

Degenerative Retinal Disorder in Mures Musculi: An Update

Thinking of an essay subject is not easy.

At this time last year Jim Carpenter delivered the outstanding *Amerigo's Niece*.

At that time Jim, gave nod to the holiday season by noting his personal sense of gratitude for the gift that has been the Kit Kat Club. Picking up on the idea of the holiday season I read a book about Charles Dickens, entitled *The Man Who Invented Christmas*. I was thinking I might create a polemic on the impact *A Christmas Carol* has had on economic and social policy. That idea is now free for the taking to any one who wants it, my compliments.

At the beginning of his essay *Seapower* Jack Chester mentioned that he had considered a report on the great 1930 Fire at the Ohio Penitentiary. This was an idea I came perilously close to absconding with. Four generations ago it was the Ohio Penn that landed the maternal side of my family here in central Ohio. Not as a criminal element. That would be more suited to my father's side. My great grandfather James Byrd was recruited here from Tennessee in 1919 specifically as a corrections officer that also possessed the skill set to run the Penn's woolen mill. Many of the 300 men killed the night of April 21, 1930 were his workers in the mill.

I enjoy following the cases of the United States Supreme Court. I especially like reading the descending opinions. Then as a person whose only legal education is having taken the LSAT in 1989, I questioned the wisdom of my first official public performance here to be giving the likes of Chief Justice Moyer and the other considerable legal minds in this room a lecture on Constitutional Law.

Ah, what Kit Katter doesn't enjoy a challenge? But I plan to be in Kit Kat for years to come and wouldn't want my first essay be the one that earns me the nick name the Sultan of Temerity or simply the club idiot. So, I thought keep it simple and decided to have a breezy little discussion of... The Evolution of God. So much for not setting myself up for maiden voyage ridicule. Parenthetically I would highly recommend this best-selling book by Robert Wright entitled *The Evolution of God*. However to fully enjoy the book without the nightmare of a Jacob Marley-like apparition escorting me in my nightshirt and sleeping cap to a preview of me ducking behind this lectern dodging full plates of food heaved in my direction by a normally civilized room full of scoffing, learned gentlemen I summarily dismissed an essay on evolution, God or any variation thereof. It would be embarrassing to be first essayist to be forceful removed in mid-sentence since the guy who presented the wildly unpopular February 1918 essay entitled *The Flu, You Get What You Deserve*.

Thus when Bob Wandell called I gave him the title

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So was I to be speaking about the latest research in rodent blindness?

In keeping with the rich Kit Kat tradition of title obfuscation, that of course is not literally my topic this evening. However the title does refer to the *Three Blind Mice*, but not the trio of nursery rhyme. These Three Blind Mice are in reference to the three major television networks and the title of the 1991 book by Ken Auletta subtitled *how the networks lost their way*. However before I go down the

rabbit hole with this essay I would like to take an extra second here and pick up on the theme that I mentioned earlier as voiced by Jim Carpenter this time last year- that is one of gratitude. I have been honored to have been included in this group. I want to thank my friend Artie Isaac for bringing me here as his guest in November of 2007. As well I want to thank Sid Druen for his deft hints on presentation and John Carnahan who has been a trusted advisor and family friend for over 30 years. Before coming here as Artie's guest I had no idea something like this existed. Now every third Tuesday from October through May is like a blissful mini vacation. Thank you again Artie, Sid and John and thank you fellow Kit Katters for the inspiration to date and the great thoughts, conversations and fellowship to come.

Video Roll IN

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Three Blind Mice is considered the definitive chronology of what happened to broadcast television in the mid 1980's. What writer Paddy Chayefsky prophetically predicted would happen to television in the 1976 film *Network*, a scene from which was cut into the video montage, did in fact take place. But what has happened to media in just the last 5 years has been an utter revolution. Every commonly-held law of the media universe has been over thrown. The seismic change for television, like all other media has been in how information is delivered and how media companies can remain solvent.

All combined Broadcast Networks are still dominant players. However, in 1979 the 3 major networks divided 90 percent of the viewing audience; today they struggle to retain 30 percent of that audience. One of the major changes from, when *Three Blind Mice* was published, until now is how it has become a nearly impossible to discuss news strictly in terms of BROADCAST NETWORK NEWS. As hopefully illustrated in the video clip, there has been significant change to broadcast news content since 1991. In addition though there have been three changes in the last five years that make an exploration of network news as a separate discussion unto it's self a bit of an anachronism. An examination of network news becomes a discussion of the news business in general which inescapably questions television, newspapers, magazines and movie screens as continued relevant mediums which in turn all arrives at the big tent know as the media business. And why? Because it's all the same; print, audio, video, no difference. Not that long ago mail, television programs, books, films and news stories were all produced and delivered by different means. Now all media content is digitized and share the same delivery system. Our cell phones can be a newspaper, TV screen, a camera, a theater, a Walkman, a radio, a file cabinet, yellow pages, and a travel agency. Convergence has arrived and for many it has arrived with a vengeance. In addition to the upheaval in delivery the other two players in the shifting landscape are citizen journalism which is impacting the very definition of a journalist and most importantly the solid business model for how to get paid for creating content has been completely turned upside down.

So we have 1) convergence of delivery system, 2) evolution of the traditional news gatherer and 3) a giant mystery as to how to make money on any of this.

A true Axis of Revolution and a perfect storm for traditional media.

One paradox here is that while a discussion of broadcast news in unto its self now seems overly narrow, as individual consumers the narrowcasting of information is a viable and increasingly likely choice each of us can readily make.

For example if one only wanted to listen only to Soul music, only read news items regarding crabgrass and watch only *Law & Order* that is easier done than said.

Using mainstream technology such as Tivo, Satellite radio and Google one's customized myopic view of the world is complete in 3 minutes or less.

Chairman and CEO of News Corp., Rupert Murdoch believes the future of journalism belongs to the bold. Companies that prosper will be those that find new and better ways to meet the needs of their viewers, listeners and readers.

But for a minute let's look back at *Three Blind Mice*.

In the 18 months between March of 1985 and September 1986 all three major networks were acquired by large public companies; CBS by the Tisch Brother's Lowes Corporation, ABC by Cap Cities and eventually Disney and NBC by General Electric. For the previous 37 years, basically the entire history of broadcast television, the Networks, while high profile companies, were not terribly far from the companies that were started by prospectors of early radio wave technology. Case in point, when CBS was purchased by Lowes over two million shares of CBS stock was still personally held by founder Bill Paley an early pioneer of broadcast.

The first order of business for each new owner was to whip the flabby networks into profit machines across all divisions. The old school heads of the news divisions were collectively incredulous at the idea that they would be held to shareholder ridicule for the costly endeavor that news gathering was to the network. Before the takeover news was an absolute sacred cow. It was and always had been the Fourth Estate of Western Civilization, a daily citizen's check on government, industry and power. News was in direct service to the public interest and welfare. In fact broadcasters are given a no-cost license from the government to use the public airwaves on the condition some of that use operates "in the public interest and necessity." To quote Section 315 of the FCC Code. News is precisely the public service the FCC had in mind that licensed broadcasters should bring to each and every inhabitant of the United States. This requirement traces directly back to the foundation of the country, a healthy nation requires a free and well informed citizenry. The notion that such a mutually beneficial relationship, let alone a matter of law, would be disrupted by investors seeking profit was nothing less than heretical for most in broadcast news. The new owner's position on the public service aspect to the broadcasting business was relatively simple: Continue serving the public trust, but do so in a way that doesn't waste money.

The corporate position is best expressed by then CEO of GE, Jack Welch. Welch saw no differential between the public trust in GE's aircraft engine unit and that of News. Actually he considered the public trust inherent to the consumer businesses often greater.

“Every GE engine attached to a plane, people bet their lives with. That’s a public trust that’s greater in many ways than a network,” Welch said.

If the aircraft engines division of GE made money, Welch and his counter parts at Cap Cities and Lowes didn’t buy the argument that news had to lose money.

The problem came when a ham-fisted approach to how news would become a profit center was applied. The new owners, shareholders, and other institutional investors were not known as a patient crowd. Results were expected within a few quarters. Analyst charged with making news profitable made cuts, closed bureaus and replaced the seemingly lazy and over paid old guard with a more flexible and less expensive staff that was capable of seeing things a new way or at least the way of the new ownership. As this uproar was taking place, attention was turned to where the networks did make money. And that place was entertainment. So much so that there was never before a question about the money generated by an *All in The Family* or *M*A*S*H* covering the millions lost each year by news.

The analyst zeitgeist was that if news could become more like entertainment then the news division’s profit would also look more like entertainment. Thus Chayefsky’s look forward in anger proved to be an exact prophecy of what happened.

Adding to the melee was a guy in Atlanta who had a billboard company and a dream that a 24-hour news cycle was something the world needed. One can imagine the forehead-slapping that went on among the new network ownership

when they learned that CNN, CABLE NEWS was turning a tidy profit a scant six years after its launch in 1980.

It's not likely Ted Turner, or anyone else had an idea what a monster the 24 hour news cycle would become. CNN was there with a front row seat to the fall of The Iron Curtain and captured incredible live-to-air coverage of Desert Storm the likes of which the world had never seen. But beyond spectacular history-changing events like this, the 24 hour news monster still needed fed and there just is not enough red-meat news on an hourly basis. However there is plenty of local Cheez-Wiz. And as we all know, this has become the bulk of what one can find on an hourly basis. Car chases through suburban Los Angeles, a crazy man in Denver who floats a balloon to get another shot at being a reality star or a pair of half-witted society wannabes who crash a State Dinner again for a shot at the fool's gold that is reality television stardom. This is the sustenance of today's 24 hour news cycle. Essentially goofy local stories thrust immediately upon a world stage.

Many simply subscribe to the sentiments as expressed on a New York Times chat board by a user know as RLK from Chappaqua, NY:

"Everyone with an ounce of sense had a feeling, at the time, that Balloon Boy was a hoax, even after law enforcement gave it some credence. And everyone realizes that CNN, Fox, MSNBC et al are really entertainment and not news. TV and print media are truly becoming irrelevant in the era of on-line blogging

and news. Journalism has become entertainment...there is nothing newsworthy to report anymore.”

A cynical viewpoint and one shared by many consumers and scholars alike.

One could argue blowing up local ner-do-well antics to the world stage has a detrimental effect that helps enforce the collective perception of a world in which “things are bad and only getting worse” and that farcical stunts are just a side effect of the narcissistic qualities that are now a normal part of the modern human personality.

The final word in the video roll-in is exactly that. The President expresses his belief that significant distortions are fostered in the Petri dish that is the 24-hour news cycle, blogs, twitter accounts, and the like.

In a recent New York Times column entitled “In Defense of the ‘Balloon Boy’ Dad” Frank Rich wrote:

Richard Heene is the inevitable product of this reigning culture, where “news,” “reality” television and reality itself are hopelessly scrambled and the warp-speed imperatives of cable-Internet competition allow no time for fact checking.

Rich goes on to quote Norman Lear’s vent on The Huffington Post.com , calling out CNN, MSNBC, Fox, NBC, ABC and CBS alike for their role in “creating a climate that mistakes entertainment for news.”

Lear laments the “balloon boy” episode is the inevitability “when the demarcation between truth and fiction has been obliterated.”

It's probably worth pointing out that the individual calling out news organizations for their recklessness is the very same person who created the entertainment vehicles that subsidized a good portion of the golden age of responsible broadcast journalism. Additionally it is worth note that Lear is making his argument not as a guest columnist in the Sunday Los Angeles Times but in one of the better aggregators of news and editorial content, the web-only Huffington Post.com This is then cited by a Sunday columnist for The New York Times.

Another significant challenge for the traditional news reporting organizations is what has become known as the citizen journalist. Anyone with a camera-equipped cell phone, which is to say anyone at all, can arrive on the scene of a disaster, take pictures post to Facebook and Twitter what they see happening and blog about it as well. These are people not trained nor inclined to conduct fact checking exercises yet they are in the same race to scoop all others that has been the golden challis for professional news organizations since the beginning. The recent shooting rampage at Fort Hood relied heavily on Twitter dispatches and was fraught with an unusual number of widely-reported inaccuracies, one being that the assailant was accompanied by other shooters and had been killed in the attack by military police. On the brighter side it's safe to say the uprising in Iran this summer would have been totally contained and brutally smashed without Tweets dispatched from inside Iran. The Iranian government was able to blackout nearly all media except that of social networks.

In his essay for CBS Sunday Morning media analyst Jeff Greenfield stated "At its root this revolution has shifted massive power away from the providers of

information and to the users of information. If you don't want to watch a program at its regularly scheduled time, no problem it's always on somewhere. Want a song but don't want to buy the whole album? itunes will help you with that. Don't want to buy a newspaper? Read it for free on line.

One thing that keeps Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google, up at night is the power social networks have in the fantastically detailed and precise amount of personal data they essentially own and the peer-to-peer information sharing that takes place on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. Google fears this can put a significant road block in their quest to be the World's first \$100 billion dollar media company by short circuiting Google's ability to sell advertising. For example if you want to see a movie or are thinking of buying a new ipod, whose input is more valuable that of the general public or that of your circle of friends on Facebook. Facebook has 350 million users, My Space 225 million. Every minute another 10 hours of content is added to YouTube. Twitter has a monthly growth rate of 1382%. Powerful stuff for sure but a sustainable business model has yet to follow.

Bob Garfield, author of the forthcoming book *Chaos Scenarios*, observed: "...the mantra "we have audience. All we need is a business model." (assumes) adequate revenue were somehow guaranteed by physics or heavenly deity. It isn't. I've pored over Isaac Newton and the Ten Commandments. There is no "Thou shalt monetize."

Garfield makes a salient point about some of the trouble behind the money in media:

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Today the average 14-year-old can create a global television network out of applications that are built into her lap top. So from a very strict Econ 101 basis, you have the ability to create virtually unlimited supply of media ad space against what has been historically stable demand. So the biggest online publishers, with all their vast overhead, have no more access to audience than Courtney, the eighth-grader.

The media business's most significant challenge is to navigate the current era in which analog dollars are traded for digital dimes. The fundamental question to which there is no clear answer is this: **Will users who have grown up with the Web pay for content they now get for free?**

Currently there are no fewer than several dozen theories and beta test partnerships to see what model or models will work-- subscription, micro-payment systems, endowment funding, government-based funding, limited free-to-fee based content. In this Schmidt at Google, Murdoch at News Corp. and every head of all media companies great and small are engaged in a frantic search for the right model that would make the ludicrous *It's Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World* seem like a Zen Buddhist exercise searching for life's meaning. The models that are in test right now are fascinating and could easily be a free-standing topic of another essay.

The short answer to the future is pretty much Vardi's Law. Yossi Vardi, the Israeli entrepreneur whose company invented instant messaging, once spent three years trying to graph the future. The result was a presentation consisting of four

hundred slides. He discarded the slides and instead created his namesake law which is if you need four hundred slides to explain it, it really means you don't have a clue.

What is known is that the future is probably bright, but It's apocalypse now. Like the Okie's in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, media companies must come up with a strategy to survive their revenue dustbowl, which is forecast by many to be a decade of tumult and financial doubt. Many of the tea leaves point to resurgence in the strength and relevance of local and localized media. Media companies will do well to leverage the work of the masses that are out there blogging, tweeting and posting content at light speed. The Washington Post is already at it by utilizing "crowd sourcing" to quickly digest and cover big issues such as the health care bill.

In his latest book *Googled: The End of the World as We Know It, Three Blind Mice* Author Auletta points out that The Great Hall of Innovation Misses is populated by some excellent companies. Disney CEO Robert Iger asks himself everyday why he didn't think of YouTube when he was the one that originally put America's Home Videos on the schedule, a program that was the incarnation of user-generated content. The New York Times or CBS should have invented CNN? In retrospect ESPN would seem a lay-up for the venerable Sports Illustrated. AOL which launched Instant Messenger should have thought of Facebook.

Ever the contrarian News Corp's Murdoch sees the forecast much differently. In his December 1 remarks before the Federal Trade Commission's workshop on

journalism and the Internet, he said “the future of journalism is more promising than ever—limited only by editors and producers unwilling to fight for their readers and viewers-- or government using its heavy hand to either over regulate or subsidize us.

I wish Chayefsky were still alive. I'd ask him what he thinks is going to happen. But likely he would suggest shouting out the nearest open window “I'm as lost as hell and not going to listen to Wolf Blitzer talking about his Tweets anymore!”

People born before 1984 grew up without computers. These devices were post-childhood introductions for us. We generally do not have an innate understanding of the devices, their capacity or how they “think.” Even among the younger population that does possess a second-nature understanding of technology's possibilities, the revolution is fragmented not unlike the narrowcasted world we now know. With \$11.5 million of venture capital three young men created YouTube in a room above a pizza shop San Mateo, CA in February 2005. In October of 2006 YouTube was sold to Google for \$1.65 Billion dollars. Like the Networks who once held absolute power over programming and content the old model in which companies like AT&T, IBM and GE assumed proprietary rights over innovation has cracked.

No matter the direction, no matter the economics, no matter on a TV screen, a computer, laptop, cell phone, Kindle, toaster or computer chip imbedded in one's head. Whether the newspaper of the future is delivered with electrons or dead trees, the fundamental things will still apply: a passion for storytelling, a love of

clear vivid language and a respect for history—the world didn't start 15 years ago even if Google did—these things still matter most; or at least they should.

This all brings to mind a passage from Joseph Campbell's seminal book of comparative mythology *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*:

"A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder:

fabulous forces are there encountered-- and a decisive victory is won:

the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man."

Our stories, myths and legends are who we are. News for better or worse is our running daily human narrative. Free men and women require honest and reliable news about the events affecting their lives. There are some things that revolution and upheaval will not change; one of those is our need to know. To know why, to know how, to attempt to make sense and bring purpose and context to this existence. The best endeavors in news try to do that. I think even Paddy Chayefsky might agree the true mission of news *is* worthy of a good yell out the window, but basic human curiosity is nothing to be mad as hell about.