



Mediasaurus

Today's mass media is tomorrow's fossil fuel. Michael Crichton is mad as hell, and he's not going to take it anymore.

By Michael Crichton

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I am the author of a novel about dinosaurs, a novel about US-Japanese trade relations, and a forthcoming novel about sexual harassment - what some people have called my dinosaur trilogy. But I want to focus on another dinosaur, one that may be on the road to extinction. I am referring to the American media. And I use the term extinction literally. To my mind, it is likely that what we now understand as the mass media will be gone within ten years. Vanished, without a trace.

There has been evidence of impending extinction for a long time. We all know statistics about the decline in newspaper readers and network television viewers. The polls show increasingly negative public attitudes toward the press - and with good reason. A generation ago, Paddy Chayevsky's *Network* looked like an outrageous farce. Today, when Geraldo Rivera bares his buttocks, when the *New York Times* misquotes Barbie (the doll), and NBC fakes news footage of exploding trucks, *Network* looks like a documentary.

According to recent polls, large segments of the American population think the media is attentive to trivia, and indifferent to what really matters. They also believe that the media does not report the country's problems, but instead is a part of them. Increasingly, people perceive no difference between the narcissistic self-serving reporters asking questions, and the narcissistic self-serving politicians who evade them.

And I am troubled by the media's response to these criticisms. We hear the old professional line: "Sure, we've got some problems, we could do our job better." Or the time-honored: "We've always been disliked because we're the bearer of bad news; it comes with the territory; I'll start to worry when the press is liked." Or after a major disaster like the NBC news/GM truck fiasco, we hear "this is a time for reflection."

These responses suggest to me that the media just doesn't get it - doesn't understand why consumers are unhappy with their wares. It reminds me of the story of the man who decided to kill his wife by having a lot of sex with her. Pretty soon this beaming, robust woman shows up, followed by a wizened little man with a cane. He whispers to a friend, "She doesn't know it yet, but she has only two weeks to live."

It is this perception that the media, and our current concept of news, is outmoded, that I would like to address.

So for a moment, let's set aside the usual bromides about the press. Let's take it as given that the bearer of bad news is often executed; that all human beings have an appetite for gossip and scandal; that media must attract an audience; that bias is in the eye of the reader as much as in the pen or sound-bite of the reporter.

And let's talk instead about quality.

The media are an industry, and their product is information. And along with many other American industries, the American media produce a product of very poor quality. Its information is not reliable, it has too much chrome and glitz, its doors rattle, it breaks down almost immediately, and it's sold without warranty. It's flashy but it's basically junk. So people have begun to stop buying it.

Poor product quality results, in part, from the American educational system, which graduates workers too poorly educated to generate high-quality information. In part, it is a problem of nearsighted management that encourages profits at the expense of quality. In part, it is a failure to respond to changing technology - particularly the computer-mediated technology known collectively as the Net. And in large part, it is a failure to recognize the changing needs of the audience.

In recent decades, many American companies have undergone a wrenching, painful restructuring to produce high-quality products. We all know what this requires: Flattening the corporate hierarchy. Moving critical information from the bottom up instead of the top down. Empowering workers. Changing the system, not just the focus of the corporation. And relentlessly driving toward a quality product. Because improved quality demands a change in the corporate culture. A radical change.

Generally speaking, the American media have remained aloof from this process. There have been some positive innovations, like CNN and C-SPAN. But the news on television and in newspapers is generally perceived as less accurate, less objective, less informed than it was a decade ago. Because instead of focusing on quality, the media have tried to be lively or engaging - selling the sizzle, not the steak; the talk-show host, not the guest; the format, not the subject. And in doing so they have abandoned their audience.

Who will be the GM or IBM of the '90s? The next great American institution to find itself obsolete and outdated, while obstinately refusing to change? I suspect one answer would be The New York Times and the commercial networks. Other institutions have been pushed to improve quality. Ford now makes a better car than it has any time in my life; we can thank Toyota and Nissan for that. But who will push The New York Times?

The answer, I think, is technology. The media have always been driven by technology, but it's surprising how many of their attitudes and terminologies are very old. Stereotype and cliché are 18th-century printers' terms that refer to metal type. The inverted pyramid story structure was a response to the newly-invented telegraph; reporters were not sure they could get the whole story in before the telegraph broke down, and so began to put the most important information first. The first image broadcast on television was a dollar sign, setting the tone for the future of that medium.

But the modern thrust of technology is radically different, because it is changing the very concept of information in our society.

Information today is vitally important. We live by it. For the first time in our history, by the year 2000, 50 percent of all American jobs will require at least one year of college. In this environment, news isn't entertainment - it's a necessity. We need it - and we need it to be of high quality: comprehensive and factually accurate.

More and more, people understand that they pay for information. Online databases charge by the minute. As the link between payment and information becomes more explicit, consumers will naturally want better information. They'll demand it, and they'll be willing to pay for it. There is going to be - I would argue there already is - a market for extremely high-quality information, what quality experts would call "six-sigma information." (The trendsetter for benchmarking American quality was always Motorola, and until 1989 Motorola was talking about three-sigma quality - three bad parts in a

thousand. Six-sigma quality is three bad parts per million.)

That's a quantum leap, previously incomprehensible in American quality, although the Japanese have been doing it for years. But such rigor is unknown in the media. None of the traditional media have begun to address this need.

In my own case, when I add up what I spend for newspapers, magazines, books, databases, cable services, and so on, I find I spend about as much for information - food for thought - as I do for food. I may not be typical, but I'm hardly unique. Yet I don't pay all this money because I think I'm getting high-quality information. I pay to find out what Ken Kesey used to call "the current fantasy" - what is being written and bruited about.

But what if somebody offered me a service with high-quality information? A service in which all the facts were true, the quotes weren't piped, the statistics were presented by someone who knew something about statistics? What would that be worth? A lot. Because good information has value. The notion that it's filler between the ads is outdated.

There is a second and related trend. I want direct access to information of interest to me, and increasingly, I expect to get it. This is a long-standing trend in many technologies. When I was a child, telephones had no dials. You picked up the phone and asked an operator to place your call. Now, if you've ever had the experience of being somewhere where your call was placed for you, you know how exasperating that is. It's faster and more efficient to dial it yourself.

Today's media equivalent of the old telephone operator is Dan Rather, or the front page editor, or the reporter who prunes the facts in order to be lively and vivid. Increasingly, I want to remove those filters, and in some cases I already can. When I read that Ross Perot appeared before a Congressional committee, I am no longer solely dependent on the lively and vivid account in The New York Times, which talks about Perot's folksy homilies and a lot of other flashy chrome trim that I am not interested in. I can turn on C-SPAN and watch the hearing myself. In the process, I can also see how accurate The New York Times account was. And that's likely to change my perception of The New York Times, as indeed it has. Because The New York Times seems to have a problem with Ross Perot. It reminds me of the story told about Hearst, who remarked upon seeing an old adversary on the street, "I don't know why he hates me, I never did him a favor."

But my ability to view C-SPAN brings us to the third trend: the coming end of the media's information monopoly - a monopoly held since the inception of our nation. The American Revolution was the first war fought, in part, through public opinion in the newspapers, and Ben Franklin was the first media-savvy lobbyist to employ techniques of disinformation. For the next 200 or so years, the media have been able to behave in a basically monopolistic way. They have treated information the way John D. Rockefeller treated oil - as a commodity, in which the distribution network, rather than product quality, is of primary importance. But once people can get the raw data themselves, that monopoly ends. And that means big changes, soon.

Once Al Gore gets the fiber optic highways in place, and the information capacity of the country is where it ought to be, I will be able, for example, to view any public meeting of Congress over the Net. And I will have artificial intelligence agents roaming the databases, downloading stuff I am interested in, and assembling for me a front page, or a nightly news show, that addresses my interests. I'll have the twelve top stories that I want, I'll have short summaries available, and I'll be able to double-click for more detail. How will Peter Jennings or MacNeil-Lehrer or a newspaper compete with that?

So the media institutions will have to change. Of course, I still don't know what I don't know, which means broad-based overviews or interpretive sources will have value - if these sources engage in genuinely high-quality interpretive work, or genuinely high-quality investigative work. At the moment, neither occurs very often.

On the contrary, superficiality is the norm, and everybody in the world knows it. When Barry Lopez went to a remote Eskimo village in 1986, one of the residents asked him how long he was staying. Before he could answer, another Eskimo said: "One day - newspaper story. Two days - magazine story. Five days - book." Even in the Canadian Northwest, the audience is way ahead of the press.

Moving closer to home, let's consider some questions journalists recently asked public figures. I invite you to guess the answers:

Mr. Kantor, are you a protectionist? Mr. Christopher, do you think your Mideast trip was a waste of time? Mr. Aspin, do you think we'll really see homosexuals accepted in the military? Mr. Gergen, did the White House treatment of Lani Guinier hurt the administration? Mr. Reich, do you think Clinton's stimulus package will do enough to create jobs?

There are two points to be made here. The first is that the structure of the questions dictates the answer, because no one is going to say he's a protectionist, or a time waster, or that he's promoting policies that will fail. But the more important point is that such questions assume a simplified, either/or version of reality to which no one really subscribes. In the real world, no one is "a protectionist." Because in the real world, there is no such thing as a free market. Haven't you noticed how free market advocates want tenure?

So what we really want to know from Mr. Kantor is not some general characterization of his approach, because that characterization is too simplistic to be useful. We want to know his thinking on specific trade issues. Even to say, "What's your approach to Japan?" is too simplistic, because it is highly unlikely that Mr. Kantor thinks the same way about semiconductors, automobile parts, rice, and flat panel displays. No simple answer will satisfy the complex questions he faces. And no one imagines it does - except the press.

This is one reason why so many people who regularly interact with the press come to view it as an anomaly. They go about their daily work, which is specific and complex, and then they meet with the press, where interactions are general and oversimplified.

Why? One answer is that it's easy for the press to behave this way. You don't have to be knowledgeable about trade to ask Mickey Kantor if he is a protectionist. In fact you don't have to know much to ask any question that takes the general form of: "Are we doing enough?" Or "Are we going too fast or too slow?" Or "Is it fair?" Or "Is it really the best way to go about it?" I would argue this whole journalistic procedure is a way to conceal institutional incompetence.

Consider the following: I don't know much about the military. I don't follow it. Someone says to me, Okay, Crichton, you're doing an interview with Les Aspin. You have two hours to prepare questions. What am I going to ask? Well, let's see. I know he was in the hospital for some reason earlier this year. I'll inquire about his health, but I don't want to be obvious, so I'll frame it as a national security issue. Are you really fit to do the job? Then I'll ask him something about base closings. Are there too many? Is it happening too fast? Is the process fair? Then I'll ask him about defense conversion. Are we doing enough for unemployed engineers? Then let's see, waste in procurements. Wasn't there a \$600 toilet seat? I know it was a few years ago, but it's always good for a few minutes. Then the Soviet Union, should we be downsizing so fast with all the uncertainty in the world? Then I'll ask him about gays in the military. Was Clinton's approach wise? Is this really the best way to go about it? And that should do it.

Unfortunately, that's also the standard Les Aspin interview. But I don't know anything about the military. Still, I managed to do the interview, because the questions are structurally very general.

This generality creates a fundamental asymmetry between subject and journalist - and ultimately, between journalist and audience. Les Aspin has to address very specific pressures to carry out his job. But I can frame very general questions and get away with doing mine. How do I justify my position? Well, I can tell myself that I'm too busy to do better, because the news rushes onward. But that's not really satisfactory. Better to say the American people don't want details, they just want "the basics." In other words I can blame my own shoddy behavior on the audience. And if I hear the audience criticizing me, I can say I'm being blamed as the bearer of bad news. Instead of facing what is really going on - which is that my customers are telling me that my product is poorly researched, and often either uninteresting or irrelevant. It's junk-food journalism. Empty calories.

The media's tendency to be general instead of specific is inherently superficial. It is also inherently speculative, because it focuses on attitudes - what people think - and not what they do. But what people think is far less important than what they do - because the two are often contradictory.

The tendency to characterize people's beliefs - instead of focusing on their actions - is one of the true abuses of the power of the media. Look how quickly Kimba Woods was transformed from respected jurist to Playboy bunny; just as I went from author to racist Japan-basher. In my case, what was striking was how many journalists applied the Japan-bashing label, without appearing to have read my book. The hazards of this practice became clear in a few months, when the Columbia Journalism Review reported last December that the term "Japan-bashing" was invented by an American public relations flack at the Japan Economic Institute, a Japanese lobbying organization. The term was promoted as a way to stifle debate, including legitimate debate, on relations with Japan. The man who coined the phrase said: "Anyone who uses that term is my intellectual dupe."

Worse still, characterization lies at the heart of the impulse to polarize every issue - what we might call the Crossfire Syndrome.

We are all assumed, these days, to reside at one extreme of the opinion spectrum, or another. We are pro-abortion or anti-abortion. We are free traders or protectionists. We are pro-private sector or pro-government. We are feminists or chauvinists. But in the real world, few of us hold these extreme views. There is instead a spectrum of opinion.

The extreme positions of the Crossfire Syndrome require extreme simplification - framing the debate in terms that ignore the real issues. For example, when I watch Crossfire, or Nightline, or MacNeil-Lehrer, I often think, wait a minute. The real issue isn't term limits; it's campaign finance reform. The real issue isn't whether a gasoline tax is regressive, it's national security - whether we'd prefer to go back to war in the Gulf instead of reducing oil consumption by taxing it more heavily, as every other nation does. The real issue isn't whether the United States should have an industrial policy, it is whether the one we have - no policy is a policy - serves us well. The issue isn't whether Mickey Kantor is a protectionist, it's how should the US respond to its foreign competitors.

This polarization of the issues has contributed greatly to our national paralysis, because it posits false choices which stifle debate essential to change. It is ironic that this should happen in a time of great social upheaval, when our society needs more than ever to be able to experiment with different viewpoints. But in the media world, a previously established idea, like a previously elected politician, enjoys a tremendous advantage over any challenger.

Hence the familiar ideas continue to be repeated, long past their demonstrable validity. More than two decades after right-brain, left-brain thinking was discredited in scientific circles, those metaphors are still casually repeated in the media. After 30 years of government efforts to banish racism, persistent racial inequality suggests the need for

fresh perspectives; those perspectives are rarely heard. And more than three decades after the women's movement began amid media ridicule, the men's movement finds itself ridiculed in exactly the same way - often by leading feminists, who appear to have learned little from their own ordeals.

This leads me to the final consequence of generalization: it caricatures our opponents, as well as the issues. There has been a great decline in civility in this country. We have lost the perception that reasonable persons of good will may hold opposing views. Simultaneously, we have lost the ability to address reasoned arguments - to forsake ad hominem characterization, and instead address a different person's arguments. Which is a tragedy, because debate is interesting. It's a form of exploration. But personal attack is merely unpleasant and intimidating. Paradoxically, this decline in civility and good humor, which the press appear to believe is necessary to "get the story," reduces the intensity of our national discourse. Watching British parliamentary debates, I notice that the tradition of saying "the right honorable gentleman" or "my distinguished friend" before hurling an insult does something interesting to the entire process. A civil tone permits more bluntness.

And where can you find this kind of debate in today's media? Not in television, nor in newspapers or magazines. You find it on the computer networks, a place where traditional media are distinctly absent.

So I hope that this era of polarized, junk-food journalism will soon come to an end. For too long the media have accepted the immortal advice of Yogi Berra, who said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." But business as usual no longer serves the audience. And although technology will soon precipitate enormous changes in the media, we face a more immediate problem: a period of major social change. We are going to need a sensitive, informed, and responsive media to accomplish those changes. And that's the way it is.

Michael Crichton is the author of The Andromeda Strain, Jurassic Park, Rising Sun, and the soon to be released Disclosure. This article was adapted from a speech delivered before the National Press Club in April of this year.

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