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Attention Must Be Paid (Except to Climate Change)



By Marty Kaplan



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A bombshell dropped the other day. But if nobody heard it explode, did that make it a dud?

This is from a news story on Thursday: “We are not saying this is definitely going to happen. But there’s a danger, and it should receive a lot more *attention*.”

What danger? Sez who? I’ll get back to that. But check out the last word in that quote first.

I don’t know a better way to understand media than through the idea and the neurobiology of attention. Unless you’re living in a cave, in which case you’re not reading these words anyway, you are constantly being bombarded by information. So much assaults our senses and competes to be noticed every waking moment that the modern condition can arguably be characterized as information sickness, a state of nervous, data-driven exhaustion.

Attention is finite. It’s limited by how our brains are hardwired. But information is limitless. Every two years, the amount of information in the world doubles; it’s already as inconceivably abundant as the number of stars in the cosmos.

A wealth of information, as Nobel Prize-winning economist Herb Simon put it, creates a poverty of attention. The business model of our information era is to monetize our scarce attention — to hijack our eyes and ears, captivate our awareness, seize control of our choice of what to attend to and use that stolen mindfulness to sell us something.

The goods we’re being sold may be products and services, rulers and ideologies, gods and myths, customs and values. But what any of those sales first requires is a sales pitch that can break through the cacophony of messages clamoring for our focus.

The methods that messages use to get our interest are as old as human evolution. Danger, sex, novelty, play, story: Their power to grab and hold our attention kept us alive when we roamed the savannahs. But what once enabled us to survive is today an instrument of other people’s purposes. Not only does that manipulative barrage leave us dazed and confused, it also deprives us of agency, depleting our capacity to decide for ourselves what’s important.

The quote I began with comes from David Pollard, a climatologist at Pennsylvania State University and a co-author of a new paper published by the journal *Nature*. The danger he was referring to, revealed by an improved computer model of Antarctica, is that the melting of the West Antarctic ice sheet may not be hundreds or thousands of years in the future, as had been thought until recently, but could be on its way right now. The sea level rise it could cause may total five or six feet by the end of this century, twice the worst-case United Nations scenario of three years ago - "so high," according to the front-page *New York Times* story quoting Pollard, "it would likely provoke a profound crisis within the lifetimes of children being born today." Think of it: Along all 95,000 miles of American coastline — not to mention coastlines all over the earth — "immense areas will most likely have to be abandoned to the rising sea." Los Angeles, New York, London, Shanghai, Sydney, you name it: all the coastal cities of the world will be vulnerable to the same fate as Atlantis.

Did you hear that information explode last week? Unless you saw the *Times* that day, you probably didn't. The danger described in their study, Pollard told reporter Justin Gillis, "should receive a lot more attention," and the prime real estate the paper gave the article — 1,500 words, plus pictures, graphics and plenty of links — was clearly a bid to do that: to grab readers' interest, to influence other outlets to cover it, to set the nation's agenda for policy and politics. But it didn't. The dog barks, but the caravan - the media circus — moves on.

Democracy pays a price when that happens. Two days before that article appeared, President Barack Obama spoke at a Washington, D.C. ceremony where the Toner Prize for Excellence in Political Reporting was awarded. The implicit target of his speech was the nearly two billion dollars of free media coverage that Donald Trump has received in the primaries, and the failure of journalistic fact-checking to hold Trump accountable for his lies.

"I spend a lot of time reflecting," Obama said, on "how this crazy notion of self-government works, how we can make it work. And this is as important to making it work as anything - people getting information that they can trust, and that has substance and evidence and facts and truth behind it." The problem, he told his audience of journalists, is that networks and producers are reluctant to "give you the room, the capacity to... dig deeper into the things that might not always be flashy, but need attention."

The economic imperative of journalism is to get attention — to rent the eyeballs of its consumers to its advertisers. The suits fear fact-checking because they think it's ratings poison. But "just because something is substantive," Obama said,

doesn't mean it's not interesting.... In an era in which attention spans are short, it is going to be hard, because you're going to have to figure out ways to make it more entertaining, and you're going to have to be more creative, not less. Because if you just do great reporting and nobody reads it, that doesn't do anybody any good, either.

I've always been a fan of Neil Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, but on this point, Obama is right. I don't think entertainment is inherently corrosive of journalism or democracy. The root meaning of "to entertain" is to capture attention. David Pollard, the Penn State scientist, wants us to pay attention to the melting of the great Antarctic ice sheet; so do reporter Justin Gillis and his editors at the *Times*. Why didn't their story make a bigger kapow?

Not because the danger isn't scary enough, but maybe because we've been so hammered by climate change doomsday scenarios that they've lost their power to shock. Not because the scientific substance isn't flashy enough, but perhaps because news this apocalyptic leaves us feeling numb and helpless instead of angered and mobilized. Not because the *Times* didn't try hard enough to grab the world by the networks, but apparently because a melting ice sheet 10,000 miles away isn't as big a bombshell as Donald Trump's creepy tweets about Heidi Cruz.

This is a crosspost of my column in the Jewish Journal, where you can reach me if you like at martyk@jewishjournal.com.

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