

The agony and the ecstasy of media work in the USA

Bernard R. Bonnot

The media environment in the USA today is one in which a company that didn't exist 20 years ago can swallow up Time Warner. That's part of the agony, the uncertainty of a dynamic situation. Even the most prosperous and powerful of media enterprises worries about being taken over whole by some yahoo or other and about their executives migrating to some e-commerce start-up. But there are compensations, as the following article suggests.

Twenty years ago TV in the United States consisted of three commercial networks, PBS and an upstart cable industry looking for more HBOs or 700 Clubs to expand its reach. Cable then served only 17% or so of U.S. households. Today there are seven national TV networks plus PBS plus more than 60 ad-supported cable networks and more than 200 networks overall. Newspapers still reach 56% of adults with some regularity according to the Newspaper Association of America, but that percentage is falling every year. That same source says primitive broadcast TV reaches only 38% of adults today (vs. more than 60% a few decades back), drive time radio 24% and primitive cable 12%. Only the cable percentage is rising.

During the last century radio revolutionized newspapers, TV revolutionized radio, cable revolutionized television, and satellites threatened cable. Now the web is threatening everything. In the spring of 2000, the Discovery Network drew its largest audience ever till then with "Walk with the Dinosaurs," surpassing its previous best, "Raising the Mammoth." Dinosaurs outdrew any broadcast network's offering at that time. It even outdrew cable's usual ratings champion and the real *www* of our era, Worldwide Wrestling. Dinosaurs, mammoths and wrestling ? it makes one wonder whether today's media are taking us into a new millennium or back to the caves!

This turmoil, churn, and change that marks our Information Age is a first dimension of the agony of media work. It is the context within which media workers live and move, work and have their being. I, with many, wonder if it can all keep going. The pie just seems to keep getting bigger, but some are beginning to doubt. Cable veteran Steve Effros admits that people are reading more newspapers today than ever before (I'm not sure he's right), listening to more radio, viewing more television and having more choice than ever. But now, he says we just seem to be offering a little better, quicker, and more convenient way to deliver the same content to consumers. Some of these options may have to go! Some already have ? several Internet start-ups and a few digital TV networks.

Impact on public consciousness

Another dimension of the agony is concern about media's impact on human consciousness. Manuel Castells, seasoned Professor of Sociology at UC Berkeley, argues in his three-volume encyclopedia on The Information Age that today's revolutionary communications technologies are generating an anarchic world, one beyond our capacity to understand. We are drowning ourselves in the information we generate. And in complexity. The computer systems so many people use to get their work done and to collaborate with others in the generation of media and other products require constantly available computer technicians to make them work. Most users don't understand how they work enough to fix them when things go wrong. One colleague stated with passion, "I'm not going to learn a new computer programme again. The last one nearly killed me."

Castells goes further, suggesting that the power of today's information technology threatens civilization as we know it. It floods us with so much data that we lose a stable sense of who we are, what is going on, what is worthwhile, and how to live. In short, it prevents us from living with wisdom. We know a lot, but too much of what we know is trivial. The flood of specialized and

often meaningless information thrust upon us, in Castells' view, is threatening our personal, familial and social cohesiveness as well as the economic and democratic foundations of our society. If you are a media-tor, a labourer in the consciousness industry, and get up with that in your craw, you may not be terribly enthused about going to work each day!

Columnist John Leo puts Castells' perspective in more practical terms. Drawing on the American Society of Newspaper Editors' journalism credibility project, Leo describes journalists as a group that reads daily events in terms of 'a ready-made narrative structure' that only seems to give order to confusing news. The problem is that the lens through which journalists read the news is elitist. Journalists are better educated, live higher and move around more than most Americans, but worship less with others and volunteer less. They're not like the people for whom they write. They know it and show it. No wonder the public doesn't much trust reporters and what they report!

Well then, why work in a field that changes so rapidly and dramatically, that inflicts an elitism on the body politic, that stuffs us with trivia and damages our collective wisdom? Maybe labourers in the media ought to find a less agonizing field of endeavour.

From agony to ecstasy

Indeed there are many refugees from media work, but large numbers of those who enter the field stick with it because its agonies are balanced by its rewards. One glimpses this at such annual awards ceremonies as the Gabriels, the Wilburs, and the Christophers. These awards are given for work that somehow reveals the depth and beauty of human persons in their daily struggles. The award recipients are often ecstatic. They regularly attest to the thrill not only of being recognized for the work they have done but even more at the privilege they know they have had of doing something profound and meaningful, of somehow adding to the public perception of the dignity of humankind, of enhancing our collective wisdom through their work. They feel that they participate in something divine, in the very work of God. Some actually say that. Many media workers know the feeling without receiving an award or even articulating it.

Humanity today is perceived by many thinkers as the consciousness of the universe, the self-directing spear-point of the evolutionary unfolding of the cosmos. In that perspective, media workers are at once the revealers and the formers of that consciousness. To realize that somehow one's work has played such a role is to feel divine, at least for a moment, and to experience ecstasy.

Bill Pepper, a reporter for Newsweek in the 1960s, covered Blessed Pope John XXIII, a hero of the century just closed. During a ceremony in Loreto, a small shrine town on the east coast of Italy, Pope John once greeted Pepper with these words: 'Well Mr. Pepper, are you still sounding your trumpet of truth?' Pepper never forgot that affirmation. It was an ecstatic moment for him.

The media, our media, often feed people with what they most profoundly want, need and crave - meaning, being in touch with reality, truth, encouragement, wisdom, something constructive to help them through the day and the week. When media-tors do their work in such a way as to provide that kind of information and occasion that kind of experience in people, they can, do and will know the ecstatic dimension of their profession.

Management guru Peter Drucker believes strongly that we are in the midst of an Information Revolution as powerful as the Industrial Revolution. He esteems 'knowledge workers' as key figures in this new revolution. He believes that their values are critical to developing and guiding the way society unfolds. He advises that media workers must be affirmed and recognized for what they bring to the party. They are meaning makers, creators, persons who bring their own deepest values and aspirations to their work and share them with others through their work. They don't just hire out their considerable talents to project somebody else's meaning and values. They are not just worker bees. They are the designers and creators of the Information Age. That's heady appreciation from one wise in the ways of our era.

Integration the public and the personal

Harvard psychologist Robert Coles writes of a key ingredient for ecstasy in media or any work – the integrating of one's personal and professional lives. Commenting on the failed personal and family lives of such highly successful individuals as Gandhi, Coles cites Walker Percy's description of people "who get all A's and flunk ordinary living." Coles reflects on how his mentor, Erik Erikson, once lectured on this matter and brought in the notion of "grace," much to the discomfort of his elitist Harvard audience. Erikson noted that the qualities that often make for success on the professional side of people's lives are not the same qualities as are needed for success in their everyday lives. Media-tors know the problem. "Success" in the media, with its notoriety and fame, can leave the significant others in media workers' lives feeling ignored and forsaken, even injured. It is a grace to hold one's life together. Such grace enhances the prospects of ecstasy on either side of the two-railed track media professionals perforce travel.

Several witnesses testify to the truth and availability of this grace, among them Peter Steinfelds, Click and Clack the Tap-it brothers, and Steve and Cokie Roberts. New York Times columnist and religion writer Peter Steinfelds recently reflected on the notion of "vocation" in the marketplace. He focused on work as a contribution to the common good rather than as something done for oneself. Drawing on Robert Wuthnow's book, *God and Mammon in America*, he reported that 30% of the general American labour force (40% of religiously grounded workers) feel that God has called them to the particular line of work they do. Such persons report that this sense of calling makes a difference in how they approach their work. They don't work any harder or longer than others, but they work with greater job satisfaction. They are motivated more by fulfilling their own potential and helping others than they are by money, fear or competition. Because their sense of calling makes their work meaningful, doing it well is important to them.

NPR's Click and Clack, hosts of National Public Radio's "Car Talk," are those kinds of people. Known in real life as Tom and Ray Magliozzi, these MIT graduates have a barrel of fun doing their programme every Saturday morning. They've been doing it for 22 years, 13 of them on NPR. They have written a few books and have a syndicated column, but one of them still works in their garage. Here's the instructive thing: they have made it a point to control their celebrity, declining million dollar financial inducements to take on a TV programme and \$25,000 per pop fees, each, to hit the lecture circuit. They have refused because they like the happy and relatively anonymous lives they live in their hometown. That, I think, is an important aspect of experiencing ecstasy as a media worker. Click and Clack's ecstasy shows up in their work.

Steve and Cokie Roberts have survived not only the Jewish-Catholic difference that marks their marriage but two media careers as well, intact as a couple. They offer three tips on how they've done it. First, they made their kids top priority. Second, they decided early on that they did not have to be out every night, reporters though they were in Washington DC. Third, they kept the romance in their lives alive by making special time for one another. Steinfelds, the Magliozzis and the Robertses all witness to the grace that Coles talks about. They all offer tips for experiencing ecstasy in life as well as in their work.

I offer a final tip. Ecstasy is a fruit of prayer. It derives from a life ordered and centred in God whether in a monastery, a newsroom or a studio. Prayer helps one work with a sense of God and God's purpose, and being part of a community of spiritual and religious meaning helps one keep a healthy prayer life. A recent conference on "God at 2000" offered several instructive comments in this regard. Lutheran scholar and Jesus Seminar leader Marcus Borg talked about the importance of experiencing rather than just believing in God, of recognizing "the mystery" that is available to us humans – even at the end of a lens, a reporter's pad or an editor's pencil.

Rabbi Lawrence Kushner spoke of the web of meaning within which we each figure out what we are doing here. Reverting to that web in moments of prayer enhances one's sense of the Creator's presence in one's work and enables one to help others enter that Presence. Muslim Seyyed Hossein Nasr of George Washington University emphasized the importance of silence and "surrender to the will of God" in the midst of the noisy misdirection of our lives. Such

surrender, he said, "turns even the adversities of life into sweetness." That Islamic formula echoes what Jews and Christians and nature itself celebrate in their most sacred rituals - the passage from winter to spring, from slavery to freedom, from death to life, from agony to ecstasy.

Thus can the media-tors of our Information Age get beyond the agony of their work both to successful careers and ecstatic lives. And if they can do that, they will be better able to offer not only information but also wisdom to their audiences.

Bob (Bernard R.) Bonnot, S.T.L (Gregorian University), PhD (University of Chicago) is a Catholic priest of Youngstown, Ohio, USA, serving as Senior Vice-president for Religious Affairs at Odyssey, A Hallmark Entertainment Network, based in Los Angeles, California.