

BLOG POST

Analog in a Digital World

August 19, 2014

In an [article](#) profiling John R. MacArthur, the publisher of Harper's Magazine, MacArthur is quoted as saying, "I've got nothing against people getting on their weblogs, on the Internet and blowing off steam. If they want to do that, that's fine. But it doesn't pass, in my opinion, for writing and journalism." The article goes on to note that MacArthur is "analog in his habits" because he "prints out articles to read" and that "[h]is version of searching for [a fact] on Google was yelling to a staff member, who hurried to deliver the information."

MacArthur certainly expresses a sympathetic position. A 24-hour news cycle has contributed to an environment where airtime needs to be filled – recent examples of well-publicized overexposure include CNN's coverage of the Malaysian Air disappearance or the Casey Anthony trial. And because anyone with an internet connection and a Twitter account can "break" news, there is a race to the bottom as to which organization can print the news first as opposed to which can report it most accurately. The inevitably incendiary rush to judgment after the report of a rumor reported as fact seems only to support MacArthur's position.

But where MacArthur and I part ways is in our view of what blogs or "lighter" commentary may provide. Instead of web commentary offered as simply "blowing off steam," the internet is more of a tray of samples. You can try a little of anything, and if you'd like more, then that's available to you as well.

That's really the beauty of the internet, right? You can critique BuzzFeed's lists, but they are a quick read that provide you with the opportunity to read more – possibly even from a true "writing and journalism" source. I mean, no one would think to use *this* blog exclusively as a defense to criminal charges or as any sort of compliance manual. But ideally, it would help you spot issues or pique your interest so that you read more on a particular topic, consult with counsel, or find a way to improve your workplace.

I like to think about the internet like a newspaper with only headlines. I can get the gist of the story from the headline, and if I'm interested, I can read more. (Example: "Salmon Spawning in Seattle" will not encourage me to read further. But hit me with "Cowboys Sweep Eagles, Giants" and I'm 100 percent in.)

MacArthur and I simply diverge on this implied concept that analog habits are somehow better than digital habits. Perhaps it is the trial lawyer side of me, but I try to be open to ways in which you can convey information. People learn in a variety of different ways: some learn by hearing, some learn by seeing, some learn by doing. Some have longer attention spans; some give hummingbirds a run for their money. So the more ways that you can find to reach people, the better odds of success you have in conveying information that they can use.

And that's the takeaway point here (yay!). Imagine if your organization disseminated a ten-page written policy on what to do if a federal agent knocks on the door. That's some important information right there. Is everyone going to read and understand it? Unlikely, right? Too busy to get to it right now, will read it tomorrow, and so on? Yup, that's the MacArthur way. It just doesn't work by itself.

Okay, change it up. Skip the written policy and instead conduct a 10-minute training session covering the key facts. Have you taught everyone everything they need to know? Probably not, but you hit the high points. Even if a couple of folks dozing in the back of the room missed it. Right. That would be the BuzzFeed way. This doesn't work by itself, either.

So instead, disseminate the policy to everyone, and you'll capture the folks who learn by reading. And conduct your training session, and you'll capture those folks who learn by listening. And then, as a bonus, *rehearse the drill*, so you capture those folks who learn by doing. It's the last piece that most organizations miss, and thereby miss a huge opportunity to make sure their people understand the policies *and* that their policies *actually work*.

You can be analog like MacArthur or digital like BuzzFeed. But really effective communication is a blend of both ... and just a touch more.