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PRESS BOX

Michael Crichton, Vindicated

His 1993 prediction of mass-media extinction now looks on target.

By Jack Shafer

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In 1993, novelist Michael Crichton riled the news business with a *Wired* magazine essay titled "Mediasaurus," in which he prophesied the death of the mass media—specifically the *New York Times* and the commercial networks. "Vanished, without a trace," he wrote.

The mediasaurs had about a decade to live, he wrote, before technological advances—"artificial intelligence agents roaming the databases, downloading stuff I am interested in, and assembling for me a front page"—swept them under. Shedding no tears, Crichton wrote that the shoddy mass media deserved its deadly fate.

"[T]he American media produce a product of very poor quality," he lectured. "Its information is not reliable, it has too much chrome and glitz, its doors rattle, it breaks down almost immediately, and it's sold without warranty. It's flashy but it's basically junk."

Had Crichton's prediction been on track, by 2002 the *New York Times* should have been half-fossilized. But the newspaper's vital signs were so positive that its parent company commissioned a 1,046-foot Modernist tower, which now stands in Midtown Manhattan. Other trends predicted by Crichton in 1993 hadn't materialized in 2002, either. Customized news turned out to be harder to create than hypothesize; news consumers weren't switching to unfiltered sources such as C-SPAN; and the mainstream media weren't on anyone's endangered species list.

When I interviewed Crichton in 2002 about his failed predictions for *Slate*, he was anything but defensive.

"I assume that nobody can predict the future well. But in this particular case, I doubt I'm wrong; it's just too early," Crichton said via e-mail.

As we pass his prediction's 15-year anniversary, I've got to declare advantage Crichton. Rot afflicts the newspaper industry, which is shedding staff, circulation, and revenues. It's gotten so bad in newspaperville that some people want Google to buy the *Times* and run it as a charity! Evening news viewership continues to evaporate, and while the mass media aren't going extinct tomorrow, Crichton's original observations about the media future now ring more true than false. Ask any journalist.

So with white flag in hand, I approached Crichton to chat him up once more. Magnanimous in victory, he said he had often thought about our 2002 discussion and was happy to revisit it. (Read the uncut e-mail interview in this sidebar.)

Although Crichton still subscribes to the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal*, he dropped the

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Los Angeles Times a year ago—"with no discernable loss." He skims those two dailies but spends 95 percent of his "information-gathering time" on the Web.

He concedes with a shrug that the personalized infotopia he crystal-balled in 1993 has yet to arrive. When we talked in 2002, Crichton scoffed at the Web. Too slow. Its page metaphor, too limiting. Design, awful. Excessive hypertexting, too distracting. Noise-to-signal ratio, too high.

Today he's more positive about the medium. He notes with satisfaction that the Web has made it far easier for the inquisitive to find unmediated information, such as congressional hearings. It's much faster than it used to be, and more of its pages are professionally assembled. His general bitch is advertisements in the middle of stories, and he's irritated by animation and sounds in ads. "That, at least, can often be blocked by your browser," he says.

In 1993, Crichton predicted that future consumers would crave high-quality information instead of the junk they were being fed and that they'd be willing to pay for it. He's perplexed about that part of his prediction not panning out, but he has a few theories about why it hasn't.

"Senior scientists running labs don't read journals; they say the younger people will tell them about anything important that gets published—if they haven't heard about it beforehand anyway," he says. "So there may be other networks to transmit information, and it may be that 'media' was never as important as we who work in it imagine it was. That's an argument that says maybe nobody really needs a high-end service."

It will take a media visionary, he believes—somebody like Ted Turner—to create the high-quality information service he foresaw in his 1993 essay. In addition to building the service, the visionary will also have to convince news consumers that they need it.

Sounding like a press critic, Crichton criticizes much of the news fed to consumers as "repetitive, simplistic, and insulting" and produced on the cheap. Cable TV news is mostly "talking heads and food fights" and newspaper reporting mostly "rewritten press releases," he says.

Crichton suggests that readers and viewers could more objectively measure the quality of the news they consume by pulling themselves "out of the narcotizing flow of what passes for daily news." Look at a newspaper from last month or a news broadcast.

"Look at how many stories are unsourced or have unnamed sources. Look at how many stories are about what 'may' or 'might' or 'could' happen," he says. "*Might* and *could* means the story is speculation. Framing as I described means the story is opinion. And opinion is not factual content."

"The biggest change is that contemporary media has shifted from fact to opinion and speculation. You can watch cable news all day and never hear anything except questions like, 'How much will the Rev. Wright hurt Obama's chances?' 'Is Hillary now looking toward 2012?' 'How will McCain overcome the age argument?' These are questions for which there are endless answers. Contentious hosts on cable shows keep the arguments rolling," he says.

Crichton believes that we live in an age of conformity much more confining than the 1950s in which he grew up. Instead of showing news consumers how to approach controversy coolly and intelligently, the media partake of the zealotry and intolerance of many of the advocates they cover. He attributes the public's interest in Mike Huckabee, Ron Paul, and the Rev. Jeremiah Wright to its hunger for a wider range of viewpoints than the mass media provide.

He tosses out a basket of questions he'd like to see the press tackle, some of which I've seen covered. "What happened at Bear Stearns?" got major play this week, after Crichton answered my questions, in a *Wall Street Journal* series. And I know I've seen "How much of the current price of gas can be attributed to the weak dollar?" answered a couple of times but can't remember where. (Answer: a lot.) But such Crichton questions as "Why have hedge funds evaded government regulation?" and what specific lifestyle changes will every American have to make "to reduce CO₂ emissions by 60 percent?" would be great assignments for news desks.

"I want a news service that tells me what no one knows but is true nonetheless," he says.

Me, too. What do you want? Send your requests to slate.pressbox@gmail.com. (E-mail may be quoted by name in "The Fray," *Slate*'s readers' forum, in a future article, or elsewhere unless the writer stipulates otherwise. Permanent disclosure: *Slate* is owned by the Washington Post Co.) Track my errors: This [hand-built RSS feed](#) will ring every time *Slate* runs a "Press Box" correction. For e-mail notification of errors in this specific column, type the word *mediasaurus* in the subject head of an e-mail message and send it to slate.pressbox@gmail.com.

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Interview With Michael Crichton

Crichton's answers were received May 23, 2008

How do you cull your news these days? If it's not too much of a bother, describe how you consume news each day.

I long subscribed to three newspapers, the *L.A. Times*, the *N.Y. Times*, and the *WSJ*. I canceled the *L.A. Times* a year ago, with no discernable loss. I skim the other papers. The rest of my time is spent on the Web. I would say 95 percent of my information-gathering time is spent on the Web.

Has the collapse of the classified-ad market at the hands of Craigslist surprised you? Or the massive migration of ads to the Web? Your '93 essay didn't really talk much about changes to come on the ad side of the mass media. Last year, the Web ad-sales passed those on radio.

Sorry, I don't think about ads much. I do think it is interesting how much of the real-estate market, for example, has moved onto the Web. You will recall that I argued the Web was the true home-shopping channel, and it certainly is proving to be that.

Do you think the media's factual content and accuracy is up or down from 2002 (when we last corresponded)? Do you still think it's flashy but junk?

Surely you jest. Factual content approaches zero, and accuracy is not even a consideration. I think many younger reporters aren't really sure what it means, beyond spell-checking. And in any case, when the factual content approaches zero, accuracy becomes meaningless.

Why do I say factual content approaches zero? The easiest way is to record a news show and look

at it in a month, or to look at last month's newspaper. That pulls you out of the narcotizing flow of what passes for daily news, and you can see more objectively what is actually being presented. Look at how many stories are unsourced or have unnamed sources. Look at how many stories are about what "may" or "might" or "could" happen. Look at how many news stories have opinion frames, i.e., "Obama faced his most challenging personal test today," because in the body you probably won't be told much about what the personal test was, or why it was most challenging (which in any case is opinion). In summary, reliance on unnamed sources means the story is opinion. *Might* and *could* means the story is speculation. Framing as I described means the story is opinion. And opinion is not factual content.

Have you noted any news-industry innovations since last we talked?

No.

You had very negative notions about Web-page design and implementation when last we talked. Do you still feel that way? RSS feeds have really changed the way I get news, especially RSS feeds of Google News alerts.

I no longer feel so critical. Web pages are more professional now, and we've established some conventions. And connection speeds are faster. It's all better. I personally dislike ads in the middle of stories, and I loathe animation and sound in ads anywhere, but that, at least, can often be blocked by your browser.

In your essay, you wrote: "As the link between payment and information becomes more explicit, consumers will naturally want better information. They'll demand it, and they'll be willing to pay for it. There is going to be—I would argue there already is—a market for extremely high-quality information, what quality experts would call 'six-sigma information.'"

I don't think there has been the emergence of much of a market for six-sigma info outside of the data manipulations you can do on a Bloomberg terminal. What do you think?

I agree, and I must say I am perplexed. Several thoughts come to mind. Senior scientists running labs don't read journals; they say the younger people will tell them about anything important that gets published—if they haven't heard about it beforehand anyway. So, there may be other networks to transmit information, and it may be that "media" was never as important as we who work in it imagine it was. That's an argument that says maybe nobody really needs a high-end service.

A second thought concerns Ted Turner. It may be that instead of waiting for audience demand, we are waiting for a visionary entrepreneur to create a service that most people think can't be done. As Ted Turner once did.

A third thought concerns changes in our society. I have been very interested in the differences between how scientists and engineers treat information, for example. The fact is, engineers are much more rigorous about information, and it has legal consequences for them. In contrast, scientists (and politicians) are just playing with information. Broadly speaking, they have no responsibility for what they say at all. Now, as our society shifts away from manufacturing (now something like 15 percent of workers are engaged in making something), I speculate that this is having an effect on what we regard as information. I speculate we are moving from the rigor of engineers to the free-for-all of politicians. In which case, nobody is interested in high-quality information. It only gets in the way.

Arguably, contemporary media has made that shift away from hard information toward free-for-all opinion and speculation. This shouldn't cost a lot, and indeed modern media peddles an inexpensive product. Most cable television "news" is just talking heads and food fights; they don't even change the heads very often—they hire regulars who appear week after week. Most newspaper reporting consists of rewritten press releases and faxes. Many reporters don't go after stories, they wait for the stories to be fed [to] them by publicists and flacks. Now if you set aside this cheap model and instead start staffing bureaus around the world, putting reporters and cameras on the ground, assembling smart teams to do real investigative work in business, high tech, and so on, that costs a lot of money. I remain convinced that plenty of people would pay for a good news service—who stayed with a daisy wheel printer once laser printers arrived? We didn't know we wanted laser printers, as we didn't know we wanted digital cameras, but it turns out we did. In any case, what we are now being fed as news is repetitive, simplistic, and insulting.

The biggest change is that contemporary media has shifted from fact to opinion and speculation. You can watch cable news all day and never hear anything except questions like, "How much will the Rev. Wright hurt Obama's chances?" "Is Hillary now looking toward 2012?" "How will McCain overcome the age argument?" These are questions for which there are endless answers. Contentious hosts on cable shows keep the arguments rolling.

Here are some important questions that I don't hear [being] asked: "Why has the dollar been allowed to fall so far?" "Why have hedge funds evaded government regulation?" "How much of the current price of gas can be attributed to the weak dollar?" "Does the Fed control the price of the dollar?" "What happened at Bear Stearns?" "How exactly are you going to reduce CO₂ emissions by 60 percent? What specific lifestyle changes does that require for every American? What nation in the world now has per capita emissions at 60 percent less than the US?"

No one hears the answers to these questions, and if they did, they would start a mini revolution.

Maybe the questions are too sophisticated and difficult for television? Then it ought to suit the sophisticated *N.Y. Times*. The notion that we have no source in any media for an extended and detailed discussion of economics is frankly astonishing. (A special note of appreciation to Robert Samuelson of the *WaPo*, always excellent, frequently prescient.)

How many years do you think we are from the futurism predicted by your essay?

Intelligence agents roaming the Web, televised congressional hearings on demand, etc.

People are having second thoughts about Web-roaming agents, and they'll probably have second thoughts about congressional hearings, too, if they watch a lot of them. But actually an awful lot of hearings are already televised and already available online. Just hard to find, sometimes. (This is not new. When I gave my Senate testimony two years ago, it was on the Web.)

Do you think the media are more entertainment oriented today than they were in 1993 or less?

Far more.

Just as you were slammed as a Japan-basher, you've been called a denialist (and worse) for your climate-change views. Do you think that stands as another example of how the media stifle debate?

The truth is, we live in an age of astonishing conformity. I grew up in the 1950s, supposedly the

heyday of conformity, but there was much more freedom of opinion back then. And as a result, you knew that your neighbors might hold different views from you on politics or religion. Today, the notion that men of good will can disagree has disappeared. Can you imagine! Today, if I disagree with you, you conclude there is something wrong with me. This is a childish, parochial view. And of course stupefyingly intolerant. It's truly anti-American. Much of it can be laid at the feet of the environmental movement, which has unfortunately frequently been led by ill-educated and intolerant spokespersons—often with no more than a high-school education, sometimes not even that. Or they are lawyers trained to win at any cost and to say anything about their opponents to win. But you find the same intolerant tone around considerations of defense, taxation, free markets, universal medical care, and so on. There's plenty of zealotry to go around. And it's hardly new in human history.

The media might stand as a corrective, cool and a bit detached, showing by example how to approach information and controversy. Instead, the media has clearly caught the fever of our intolerant times. Formerly, news people would never openly state their allegiance; young reporters understood it was poor form, and a senior person would carry the caution born of the experience that at least some of what one believes in the course of one's life turns out to be wrong. But it's a new era. Now, media reporters are proud to pound the table and declare their advocacy. Since so few of them have any training in science, they don't really know what they are pounding about, when it comes to global warming. They couldn't tell you even in general terms how the global mean temperature is calculated, for example. But it doesn't matter anyway. They just want to declare they believe what "everyone" believes. Who values such a news source?

I want a news service that tells me what no one knows, but is true nonetheless. That's what I would value.

Second, the media narrows the expression of viewpoints to an extraordinary degree. We've already discussed the small population of talking heads on cable shows. At the same time, the interest aroused by figures like Mike Huckabee and Ron Paul occurred because, in my view, the American public had never heard people talk that way. Similarly, the Rev. Wright is espousing views that are hardly rare, but people react with shock and awe. People should take it as a sign that something is wrong—the media isn't giving them the full story. By a long shot.

How much has the ability to surf foreign news sources upset the monopoly on news that the U.S. media had over news consumers?

I don't think it's really foreign sources; the BBC has had scandal after scandal of late, which has greatly tarnished its former splendid image. But I do think that in essence, anybody on the Internet can get the equivalent of a wire service feed, and that means you are not waiting for the news. By the time 6 o'clock rolls around, or you open the paper the next morning, you already know the headlines and the talking points. The problem is that the TV and the newspaper don't give you much more than you already have. Hence the endless decline.

I might add as a personal note that we have been talking about the quality of the media and the quality of information they pass on, but from a broader perspective, the present situation scares the hell out of me. A democracy needs good information. A rapidly changing, highly technological society in a global economy really needs good information. We don't have it. We don't have anything remotely approaching it. On the contrary, we have an increasingly constricted media run by increasingly partisan forces, to the detriment of our society. For example, the tendency of media to lock in a single story day after day, like the Hillary [Clinton in] Bosnia story, effectively prevents a leader from getting any other message out. Even in its decline, the media is all we have, and thanks to *Sullivan*, it operates entirely free from litigation, or other forms of

regulation that might make it more responsive to public needs. Not good.

*Jack Shafer is **Slate's** editor at large.*

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