



tell you what we think you should know!" That CNN is one of the "mainstream" institutions, the self-interested nature of her question expresses the empty desperation of the practitioners of an information system model that is rapidly dying.

The image that comes to mind when I think of the present institutional order, is that of the stegosaurus, the bell-curve-shaped dinosaur with plated armor along its spine. The stegosaurus was so large that it had two brains, one in its head the other in its tail. It is said that a stegosaurus might have been fatally attacked at its backside, while the frontal brain — due to the sluggish nature of the animal's nervous system — might have continued munching tree leaves, not knowing that its fate was already sealed.

So it seems with denizens of the institutional order, particularly those in the news media. The minds at the major television networks, newspapers, and other "mainstream" purveyors of information, either (a) don't understand that the vertically-structured information model — which operates from the premise "we will tell you what we think you ought to know" — is in as terminal a state as our stegosaurus; or (b) they do understand this, but hope that, by denying the inevitable, they can forestall the fatal consequences.

There is nothing "faddish" about the collapse of vertically-structured institutional systems, and the emergence of horizontal networks of interconnected individuals. Centralized systems are rapidly becoming decentralized — a matter about which I have written before — producing a fundamental change in how people will organize themselves in society. Because of the Internet, the information-genie has escaped its institutional confines — where it has been controlled, manipulated, and hidden from view, in furtherance of institutional interests to monopolize the content of the minds of subjugated men and women.

The role of the "mainstream media" has long been the same as that of the government school system: to condition minds to not only accept, but to desire having society organized just as it is. As the United States' wars against Afghanistan and Iraq progressed, major news outlets were preoccupied with propagandizing the Bush administration's party line. One retired general after another — most employed by defense contractors! — was brought on camera to assure the American people that the war policy was justified and the military strategy was in competent hands. Critics of the war were not to be seen or heard, save for the one channel that has preserved its journalistic integrity: C-SPAN.

American television, in particular, has so diluted the substance of "newscasts" as to render them virtually meaningless to thoughtful men and women. While bloggers, Internet websites, and individual e-mailers were often making factual and analytical challenges to political policies and programs, network television was anesthetizing minds with prolonged coverage of the Scott Peterson trial, entertainment world gossip, or trivial events writ large as the "lead story" of the day. Driving down the Pacific coast the other day, my wife and I listened to a BBC News show on satellite radio — a phenomenon that is carrying

decentralization into the realm of broadcast radio. It was refreshing to hear newscasters discussing something other than who had won what particular “Grammy” award the night before!

The establishment media is so intellectually bankrupt that the most informative television news program is “The Daily Show, With Jon Stewart” on the “Comedy Central” channel. When satire becomes the most effective means of understanding human events, it is a sign that established society may be in an irreparable state of collapse. Air-headed television voyeurs who partake of the sociology of men and women transported to a remote island, or locked up in a suburban house – shows peddled to the American public as “reality” – overlook the reality that such mindless programming represents: the continuing failure of an establishment media to appeal to intelligent minds.

News reports abound of the sharp declines in television viewing and newspaper subscriptions. Men and women intent on understanding the world in which they live are increasingly turning to the Internet, a system that expresses the phrase “marketplace of ideas” as no other has up to this point in time. Websites and bloggers are learning the same lessons that now beleaguer the established media: in a rapidly decentralizing world, men and women will develop their own demands for information that serves their interests. With the Internet, people need no longer be passive recipients of what institutional authorities regard as the “politically correct” content of their minds!

Established interests have always been discomfited by innovation and change. In the face of the Internet challenge, I suspect that many media chieftains would find comfort in the sentiments of a Michigan banker who, in 1903, opined that “the horse is here to stay, but the automobile is only a novelty — a fad.” Because, as the study of chaos informs us, complex systems generate unpredictable outcomes, “blogging” may, indeed, be a short-term phenomenon. But as long as the channels for the flow of information remain unrestricted, today's blogs will likely evolve into more sophisticated, horizontal processes that allow individuals to freely communicate their understanding to one another, without the need for institutionalized oversight and control. Individuals who are both the producers and consumers of information will have incentives to create more effective systems and mechanisms for the pursuit of understanding.

Such establishment shepherds as Hillary Clinton will continue their pleas for Internet “gatekeepers” to keep the marketplace of ideas as subject to rigid regulations as attend other economic activity. Nor will there be a shortage of Judy Woodruffs imploring the ovine herds to give up their wanderings into uncertain territories and return to the fold wherein minds are soothed and left untroubled by events they are told are beyond their ken.

But such efforts will not avail the institutional order. Gutenberg put the establishment on the defensive centuries ago, demonstrating the creative consequences that flow from a loosening of monopolies on information. The Internet — with its proliferation of websites

and bloggers, and the continuing collapse of the vertical into the horizontal — has taken the Gutenberg revolution to exponential dimensions. How far this will extend and what forms may arise are completely unknown, which makes the process all the more exciting. Perhaps, sooner than we think, we shall be witness to a new “reality” show, wherein Hillary and Judy find themselves on an island with a group of bloggers. Who would be the likely “survivor” in such a world? I know upon whom I would not be betting!

The Best of Butler Shaffer

