

The Great Simplification

Nate Hagens (00:00):

Greetings, friends. Oh, my gosh, I have so much to say on so many different topics, and topics come up during the week that push my planned Frankly to the next week. This keeps happening. I would like to talk about information in our modern world, and what I'm about to say is a riff, a reflection that was initiated by the response to last week's special episode on NATO, Russia, Ukraine. I'm not going to talk about that episode, but I'm going to talk about the role of the different bifurcations, the different lenses with which information is offered and information is received. I'm not an expert on this topic. I've got people in my network, Jonathan Haidt, Douglas Rushkoff, Tristan Harris and others who are, but I increasingly feel like this is one of our greatest risks is how we receive information and where the information comes from and how we respond to it. If we can't have conversations about (beep) we won't be able to deal with reality. So here's a bit of a extemporaneous reflection on this topic.

(01:35):

I've come up with 10 different dichotomies with respect to information. The first is Speaking vs. Writing. If you think about it, when you speak in a podcast, on television, in a presentation, that has a higher bar for novelty, sensationalism, attention-getting things than writing does. Writing, you can take your time. There are references. It can be a little bit more boring and bland. So the actual media itself in a Marshall McLuhan way, speaking, which many popular podcast hosts and other flashy video today is actually pulling us away from straight facts and references and education because it hits our human evolved neurotransmitter buttons in a more aligned way than writing. So that's the first pairing. Building on that is Sensational vs. Educational. A lot of our, quote, unquote, "information" these days is edutainment as opposed to purely educational. Educational things are, by definition, more dry, more boring, more nuanced, more uncertain, more caveats and a sensational binary "this is the way it is" information source will out-compete the educational more bland but referenced source, another lens.

(03:43):

A third lens, for lack of a better word, is Simple vs. Advanced or complex. The simpler the story, the more that fits, again, with the way our brains are wired, because nuance and uncertainty costs us energy and brain space. Whereas, simple yes or no, us versus them binary choices are more efficient in our brain. We don't have to allocate a lot of uncertainty and things working in the background to decide the nuance and such. We

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live in a complex system, though. Single-issue things are difficult to really understand without the complexity of how everything fits together, so this issue is difficult to convey. I think on this podcast, we like to be able to zoom in and zoom out and zoom back in and zoom out. So we try to simplify things, but also as a part of the broader picture. Most media, most information sources today tend to be on the single issue or simple side of things. Another category would be the Fourth Estate vs. The Fifth Estate. The Fourth Estate is journalism and media writ large.

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The Fifth Estate is podcasts and blogs and Substack and independent media of sorts. Unfortunately, the Fourth Estate is increasingly dominated by well-resourced interests, and it is getting very powerful as can be seen by many of the narratives that are prevalent in our culture. The Fifth Estate is underresourced and very scattered, but a lot of people, including me, get most of their information from the Fifth Estate. Then there's another subcategory, which I'll label the fifth category. There's Fifth Estate Crazy vs. Fifth Estate reasonable, and the Fifth Estate Crazy are all kinds of independent media things out there touting various conspiracy theories or sketchy unreferenced things that people want to hear, and they get confirmation bias from that. I still think that those podcasters and video bloggers that were (beep) was the response to COVID, should offer the public apology three years on now that we know the science. So I think the Fifth Estate also has a bifurcation in it. Beyond that, another filter is Agenda vs. Authentic, and a lot of news sources ultimately have an agenda.

(06:54):

Whether it's a political agenda or a monetary agenda, there is an unspoken agenda that supersedes the personalities of the people involved who are writing or speaking. In contrast to that, I think authenticity is lacking in our culture with people without an agenda or whose agenda is just the truth or a better future, and those are increasingly rare. Building on that, the seventh category that I came up with is Acceptable vs. Cancelable. I don't even like to use that word "cancelable." In fact, in all these categories, and I am describing things as nouns, and when you describe things as nouns, they create a life and an identity of their own, which can get you in trouble. But I think increasingly as events accelerate and become more chaotic and uncertain, the socially-accepted ceiling of what can be said on a podcast or in a public

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conversation is going to diminish because you will invariably offend or pose a risk to more of these resourced interests or more of a captured audience.

(08:22):

So the social institutional pressure is going to narrow the ceiling of what is acceptable to be said. So the seventh category is, what is socially acceptable to convey as information and what can get you in trouble even if it is true. Speaking about what is true, let's move to another lens on this bifurcation, and that is publicly-available information and privately-sold information. I think I've already witnessed this since COVID and what's going on with Russia and what's going on with Bitcoin and money flows. I increasingly see the best analysis not being on the public media, but sold by consultancies or hedge funds or special groups that for \$20,000, you get to see this super high level recent synthesis of information that's in articles that aren't through peer review yet, and we've summarized it, and this is what's going on with, for instance (beep) COVID and other things like that.

(09:39):

As events accelerate and wealth inequality and income inequality accelerate, and as AI becomes more prevalent, I expect there will be a bifurcation of information availability that is quite different than the Walter Cronkite era, and this is a problem. Now, I'm not saying that the private information is always right, but increasingly, understanding and knowing what's going on in the world may come with a price. Next category of information or information reception is there's a difference between What is Heard and What is Said. So what was said in my episode last week with Chuck Watson on NATO and Russia was that the war is hurting the West, is a disaster for Ukraine and increasing the odds of escalating beyond the region. What was heard, at least by reading the YouTube comments was, "Putin is great."

(10:44):

So the problem is that propaganda and indoctrination are especially insidious in that not only did they displace neutral information, they predisposed the listener to react and reject even uncontroversial information or points of view that are threatening to the desired narrative. So it pre-loads the listener to not just reject, but to attack anyone who disagrees. Another example is that the people of Gaza (beep) as an example. So we imply that war is bad and that is heard as support for the other side. So this gets to the 10th and final bifurcation is, a lot of information has to do with someone's Identity vs. someone's Learning. Here is an example from last week, again,

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from this Chuck Watson podcast. This is a comment from YouTube. "I've watched 20 seconds. No, thanks."

(12:08):

So what does that say about the viewer who has not heard any of the analysis or facts or context, but the first 20 seconds were enough to put him or her off because it didn't conform with their existing identity or beliefs? In contrast, here is another comment, and there were several, but I'll just share one from Twitter. "So this episode took me on a little bit of a ride. I could not believe what Chuck was saying. It went against my mental model of what I thought is true, and it made me feel very uneasy and even angry. But then I listened to the episode again today, and this time was different." "Listening to the arguments Chuck gave, it occurred to me that I need to question more what I read in the media about this conflict. Macron, (beep) US, Poland, (beep), Romania, the reality is much more complex and harder to navigate than the media is able to portray." This is an example of metamodern thinking, someone that's mature enough to be self-aware of their own reactions and still try to glean what they could from a conversation.

(13:22):

Again, I don't want to overly focus on last week's episode, but I do think writ large, this is where we're at. Can we as a species suppress our identities, suppress our built image of the world, which is of course influenced by our own background and by the media to suss out what is true, what is false, what is important, what's trivia, what's relevant? What's a side story? I think, and again, I'm not an expert on this, I think we have to rebuild the Fourth Estate in a way that works for the crises that are ahead. So we need a new information infrastructure in our society. But along with that, we have arrived at a point where some of us have to evolve beyond the tribal single issue, binary thinking that was adaptive in the past. We have to evolve how we approach information, how we use information towards discourses, collaboration, and a broader discussion on how we engage with the events of the day. More to come. Thanks for listening. I'll see you next week.