

Missing the Point – Craving Attention

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During a break at a meeting several years ago, I was chatting with the guy sitting next to me while we ate sandwiches our host had ordered for us. I had the fresh turkey and Swiss on rye which, for a safe, ordinary sandwich, was surprisingly good. He had a meatball sub and was telling me, between bites, about how he'd been at a Friendly's restaurant a few days earlier when a TV station reporter came up to his booth. Apparently, the reporter – and her cameraman – were interviewing people at random for their opinions related to some local story. She asked him a couple of questions and subsequently aired his comments on the news, later that evening.

With considerable pride, he bragged to me about how he had assured that he would be selected for the segment by having purposely said something outrageous and more dramatic than how most people would have responded. That was the trick, he told me – but that wasn't what I took away from our conversation. All I can remember asking myself was why it was so important to him that he be on TV.

As it turns out, it's a common behaviorism that I have been thinking about more and more lately. It's the need for public exposure – and, if possible, for the adoration, real or imagined, of strangers – no matter how absurd or hurtful, even dangerous the means of accomplishing that objective.

Donald Trump's craving for public adoration is the example of our lifetimes. Thrown off Twitter, Trump was so desperate for the supportive fix of millions of followers that he created his own messaging platform, [Truth Social](#). Kanye West, who would rather lose a fortune in endorsements and other business relationships than not go public

with [his antisemitism](#), is another case in point. And then there's the recent purchase of Twitter by Elon Musk who overpaid by billions for his high-profile trophy acquisition – and then tweeted an [absurd conspiracy theory](#) alleging a special relationship between Paul Pelosi and his attacker.

What's going on? What's the relationship between such different people? Well, other than the fact that they're wealthy celebrities, it's that all three are experts at playing the media for the attention they need. The more attention they need, the more radical, the more outrageous their rhetoric and behavior to get and keep the attention of their following.

Trump is still claiming to have won his second run for President even though, as we now know, [he's never doubted](#) for a moment that he lost. Musk – unlike Trump who is both intellectually and ethically challenged – is a brilliant engineer and entrepreneur who can't help but squander a fortune of biblical proportions to put himself in the middle of liberating, so he says, the major social media of our time. Trump must be salivating with envy at Musk's display of wealth and the power of using it to his own advantage.

To paraphrase his triumphant tweet, Musk has “freed the bird,” having personally taken on nothing less profound than freedom of speech, however disruptive and threatening the process, as his *raison d'être* of the day. If ever there has been a reasonable basis for concern about the extreme concentration of wealth in a capitalist democracy, this is it. You've got to wonder if he believes that shouting “Fire!” in a movie theater or “Gun!!” at a crowded concert is protected by the First Amendment.

At least Kanye West, now known as just “Ye,” freely admits to having mental health issues – and, for that reason, deserves some measure of our forgiveness and concern for his welfare. That's not to say that his antisemitic rants don't express his real feelings. Quite to the contrary, he knows exactly what's he's saying and we should take him at his word.

Unfortunately, in our era of instant and never ceasing communications *about everything*, media – which are themselves competing for attention in their respective markets – can't help but feature the antics of these people. In what is almost a self-fulfilling prophesy, news media publicize the behavior of these exhibitionists, even while telling us how untruthful and potentially incendiary it is. But then, what choice do the news media have given that there is no way to defend truth and civility without discussing the outright lies and other misbehavior of the offenders?

The result of all this social and mainstream media coverage is the amplification and, to many, the legitimization of messages that threaten the founding principles of government in which the vast majority of us believe.

What starts with a few people of wealth and influence turns into movements that can take over everything from local government to a major political party for which the humble lemming, well known for following the crowd into oblivion, has replaced the elephant as its de facto mascot. (My apologies to lemmings everywhere for my using them in such a derogatory way.)

For those of us who care – and I have no doubt that we are a very significant majority of our country – there is no simple solution. No easy switch to turn off the light in which these leaders and their groupies bask and thrive. What can we do? We can speak up whenever the opportunity presents itself. Keep their advocates away from government and vote their leaders out of office. Decline to buy the products and services of companies that don't get it. Nothing more than relative poverty, for example, will silence the flow of Mr. West's encouragement to those who would respect his prejudicial rhetoric. Cutting him off from his endorsements was appropriate and the powerful thing to do.

Don't ever stay at a Trump hotel, whatever. Stop using Twitter to message or advertise, as General Motors has done, until it's clear what Elon Musk has in mind for that medium. Be observant but know that patient civility and respect for the truth are their worst enemies and our most effective defense of every we hold dear.

-Les Cohen

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