The information bubble

Alix Paultre, Editor-in-Chief

The wonderful communications technology infrastructure we have created has given everyone the power to communicate with anyone else on the planet at a moments notice with images, text, voice, and video. All of the focus is on the software tools such as Twitter, Facebook, or YouTube that are at the forefront of the societal sea change, but it is the newly-risen global information network that is the real hero.

The flip side of the situation is that we are all caught up in an expanding and increasingly unstable “information bubble”, one that has the power to completely disrupt our society when it breaks. Just as the recent bubbles in banking and insurance, stock and commodity speculation, and housing have rocked our society, they may pale in comparison to the risk of damage from the information bubble. The infobubble has devalued information as much as the housing bubble devalued real estate. It’s just that we don’t notice as much because the impact isn’t measured in simple terms like dollar cost.

As my friend James Foster from XMOS observed recently, “There’s too much data, not enough information”. The instant-on, thumb-typed, quick-fix nature of the new electronic reality drives us into smaller and smaller data fragments, to the point where the most newsworthy means of disseminating data today is the equivalent of a teenager texting their friends. Bits and snatches of news, however timely, are not real information, and comments flying out of the ether have no credibility or credentials.

Don’t get me wrong, however. There is a huge positive factor to instant messaging, Twitter, YouTube, and the other data-fragment purveyors. Such media enable easier interpersonal communications, provide lubricant to the gears of society, and provide new and interesting ways to exchange information. The problem is when society (or elements thereof) try and force all media to conform to the Procrustean bed of whatever happens to be popular in media.

Print has value, radio has value, and even TV (believe it or not) has value to their audiences and society as a whole. Yet entire institutions are being thrown under the bus of web expediency. What about people who do not have (or do not want) the internet to deliver their news? What happened to analysis? What about detailed articles from professional journalists with the time and resources to follow a story? All of this is going on even while nobody knows what a viable business plan for a web-based news organization looks like anyway.

There is a very real danger that once the infobubble bursts, we will be left with a chaotic, unregulated news environment where “real” news is drowned out in the omnipresent shouting match that is the internet. We need to take a deep breath and evaluate where we are going with our news and information media before we find out it’s too late and can only get our news in random chunks from whoever feels like providing it at the time.

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