Seeking the H Zone: How we mix media messages to create compatible community in the emerging papyrus society

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ABSTRACT: The emergence of personal media provides new opportunities to relate to our social world. Newspapers, network radio and television and news magazines reach down vertically, as it were, to reach everyone, men and women, rich and poor. Social media, such as magazines, websites, Facebook and Twitter, reach across horizontally to connect with communities already interested in particular topics. The availability of these two types of media allows us to pick and choose among agenda items to find a level of personal or horizontal comfort among messages that tell us what we should be doing and messages that entice us to do what we want to do. In short, this paper argues, we mix media agendas to create compatible public (and private) communities. The media agenda communities that are emerging are more like the flat strips that make papyrus paper than the massive stones that characterize the pyramids that dominate the horizon, an emerging papyrus society where authority is much more democratized and fused.

KEYWORDS: agenda setting, agenda community, vertical media, horizontal media, audiences, public citizens

A GREAT PYRAMID

I had the opportunity recently to visit Cairo and, like any tourist, found myself in a cab for the nine mile ride to the three great pyramids of Giza next to the Sphinx near Giza. The tallest, the pyramid of Khufu, rose almost 455 feet in the air, about forty stories, with the top stones resting next to the sky with the smaller ones lying in ever-increasing horizontal layers spreading toward the ground. It is about two thirds of mile around the bottom. How like the way society has evolved, I thought, with the top stones standing metaphorically for the many pharaohs in our lives,

presidents, kings, senators, mayors, even the fathers and mothers of our early lives. Those at the top oversee the entire structure, as newspapers, local and network television and other media oversee the communities in which they publish or broadcast. These media generally keep lookout for all the stones in society, from top to bottom, although, of course, they cannot write about all of them every day.

Nearby, in Giza itself, various shops demonstrate how ancient Egyptians made paper from the pulp of the papyrus plant, which grows in the waters of the Nile and elsewhere. Experts peel away the three tough green layers of the plant, leaving the white pulp inside for slicing into strips from which the water can be pressed and allowed to dry into long white strands. Experts take the completed strips and lay one down, then one across, then one down and so forth, as in a sort of Scotch plaid. Woven, the horizontal and vertical strips can be fitted together at the ends to form long pieces of writing materials that can be, as they were, rolled into book forms. These papyrus books filled the great library at Alexandria, which the Romans sacked in 48 BC.

From a metaphoric point of view, one can see the horizontal strips as providing body and stability to the vertical strands, although I suppose the stability argument could work either way. Vertical and horizontal strips form a durable material for the preservation of the messages of human culture. Media such as magazines or websites aim for particular audiences or concentrate on selected topics, as aside from aiming at the entire community with all kinds of topics, and represent a horizontal agenda strand. Papyrus paper is tough but flat. Pyramids are majestic but the stones at the top are weathered, if still dominating. Vertical media provide the agendas of public community. Horizontal media provide agendas of personal community. Both represent communities, as they always have. But we have the power to mix agendas into comfortable horizontal community, the H zone, more than any time in the past.

MEDIA AGENDA SETTING, TWO LEVELS

Agenda setting scholars compare the content of a medium with what audiences judge important among that content. In 1972, communication theorist Max McCombs and journalism historian Donald Shaw published a Chapel Hill, N.C., study of the mass media use of and issues judged important by a small group of undecided voters. The relationship between what the news media emphasized and what the media audience reported as important was strong, in terms of simple correlations (McCombs, Shaw, 1972). The study confirmed political scientist Bernard Cohen's observation that the press does seem to tell audiences what to think about, although not necessarily what to think.

More recently McCombs has used the term "objects" to describe the salience of topics going from medium to audience (McCombs, 2004). Certainly newspapers rank order news from most to least importance. Major newspapers hold daily news

conferences to determine which stories should go on page 1, the marquee of the day's events. The same thing happens in local and network television news rooms. A professional journalist is presumed to know far more than how to write or present news, although this is certainly vital to his or her work, but how to gather and evaluate information. Audiences presumably rank ordered information rather than just learn information. The mission of journalism is to gather news and rank order the information from most to least important, with the most important news at the top of page one, as the stones on top dominate the ancient pyramid.

Journalists in newsrooms, or still in college, learn the elements of news around the world – information about events/issues that are timely, important, involve a lot of people, are nearby, and involve important or well known people, among other variables. Likewise professional journalists often work beats that regularly cover news from the executive branches of government, from mayor to president, legislative branch, from council to Congress, and judiciary, from local courts (and police) to Supreme Court.

So the typical news agenda covers major events (Rosenblum, 1979), but also covers the regular operations of government, along with stories about sports, features, personalities, and personal news. But all of this is rank ordered in terms of position in a print publication or placement in electronic broadcasts. An individual story is often arranged with the most important information at the top, in the inverted pyramid style. Journalists set agendas in many ways and they broadcast information about important events in all directions. Journalists are always aware of the pyramid. Journalists are trained to be aware.

LIVING IN VERTICAL *VS.* HORIZONTAL MEDIA COMMUNITY

We invest in those sources of information that best fit the communities in which we desire to live. If we are intensely interested in the places where we live, we likely take the local newspaper, a medium of place. If we are young and interested in fashion, we may take the magazine *Seventeen*, a magazine, like those, that seek to fill a niche in public interest. Our interest in national news leads us to the mass media of network television, a place medium like newspapers but on a large scale. And our natural human interest in particular subjects leads us beyond magazines to other sources, such as the Web, where we can find both information and ways to stay in touch with other people like us, with similar interests, regardless of where they live in the world. This mixture of agendas, ultimately, is in the hands of audiences but evolving communication technologies makes possibilities for agenda mixtures change over time. Not only that, but some media have certainly framed public events within the context of the topics about which they write – newspapers about place, magazines about class, or at least special interest audiences, network radio and television about mass national audiences, and the newer media, such as the Web, about topics and people wherever they are – in space – so to speak.

Of course, people live in communities in an actual place, as well as in social groups of all kinds. Sociologists use the term "reference groups" to locate the various social arrangements from which we draw clues and values. We are members of a town or city, country, region, nation, and world in terms of place. We are members of families, work groups, civic clubs, sports and many other organizations as part of the people to whom we relate. All of us feel a sense of national identity when we see the flag of our nation, especially if we were abroad. And many of us are making contact with others related to our work or personal lives *via* the Web and maintaining contact with cell phones, which can stretch contact across the world. We live in place, classes or groups, mass nations, and as part of the extended world population. We live in all of them all the time. As children, local place and people – our mothers and fathers for example – dominate our world, but over time we extend our reach to others, a nation, and beyond. The attention to each of these communities varies depending on our age, experience, and interests. And, as we grow up, the media of our early-learning lives influences us for the rest of our lives. For example, older Americans are more likely to read daily newspapers than their children, reflecting the steady decline in daily newspaper circulation. The same older group is more likely to watch network television news, which was in the ascendancy when they were growing up. The reach of the traditional television networks – *NBC*, *CBS*, *ABC* – has been declining for the past two decades, although people still watch almost as much television from the sampling of cable options available.

Each of these media frames events for their audiences. Newspapers own the franchise for the local community of place, a position challenged by local television. Magazines frame events and issues for their readers. The national television networks frame events in terms of national interests, with some attention to the larger world – although foreign news expands and contracts like an accordion depending on the course of world events.

Newspapers emphasize the importance of place, with attention on all those who live in that place (with due regard to shifting news values, which sometimes unfairly ignore a segment for a while, such as news about women or African Americans). That is also true of local television and radio. Newspaper journalists do more than provide information about place. Journalists rank order the information from most to least important, by use of page placement, headline font, and frequency of attention given to any specific event. The place subjects of most importance merit regular beats with reporters to cover topics on a daily basis. Journalists and editors assume important public roles by this ranking of importance – establishing the salience of events as a social scientist might say – and that is probably as important as providing the news. News about most events is readily available from many sources in our times, although not a dispassionate, professional ranking of importance.

What is true of newspapers is true of the work of journalists in any medium, although journalists who work for horizontal media – that is, media oriented to

segments of the community rather than to the entire community – focus on a narrow span of the very large rainbow of human events. These journalists aim their news at audiences that already have segmented themselves into interested groups, like audiences leaving the large circus maintop to visit the specialized entertainment tents throughout a fairground.

The vertical, top-down, agendas of newspapers, network and local television weave among the strands of horizontal, focused topics and segmented audiences, to form a sort of mixed agenda community. No medium in any age is without competition, but newspapers with their top-down orientation to the local community of place did dominate our earliest national history, to be challenged by magazines, which sought particular niches in the audience with particular content, to be challenged by top-down network and local radio and then network and local television. Network broadcasting has been challenged by more individualized media agendas such as those from television cable channels, websites, satellite radio or other focused horizontal media. Vertical and horizontal media are always evolving and competing, as are the communities they reflect.

We live in information communities in which particular media challenge each other with competing frames – newspapers with a frame on place, magazines with class (considered broadly) as the major frame, broadcasting stations with a focus on larger audiences, and finally more individualized targeted media, such as the Internet, with a capability of sorting individuals into groups along any number of frames. There has been an historical evolution of frames, from vertical place (with newspapers) to horizontal class (with magazines) to vertical mass (with, especially, network radio and television) to horizontal space (with the Web, cable and other news sources).

FLOATING IN PUBLIC AGENDAS

The mass media, television, radio, newspapers and magazines, remain the most powerful way to spread news of great and awful events, although other people often tell us of these events, today by the omnipresent cell phones or electronic mail. Important news always spills over the boundaries of the traditional media as people rush to tell other people. That was true with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy on November 22, 1963 and the explosion of the spaceship Challenger in January 1986 (Kraus, 1968).

And it certainly was true on September 11, 2001, when a Boeing 747 low over New York City crashed at 8:46 a.m. into the North Tower of the World Trade Center, causing that building to collapse 2 hours and 22 minutes later. At 9:03 a.m., a United Airlines plane crashed into the South Tower, and that building fell into a bubble of ashes at 10:59 a.m. Meanwhile, a plane crashed into the Pentagon, head of American military power, on the same morning and another aircraft, where hijackers confronted a passenger challenge, crashed into a field in Pennsylvania.

News spread by television and radio, and also by telephones, as the significances of the event permeated the consciousness of audiences. Newspapers put out special editions, some for the first time in decades, and magazines pulled back their planned weekly issues to focus on September 11, 2001 events. At first, there was speculation who was involved in what *CNN* called the "Attack on America." Suspicion soon fell on the Al-Qaeda, however, and Americans of the Middle East came under suspicion in some places and a few journalists who wrote columns that were less than fully supportive of the government lost their jobs. But the mass media proved their ability to spread news rapidly around the world.

Table 1 shows how people learned about news of terrorism in the weeks after those catastrophic events. The table uses Pew Charitable Trust Data to show how audiences acquired news about terrorism in the two weeks immediately after September 11, 2001 and two months later. We divided the media into what we have called vertical media, that is media that addressed the entire community in place (network television and daily newspapers), and horizontal media, which usually aim at more specialized audiences. In the days after September 11, network television dominated all other media, except for cable news. Even newspapers were swamped by audiences scrambling for fresh news from electronic broadcast based sources. Within two months however, audiences had shifted back into what we call more normal use of media. One can see a steady rise in the use of horizontal media,

Table 1. Using media to learn about terrorism, September *vs.* November 2001

	Mid-September use (%)	Rank	Mid-November use (%)	Rank	"Normal" use difference
Vertical Media					
Network Television	90	1	85	1	–5
Newspapers	11	5	34	3	+23
Horizontal Media*					
Local Television News	17	3	18	5	+1
Cable News	45	2	53	2	+5
Radio	14	4	19	4	+5
Magazine	–	7	2	7	+2
Internet	5	6**	13	6**	+8

* "Other television use" which was 2 percent and 2 percent, for September and November respectively, and "don't know" television use which was 2 percent and 1 percent, for September and November respectively, are ignored, as are "other" and "don't know" answers in general, which were 1 percent and 1 percent and 1 percent and less than 1 percent, respectively.

** The correlation between media use to learn about terrorism in mid-Sept. and mid-Nov. was 92, Spearman's Row.

Source: Pew Charitable Trust Data, http://peoplepress.org/reports/print.php3?ReportID=143. Respondents answered a question about how they used media to learn about terrorism in mid-September 2001 and mid-November 2001. There were 1,500 adult respondents in this national study. Respondents could check multiple media sources.

as we suggest happens after most news events, whether the news is about terrorism or other "ordinary" topics. If September 11 is an example, national crisis audiences use media in this order: network television, cable news, local television news, radio, newspapers, Internet, and magazines (of course many learned about the event from another person, either directly or *via* a cell phone). In normal times, audiences most likely use network television, cable news, newspapers, radio, local television news, Internet, and magazines. Vertical media dominate in crisis. After the immediate crisis, horizontal media rise in audience use, like your car spring snapping to normal when you hit a bump in the middle of the road.

But there was an enormous desire for information as people with cell phones called each other to check on friends and/or to console each other or to learn about events. Approximately 16 million Americans subscribed to cellular phone services in 1994. More than 110 million Americans are subscribers today.

Communication technology, which once fixed audiences to a specific place, allows us to float while staying in place. Many cell phones or other hand-held personal devices monitor news constantly. World War II Gen. George Patton regarded the headquarters of the U.S. Third Army to be where he happened to be standing. Metaphorically, in terms of communication with the outside world, this increasingly applies to all of us. Figure 1 shows the growth of homes with cell phones at the turn of the century. As we live through evolving media agendas, we are not always aware of the changes we absorb, and only become so when we ask: What did we do before email, the Web, cable, on-call films and chat groups? When did we discover we rarely use our landline telephones for long distance? For local calls either, for that matter. Nearly twenty percent of American homes recently have shifted to cell phones only (Lambrecht, Pantagraph.com).

The informational picture that comes to individuals today, much more than before modern radio and the spread of telephones beyond cities, is a mixture of public agendas, sifted through the minds and judgments of professional journalists, and more personalized agendas, picked up from friends, individual media, or from websites. Where in the 1930s, leaders could use radio to reach a national audience with a message relatively unchallenged, today those leaders soon find their messages interpreted by a variety of supplementary informational sources, some of which also provide a social support system for particular views, such as a chat group.

The Google search pattern showed an almost total interest in events of September 11. The ten most used terms for searching that week related to September 11, 2001 events. The week before these terms did not appear, not did they in the weeks to come, as the public began to direct searches into more personalized channels, often inspired by news stories.

Major mass media still powerfully influence the major public agenda. These media do so in ways of which we may not even be aware. For example, the mass media not only portray events, they also frame them – put in certain characters and leave others out, quote certain people and leave others out. McCombs (2004) calls these

details "attributes." Firemen became heroes to many in the days after September 11, as firemen struggled to find people, a few still alive, buried in the ruble of the towers or at the Pentagon. There were no survivors in Pennsylvania.

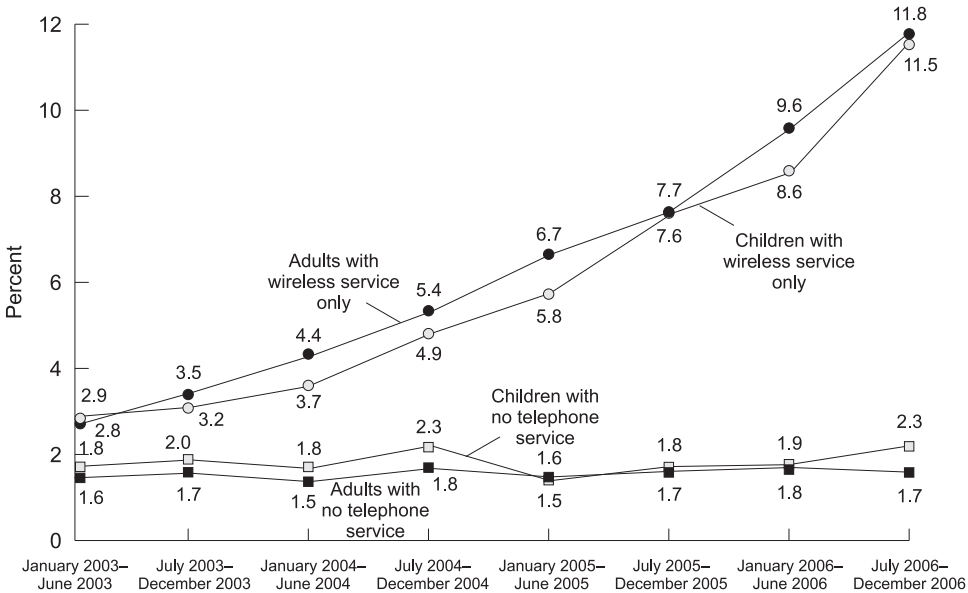

Figure 1. The growth of homes with wireless phones only, 2003–2006

Source: Pollster.com (http://www.pollster.com/blogs/cell_phones_and_political_surv.php).

A COMPETITION OF AGENDAS

In a way, those people who regularly read newspapers or tune in news broadcasts have decided to stay in touch with the community agenda, even if it is primarily a subsection of the agenda in which they are interested, such as sports or entertainment, which also are part of the extended community. High agreement with the news agenda there means, we argue, not just high readership but a high commitment to the major issues of the selected community. Media agendas represent community agendas.

If audiences read enough they also are likely to absorb the way that events/issues are framed. Several recent studies of agenda setting, level 2 framing demonstrate that audiences do more than absorb the saliences of the major events/issues, but also the way those issues are presented – almost as if there was an agenda, within an individual story. Audiences do seem to reflect the frames, or attributes, along with the events/issues, or objects.

This research suggests the potential for social understanding or misunderstanding is great. For many decades, Southern newspapers did not print news about Af-

rican Americans, unless they were involved in crime, thereby usually leaving African Americans out of the level of objects and, where there was crime news, framing the group with very negative attributes – the worst of both worlds. Consider how German newspapers, controlled by the Nazis, treated Jews in the late 1930s – and what happened to Jews in death camps after, with the apparent collusion of many ordinary Germans (Goldhagen, 1997). To be high on the object agenda, and very negative on the attribute agenda, helped fuel a political system that led, tragically, to the euphemistic final solution. Agenda communities do not always work in the same direction.

Media agendas are inherently a part of our society and stories in newspapers, many magazines, and local and network broadcast outlets reflect that top to bottom community. There is a going competition of media community agendas in any age. Of course, in some historical periods, religious authority has dominated the perspectives through which citizens viewed the world, and other times, civil authorities have controlled, or attempted to control, the public agenda. But there are always alternatives to challenge the dominant agenda.

Media that sort priorities for the whole community generally consider the issues and events from the perspective of the entire community. Journalists find themselves locating and quoting news leaders in all areas of public life.

The agendas of these vertical media aim to resolve social ambiguity for the entire community by prioritizing events and issues from most to least important. Major news media, such as the *New York Times*, conduct meetings during the day to discuss which items should be on page 1, which is a major statement by journalists, as well as to where they should be placed on that page, which is a lesser, but still important professional judgment. Many people think that the most important job of a journalist is to gather and present the news but it is just as important to determine where to place items from top to bottom on the news agenda. Journalism is a profession of prioritizing, the same as is true for law, medicine, and public health. Agendas of these media reach, so to speak, from the top of the community to the bottom. As scholar Harold Lasswell put it, the media constantly survey the society, as if from the top few stones of the pyramid, seeing far to warn the many stones below (Smith, Lasswell, 1949). Magazines and media like the Web also rank order issues and events of course but within the context of the subjects covered and audience niches sought.

In a sense the audience's use of these media to pursue general, vertical topics shifted back toward more horizontal interests. Where vertical media agendas prioritize and frame events, horizontal media agendas contextualize them for the specialized interests of particular audiences. Vertical and horizontal media can supplement each other or work at cross purpose. For example, Jon Stewart on the *Comedy Central* provides a nightly news program that builds on the major news agendas of the day, especially the television network agenda, but often puts events into a humorous context. This may not be entirely supplementary because large numbers of young Americans obtain their news from this show without also viewing other

media on a regular basic. And significant numbers of voters obtain news about presidential campaigns from *NBC*'s Jay Leno on whose late night show actor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced his (successful) run for California governor or on *CBS*'s late night competitor hosted by David Letterman.[1]

Journalists remain the most important professional activists on what is important in our lives, but journalists are gradually losing control over what audiences do will do with these agendas because of the availability of many media that cover the same topics from different perspectives and enable audiences to find others like themselves who may or may not agree with 1) the priorities and 2) the way these priorities are framed by professional journalists.

Agenda setting studies show that the major mass media still have about the same power to set agendas they did 40 years ago – correlations between media agendas and audience learning hover around .70 to .80, accounting for about one-half or more of the variance. Vertical mass media are still important in setting broad community agendas, despite declines in audience size.

But horizontal media also set agendas for specialized media that constantly relay news of events and issues to more specialized audiences. Historically one can argue that audiences are weaving agendas to create new community, one influenced but not dominated by those at the top of the perspectives of our society. As the steps of vertical media agendas are vectored out, they are crossed by horizontal media strips, so that society is becoming less vertical and more flat and horizontal. The period of time in which the agenda of leaders is little questioned is continuing as it has been since the Renaissance, and especially since Johannes Gutenberg's 1450s press started what turned out to be an avalanche of books and ideas. But things are also changing. After September 11, 2001, perspectives quickly appeared on the Web, then other media, that challenged the official views of events developing from the White House and other government sources. The papyrus society is a natural outcome of the blend of communication technology and community agendas.

THE EMERGING PAPYRUS SOCIETY

We are living in agenda communities nourished by our ability to find other media and like-thinking individuals *via* the communication complex available. The temptations to live within safe agenda communities are great. Diversity shrinks within those communities. In the past few decades we have expanded the early 19th century Gerrymander to surround voters with other voters of like kind, either Democrat or Republican, and the U.S. Supreme Court in 2007 ruled that regular political redistricting could be done by legislatures even in years in which there has not been a population census. As Congressional districts are reorganized into politically homogeneous communities, it

[1] The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found that 21 percent of people 18–29 cited "The Daily Show" as a place where they regularly found out about presidential campaign news.

seems that political views are amplified, as if the districts were reorganized from a newspaper that serves a community in place into a magazine that appeals to a self-selected audience, a profound horizontalling of political power.

This is one consequence. In 2004, journalist Bill Bishop and his colleague of the Austin, Texas, American-Statesman studied Congressional election returns since 1948 and concluded that the "assumption since the 2000 election has been that the United States is evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats. Nationally, this is still true. At the local level, however, that 50–50 split disappears. In its place is a country so out of balance, so politically divided, that there is little competition in presidential contests between the parties in most U.S. counties" (http://www.statesman.com/specialreports/content/specialreports/greatdivide/0404divide.html).

In other words, these journalists found in essence that voters in communities that voted, say, Republican (or Democratic) 55% (to 45%) twenty years ago, now vote Republican (or Democratic) 75% (to 25%). These two towns may sit side by side, one voting Republican and the other Democratic, as they did two decades ago, but they lean one way or the other far more than in the past. Perhaps that is why there has been a dramatic increase in Congressional "earmarks" that allocate federal dollars to projects in Congressional districts. When we are anchored to agenda communities that fit our interests we are constantly informed and reinforced in our own views. Certainly, earmarks have grown, showing we also are awarded. Figure 2 demonstrates a profound horizontalling of American political largesse that fits the newspaper to magazine metaphor.

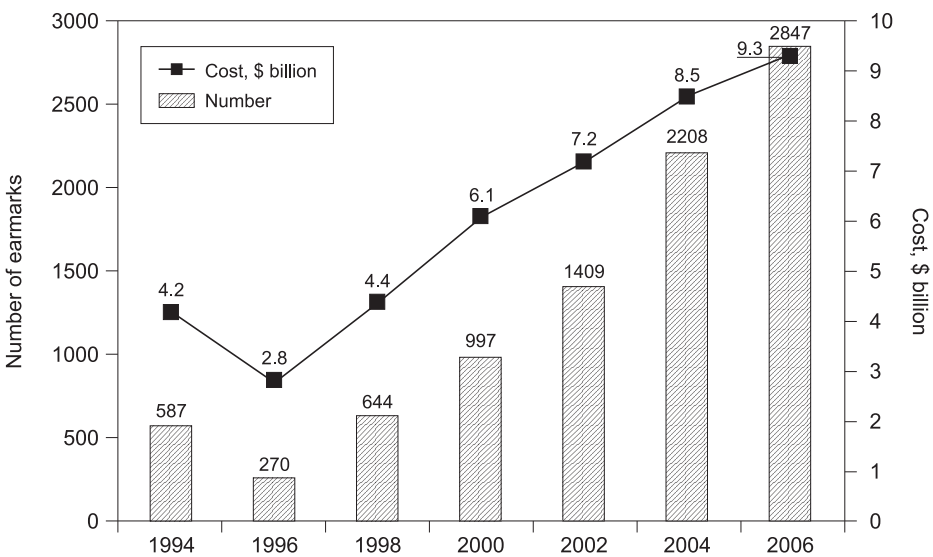

Figure 2. Congressional earmarking in DoD Appropriations Acts

Source: "Congress' Earmark Reform Fiasco," Stratus Military Reform Project March 2006 (http://www.cdi.org/program/document.cfm?DocumentID=3361&from_page=../index.cfm).

History is filled with examples of groups who find or create identities into which we can fit. Once a search of Google revealed few hits for "walled off communities," those enclaves where we pass gatehouses, often guarded, to keep out those who cannot afford entry, or who might be excluded for other reasons. Some monks live together in silence. Soldiers survive when they observe and defend the community that guards their backs. There are terrible examples. In the 1930s, Adolph Hitler's Nationalist Socialist Workers Party created a national community in which Arians dominated, and very nearly eliminated those of Jewish background. In ancient times, the crusades pitted Christian warriors against Muslim warriors. Groups often cannot conceive they are wrong and exclusionary, but sometimes do. Like deer and monkeys, we are also social. But we are also human. We live in communities in place, and we also lie in communities of shared interest. Most of what we learn about people and interests we necessarily learn from others or from media such as newspapers, television, radio, or magazines, or from email, Facebook, YouTube, Ipods, or other more individualized media. We float on a motorized boat on a Mississippi River of information. We are not powerless because we can float more around on the river, which is wide and slow in places and narrow and swift in other places. We constantly direct our boats in areas where we can both move and be still, matching our choices with the movement of the river to find a zone where we have flexibility of movement and the security of control.

We gather so often that we even have a phrase for it: Birds of a feather flock together. We gather in families, clubs, social and professional organizations. We bowl together although social observer Robert Putnam points out that we more often bowl alone that we formerly did, in leagues (Putnam, Bowling, 2001). We go to social events determined to mix but end up talking to those we know, or like, or with people who are, one way or another, like us. Perhaps we attended the same school as someone else, although in different years, or we are both Army veterans. There are strong temptations to mold the social environment to match out desire for comfort. At least we are aware of our tendency and we try hard to make ourselves meet new people, try new foods, sample books and newspapers we know we will not like, but sometimes do. If we related to the places we live, we use media of place, newspapers or local and nation television and radio. These media, like the pyramid, reach down vertically to all citizens. If we seek those with our own interests, we read magazines, watch cable channels, and attend to our own Twitter and Facebook pages – media that reach out horizontally, as it were, to those who share our interests. In fact, we argue, we mix the two agendas like papyrus paper, to create a comfortable horizontal zone.

The pharaoh, whether the pharaoh be president, king, dean, or plant director, remains important. But the pharaoh does not dominate our attention as surely as was true in the past. Vertical media agenda communities once dominated the country around them, and vertical media still do, but less so than they did three decades ago. The age of mass media dominance is passing, slowly, into history. Yet media are more important than ever.

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