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Health Care Reform and The Awesome Power of Techno-Confusion

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I'm glad it was back in the 60s when we decided to go to the moon. If we had to make that decision today, I'm not sure we would get there.

I can hear the anger at town hall meetings. "It's too expensive." "It's a corporate land grab." "If God wanted us to be on the moon, he wouldn't have put us on earth."

The difference between then and now, of course, is a world-rattling ability to disseminate opinion -- no matter how self-serving, agenda-driven and utterly specious that opinion might be.

Witness the spittle-flung warnings of "Nazis" and "death panels" lurking in the fine print of health care reform; all the ridiculous diversions at a time when few topics have demanded more informed opinion or more rational discussion.

The mass confusion so successfully created in the health care debate (and we may have already slipped from debate into diatribe) raises a question:

Were we better off when professional gate-keepers assembled and presented news and perspective, or in today's media mosh pit, where anybody with a laptop, simple software and a cause can elbow their way into the national discussion?

It's a rhetorical question.

We're not going back to for-profit hegemony over the shaping of opinion any more than we are going back to carbon paper, rotary phones and antennas on the roof.

Newspapers are not going to repopulate the expertise they have driven from the payrolls - not for the immediate future, maybe not ever.

The media filter of the past was never a perfect device, but at least its' imperfections were kept in check by the diverse expectations of a shared audience. There was a business case for accountability and balance.

So the open question is how -- somehow -- to manage opinion overload. How do you sort out who is right, who is wrong, who is paid, and who is simply saying what the voice in the toaster-oven commanded?

By comparison, information overload is simple. Today, like a sauce, we can reduce and reduce down to the categories and sources that have meaning in our lives.

For civility and society, that is also the bad news.

The reduction process tends to create a mix of input that calcifies opinion -- simply accumulating evidence to support what we already believe provides no place where give and take matters on the way to considered compromise.

It doesn't matter whether you think that the health-care shouters, were dispatched to reign havoc like the flying monkeys of Oz; or whether you believe their righteous anger is a simple reflection of their righteous anger. The point is that they were not there to hear and learn and consider. They were there to promote an agenda at high volume.

Just as they were, at least in part, a creature of the Web's ability to mobilize, they also are a reflection of what the Web has done to the ability to create the kind of compromise that creates democratic action. You don't have to consider contrary opinion if you never have to hear it. And if you make enough noise in enough places, you can make sure that nobody else hears it either.

I know we need to reform health care. I have no idea how to do it. I can Google "health care debate" and get almost 8 million places to go for answers. I don't know who is providing those answers. I don't know why they are saying what they are saying. I don't know who is paying them to say it.

Information technology has added rocket fuel to the engine of democracy. Will it power us forward or keep us spinning wildly in one spot?

The question remains open. The outlook is not encouraging.