The Destabilizing Force of Fear

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Fear is perhaps the most immediately powerful emotion. More powerful than lust, anger, or even love. All those other emotions move people to do great things, make sacrifices, and change the world. But fear inspires in all animals - humans included - an immediate, rapid, sometimes involuntary response. Fear makes you jump, or yell, or fight. Fear motivates mobs, which go on to commit violence. Fear makes rational behavior unlikely. Fear overwhelms compassion.

Increasingly, certain aspects of the internet run on fear. Thanks to technology, people have more access to more information at their fingertips than ever before in human history. This creates a new challenge for those who are trying to produce and disseminate information: The attention economy. Organizations that rely upon people's attention - including news media - must go to great lengths to seize focus by any means possible.

Of course, the attention economy has always been a companion to the world of media. It's why the commercials are louder and sometimes more clever, certainly more obnoxious on TV and radio than the programming. It's why billboards and cereal boxes are designed to draw your eye.

But the technology explosion that has shepherded us into the 21st century has magnified the value of attracting an individual's attention such that it challenges journalism's core values of

truth, transparency, and community. Or to put it another way, everyone has a limited span of attention available to consume information. And people are willing to squander that precious resource when they are afraid. That's because fear sells.

Fear sells particularly well in a social media environment. How many times have you seen a friend click (which automatically re-posts) on an ad like the one warning you of the three things that happen before you have a heart attack on Facebook? How tempting is it to click a link to site that promises that you can see who's viewing your profile, even though you know it's a phishing scheme, meant to trick you into revealing your password? The more likely it is you'll pass the information by, the greater the payoff when the creator taps into your anxieties and grabs your attention.

Indeed, journalism has a tradition of fear. TV news and radio programs use auditory cues, linguistic patterns, and segment cliffhangers in order to entice people to stay attentive. Teasers for the upcoming newshour often hook viewers with with stories of scary events that "could happen to you." Media organizations regularly employ fear because it works. Fear generates attention and helps draw an audience.

As our society grows increasingly networked, and as our attention is increasingly trained on a device - be it a laptop, tablet, or phone - we face a critical crossroad. We are presented with an increasing volume of information, while our capacity for attention remains the same. Thus our attention is increasingly commoditized. And countless actors go to great lengths to be the ones we turn our eyeballs towards. But what are the costs? And what are the implications?

Democracy depends on a citizenry if not fully informed, at least episodically engaged and willing to render judgments on public policy. Ideally, that notion works best when the media plays the role of directing the public's attention to issues and concerns of public significance. But as news organizations compete for audience, and as data and demographics tie specific audiences to specific stories or topics, the product of a journalist's effort can increasingly be valued in commercial terms. Thus, journalists and newsrooms are not just pursuing information in order to inform the public. They are increasingly tempted to select narratives that will entice desirable demographics to sell to advertisers. To do so, they are playing into the attention economy. Given these very real pressures, how should understand the ethics of using fear to capture attention?

The Culture of Fear

Fear trickles down in a society. While it's easy to look at historic examples of xenophobia and recognize the real consequences, it's harder to see the damage it's causing as it unfolds right in front of you. An individual act of fear-mongering causes little damage, but the additive effects are huge.

Consider contemporary parenting culture. Every day, we wake up to news reports about the dangers that youth face when they go online. Parents surveyed by researchers are patently afraid of online sexual predators. When parents explain their decisions to place restrictions on their kids' freedoms, they point to the risk of abduction and sexual victimization. It is rare for these parents to know anyone who has ever been kidnapped or sexually assaulted by a stranger at all, let alone

one met through the internet. Instead, they point to television news shows like Dateline's '*To Catch a Predator'* series as proof of the pervasiveness of lurking pedophiles.

Yet the data on sex crimes against children is clear and conclusive. More often than not, family members and friends of family members are the aggressors in sexual assaults of children. People hold onto the image of innocent children who are duped by lurking abusers, because they refuse to accept the possibility that dad or grandpa, coach or mom's boyfriend could be a predator. And in the extremely rare cases where the internet is involved, it's typical to find a teenager who was previously abused, playing an active role in engaging strangers in sexual activity in an effort to feel loved by someone in their mid-20s or early 30s. These teenagers are being violated, but the model of their abuse is far from the public image of an online sexual predator. And what it takes to intervene is far different than the white knight image that so many policy makers imagine. The fabricated image of the sexual predator obfuscates the true risks that vulnerable youth face. The fear that surrounds that image is inaccurate and unhelpful to those who are abused, as well as to those who are not.

For example, in February, 2006, two girl friends, ages 13 and 15, disappeared in the middle of the night from the same condominium complex in Los Angeles. The girls left behind their wallets and prescription medication and had not packed anything of sentimental value. Quite reasonably, police and family immediately assumed they had been abducted. As law enforcement investigated, the news media told stories about the dangers of MySpace, the perils of the internet, and the prevalence of sexual predators.

As the story unfolded and the girls were found, it became clear that the teens had not been kidnapped. Instead, they had run away together because they were lovers and their parents had barred them from seeing one another or even communicating with one another online. Rather than correcting the earlier stories, which had implicitly drawn a connection between the dangers of technology and the girls' disappearance, most news media outlets covering the story went silent. As a result, many parents and teens in Southern California continued to see this story as evidence of sexual predators on the Internet even though the real story was about the costs of parental homophobia.

The story of sexual predation captures people's attention. Every parent out there is worried about the idea that terrible things might happen to their child. News media play on this fear by amping up any and all stories that suggests that an evil man lurking in the corner has abducted an innocent child.

This is not to suggest that those with disturbing sexual desires don't use the internet to engage in illegal or problematic behavior. They do. But the story that is told is rarely the full story. For this reason, we want to draw attention to problems with the common, simplistic narrative that we tell about sexual predators and the costs that we as a society bear as a result of telling that oversimplified tale.

Furthermore, when we accept the stranger-danger story of children on the internet, we fail to tell other stories. We've already mentioned the fact that most child sexual abuse victims are harmed by someone they are close to. Another story we fail to give voice to is the one about teens who

do engage in risky behaviors online. Often these kids are acting out partially as a result of previous trauma and abuse. Rather than educating the public to recognize these behaviors as warning signs, journalists typically demonize the technology and ramp up the narrative about the risks all teens face. They do so at the expense of accuracy. But more devastatingly, they are doing so at the expense of youth who seriously need attention, support, and help.

The Cost of Fear

By most measures, today's youth are safer than ever before in history. Yet parents perceive the exact opposite, then act on those perceptions by restricting independence and curbing opportunities that allow children to grow and engage in public life. As a result, we've seen an increasingly fractured youth culture where teens have few opportunities to socialize unsupervised or take risks. We don't let them ride their bikes far from home or walk to school; and yet we're surprised that we have a rising crisis of obesity. The externalities are widespread.

And while it's difficult for researchers to draw a direct link between the culture of fear and the problems of obesity, or the failure to mature in our society, it's quite likely that they are related. In *The Culture of Fear,* sociologist Barry Glassner provides numerous examples of how fear has stymied people's willingness to engage in public or take risks that lead to personal growth. For example, elderly populations often grow fearful of the possibility that they will be victims of violent crime because of how news media covers violent crime. This leads some senior citizens to not leave their homes and isolate themselves out of fear of potential abuse. Some have died of starvation because they were too afraid to purchase groceries. The cost of fear is real.

For every headline meant to capitalize on fear, an opportunity is lost. The premise of fear is easy, whether it's a story about bedbugs, dirty restaurants, or contaminants in your food. Again, this is not a new device to journalism. You can look no further than local television sweeps week or the grocery store tabloids to see examples that predate the internet.

But layer on the massive explosion in information, as well as the new platforms through which information is delivered - phone, social media, tablet, etc. - and you intensify the competition for people's attention. This gives rise to an attention economy where competing interests are vying for a limited resource.

Across news media, we have experienced an escalation of fear, which makes us convinced that things are getting worse. Just compare the common perception of violent crime (that it's worse) to the reality (that it's at an all time-low.) Fear is not predicated on risk assessment. Instead, it is predicated on the perception of risk. And that perception is shaped through exposure to a narrative through media, friends, and social messages.

The problem with this is that humans are terrible at assessing risk. We respond to fear, not with our intellect, but with our emotions.

In the days that followed Sept. 11, 2001, Americans scrambled to understand what was going on and to get their heads around the potential threat they faced as a community. This wasn't the first

time Americans endured national confusion and chaos. Read accounts of the Cuban Missile Crisis and you'll hear a similar set of fears, borne out of uncertainty. The government can and does use those fears to justify particular policies and to get public buy-in. The media both serves the government's mission by producing these stories and capitalizes on the opportunity to sell stories that are part of widespread cultural anxieties. For the last decade, the U.S. government has tapped into this fear to mold the behavior of its citizens. A full decade after the 9/11 attacks, the United States is still on orange alert.

In an information-rich world, it stands to reason that forces would rise up to counter corruption and push back against institutional oppression reliant on fear. Indeed, even in the months following 9/11 when it was clear that the U.S. would invade Afghanistan, we saw survivors rise up to state "Not in our Name." But in many communities where the media-driven narrative was disconnected from the physical realities of those attacks, the fear sold by the media had much more traction and provided much greater fuel to justify a reaction.

Healthy fears are those that encourage survival. Burn yourself on an open flame, and you'll be more wary next time. In a journalistic context, healthy fears would translate into those that are not only true to the context of the events--for instance, that sexually predatory behavior is more likely to come from family or friends than strangers. Healthy fears would also relate to problems that rise to appropriate significance--for instance, the implications of climate change or the consequences of the rising costs of entitlement programs on future fiscal policy. The more outrageous the perceived threat, the more willing people are to go to extremes to avoid it. Even

if such trade offs do significant cultural damage. But who is responsible for fueling the flames of fear? When is doing so acceptable?

Begging for Attention

There are plenty of journalists - indeed probably most in the profession - who don't set out to scare people with their work. But they are traveling upstream in the information flow. The fear element is often teased out of the most respectable work, in order to help information travel far and wide via social media. It emerges in the headlines that adorn an otherwise tempered article. And it emerges in how a particular segment is juxtaposed with another.

Part of journalism is presenting information in a way that will capture people's attention, and some publications have looser standards about what means can be used to do so. In an era of fragmented media, even the most tradi- tional media organizations must now leverage the Internet to broadcast stories and attract attention. To increase the likelihood of their success, they often make it easy for viewers to spread stories via email, Facebook or Twitter, where those who originate the stories lose control over how they are presented. What circu- lates is often the content that has the least geopolitical consequence and is most likely to scare universally. Fearful messages spread especially far, particularly stories that play into broad cultural anxieties. When journalists are rewarded for viewership, there's a perverse motivation to play into people's attraction to freak shows and horror, regardless of the broader social consequences.

Journalists and news media are responding to existing incentives. They're incentivized to generate audiences that they can then sell to advertisers. They're incentivized to capture attention by any means possible. The underlying incentive to inform and educate is still there, but it's muddied by the corporatized incentives to increase eyeballs. Left unchecked and incentivized to increase viewership at whatever costs, news media will continue to capitalize on fear and increase the culture of fear in the process.

Consider the 2012 story surrounding the "Innocence of Muslims." This atrociously produced, low-budget, semi-pornographic film had few redeeming qualities. In a badly acted narrative, the film suggested that the prophet Muhammad was a pedophile, a womanizer, and an egomaniac. The movie was created by a California man, Nakoula Basseley Nakoula, and clips were uploaded to YouTube in the summer of 2012. A Canadian man, Morris Sadek, then added Arabic subtitles the film. Media in the Middle East found the film clips on YouTube and broadcast them as evidence of America's Islamophobia.

While trying to track down information on the film, journalists called Florida Pastor Terry Jones, of the Dove World Outreach Center in Gainesville, Florida. Jones seized the opportunity to say that, yes, he supported the film and would be showing it in his church. Within hours, dozens of reporters were outside Jones' church in Gainesville representing the nations' media outlets.

Jones had gained notoriety in 2010, when he promised to burn a Koran, on the anniversary of the September 11 attacks. After much attention and international pressure, he backed down. He actually did burn a Koran in March 2011, which sparked protests in the Middle East.

But Jones had nothing to do with the Innocence of Muslims video. In fact, until reporters called it to his attention, he wasn't even aware of it. But suddenly, his statement that he "supported" the video, made it seem like there was network of Islam haters working to incite riots in the Middle East. Within hours, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff was asking Jones to withdraw his support for the film, furthering the impression that Jones was part of a network.

Meanwhile in the Middle East, discussion of the footage took on an equally hateful narrative as commentators used the film to make broad claims about American attitudes towards Muslims, which were then used to justify anti-American sentiment. Networked conversations online fueled those messages, which were in turn reinforced by people having broad anytime access to the disturbing video. The news media helped create a spark that turned into a bonfire.

Fear's influence over information can be subtle, as well as overt. In the case of the Innocence of Muslims video, journalists invited Jones to insert himself into the story. When he did, the resulting impression was greater than the sum of its parts. Journalists didn't simply report on a story; they helped create it. And in doing so, they leveraged an opportunity to capitalize on existing fears and phobias.

Serving Citizens, Fueling Citizens

Historically, journalists focused on creating broadcast media that citizens consumed. While word-of-mouth and watercooler conversations always served as vehicles for commentary to

circulate, news media did not actively rely on viewers to play an active role in distribution and circulation. In an era of social media where news organizations traffic in "likes" and depend on readers to forward along anything they find interesting, that is no longer the case. Newspapers like the New York Times prominently display the most emailed articles while news aggregators like Yahoo! News and Google News depend heavily on user interactions to determine what is most popular or most interesting.

Newsrooms control their own websites - and editors are passionate about architecting what goes above and below the digital fold - but when millions of people find news through what's posted on Facebook or what appears at the top of an aggregator, news organizations have to fight hard to make sure that their content gets to the top. Salaciousness and fear often win.

In February 2012, the New York Times published an extensively detailed and rich feature article about the ways in which Target used customer data to raise serious questions about privacy in a world of data analysis. The article was posted under a relatively neutral headline "How Companies Learn Your Secrets." A few hours after the Times published this well-researched article, Forbes posted an article that provided a synopsis of the New York Times story, complete with a link to the Times in the second paragraph. Their story, "How Target Figured Out A Teen Girl Was Pregnant Before Her Father Did," played on consumer fears. Needless to say, this latter story spread like wildfire on social media as people actively shared the link. While it's not clear how many people clicked through to read the full New York Times expose, it was quite obvious that preying on people's concerns attracted widespread attention and enabled Forbes to capitalize on and then distort the New York Times' investigative work.

Just as news media consider what might capture their potential audience's attention, so too do everyday people participating on social media. They craft status updates and publish tweets meant to entice their friends to pay attention, either to them or to the content that they're suggesting. When the media gives them a salacious message to spread, they take that language and roll with it. But even when the media is more neutral in its tone, people often pick up the most fearful component of the story and use that as link bait.

Social media has made information overload a de facto part of everyday life and people have yet to develop the wherewithal to manage the onslaught of people, brands, and messages vying for their attention. Some have adopted a Zen-like approach, letting the flood of information flow over them and grabbing onto the occasional message just to check in. Others obsessively try to prioritize what to consume. But either way, there's always the question of what will stand out, what will capture someone's attention. It's no longer the message that's at the top of the hour or above the fold. It's often the message that's repeated the most or framed in a way that's too juicy to ignore.

Journalists aren't the only ones struggling to find their voice in an information saturated world. This is now everyone's challenge and everyone's dilemma.

Combating Fear in an Attention Economy

There is no magic bullet to solve the problem of fear mongering in media. But it starts with awareness. It's clear that journalists are for the most part fully cognizant of the pressures of the attention economy. But have journalists articulated how those pressures undermine their core commitment to truth? Do we understand the costs that fear has to society? Have we considered the role that journalists play in setting societal norms?

As we fully embrace a networked society, we need to consider what guiding principles should influence decisions about the spread of information. This book has articulated three core principles – Truth, Transparency, and Community – as guideposts by which to navigate. These principles aren't simply nice things to have; they become increasingly essential as we navigate the costs and consequences of an attention economy. But they also raise serious questions about how we move forward to achieve these higher goals.

Is it possible to break down the workflow in newsrooms and identify where the influence of fear is inserted into the news product and then ask if those small decisions are undermining those big principles? When a reporter focuses on a sensational anomaly, what obligation does she have to place that information in a broader context? When a web producer writes a catchy headline, how much distortion is tolerated in order to grab people's attention? What are the ethical responsibilities of a publisher who has both a fiduciary responsibility as well as a commitment to journalism? How can we assess the influence that journalists have on the public's use of fear-mongering? Can we articulate best practices for packaging pictures and words for social media distribution? Who is responsible for making journalists accountable in a networked age?

Just as societies are dependent on information to enable citizenry, societies can be undermined and fragmented through fear. There is nothing neutral about the practice of reporting and it behooves journalists to draw from a practice widespread among anthropologists and reflexively account for how their work affects the communities they serve. Journalistic principles should go beyond thinking about a commitment to accuracy in reporting, but also include accounting for accuracy in interpretation. In a mediated world where information flow isn't just par for the course, but something that is highly visible, it becomes imperative for news agencies to examine how their acts of journalism are influencing the public's understanding of the world.

As our society gets increasingly networked, we need to hold onto the importance of serving the citizenry in ways that support democracy rather than undermine it. Journalists are not simply in the business of reporting the news; they are in the business of making sure that the public is meaningfully informed. Key to that is a commitment to not allow fear to take over.

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