound government.

Of equal concern is the rise of pseudoscience on TV, with themes of science fiction, "strange but true" or "alternative" remedies. These further confuse an already baffled public, which is having trouble telling the difference between science fact and fiction because of the indiscriminate way in which the media presents them.

The same trend may be seen in bookstores, where shelves of lurid fiction masquerading as fact – pseudoscience, religious cultism, faith healing, herbalism, conspiracy theories and New Age nonsense – now far outweigh the non-fiction. These books are churned out by the same vast entertainment empires that produce TV shows, movies, newspapers, computer games and multimedia with such disregard for reality.

A form of intellectual pollution is insidiously spreading in the community, far worse than any oil spill. Just as society turned hungrily to "junk food" in the 1960s, '70s and '80s, in the 2000s it has begun to gorge on "junk information". Just as junk food became a global industry worth billions, so today has junk information.

And, just as we found that junk food kills millions of people through degenerative disease, it is my expectation that social scientists and psychologists will in time find evidence that junk

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information exacts a horrifying societal toll.

The upsurge in mental disorders, “road rage”, domestic violence, predatory sex, drug-taking, religious cultism and multiple slayings may in many cases be found to originate with society’s growing appetite for fantasy, whetted and satiated by the multimedia empires; and with people’s growing inability to cope with the sombre realities and stresses of day-to-day life.

Clearly, this predilection for the fantastic, the unreal and the irrational places those who wish to communicate factually, truthfully or rationally at a disadvantage. It is a major cross to be borne by modern science.

Avoiding Disaster

A second, and in my view even more critical, issue is embedded in all this: it concerns the media’s apparent hunger for “bad news”. Many people assume that the media’s predilection for bad news over good is a perversity peculiar to sour old editors.

Not so. The media lives in a rough marketplace, and it has discovered the hard way that your circulation or audience ratings drop if you give the public too much good news. Conversely your ratings rise if you feed the public the right proportion of doom, gloom and disaster. Disasters are good for ratings.

Why does the public crave disaster? Why on earth would we want to devour plane crashes, car smashes, market collapses, crimes, fires, floods, pollution, epidemics and cancer scares along with our morning muesli?

Here we must probe into the human psyche and our prehistoric origins. We crave disaster not because we enjoy it but because it reminds us we are vulnerable – and we need that reminder in order to hone our survival skills.

Humans have been social beings for over two million years. In that immense span, one thing that assured our survival and success was our ability to work together to identify the threats surrounding us and to take action to prevent them.

Originally these threats were predators, poisonous plants and natural events like fire, flood or landslide. But new threats emerged as cities arose: epidemic disease, bad water, crime, marauders, collapsing buildings, fires, famines, civil strife and so on. It was our ability to plan ahead and cooperate that led to the creation of

sewerage, irrigation, education, science, medical services, fire brigades, police and defence forces and ensured our survival.

Today, the media is full of threats. Society’s instant response to these threats is to increase the pressure on governments and on scientists to make our lives safer. It uses the media to amplify this call, and the media thrives on the drama and sense of power it derives from forcing governments to act.

So, behind the apparent appetite of the public for so-called “bad news” there lies a sophisticated social mechanism, evolved over millions of years, to identify, anticipate and prevent disaster. But in today’s climate this risks being overdone.

Monitor TV current affairs shows for the next week. How many stories are designed to trigger a fear response in their audience – fear of crime, health hazards, rip-offs, natural disasters – with the TV show dubiously representing itself as your guardian? TV is building its future on the impression of a darkly threatening world – and on angry, fearful, isolated audiences itching to strike back at the media’s pre-packaged villains.

The need of humans to anticipate and avoid disaster is as old as time. It is worthy of study and encouragement. It is vital to our species’ future survival. But it will not work if we are distracted by cries of “wolf” by beaten-up pseudo-threats rather than genuine ones.

When the media blurs the distinction between truth and falsehood, between information and entertainment, between fact and fantasy, the whole delicate edifice of society’s early warning system is imperilled.

If society, through being fed too much dubious, exaggerated or false material, finds itself unable to distinguish real threats from imaginary ones, imminent ones from distant ones, or serious ones from inconsequential ones, we risk paralysis. As a democracy we may lose the faculty for making good decisions and taking effective action.

A society unable to discriminate between real and imaginary threats has poor prospects for long-term survival.

As a journalist and former newspaper editor, I believe it is high time to revisit some of those ideals of objectivity, integrity, factual accuracy and professionalism in presenting the news and in commenting on it. It is time to again make a clear separation between reporting and entertainment – before our society pays a high price for living in the Junk Information Age.