

Truth One – The media are essential components of our lives.

This truth is very nearly self evident - (to borrow from the Declaration of Independence). Media is not just an essential component, but I would go so far as to say an overwhelmingly pervasive component. Media provides people with commonalities, and similar points of reference, not to mention provides us with common ideas and language. These can be both positive and negative. A perfect example of this would be a recent performance at the 2013 MTV Video Music Awards. I don't ever watch MTV or the video music awards. I'm not a fan of Miley Cyrus, and until this week, I'd never heard the words "twerk" or "twerking". Regardless of my apparent distance to these items, my daily media stream was inundated with references to them. People I follow on twitter made reference to it, the news radio station I listen to in the morning did a piece on it, and it was plastered over all of the internet news sites that I frequent. Co-workers of mine who share similar tastes and distastes in media mentioned it, and we all had a relatively common frame of reference, due to the saturation of the item on virtually every form of media. Cyrus' performance and the reactions were spread by the media in nearly every format, across the nation, and was essential in this becoming (although hopefully briefly) a nationally discussed event.

Truth Two – There are no mainstream media.

This is a truth that I believe has only become true in the time of the internet. In previous generations, the bar to entry for a mass targeted media was extraordinarily high - the cost to run a TV station, Newspaper or Magazine was prohibitive, and thus the concept of a 'Mainstream' media made sense. Now, with a nearly-free digital distribution channel (the internet), any person is capable of disseminating ideas or content to a virtually unlimited audience. My favorite example of this idea is a men's a cappella group named Straight No Chaser. Originally formed at Indiana University in the late 1990's and then breaking up, a band member posted some videos to YouTube in 2006. After garnering millions of fans and views, the CEO of Atlantic Records took notice and signed them¹. The availability of millions of potential recipients and a low bar to entry allowed them to utilize a social media distribution channel to much greater effect than attempting a more traditional media channel. The idea of modern mass media means that at its core, any person can potentially reach millions of people, thus rendering the idea of 'mainstream' media virtually irrelevant.

Truth Three – Everything from the margin moves to the center

This truth was one that I wasn't sure I agreed with on its surface, but once I thought about it, I thought of an example that revised my thinking. At their core, the major US political parties are political organizations, but a vast amount of their time and money go into media - positioning, advertising and spin in every form of media. The two major parties spend billions of dollars proclaiming their platforms and candidates, and especially how they differ from the other party.

¹ <http://www.sncmusic.com/about>

They are two groups who specifically thrive on being on opposite ends of varying spectrums, and broadcasting that in every form of media. The Republicans position themselves on one extreme, and the Democrats on the other. In the past few years, the Republican offshoot “Tea Party” group has emerged, and has held that the Republican party has not been far enough along the “right wing” axes. The main Republican party has responded by moving towards more moderate views (at least in public, and in the media), and more mainstream/moderate candidates. In this example, we see the exact idea: that a group who publicly thrived on being oppositional has gradually moved towards a less extremist point of view.

Truth Four – Nothing’s new: Everything that happened in the past will happen again.

The textbook discusses an ongoing change in media companies to resist a format change for the distribution of television and movies, and this continues to be ongoing. We have seen this (as mentioned in the textbook) where Amazon and Apple are selling and renting audio video media content to the end consumer. This is taking place in other forms of media as well - the conversion of eBooks has been in the media a great deal recently as well. The form of media that I find this most interesting in currently is in the video game console industry. Previously video games were exclusively sold on a physical piece of media - a game cartridge, floppy disk, CD or DVD. The media was inserted into a console, and the game was played. In the last few years, physical media has been increasingly phased out in non-console gaming: the Mac App Store, the iOS App store, the Android store and the Steam delivery network have all created ways to deliver games and applications securely to a computer or mobile device, and all are widely accepted as means of delivery - in fact, Apple had recently announced that they have sold over 50 billion applications through it’s App Store². This is a huge contrast to the console video game industry - where Microsoft recently announced, then reversed a decision that games would have strong DRM and restrictions with regards to downloading, sharing and using games for it’s upcoming Xbox One platform³. This is a slightly different example, as in this case, the company itself was trying to push for a new adoption technique, but the consumer outcry was against it, despite overwhelming evidence that digital downloads are rapidly becoming the largest distribution channel. In this case, it is only a matter of time until physical media is irrelevant.

Truth Five – New media are always scary.

This is an interesting truth to evaluate - because (in my opinion) - it’s not just a truth, but a scary truth. As a parent, I find I am much more critical of current media and it’s influence on my children. This extends and is exacerbated by the new media options (such as YouTube) that are very easily accessible. While most television has at least some restrictions and ratings on it to guide concerned individuals, with most internet-based media options, there exists no way of filtering or discerning what may be in any piece of content, short of watching or reading the

² <http://www.apple.com/itunes/50-billion-app-countdown/>

³ <http://techcrunch.com/2013/06/19/microsoft-heeds-gamer-feedback-dumps-xbox-one-drm-restrictions/>

entire thing. An example of this that has recently concerned me is the inability to filter content that appears on YouTube. Parental controls on my children's computer allow me to block all of YouTube only. This is not a viable alternative, as two of my kids require at least occasional access to the site for school-related videos, and both enjoy watching some videos recreationally (my 9 year old son specifically loves to watch videos about Minecraft.) The content of videos can have explicit language and content that I don't want them to see, but I have no way of monitoring every thing they watch, thus I am highly fearful of the content that they may be exposed to.

Truth Six – Activism and analysis are not the same thing.

To paraphrase an old professor of mine: "Analysis is performed by academics and non-profits. Analysis implies an unbiased evaluation - and there's no money in being unbiased." This quote enforces the basic idea behind this truth: That activism is enacted towards an end, and that end is not always (nor even mostly, I would suspect) backed up by unbiased evidence. Unbiased analysis of a subject (especially one as vast and polarized as modern media) is rare and difficult - everyone has their own agenda. Activism, especially political activism, is always done with an eye towards something - pleasing the voters, placating other politicians, or the quid-pro-quo that happens in any political forum. A recent example of activism that is not backed up by valid analysis was evident last year, when West Virginia Republican Ray Canterbury introduced a bill to make Science Fiction reading compulsory in West Virginia schools⁴. In his related media appearances, he cited virtually no concrete correlations between compulsory sci-fi reading and an increase in science and math graduates. Instead, he appears to be focusing on what he perceives as a lack of science graduates and the desired outcome.

Truth Seven – There is no "they."

This final truth that not only tells us that broad generalities are to be highly discouraged, but also encourages us to challenge our preconceived notions and beliefs. The prime force behind investigative journalism is not to take things at face value, but instead to look deeper and to uncover other truths. This truth also tells us that finding a specific individual that has a certain belief or message is probable, but that media is so broad and diverse, that it's nearly impossible to find a 'them' that is grouped or unified. I'm reminded of Neil Gaiman's 'The Wolves In The Walls', where the main character (young Lucy) is constantly re-told: "You know what they say: If the wolves come out of the walls, it's all over." to which Lucy asks: "Yes, but who are THEY?" (Gaiman, 9), without a satisfactory reply. The child in the story is the only one who questions the identity of the nameless, faceless masses. We should certainly strive to do the same.

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/apr/19/bill-compulsory-science-fiction-west-virginia>

WORKS CITED

Gaiman, Neil. *The Wolves in the Walls*. HarperCollins. 2005. Print.