OLD NEWS

An Essay Presented to the Kit Kat Club of Columbus by Gary C. Ness, 11/18/08

Early this past Spring, I accepted an invitation from Ric Petry to offer an essay during his presidential tenure. I was determined to honor the hallowed Kit Kat tradition of researching and writing on a topic about which I knew little (but wanted to know more) and which might hold interest for our members and guests and, perhaps, elicit spirited discussion. I requested (and was granted) the December date for my foray. From my perspective as Christopher Katt, that particular pre-holiday meeting (or, more especially, the unusually robust meal typically accompanying that meeting) seemed likely to provide a "kinder and gentler" environment and, if needed, a soporific prelude in case my topic and my words were, indeed, "old news". Subsequently, Jim Carpenter approached me (nay, beseeched me) about our exchanging speaking dates inasmuch as he was scheduled for a major trial this month. In the spirit of Kit Kat fellowship, I could only agree. (Jim – if your case settled early or if you obtained a continuance, I don't want to hear about it!)

At the time I agreed, I knew what I wished to explore, and when I forwarded my title to Ric for inclusion in this year's program, it seemed both apt and ambiguous – another gesture to our club's traditions. But as things will do, contemporary events (and the fact that my sources of information and my perceptions often argued with one another) intruded upon the sense of order I initially sought. As a result, I am attempting to weave together three seemingly disparate sets of observations which we can, I trust, either tighten or unravel during our discussion session.

These strands of thought are:

First, "Old News" – the very phrase connotes something that is widely known and has been so for quite a while. When uttered, it is a rather unkind "put down" indicating that what once might have been "news" is so no longer, and belaboring it is both boring and less than useful. But as the senior professor who guided my first graduate seminar noted on the day we met, "You may already know this; nonetheless, it is true". Whatever else I have forgotten from that seminar, those words stuck. So, while many in this audience will not only be conversant but fluent with the material in the early parts of my essay, please bear with me.

Second, what else would you expect from an erstwhile historian than "old news"? After all, that's what historians do – seek to provide new perspectives onto the past. I confess that such an orientation persists, and I will offer brief commentary on the status of a debate that continues over "the end of history" as we have known it.

Third and last, I have enjoyed watching a certain young adult progress, across the past decade, through college and into the "real world" with the determination to be a writer, a communicator. His experiences (more correctly, my sense of his experiences) have enabled me to begin to grasp how profoundly our human interactions are changing. That said, back to the beginning.

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The digital environment that has enveloped us, especially in the last fifteen or so years, has altered forever the ways in which we obtain and share information. The formulation of the World Wide Web and the myriad networks spawned therein have

connected us more closely and frequently with family and friends while simultaneously exposing us to the "views" of persons of whom we had no prior direct knowledge. These observations are, clearly, "old news", but they seem to have taken on greater significance as our use of the Internet and our familiarity with digital devices (cameras, cell phones, Webcams, etc.) have expanded. What has become increasingly apparent is that how we communicate shapes how we interact with one another.

One highly regarded observer, Clay Shirky, has written of this social transformation in his most recent book (HERE COMES EVERYBODY: The Power of Organizing without Organizations -- Penguin Press, 2008). He calls attention to three, progressively more complicated, stages of human interaction: sharing, collaboration, and collective action, and he notes how each has been made easier to achieve in this evolving environment. His sub-title reveals the major thrust of his work – that is, that humans are complicated social creatures who crave social interactions which are, as a result, so complex that we have, historically, resorted to formal organization with attendant rules of behavior, priorities, and structure in order to coordinate and focus our activities. He also observes that, heretofore, the advance of society has been shaped by those organizations that have produced the goods and services which characterize that advancement. He extends that argument by commenting that the reason that more or different goods and services were not produced is because it was not cost-effective to do so, given constraints embedded in the producing organizations. More specifically, each new product line and/or higher levels of output or service require more organization and coordination (i.e., management and overhead), and a ceiling exists beyond which profitability is unattainable for the organization.

Shirky focuses upon communication because that is the fundamental ingredient --
the "glue" -- of social interactions. He believes that the only parallel for this digital
revolution was Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in the 15th century and the
resultant fostering of wider literacy. Almost overnight, printing technology swept aside
the need for scribes, a proud and venerated early group of communications professionals.
The wider availability of the printed word encouraged greater literacy, and increased
literacy generated demand for more words in print. In many respects, the emergence of
the newspaper, especially the daily editions founded in urban areas, was the pinnacle of
the printing revolution because it brought timely information to a mass audience.

Newspapers, of course, required presses – expensive pieces of specialized
machinery – and a cadre of skilled persons (typesetters, journalists, editors, etc.); these
resources could not be brought together and meshed without substantial financial
investment. Thus, the publisher who organized the finances, technology, and human
talent necessary to create and present "the news" became a powerful presence, and his
organization served as an arbiter of what the literate public should regard as the news.

Similarly, the evolution of, first, radio and, second, television mirrored the
development of the newspaper, but the emphasis of the first was the "listener" and that of
the second was the "viewer". All three media were characterized by large and powerful
organizations staffed with "professionals" possessing the essential skills to deliver their
respective products – whether it was the newspaper on your doorstep at 6:00 a.m., the
news/weather/sports headlines every 20 minutes on your radio, or the 6:00 p.m. evening
news on TV. Two of the several common denominators among the media types were of
greater importance: the element of control – the determination by a small group of

persons of what the rest of us would read, hear, and see and profitability of what was presented to us. So valued was our access to the media that the publishers and their counterparts could attract advertisers who wanted access to us; these ad revenues enabled the media to expand their professional cadres and, often, their audiences without relaxing their control over the content.

Enter the internet revolution.

In recounting the impact of Gutenberg's invention of mechanical printing upon the reputation and importance of the revered professional scribes, Shirky noted that a highly placed cleric, an Abbot, hearing the anxiety arising from his stable of monastic scribes, wrote a powerful tract which minimized the likely future use of movable type and reinforced the essential and enduring role he foresaw for hand transcription of sacred texts and other major writings. In an effort to register his views quickly and widely, ironically, he resorted to having his argument typeset and printed – a Pyrrhic victory for the scribes, if there ever was one. Tongue in cheek, Shirky observed that the Abbot's reasoning must have proven persuasive across the centuries because we still have scribes today, but now we call them "calligraphers".

The story of the demise of the scribes and the essential professional niche they occupied is the key parable used by Clay Shirky to describe the implications of the internet and World Wide Web for their 20th century media predecessors (newspapers, radio, and television) and the vast and relatively rigid organizational structures which control them. In Shirky's words, in this digital age, "Everyone is a media outlet", and by extension, potentially, everyone is a journalist insofar as they choose to share eye witness accounts of events they deem interesting, a columnist insofar as they are inclined to

convey their opinions about persons and issues, and an editor insofar as they read the views of others and cut/paste or forward/delete those views.

Turning to my second set of observations about "old news", I am both dazzled and perplexed about the implications of the internet for my craft, history, and for my former employing organization, the Ohio Historical Society (and other similar organizations). A recent major story in the Columbus Dispatch was headlined "Ohio Historical Society Withering". Reading the article, one quickly discerned that what was "withering" was appropriated support for the organization by the State of Ohio, and as a result, reduction of the array of public services and hours of public access to which the citizenry had become accustomed, especially in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Coincidentally, that news article was still lying on my desk when the Society's newsletter, "Echoes", arrived. Two extended reports therein expanded my sense of what was occurring at OHS in addition to the cutbacks in public funds. Our Kit Kat colleague and OHS Executive Director, Bill Laidlaw, wrote persuasively that, in apparent response to the federal educational mandate, "No Child Left Behind", coursework in the our public schools (K-12), had been realigned so as to emphasize science and mathematics – at the demonstrable expense of history and social science, in particular. One hopes that this sad situation is only an example of the proverbial "unintended consequence" of an otherwise well-intentioned initiative, but the absence of any remedial activity within the schools suggests they are committed to their current curriculum. But all the news was not so discouraging. A second piece in that issue of "Echoes" described one aspect of the Society's very aggressive and impressive application of digital technology – "Ohio History Central", an online encyclopedia of Ohio's history which is well-illustrated and

tailored for use by teachers and students. This resource has evolved across recent years, and is continuing to grow in terms of the number and breadth of topics it discusses. Moreover, it is an effective and attractive counterpart to the other information contained on the Society's website.

One major problem remains, though, aside from (but logically related to) the decline in appropriations needed to address the statutory responsibilities assigned to the Society. In my experience, especially during the last 3-5 years of my tenure at OHS, I discerned a far greater level of interest by legislators in the more traditional elements of the Society's holdings and offerings(historic sites and museums, certain publications, special exhibits) than in our adapting newer technology (distance learning, development and use of the Web, access to electronic records, etc.). Even when, for example, school officials would forego traditional field trips to sites because of the increased cost of fuel, and distance learning beckoned as an alternative not requiring the expenditure of commensurate time or funds or additional personnel, legislators (taken as a group) were disinclined to encourage the Society to invest in technology if such investment required reduction of access to the traditional attractions.

I confess, though, that I regarded the onset of the internet and the new digital milieu with mixed emotions. I saw them as inevitable, but not as unqualified benefits. My principal reasons were two: First, as noted, I was not optimistic that sufficient funding would be appropriated to enable our organization to take advantage of the technology, and I was apprehensive about political and financial repercussions if we re-allocated funds and personnel internally at the expense of more traditional aspects of our operations. Second, I regarded the Society's collections as the bulwark of our reputation

and our institutional stature; therefore, I was wary of transmitting so much of cultural value into a medium where the linkage between the object or document or photograph and its curatorial home (the Ohio Historical Society) could be obliterated by the click of "mouse". In a nutshell, I had darker hair and more of it before the arrival of the internet.

Since retirement, I continue to ponder the implications of this free-flowing information universe. Researchers can accomplish so much more in less time by availing themselves of online resources. Of course, they may be less confident of the completeness or authenticity of an item if it lacks conclusive linkage to a trusted repository; citations of sources in footnotes and bibliographies – long a hallmark of scholarly reliability – become more of a challenge. On the other hand, Wikipedia, the extraordinary online encyclopedia, is the product of all manner of folks who share only an interest in the topic being explained; as more persons consult this "source", the number of Wikipedia entries increases and their accuracy and reliability are continually improved. At the very least, Wikipedia is an easily accessible mechanism for gaining a more than rudimentary understanding of a topic, and its existence, growth, and use demonstrate the power of a network of interested participants.

So far, my remarks have juxtaposed both a "third person" perspective (my terse review of certain elements of Clay Shirky's HERE COMES EVERYBODY) and my "first person" experiences (recollections of the Ohio Historical Society's early adventures with the implications and potential of the internet). The concluding section of this presentation seeks to provide a window into our evolving digital world through the life of a young man whom I know well.

He was a rather quiet adolescent, but one who enjoyed sports, camaraderie with his peers, creative writing, and experimenting with video (especially for class projects) and with his family's primitive Apple computer. A very good student who successfully pursued several Advanced Placement courses in high school, he chose a small, well-regarded liberal arts college in the South. Initially focusing on a major in English, he honed his writing skills. His interests broadened through other coursework and two visits abroad; in 1998, he graduated in four years with a double major (English and History). He set his sights on a vocation that emphasized writing and communication, and he wanted to test himself against tough competition. He secured an entry position with Columbia University Press in New York City, and by virtue of peer contacts, he later learned of a position at Newsweek. His interview there resulted in his hiring and being assigned to coordinate articles for inclusion that news magazine's electronic international editions. On the morning of September 11, 2001, he saw the Twin Towers ablaze as he crossed the East River on his rail commute to Mid-Town. Upon arriving at Newsweek's office, he was greeted by the managing editor as he emerged from the elevator, handed with press credentials (which were out-of-date) and told him to return to the street and seek out stories and interviews about the attack and its aftermath. His encounters that day were career-changing, and probably, life-changing, as well. The quality of his writing about 9/11 brought him modest but valuable opportunities for bylines in Newsweek. By 2003, he was craving more professional growth; he was advised to test his commitment and initiative by becoming a free lance journalist in one of several global locations where news frequently seemed significant but where "stringers" had proven unreliable. He opted for Africa and used Kenya as his base of operations, proposing and undertaking

several assignments in Rwanda and Uganda and an extended stay in Ghana. In Spring 2004, shortly before he was scheduled to return to the U.S., he heard rumors of armed brutality in western Sudan and sought to visit that region via Chad. His requests for a visa were bureaucratically rebuffed, and he left for New York, as scheduled. Within a month, stories were breaking about the chaos and tragedy of Darfur.

Once back, he had both a treasure trove of experiences and a chronic kidney condition to remind him of his year abroad. He set about beginning to draft what he envisioned as a major book while also searching for full time employment. Now in his late 20's, he had intellectual and emotional growth beyond his years. His chronological youth and his professional maturity were, clearly, instrumental in his securing several interviews at well-regarded news providers (e.g., Bloomberg, Reuters, etc.) which were heavy users of the evolving digital technology, but he was most attracted by the potential he saw while speaking with AOL Time Warner. He was invited to consider either of two positions – one with "hard news" in Washington, D.C. and the other with sports in New York. He surprised himself, he admitted, by opting for the sports alternative. Why? Because he saw that the imaginative uses of websites, the melding of video imagery with text, and the encouragement and inclusion of weblogs by eye witnesses and/or knowledgeable commentators, was the more creative and challenging option. He admitted pangs of conscience attributable to his selecting a focus on activities that seemed so superficial, compared to so-called "hard news". But he quickly learned that sports attracted far more advertising revenue than did other facets of news reporting, and these greater revenues resulted in a proportional slice of the organization's budget that, in turn, underwrote more skillful human talent and "state of the art" technology. For a

person committed to learning and shaping communications in this fast-moving sector, sports was the place to be.

The most recent chapter in this young man's life has him moving into an environment which, more than at AOL, melds television with the internet. From his present position as Producer for the sports website for the New York City affiliate of one of the major networks, he just concluded coordinating the overhaul of the sports component of network television station websites for their ten largest media markets. Other colleagues oversaw parallel efforts for the other news sectors. He comments that, in his world, television news without an interactive internet-connected presence is a "blind alley", technologically and financially. That said, he notes how challenging it is to try to explain to those older executives who determine the budgets what is probably at stake for their enterprise. (And, by "older", he means many persons who are in their late 30's and early 40's.)

So, here we are in an environment that seems to have no boundaries or consistently reliable points of reference. Further, there is, apparently, no rule book or standard operating procedure. No identifiable cadre of "professionals" serves as gatekeepers or filters; there are as many codes of ethics as there are participants, and everyone may participate. Clay Shirky pointed out that humanity has been here before, but Gutenberg made his mark over 500 years ago.

And what of the institutions which were created to safeguard the evidence of our past? I am increasingly of the opinion that the principal reason why legislators and other officials so resist efforts to modernize how our history is curated and made accessible is precisely because so many other aspects of contemporary society are fluid and transient.

As a result, many of us seek an anchor, or better, a lighthouse, and yet all the ships are using radar.

And what of the experiences of the young man who just wanted to be a writer? His vocational choices were shaped by a curious intellect, timing, and extraordinary circumstances. He has determined that the objective of writing is to communicate, to share. As a result, he is advancing the sharing of thoughts and experiences with audiences of a size scarcely imaginable when he began high school. By now, you have surmised that the young man whose career I recounted is someone I know very well and about whom I care a great deal. He is John, the youngest of our three sons. Had circumstances permitted, he would have been at dinner with us tonight. But aside from the demands of his work, he is attending to his wedding anniversary and to the company of his bride and their beautiful baby daughter – his mother and I heartily approve of his priorities. Were he here, I would have, as deftly as I could, deflected your trenchant observations and penetrating questions to him.

Alas! I am alone and at your mercy.

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