

Sunday June 3, 2012

A society's attention deficit disorder

By Jim Taylor

Douglas Adams, author of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series of novels, once wrote: "I love deadlines. I especially like the whooshing sound they make as they fly by."

If I didn't have deadlines, I probably would never get a column published. I would keep picking at my text – altering a word here, a comma there – until I died. That's no exaggeration; I had a friend who died with a filing cabinet full of things he had written that were never quite good enough to submit for publication.

With today's technology, though, deadlines whoosh by quicker and quicker.

Once upon a time, before air travel, before electronic communication, news about a rebellion in India might take months to get back to the London papers. A week's delay in getting the story written made little difference.

Today, a reporter can stand in the desert in Afghanistan and speak live into your living room.

But tomorrow, she might be somewhere else entirely. Which accounts for what I call the media's attention deficit disorder.

Short attention spans

In a recent column, I included a reference to the mass media having a short attention span. The editor of the newspaper that prints my column rightly deleted my comment. It was irrelevant. (It did stay in the e-mail version.)

But I was also right to note that the mainline media tend to toss aside yesterday's headlines like used bus tickets. In the Rupert Murdoch school of journalism, every story must be more sensational than the last – whether it's digging for dirt on the royal family or hacking a murdered teenager's cell phone.

I sometimes wonder if Shakespeare, perchance, anticipated Fox News' international coverage when he wrote of "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury" that "struts and frets its hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more."

As media magnates slash staff while demanding more output, few reporters have the luxury of working a beat where they can develop experience and insight.

As I write this column, Syria and Quebec seem to be the hot news locations. Washington DC has slipped down the scale somewhat, as has Italy's earthquake and the implosion of Greece. Somewhere near the bottom of the news pond lurk Palestinian refugees, Canadians with disabilities, and vanishing butterflies.

For those seemingly less important issues, you have to search for blogs on the web – and then weed out ill-informed rants from knowledgeable studies.

When the media do have someone who actually understands the seething Middle East, for example, he's likely to get shipped out to cover a mudslide in Madagascar. After all, the Palestinian refugees will still be there when he gets back....

Part of a larger picture

The mass media encourage short attention spans.

But they also reflect what the rest of us are already doing. Take multi-tasking, for instance. My generation grew up being taught to concentrate on one thing at a time. Few people today even attempt single-tasking. Their attention flits from this to that, like butterflies seeking the most promising blossoms.

Technology doesn't help. Everyone today seems to wear earbuds – while exercising, while reading, even while out enjoying nature -- so they don't miss anything.

As theorist Ray Kurzweil has documented, the rate of technological change keeps increasing. My family room has a VCR (which I never did learn to program properly) and a DVD player. Both are already obsolete. In less than 20 years. Now, I'm told, I need a personal video recorder. Or something called Netflix, that eliminates the need to record anything.

Who could have imagined, just a few years ago, that casual passersby could capture video of police killing a bewildered immigrant in Vancouver's international airport and shooting a mentally ill man crawling on all fours across a Vancouver street?

Each new technology adds a distraction. Cell phones are now considered as dangerous for driving as alcohol.

In simpler times – as Neil Postman noted in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* – Americans could listen attentively to six hours of closely reasoned debate between Lincoln and Douglas. Only then did they get to ask questions.

How often today does a talk show allow a guest to speak for more than 15 seconds before interrupting?

A historic trend

The English language itself demonstrates our steadily shortening attention spans.

Everyone knows that words have changed over the centuries. But the basic unit of meaning in English is not the word. The same written word – “bow” or “bark” or “fast” or “quick” – can have multiple meanings. Only within a sentence can you know whether “bow” refers to a ship or a shoelace.

As every university English department knows, sentences have been getting shorter. When Chaucer wrote *Canterbury Tales*, around 1385, a typical sentence might run 80 or so words. By Shakespeare's time, sentences had shrunk to 40-45 words. Victorian authors averaged around 30 words.

Today, few professional writers will risk writing sentences more than 20 words long. We can't, or won't, make the effort to wade through long sentences any more.

This column, by the way, averages 13 words per sentence.

Is there a limit, below which sentences cannot shrink any further? AFAIK, no. Consider txtspk, FWIW. LOL.

Paying unbroken attention is a discipline rapidly falling out of style. For the media. And for ourselves.

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YOUR TURN

Here's some of the feedback on last week's column about the on-going protest demonstrations in Quebec.

Steve Roney noted an additional difference between the Quebec situation and the “Arab Spring” situation, “a much bigger, more important difference that you have not even mentioned: Quebec, unlike the countries involved in the Arab spring, is a democracy with a free press. This transforms the significance of street protests there into the very opposite of its significance in the Arab world. There, the street protests are expressions, however imperfect, of democracy. In Quebec, they are by their nature anti-democratic. It is possible to justify anti-democratic protests at times: when a minority is being oppressed by a majority. But it is important to see the difference.

“Then we must ask, are Quebec university students oppressed? That is the important question.”

Vic Sedo voiced a despair about Quebec that I suspect many Canadians share: "Quebec is a constant issue. I wish they would just grow up and join the rest of the world. Oh well, send them some more money to support their useless 'system'."

Larry Geldart asked, "Now that we know the system is broke -- how does it get fixed without leaders to lead or organizers to organize?"

"Can't have politicians 'cause they are all into it for themselves. Or corporate folks for the same reasons. Or the education people 'cause they are also part of the system

"Maybe a dictatorship -- that works! Oops, that is a system too. The dilemma -- how do you fix a broken system that is not replaced by another system?"

Bruce Fraser thought that the question of what succeeds the Charest government "reminds me of Tommy Douglas' great speech about Mouseland. It's a place inhabited largely by mice, but for some reason they elect black cats to govern them. When they get upset over the treatment by the black cats, they turf them out... to be replaced by white cats! Finally, someone gets the idea -- what if we elected mice to govern us? Shocking idea!

"Listen to it here: <http://www.cbc.ca/archives/categories/politics/parties-leaders/tommy-douglas-and-the-ndp/the-story-of-mouseland-a-political-allegory.html>."

Bob Wild offered what he called "one small quibble. I doubt that NATO went into Libya with 'idealism'. It was Oil, Oil, Oil -- and a military base in Africa for the USA -- as subsequent political manoeuvring has revealed.

"But I do agree strongly that the uproar in Quebec is about 'the system'. The social/economic system we have is plutocracy, and some elements in the Quebec student body know that there can be no creative future for the 99% as long as that lasts.

"I have been watching with interest to see what some Latin American countries come up with as '21st century socialism'. I wonder if there are the seeds here of a genuine replacement for our present world system."

Bob also sent along an article by Ethan Cox, on Rabble.ca, analyzing the mood and content of the "Casserole" demonstrations (so called because people leave their homes to bang on pots and pans in the street). It's worth reading.

Eduard Hiebert commented, "It's too bad that so many fixate on the corporate vision of the world (money) when what's at stake is further attempts to privatize the commons, in this instance education."

Eduard also forwarded a piece worth reading, <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2012/05/30-3>, which basically endorses Ethan Cox's perspective.

Dawne Taylor recalled her personal experience with education in Quebec: "I went to University in Quebec. I asked a friend from my university days (she has remained in Montreal) for her take on the situation.

"She said the situation is complex. The 'quiet revolution' of the 1960s in Quebec saw the government take over from the church in matters of education. Part of this takeover involved the establishment of CEGEP's, akin to a 2-year junior college after high school. CEGEP's can grant diplomas and/or are preparatory before transferring to university. The CEGEP system is tuition-free, so it is assumed that it is the right of Quebecers to have free post-secondary education, or at least education with very low tuition. Quebecers draw parallels, not with Canadian universities, but with European education systems, notably France (although there is a two-tiered system with better universities charging tuition), Sweden (where very high taxes pay for free education) and Finland (where students do a year of military or community service in exchange for free education). The 3 major universities in Quebec (McGill, Universite de Montreal and Laval) provide excellent educations and the students there are not on strike.... In general only 25% of Quebecers attend university compared to 35% in Ontario.

"Quebec is generally in a mess these days with the demonstrations mushrooming into a response that has more to do with the imposition of Bill 78 and restrictions imposed on demonstrators. There is also an extreme dislike of M. Charest's government. There is no successor to him; the alternative is the PQ government under Mme. Marois. The construction industry inquiry will highlight corruption in the Liberal government, but since it is supposed to go back 15 years, the PQ may be implicated as well."

Dawne continued with her personal view: "Post-secondary education is of great value not just to individuals but to employers and the nation.... I believe that education is one of the most important assets of a population -- and that it ought to be accessible to all with the ability and gifts. And if that means free or low tuition

rates, then I'm all for it. And yes, I will pay higher taxes. I would much rather my taxes be spent on free education at all levels than on the Olympics or corporate bail-outs."

To which I will add that the corporate world benefits enormously from free (or subsidized) education. To take just one example, Bill Gates and Microsoft would not be as wealthy as they are if they had had to educate all their staff from childhood up. They learned on the job, yes – but they got the education that allowed them to apply for that job through the public system, at no cost to a corporation that didn't exist yet.

PSALM PARAPHRASES

I have started including a psalm paraphrase for the coming Sunday with my Soft Edges column, on Wednesdays. Why not on Sunday, you ask? Well, partly because psalms seem to me to fit better with the general mood of Soft Edges, which is more likely to deal directly with faith-related matters than these Sharp Edges columns. And partly because Soft Edges is about 250 words shorter than Sharp Edges, and so including the paraphrase on Wednesday won't make the e-mailing quite as long.

That does mean that if you want to receive the paraphrase, and are not on the Soft Edges mailing list, you'll need to subscribe. No charge, just send me a message, jimt@quixotic.ca. Or you can subscribe automatically by sending a blank e-mail to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
