

The good news, and the bad news, lies in the further stratification of media, the way that is being accelerated by information technologies and in the application of those technologies to information gathering and distribution.

Many western societies now have stratified mainstream media cultures with increasingly less overlap among consumers of the various strata. News organizations can be situated within a grid that has one axis ranging along a spectrum from elite through popular to tabloid and another that moves from general to highly specific and specialized.

I've outlined the strains on general interest mass media like the national television networks. Compounding the problem for the national television networks is the emergence of strong specialty channels that siphon audience because they provide both alternate information sources and entertainment choice. They have far smaller cost bases and, unlike the main networks, a strong alternate revenue source through user pay which in some regulatory regimes is not market sensitive but amounts to a compulsory and guaranteed cash flow.

General elite vehicles are having a tough go as well assembling enough critical mass to be financially sustainable because elite consumers have a tremendous amount of choice of strongly competing alternatives. Elite, specialized media are steadily increasing their market share.

As well, we have developed a fully alternate elite news media that takes two forms: high cost, tightly edited and controlled intelligence gathering news letters that sell what used to be free and their inverse on the Internet: eclectic, unedited, free for all bulletin boards that give away what used to be sold.

Though it is far too simple a description, we may be in a transitional phase where the most commercially viable media, and the ones with expanding, loyal constituency, are those that provide mass, low end, product for people who are only marginally attached to information and public policy and specialized, high end products that are very specifically targeted to serve highly fragmented elite audiences but do so without any common agenda and foster, by definition, intramural, and largely invisible, debate.

None of this would be terribly important and could be dismissed as an artifact of the evolving marketplace, if it wasn't for the difficulties for governance posed by the twin dilemmas of agenda setting and diminishing shared information experience. If general media, both popular and elite continue to weaken, if news agendas and common experiences continue to differentiate, we will have pools of people with different information bases, different sets of agendas, different sets of expectations, different sets of standards for government performance, different sets of policy demands, and different levels of attachment to traditionally common institutions and values.