



How More Bandwidth Can Liberate the News

Everybody of my age remembers the nightly news from Vietnam. But what few remember is how the video got to us. Each evening, broadcasters flew tapes from Vietnam to Honolulu, where it was edited and transmitted. The bandwidth did not exist to transmit directly from Saigon, much less from combat zones.

More Bandwidth, More News

When I became a full-time journalist in 1970, the Associated Press national wire transmitted files at 110 baud – about five words a second using a 6-bit code. Bandwidth changed all that. The AP moved from 300 baud in the mid-1970s to 9600 by the late 1980s. The world's media quickly soaked up new bandwidth. At every step of the transformation, the volume of news carried on the wires quickly grew to use the doubling and redoubling of bandwidth.

Now we have taken a pause, as the economics struggles to keep up with the technology. More people are getting more information than ever before. But as we note in this issue, they are not getting it through traditional mass media. Daily newspaper circulation is falling. Broadcast news audiences are falling. The 24-hour cable news audience has stagnated in the past two years. At the same time, Internet viewing is up, as is circulation of weekly newspapers, specialized magazines, and more targeted info-channels like BET, A&E, and the History Channel group.

What's going on? A conference for journalists and humanitarian aid personnel at Reuters' New York headquarters last February, called to discuss tsunami coverage, offers some clues. Among those present were *New York Times* Public Editor (Ombudsman) Dan Okrent, CNN anchor Aaron Brown, and Dr. Jeffery Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia

University and head of the UN's Millennium Project to reduce world poverty.

Sachs talked about "the silent tsunami; poverty, disease and extreme hunger." Said Sachs: "It is predictable that next month 200,000 children will die... and the American media won't cover the story...2005 is being talked about all over the world as the year we will do something about poverty.... In the rest of the world poverty is a daily story."

News as Vegetable?

Brown responded: "It sounds simple but it is a lot more complicated.... It is a story that I absolutely agree that we have under-reported and I wish I could honestly say that it was the only such story.... One of the problems I have... is that I'm not in the business of making you eat Brussels sprouts. That's not the job of television. My task, because this is a business, is to present a balanced meal that includes some Brussels sprouts, and also has some chocolate and hopefully an entree of some substance. A lot of times we get it right and sometimes we fabulously screw it up.

"People who buy the *Times* can read the story, set it down, and come back and finish it because it is too much, too hard. That's not true of my medium. I'll accept the imperfections, if you accept that I am trying to do it well, to present important material to draw people to the program without turning them off because of the way that television presents it."

Nicola du Torrent, US director of Doctors Without Borders, responded, saying, "the media assume people are not interested and therefore don't invest the resources and don't explain it well, and of course the people are not interested. People are interested. That they are not is a false assumption of the media."

But Okrent noted, "What readers say in polls bears no relation to what they read

in the paper. They all say they want news on hunger, poverty, education in the inner city... and they watch Michael gawd-damn Jackson. Even at *The Times*, which has the most self-selecting audience of any medium its size, when you see my mail, that's what they write about."

"In maybe my single worst day in this business," said Brown, "I spent 4 hours talking about the arrest of actor Robert Blake. Every ounce of me was saying 'I guess you are really in cable now.' I came home that night at 2 in the morning... and my wife, a former reporter, looked up at me from her sleep and asked, 'why?' But that story did the biggest numbers of any story we had done since the American Airlines flight crashed in New York two months after 9/11 and we didn't know if it was terrorists again."

Attendees were given a digest of a large international study I had done last year on how the media and humanitarian aid groups work with one another. I suggested that the polls are honest and the ratings are accurate. But the interpretation is wrong. Half the American population is black, Hispanic, or first- and second-generation immigrant – many with a special interest in international issues like poverty. They have been forced to get their information from specialized media. Occasional coverage of Brussels sprouts issues like poverty annoys the mass media audience that's left, but doesn't attract the others back.

Thus the issue is not Fox versus CNN. It is how our bandwidth can encourage and accommodate new, narrowly focused channels these viewers might want.

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