

INFORMATION AS COMMODITY: WHAT HAPPENS  
WHEN NEWS VALUE IS PRECEDED BY A DOLLAR SIGN  
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In "Which Technology and Which Democracy?" Benjamin Barber argues that new media tend to be counterproductive in terms of creating the well informed public that is a necessity in a truly democratic system. He cites speed, specifically its tendency to favor "a certain reductive simplicity"(39) in matters of whether something is good or bad, or of whether the answer should be yes or no, as the predominant cause of this fault in the new media. Joseph Turow, in his article "Targeting a New World," recognizes the commoditization of information in the media and points out that the way all media operate is affected by advertising industries as they strive to provide content that will draw the audience that the advertisers want. This commoditization creates the same demands for speed from the news media that Barber speaks of. Information makes this transformation to commodity as news outlets compete to produce news rich in entertainment value that will attract advertising money, and as news is produced with more regard for quantity than quality. The news media is, therefore, shaped by the need to maintain the cash flow from advertisers and is willing to view news as a commodity instead of the important public resource that it is. The culmination of the demands for speed in the news is the twenty-four hour news cycle, making the news a virtually endless stream of information and leaving too little time for the reflection or elaboration on meaning that is necessary to produce news that is relevant to viewers. The reciprocal causes of availability of speed, producing an expectation of speed in the public, and the consequent continuation of hastily-provided information, are also contributing to the changes taking place in the way news is presented. Simply put, the commercialization of news, by producing pressure for quantity over quality, has been and will continue to be a detriment to democracy because it encourages simplicity and speed rather than coverage that gives knowledge and provokes thought and deliberation.

Speed, in this case, refers to the speed with which information can be, and is, accessed by news media, or by individuals on the Internet, and made available to the public. Literally, it is the measure of time between the occurrence of an event and some form of media relating it to the public. Tony Silvia, recalling a good example of

this type of instant access in "Rapid Access and the News Consumer: Ethical Aspects of Today's Technology," says,

As the Persian Gulf War showed, the speed of information transmission by the news media has long since surpassed the Pentagon's ability to keep up. Who can forget the comment by high-ranking Army brass that they first learned vital information relating to the success or failure of a given mission not from their field commanders, but by watching CNN. (Silvia "Rapid"171)

This speed can be seen as a factor, most clearly, in two things: the Internet and the twenty-four hour news cycle. The Internet is, of course, ever-present, and it allows virtually anyone to post anything, within any context or lack thereof, that he chooses. While less extreme, the standard of a twenty-four hour news cycle also ensures that the information is brought to the public without set intervals. Owing to these two trends in news media, developments in a news story can be published almost simultaneously with their occurrence. This way of doing things has brought dramatic changes to the way the news is dealt with by all media and has especially devastating consequences for the quality of televised journalism.

Twenty-four hour news cycles were actually introduced to the world by television by CNN, which began operating in 1980. Today CNN has set a standard for other news media, especially in the sense that, as a twenty-four hour news station, it introduced the idea of reporting news as it happens (Silvi "Introduction" 5-6). This constant reporting increases the need for the high pace of finding and processing news and creates the necessity for speed detrimental to well-communicated information. Alongside with televised media's tendency to view information as a commodity, this works to undermine the quality of the news.

Before the advent of the twenty-four hour news cycle, news was periodical, whether one read it in a newspaper or saw it on television. Events that were reported were collected, processed more thoroughly, and more carefully selected based on what was thought to actually be of relevance and importance to the public. This was, in part, a limitation that was forced on those who covered the news by the periodical nature of the publication or broadcast of the news. Marvin Kalb mentions the change from periodical to twenty-four hour news in his article "The Industrialization of News," saying, "What used to be a once-a-day, twice-a-day, or even three-times-a-day news cycle has now become a twenty-four hour-a-day news cycle with non-stop

demands for 'profitable news,' which is not the same thing as 'news'"(43). He recognizes profit-driven news coverage as one of the sources of the shift in the way that news is processed from a way that informs the public to a way that essentially makes news a medium for selling information to them. Commoditized news is reported without giving thorough consideration to its relevance in terms of information the public needs to know in order to function as a democratic society, and is thereby failing to function as a public educator. Commoditized news loses its value as news and becomes almost exclusively measured by its monetary value.

Commoditized information is often presented in mass quantities without regard to what relevance it might or might not have for the viewer, so that while information is given to them, the public is not encouraged to become engaged with the issues presented. In his article, "Media Conglomeration and Campaign News Coverage: Politics as a Soap Opera," James Wittebols notes this lack of properly engaging the material in the news by citing the coverage of election-related news "[containing] little substantive information on issues that concern voters"(91). He states that presenting campaign news in the mode of entertainment "evolved simultaneously with the emergence of twenty-four hour cable news operations as well as with a steady decline in voter turnout for national elections"( 91). Essentially, the media fails to give voters a sense of who it would be in their best interest to vote for regarding actual issues, and therefore many potential voters are content to remain uninvolved with the political process. Along with failing to elaborate on issues that politicians take positions on, the media also tends to move the focus away from issues completely, choosing instead to focus on unrelated aspects of the politicians personal lives for the sake of their entertainment value. However, disengagement is not simply a matter of the media neglecting to give the public what they need to participate in the democratic process.

A study done by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press called "Voter Turnout May Slip Again" shows that while the media may not be directly responsible for the lack of voter engagement, that voters are certainly disengaged from politics in general, showing that less than sixty percent of the public was satisfied with the media's coverage of presidential campaign news in the year 2000(Pew III), but also that voters, questioned about how much thought they had given the election, responded with "quite a lot" only forty-six percent of the time compared to sixty-three percent that responded that way in 1992. The study also

showed that in many cases the public was not familiar with the positions of the candidates on a variety of issues (Pew II). These trends seem to reflect the idea that the media bows to the desires of a public that has a declining interest in the important matters in politics. People tend to be satisfied with the coverage of the campaigns yet clearly have not been familiarized with the important issues involved. In his article "Why Americans Hate the Media," Fallows points out the tendency in the media to ignore the important issues. He compares a question and answer session with President Clinton in which a group of teenagers asked about "effects of legislation or government programs on their communities and schools" (48) to an assessment of the President's performance by three mainstream news programs. He notes that there was "no overlap whatsoever between the questions the students asked and those raised by the anchors" (48) and that "none of the questions from these news professionals concerned the impact of legislation or politics on people's lives"(48). This suggests that while in general the population can be disengaged with or without the influence of the media, those who are concerned with meaningful issues, such as the students, are not well served by the media. Since most members of the public do not get to sit down regularly for a question and answer session with the president, the media has to serve as the public's only window into the matters of politics that should concern them. Therefore, lack of relevance in the media's coverage of politics cannot encourage informed democratic participation, and this bodes very badly for the state of the democratic process.

In fact, the most pressing issue regarding the nature of the news media is the way in which it shapes the workings of democracy. If the news media fails to provide the public with the information that they need to make properly informed decisions, then the democracy in turn will fail to function well in the sense that the people will not fully participate in it. As Benjamin Barber has it in "Which Technology and Which Democracy?," "Voting yes or no may ultimately be required by democratic decision-making, but reducing participation to terminal choices between polarized alternatives is hardly a useful way to capture democracy's strengths"(39). In other words, democracy, especially the democracy of deliberation that Barber sees as optimal, is a government that by definition requires the involvement of the people. In her article "Journalism under Fire," Kathy Koch cites the reduction of the length of sound bites in the news as an example of the kind of simplification that works against the ability of the public to deliberate on issues:

The ratings chase also helped shrink the sound-bite. Local stations first began using shorter sound-bites to pick up the pace of TV news to garner higher ratings. "A two-minute clip of a politician is not the way to do that," Hallin says. As a result, "Voters don't get to hear the candidates speak at length anymore," Hallin says. "It's harder to make up your mind about the logic of [the candidate's] ideas." (Koch)

In this case, simplification is clearly necessitated by the demand for speed. The public is provided with clips long enough to tell them how candidates feel about issues, but not long enough to give them an understanding of the rationale behind those feelings. Speed that causes the news media to underplay the complexity of many issues is, therefore, detrimental to the potential of a stronger, more deliberative democratic process. This kind of speed in modern news media springs from both commercialization and the demands of the twenty-four hour news cycle that serves the commercial needs of news companies. While twenty-four hour news cycles allow more time for the presentation of news, they also tend to try to present news that is as current as possible. This leaves them with a need to rush despite the extra time they have because they have to update their information constantly.

Along with the new speed of news media, the commercialization of news has caused a shift in the general format in which news is presented. As Turow notes, "Media firms create and revise formats in attempts to be in sync with client needs. Formats that do not attract the kinds or numbers of people advertisers care to reach will fade away" (16). Wittebols speaks of just such a change, specifically in the way that political campaigns are handled. He describes the way that "the infusion of entertainment values in television news shows is a product of the increasing marketing orientation in the media industries"(91). Essentially, this means that the news media sees it as acceptable to give up a format which has a primarily informative basis because it is easier to attract more people with one that holds entertainment value first. Specifically, Wittebols argues that television news "plugs in a formulaic, market-focused mode of storytelling in covering campaigns"(91-2) and that this formula is much like a political soap opera in which "[viewers] are the proverbial fly on the wall, enjoying a glimpse into the intimate lives of others without involvement in the consequences or implications of the secret world to which they are privy"(95). In other words, the audience may be given details about the politicians' personal lives, or see how the politicians interact and argue over their

differences, but they are not shown or told how the politicians will actually act in regards to important issues and what implications this has for the public. Rather than being provoked into thought about the importance of debated issues, the audience is encouraged by this style of coverage to act as “spectators at a spectacle where their role is to cheer on their favored participants” (Wittebols 106). This kind of detached participation in politics could hardly be considered even remotely supportive of democratic involvement.

Unfortunately, along with simplification of issues, speed also sometimes begets the attribution of false meaning to news. This can happen because the speed of reporting required by the modern news cycle does not always allow stories to pan out entirely before conclusions about their implications are drawn. Silvia recognizes that the tendency of advances in technology available to “today’s reporters and editors has led to a rush for instant meaning in stories in which the actual meaning may come at a distance of weeks, months, even years, if ever”(Silvia 172). As an example of this sort of story Silvia quotes Ginger Casey who, in regards to the Columbine school shootings, “[observed] that ‘the search for instant meaning has resulted in a rush to facile judgments. Rap music takes the rap for inner-city violence, Marilyn Manson and video games are blamed for setting off troubled teens’”(172). Barber advances a point very similar to Silvia’s in “Targeting a New World” when he differentiates information from knowledge, defining knowledge as being a term applicable only to information that has been put into context that gives it meaning. He states that “all of what passes as information either remains unusable in raw, meaningless clumps of data, or becoming usable, gets filtered, selected, edited, imbued with coherence and meaning”(42). Thus, as faster news becomes possible, and less time is spent on filtering, selecting, and editing to give clear meaning, knowledge will fail to be communicated within the content of the news.

In almost all cases a failure to provide proper context for information can change the public perception of an issue discussed on the news. This can happen when there is a total lack of context, or when the important information about an issue is placed in a misleading context. As one can see in Jessica Durfee and Julia Corbett’s article “Context and Controversy: Global Warming Coverage,” which details a study they did on the way providing context can affect reader’s perceptions of an issue, the way in which the issue of global warming is often covered exemplifies the problem of misleading context. As they assert,

[i]n media coverage of global warming, scientists were the primary sources of information early on, but more recently politicians and interest groups have been cited more frequently in stories...Some researchers have found that as their sourcing changed, journalists tended to overemphasize the level of uncertainty about global warming. (88)

Durfee and Corbett argue that, as the journalistic lens has shifted from scientific evidence of global warming to the controversy created by political parties debating about whether or not it is really an issue, the public has been given the impression, due to a lack of scientific background, or context, that there is a great deal of uncertainty in terms of the phenomena of global warming. However, this uncertainty does not exist within the scientific community. This is a clear example of bad context causing information to be misleading. Unfortunately, those who produce the news and profit from it will continue to see it as solely an opportunity to profit, and won't see a need to change news whether or not it truly informs the public. As news becomes more and more industrialized this increasingly becomes the case.

Many news companies are now profit-oriented organizations striving only to produce more news than the competitors and thereby to attract more advertising money. It is not surprising that many such companies will actually produce news through various media outlets to capitalize on all the news they possibly can. Kalb cites a clear example of this: "Now NBC, using its new subdivisions of CNBC, MSNBC and others, produces 27 hours of news a day. Each hour sets aside at least 12 minutes for commercial advertisements" (Kalb 42). In other words, one company can, by owning multiple channels, produce and present more news in a day than one channel could, providing more room for the advertisements that motivate them to produce such a high quantity of news. Here we see that, as Turow states in "Targeting a New World," "Media executives typically consider it part of their duties to think about how advertising can fit into their plans" (72). Simply put, those in charge feel that as long as they have news to air that will draw viewers, it does not matter what value the information holds or lacks as long as it brings them money. As long as people continue to tune in to watch the quickly passing images of events from around the world, whether or not they are given context, the advertisers will keep supporting this tendency in the media.

High rates of news production, especially the rates encouraged by commercial

pressure on news providers, create a form of news whose quality is evaluated based on the audience it draws and not on whether it enriches that audiences' understanding of the world around them. Issues of relevance, such as how elected officials will deal with problems facing the public that elects them, are pushed aside and replaced with coverage of campaign dynamics and details of candidates' intimate lives that may be entertaining, but which fail to encourage public engagement. At the same time, the news is simplified, leaving only the option of a vote for yes or no, rather than for public deliberation that could strengthen democracy. The public, having accepted news as yet another medium whose value lies in entertainment above all else, shares the blame in allowing these trends to continue. It is hardly viable to expect the news to go through a dramatic change in the opposite direction by slowing down to the pace that existed before the existence of the twenty-four hour news cycle. Therefore, the main issue lies in the news media's consideration of commercial interests when determining what they will report and how they will report it. If they were to consider, first and foremost, the relevance of issues and complexity of issues beyond the split between two political parties we would have a much stronger democracy.

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COMMENTARY: Bruce Walsh

Ian Maier's essay "Information as Commodity: What Happens When News Value is Preceded by a Dollar Sign" explains how the media fails to create the "well-informed public that is a necessity in a truly democratic system." This is a clear issue if a true democracy depends upon its citizens. Very little should stand between a people and their government, but Maier's essay shows that this is exactly where the media falls. The ideal media is one that should act as a screen but the media described here acts more as a filter and, as Maier points out, it is a filter that has become influenced by profit.

Information is crucial to a successful democracy; Maier makes an important statement when he calls news a "public resource." It becomes increasingly clear throughout the essay that media outlets have corrupted this resource. The news media is an extremely influential entity and the only influence it should feel is that of the citizens which it is entrusted to serve. Maier describes how the media has essentially chosen quantity over quality. The media's current focus on speed and simplicity comes at the expense of knowledge and understanding. The lure of profitable and entertaining news will often allow legitimate and significant stories to remain underreported. The influx of entertainment news comes at the expense of seemingly lackluster political or world news that holds much more significance to the viewer.

Maier shows us a media that is critically failing the viewing public and, in

doing so, greatly harming the democratic process. As Thomas Jefferson said, "Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government." Knowledge is crucial to an effective democracy, and Maier shows how important a role the media plays in the relationship between the government and the people. If the news media continues to fail in the ways that have been described in this essay then what is the future of the democracy. Maier's essay shows a growing disconnect between the public concerns and what the new media reports. Perhaps it is this disconnect is the future, perhaps knowledge is something that the individual must seek on his own. If media continues to strive only for higher profits then it becomes the responsibility of the individuals to educate themselves. Those who truly wish to better their democracy must seek out legitimate news on their own. Knowledge is far too important to be held in monopoly. It is not something we can legitimately obtain by simply turning on our televisions; it is something we all must actively seek. Maier has shown that a news media that does not understand the critical role it plays in the democratic process is a true threat.