

Getting Attention at Any Cost

Written by Alex Baer

Wednesday, 01 August 2012 13:00

It certainly sounded outrageous: A man was given 30 days in jail for having water on his property. It certainly sounded like local government had slipped a major cog in its normally dull wheel, shambling off into abuse.

A few minutes later, after an online search and scanning various written pieces, it was far less certain what was really going on.

The initial piece was shrill in its tone. Worse, it left out key information: The man had dammed up a creek flow, a tributary to a river, without permission to do so. He had done that before, and had done it again. The first time, he received probation from the court; the second time, he drew 30 days in jail, to help get his attention.

More troubling than omitted fact in the original piece was the repeated omission downstream: other pieces spawned from the original account. Each repetition grew increasingly alarmist in its tone. Before long, some versions were mash-ups of paranoia, over-reaction, generic angst, a twitchy zeitgeist, and fears of *gummint*.

A clear pattern had taken shape: ***The stark need to get attention at any cost.*** Emotional approaches to the partial information presented became more earnestly, direly outraged. At each retelling, the alarm bells were multiplied, ratcheted up, and sounded with unusual vigor.

Deep breath, shift gears.

The mainstream press, for my money, abrogated its responsibilities, rights, and privileges long ago, when opinion first dressed up as news -- it being much easier to glamorously report how random personalities *felt* about things, rather than doing the sweaty, grubby work of tracking down, roping, and corralling facts.

When the walls between news and entertainment were bulldozed, it helped getting information to the public in the same way that the public was, um, *assisted* by banks when the walls

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between dull, old banking and casino gambling were dynamited. Which is to say, not at all.

It is a worrisome trend for the blogger-and-online press and its readers to endure, eventually see through, and attempt to surmount. With some few, shining exceptions, the mainstream media has lost that battle, and stopped caring, long ago -- the instant that presenters themselves became the news, and it became possible to be famous only for being famous.

Those who report the news would do well to ignore the rulings of the court when it was stated that lies in the news were fine -- that there is no legal obligation to tell the truth. In a world where everything is "spin," one of the few anchors left is *truth*. Leaving out facts is lying, as is telling selected portions of what was found in any search. There are lots of ways to lie; there is only one way to tell the truth.

(Brief aside: □ The film "Network" was presented in its time as satire; □ I now consider it a time-travel and fortune-telling documentary -- one that, for all its comedic horrors, stopped far short of where news, and information control, has traveled today.)

In these oversimplified waters: We clamor for attention, and, if our audience responds to shrill tones and alarm bells, we will be shrill and alarmist. It appears to be what happened here, in this one story and its offspring. This is unfortunate. No one's interests were served, save for reinforcing *told-you-so* fears.

The process broke down. Our minds and spirits were not fed, just our impatience and our fears. We threw a banquet for the human penchant for leaping, and for the quintessential American habit of not looking first: *Fire! □ Ready, aim.*

When, where, and how do alternative viewpoints morph into conspiracy theories on the sliding scale of reportage now, in this country? Good question. It's one we should be asking ourselves quite a lot. The answer will have something to do with how facts are assembled, used, and presented.

In the drive and hurry to get attention, at any cost, there is a critical need to pay equal attention

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to which facts are used, and which ones might be left out. Critical thinking, while quaint to many, is a good skill to have handy for individuals and for the species. Despite Texas Republican Party platforms to the contrary, *higher learnin' and thinkin'* might save our butts yet.

We need to remind the press -- mainstream and bloggerville -- to stop chewing our food for us, and just wheel out the facts for us to tear into, mull over, and digest. If we don't demand it of them and ourselves, it will no longer automatically or spontaneously occur -- not as it once might have been expected to do and keep on doing.

We will do ourselves an important favor if we approach shrill pieces cautiously, and require proofs of reason -- not just inflamed emotion -- in reports.

The founders of the country felt so strongly about our right to receive uncensored information that they wrote protections into the Constitution for only one job: the press. For democracy to work, they noted, there must be an informed and engaged citizenry.

If we don't develop better noses for news, and sharpen our abilities to perform "sniff tests" for the truth, we'll wind up holding the bag for the punch line of an old joke:

- Q: *What's the difference between ignorance and apathy?*
- A: *I don't know, and I don't care!*

If we're not careful, we'll keep coming up real close, on that informed-and-engaged-citizenry thing, *zero-for-two*.