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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

As a former journalist, or a reforming journalist, I am grateful for the occasional invite to journalistic gatherings, where there is a chance to reminisce romantically about life as a reporter and to relive the chills of going correspondent cold turkey. At the age of 24, I was plonked into Peking, now Beijing, and the words “naïve” and “callow” do not capture the ignorant innocence that characterized much of my time there. It was surely a learning experience - the confluence of a wide-eyed wanderer in a country that was itself emerging blinking into the real world after decades of delusionary, soul-destroying communism. It was still the age of Flying Pigeon bicycles, mostly Mao Suits and a troglodytish telex machine that was the means of communication to an outside world that regarded China as an exotica collection (the Last Eunuch, the Last Emperor’s brother, the First Privately-Run Hair Salon) rather than an economic superpower whose influence roils real estate markets and excites and intimidates governments around the world. It was an early lesson in transition, upheaval, creative disruption and the immense power of economic freedom and the magic of markets. It certainly had a profound influence on my economic and political views. As Soren Kierkegaard sagely observed: “Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forward.” Or as investment funds in shameless pitch mode candidly suggest: “Past performance is no guarantee of future results.”

But even Kierkegaard, were he not dead, would concede that it is remarkable and remiss that there is not more focus on the fact that perhaps 550 million or so people lifted themselves out of poverty in China, given the freedom to do so. It was something that literally unfolded before your eyes in the mid 1980s – as a journalist, particularly one writing for a business newspaper, visits to just-opened regions were an opportunity to listen to eager local officials discuss farmers’ markets and financially struggling factories and families that were finally leaving famine behind.

When some commentators speak of markets it is in the abstract, slightly pejorative sense – markets are actually an aggregation of collective effort and hope and action. As they get more complex, markets need monitoring, but if it were not for the role of individual decisions, the individual acts, the individual aspiration that was emancipated by reform in China, a large percentage of Asia’s population would certainly still be living in grinding, humiliating poverty. It is patronizing in the extreme, and verging on the immoral, for western elites not to recognize that undeniable fact.

In the West, China is trapped between those on the Left who preferred the simplicity of a rustic, centrally planned poverty – a Consumptive China rather than a China with consumer consumption - and those on the Right whose concerns and prejudices can almost be traced back to the 1949 debate

on “Who Lost China?” Is the rise of China to be welcomed? Of course it is. Are there some worrying signs in China? Of course there are. It’s always a concern when a security apparatus has enough power to define threats that don’t really exist and wantonly intimidate people. Security teams around the world, whether they be personal security or national intelligence networks, have an irrepressible habit of exaggerating threats to justify the expansion of influence. China, conceptually, is no different, but its application is far more draconian, to the detriment of its people and its reputation. But the abiding lesson for the dilettante abroad in the mid-1980s, was that, culturally, we have far more in common than is different, and engaging intelligently with China at a time when it is still finding its bearings is paramount.

Media companies, too, are looking for their bearings. Here we are in the age of the GPS, of relentless, endless tracking and precisely precise data, and yet some in media are wandering aimlessly, dazed and confused, without coordinates and slouching towards oblivion. We are living in the decade of content distribution, which is not necessarily good for the act of creation. For journalists and newspapers are creationists, not in the biblical sense, but in the creative sense - I am fortunate to be a custodian in a company that invests in thousands of creative acts around the world each day, great journalism, compelling analysis, feisty blogs, captivating videos and brilliant books, fiction and non-fiction. The question for this creationist is whether my views are anti-evolutionary or anti e-evolution – already a bit backward and sliding ever more so.

For the distributionists do indeed have powerful distribution channels, Google and Facebook, and pretenders like LinkedIn, which is spam central. None of them actually create content, and they certainly have little intention of paying for it, but they do redistribute the content created by others – they would argue that such redistribution is a natural extension of their role as social networks. I would argue that much of the redistribution is an unnatural act. But there are broader issues that are still unfolding for media companies, who are themselves struggling to profit from their news and other content, while the distributionists are helping themselves to that content, coopting and corralling audiences and consciously devaluing brands. The supposed idealism of these companies is in stark contrast to their actual behavior. That Google’s newly conceived parent company is to be called Alphabet has itself created a range of delicious permutations: A is for Avarice, B is for Bowdlerize, through to K for Kleptocracy, P for Piracy and Z for Zealotry.

It should be reassuring for news organisations that the distributors have suddenly started to realize that the quality of content is important, particularly as they try to build walled gardens - though it should be noted that the Chinese discovered that even a Great Wall didn’t work. The spammers at LinkedIn discovered that CVs are only burnished occasionally and anyone who tweaks their CV a few times a week is probably not worth hiring. Anyway, they now see themselves as a news distributor, and news organizations who cozy up too closely to them are guilty of techno trendiness. It is patently important to be aware of the trends but a grievous sin to be too trendy.

And we are entering a new phase of development by the big distribution networks, a phase in which they are not only appropriating content but deciding what content is appropriate and inappropriate. They are appointing editors not to create but to curate. And these curators tend to have a certain mindset, a deep fondness for political correctness, and a tendency to be intolerant of ideological infractions. Silicon Valley is moving from the PC to being a purveyor of the PC. This transition is already underway. The stream of content is often a flow of soft-left sensibility, a stream of content consciousness in which genuine debate is in danger of drowning and alternative views rarely surface. This profound movement is taking place, and without much serious discussion of the social consequences. Newspapers have always been a little unruly, but they are characterised by public debate, wrangling, haggling, arguing, sometimes passionately about issues and consequences, about the impact on societies and on people. The philosophy, the point of great newspapers is clear. But now we have the exponential growth of purportedly neutral platforms built by e-elites that will be far from neutral, far from objective, succumbing to a stultifyingly samey subjectivity and sensibility.

To get a sense of the scale of lifestyle and platform change it is worth noting that the time spent per

day per adult in the US with digital devices was 3.2 hours in 2010, when we already thought we were connected and contemporary. This year, the average time spent is 5.6 hours...about half of that time is on mobile and that percentage is still rising sharply, while desktop/laptop usage has been fairly constant at 2.4 hours. There will, fairly comfortably, be 4 billion smart phones by 2020, double the 2014 total – and smart phones are getting smarter and smarter. To be truly “smart” phones these wondrous devices should offer diversity of content and experience, but that is not necessarily the demeanour of the distributors.

Think of international reportage. Take the coverage of and commentary about Cecil the Lion’s tragic demise. Was his slaughter an appalling act? Absolutely. Will there be punishment? There has been and there will be. But the endless exegesis about how the gleaming white teeth of a mid-western dentist represented the untold cruelty of the American people was bizarre in the extreme and yet it became a common narrative. The episode probably does tell you something about testosterone, but the head of the dentist with the pearly white dentures has now been mounted on walls around the world, and the brass plate below reads “the Pox Americana”. These interpretations are as binary as they are banal. America is a much more complicated, much more textured, much more thoughtful country. Washington is the world’s most influential capital and it would be even more important with sustained focus on the world outside. Unfortunately, the much-discussed Asia pivot by the US is more an Asia divot.

More relevant to our discussion is the digital divot; the deficit in reporting resources created by the egregious aggregation of news by distributors for whom provenance is an inconvenience and who are contemptuous of copyright. The words Intellectual Property don’t appear in the Google alphabet. Without proper recognition, without proper remuneration, well-resourced reporting will be ever more challenged. When I arrived in Beijing, many a US newspaper had China correspondents – now some of those papers no longer exist in printed form. Mismanagement played a role, as did journalistic hubris, but the digital age has been hostile to investment in reporters and reporting. Why pay professionals when you have UGC, user-generated content? And why pay when you can purloin? Interestingly these companies are moving on, as we have seen, but their new-found fondness for premium content still comes with an aversion to paying for it. They start from the perspective of form as function, that the canvas should be flawless, seamless, that low latency is more important than professional potency, that content should be captive. But source code is not necessarily a source of wisdom, and platforms that are supposedly “open” will be distinctly vulnerable to closed minds.

In this age, I am proud to work for a company that has both an egalitarian ethos and a commitment to investing in journalism and in understanding. Without Rupert Murdoch, many people in this room would not be in fine surrounds celebrating the continued importance of journalism – we would be in the backroom at a dingy pub lamenting its passing. I was born in a rural pub, with the blended aroma of VB and Vicks, so there is definitely nothing inherently wrong with a pub. There is, however, something inherently wrong when provenance is profane, and when the professional journalist is an endangered species.

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