



Breaking News

*The Sky Is **Falling!***

Why the media uses terror to sell toothpaste ... and why we buy it

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“If people in the media cannot decide whether they are in the business of reporting news or manufacturing propaganda, it is all the more important that the public understand that difference and choose their news sources accordingly.” — Thomas Sowell

Do you remember the children’s story about Chicken Little and Foxy Loxy? The Brothers Grimm tale starts when an acorn inexplicably falls and hits Chicken Little on the head. Panicking and believing the “sky is falling,” she sets out to tell all her friends. We’re then led on a madcap tour as Chicken Little and her friends scurry around telling everyone near and far that the sky is falling. In the end, they bring their message of doom to Foxy Loxy’s house and are never heard from again.



The fable is generally interpreted as a warning not to believe everything you hear. That lesson is more relevant now than ever.

Today, we’re bombarded with information from all over the media and from every point on the ideological spectrum. Depending on the day, you might hear that the United States has been taken over by extreme terrorists, or we’re about to die from some deadly foreign plague, or that martial law has been declared in Texas, or our

electrical grid is being attacked and we’ll be left in the freezing darkness. Is it really as bad as all that, or is the media just trying to scare us out of our sneakers (and into new ones)?

Media researcher Courtney Seiter believes that marketers know exactly what they’re doing.

“A study published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* demonstrated that consumers who expe-

rienced fear while watching a film felt a greater affiliation with a present brand than those who watched films evoking other emotions, like happiness, sadness or excitement,” Seiter writes.

“The theory is that when we’re scared, we need to share the experience with others — and if no one else is around, even a nonhuman brand will do,” she continues. “Fear can stimulate people to report greater brand attachment.” (Seiter, 2014)

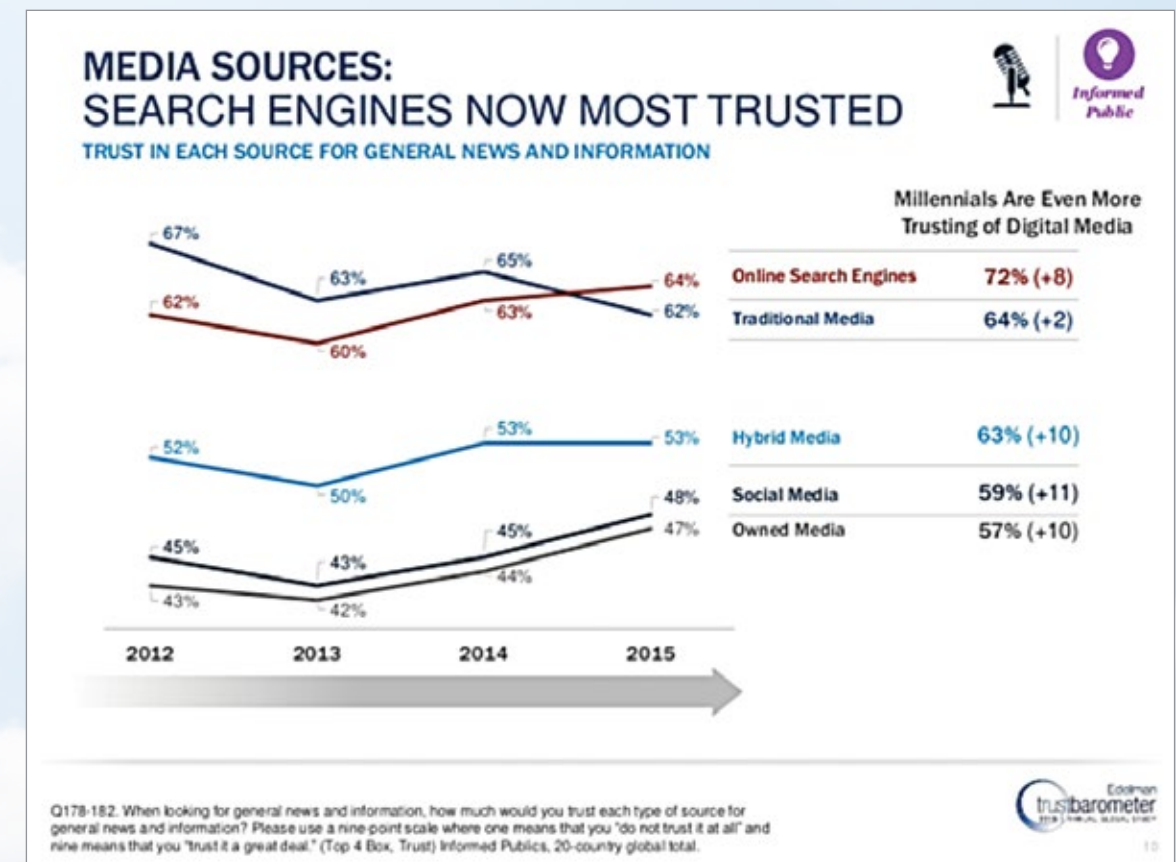
It’s entirely possible that marketers support this atmosphere of fear-based reporting as a way to enhance their marketing efforts.

In Media We Don’t Trust

According to a recent Gallup Poll, we don’t trust our media to get it right. In fact, trust in the media is at an all-time low, with recent poll results showing only 40% of those surveyed reported having trust in the media. That number has trended downward since 1997, the year Gallup started tracking these results. (Rifkin, 2015)

Why do our media have such a terrible reputation?

Gallup’s Rebecca Rifkin notes that the media has actively contributed to this atmosphere of distrust: “Some of the loss in trust may have



been self-inflicted. Major venerable news organizations have been caught making serious mistakes in the past several years, including, among others, the scandal involving former NBC Nightly News anchor Brian Williams in 2015 that some of his firsthand accounts of news events had been exaggerated or ‘misremembered.’” (Rifkin, 2015)

Journalistic integrity — including that sacrosanct division between editorial and advertising — is beholden to the agenda of the people publishing their version of the news.

Here’s the real question — how can we know the agenda of every media source that invades our space every day? How do we know the difference between actual fact and opinion? What possible agenda could there be for a news source to publish facts that are false or misleading? And how can we discern news from fear mongering, the kind that keeps us glued to the TV for hours?

Sifting Fact From Fiction

In today’s complicated media landscape, we have to understand that news organizations are profit-driven, just like any other business. The more viewers they can attract, the bigger their audience. The bigger their audience, the more they can charge advertisers.

News organizations are under increasing financial pressure and competition as media brands proliferate. Competitive pressure drives the prices those publishers can charge for that advertising downward, every year. As such, there are great pressures on news publishers to get and keep more viewers tuned in, giving their advertisers better exposure and, theoretically, a better return for their investment.

Add to the mix the fact that technology now allows anyone to publish their version of the “news.” The Wild West of Internet content doesn’t care about journalistic integrity, solid research, fact-finding, editorial oversight, or sensitivity to the audience. Today, if you have a keyboard, you’re a writer. And if you can garner eyeballs, you’re in business.

As viewership has shifted toward this kind of user-generated online content, so have advertising dollars. This leaves traditional sources of news and information scrambling for their piece of the ad pie, forcing them to find their viewers online, where they spend their time. Over the past decade or so, traditional news sources began looking like blogs, they began to use Twitter and Facebook, and they even began to recruit bloggers with large followings. The lines have become so blurred between fact and editorial or opinion content that they now all look the same. Many are blatantly partisan and use that partisanship to build large audiences of like-minded folks, a perfect boon for advertisers looking to reach that particular group of consumers.

According to Steve Rubel of global PR firm Edelman, “Essentially, we are all media. We act like the media, espousing opinions ... and in turn media has begun to act like us (blogging, tweeting, and becoming more opinionated vs. hard news oriented).” (Armano, 2010).

Becoming a Wiser News Consumer

So how do you find news and information you can trust? First, know your source. When consuming your news, ask yourself who is publishing the information. Then ask yourself why they are telling you this? What’s the purpose? In today’s 24-hour news cycle, media outlets compete for your attention nonstop. By its very nature, much of that time is filled with opinion and “expert analysis” rather than actual breaking news events.

Today’s media environment demands our discernment — keeping you tuned in is more important than giving you all the correct information. Learn to tell the difference between news events and the interpretation of those events in the media. My informal assessment seems to show about 80/20 slanted toward talk, opinion and interpretation. When they don’t have news to tell you, they talk about the news and what it might mean — and they get to show you more commercials if you’re glued to the screen, afraid to look away.

Know who owns the media sources you read and their agenda; it’s easier to learn this than you may think. If you’re reading news online, scroll to the bottom of their web page — the very bottom. In the page footer is the information you might expect to see in a newspaper masthead. You’ll see who the owner is, and most of the time, they’ll even publish a short “about us” page that will tell you who they are and why they are saying the things they are saying. Just a little wise research on your part will go a long way.

Look for multiple sources for the same information. Once you have a few sources, you’ll quickly see which ones are the outliers, more beholden to advertiser interests or non-news agendas than to giving you real information. As our media landscape devolves into a frenzied cry about “the sky is falling — stay tuned as we talk to three experts about what this means to you,” you need to understand that you can actually turn away without the world crumbling at your feet.

Finding your way to trusted information takes a little work, but it’s worth it. And really, you’re smart, you’re wise — and you’ve earned your wisdom. Put it to use as you seek out accurate news and information. And when Chicken Little comes knocking, saying the sky’s falling, you’ll know that it was only an acorn. ♦

TIPS for Becoming a Wiser News Consumer



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- Ask yourself who is publishing the information and why.
- Learn to tell the difference between news events and the interpretation of those events.
- Know who owns the media sources you read and their agenda.
- Look for multiple sources for the same information.
- Get outside and look at the sky.

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The three Senior Corps programs – RSVP, Senior Companions, Foster Grandparents are administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service, the federal agency that improves lives, strengthens communities and fosters civic engagement through service and volunteering.

