

# **Broadcasters: Head-Space Farmers in a New Ant Hill**

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When I left the MIT faculty in 1978, I had the dream that I would return as an emeritus professor when I was retired. A few days ago, I met an old colleague who had stayed on the academic career path during the 35 years when I went off being a technical and management consultant. As we talked about how our lives diverged, he described the MIT of 2009, where students did not come to classes, where research was about money not intellectual creativity and where the value system of teachers and students was nothing like I remember.

An image came to mind: if I went back to MIT, I would be like an immigrant in an unfamiliar culture. The MIT of 1969 now only exists in my mind. It is no longer a real place.

Another question came to mind: what happened to the good old days? That common phrase has the wrong emphasis. They were not necessarily good days, but they were familiar and comfortable. We had adapted to a world, and like the fish in water, we did not recognize the comfort that comes from a successful adaptation to our social medium.

If you have the opportunity to read some biographies of immigrants who moved from one country to another in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, you might notice that those of us who are older share a lot in common with these people even though we have not moved to a new country. I have lived my entire life in two northeastern cities in the US. I did not move, yet the culture changed under my feet; now, I too am an immigrant.

My observations are not new, but they highlight a more interesting concept; namely, we live in changing social and cultural systems. They may be company systems, industry systems, family systems, or economic systems.

What do I mean by a system? In some sense the answer is simple. A collection of small elements (people or modules), when connected and interacting, create a personality for the collection that is not located in any of the individual elements.

## **Think About Ants**

A good example of such a system is that of an ant hill, a system composed of thousands of individual ants. For one species, each ant has a one year life cycle, even though the ant hill itself has a 10 year life cycle from initial founding to final abandonment. This raises a question: where is the age of the ant hill located? How does each ant know to behave differently depending on the age of the hill even though each ant is biologically identical to every other ant?

The answer is both simple and complex. An ant that is born when the ant hill is two years old responds to that ant-hill system in a predictable way. During the following year, this generation of ants gradually changes the ant-hill system such that at the end of second year, the system is in fact different from the beginning of that year. The next generation of ants is born into a different system and thereby behaves differently.

The same holds for people. Each baby appears at a different stage of our cultural system and adapts to a different world. This adaptation makes them different when they become adults. Your kids, even if biologically identical to you as a kid, adapt to a different world with a different cultural system.

The broadcast industry is a perfect example. An engineer entering that industry in 1920 is joining the early stage of founding an “ant-hill.” Those entering in 1950 were contributing to growing and expanding a stable hill. Those entering in 2009 are now contemplating abandoning the old hill to create a new one someplace else. These periods are all different life stages of the broadcast ant hill, requiring different skills and adaptations.

The ant hill story does offer another insight. Each ant only lives for a short amount of time and the system is relatively stable for that year. For people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the reverse is true. I have lived through some dozen life-cycles of the “ant-hills” of a changing world. Hence, I become an immigrant as I move to new ant hills.

### **Time is Non-Linear**

A more important principle is that of measuring time. It is neither linear nor consistent; it should not be measured in years but as the percent of a cultural life cycle. For the previous example, each ant lived for 10% of the ant-hill life cycle, a relatively small percentage.

Until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the same was true for people. In a small village many generations would follow a slowly changing life cycle. You and your grandfather might have both been blacksmiths or farmers. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> you were very unlikely to have had the same career as your father. I have experienced more than a half-dozen cultural life cycles, which for the ant, corresponds to repeatedly leaving a familiar ant hill and starting a new one. My life span corresponds to 500% of a career system life-cycle, thus being an immigrant 5 times over.

How does this apply to a broadcast industry? What is the relevant cultural system that requires a rapid adaptation speed? We can understand the consequences of such cultural shifts by examining one particular cultural choice that began with the 19<sup>th</sup> century English middle class: consumerism on a large scale. This branch and the corresponding sub-branches have produced dramatic changes in our cultural system. Over the following centuries, large scale material consumption has become the economic engine that replaced the traditional economies of food, clothing, shelter, and capital goods. In fact

historically, objects were almost always treated as capital goods to be preserved, maintained, and passed along to successive generations.

Stay with me for a few more paragraphs. Mass consumerism requires an infrastructure that can manipulate people into adapting to a buying mentality. And advertising is a prerequisite for maintaining such an economic system. In 1950, my parents used their electronic appliances for 20 years. Now, we (including me), routinely replace and upgrade electronic systems; we collect DVDs, games, computers, televisions, automobile entertainment systems, and so on. The life span of objects has changed from multi-generations to a few years at best. To support an economy based on consumption requires a culture to capture the attention of potential consumers: advertising.

During previous stages of our social ant-hill, all transactions were based on paying cash for goods and services. Transactions are now based on selling head-space. Think of all the new business models for which valuable services are nominally free, Google being the obvious example. At one time, radio and newspapers were the only examples of selling head-space in exchange for something useful. A large percentage of our economy is now based on the transaction of exchanging head-space for goods and services. The theory is that once you have sold your head you will buy goods, and that cash is then used to support the system of capturing head space. The transaction is indirect.

The radio industry has become head-space farmers: harvesting the ears of helpless (or willing) animals to be herded into consumption arenas. Broadcast engineers simply make the farming process efficient. Unlike a century ago, there are now many companies engaged in head-space farming; newspapers and broadcasting have found themselves to be at a competitive disadvantage compared to new farmers using more sophisticated tools. Some farmers are simply more efficient than others.

As long as our head-space farmers are sufficiently productive, broadcasting can afford its traditional functions: paying reporters to risk their lives to cover major events around the world such as hurricane Katrina or the war in Iraq. But when the economic margins of our farmers get too thin, our industry has trouble affording the “luxuries” of an ant hill. Many decades ago, television news departments were terminated, and those functions were placed under entertainment executives. News and documentaries are still relevant but only if they contribute to the farming process. And sometimes, activities are simply loss-leaders to make our listeners incorporate radio into their lives. But directly or indirectly, executives focus on selling head-space.

## **Implications**

Having set the stage for this alternative viewpoint, we can begin to see that the implications are vast and sweeping, influencing all aspects of modern life. While waiting for the next article on this theme, try to analyze how the disruption of “free” in the current economic storm has been rippling through every cultural system. Broadcasting is simply one element in that very complex system.