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# Art Kleiner

formerly edited this magazine. Art directed construction of the colossal Next Whole Earth Catalog, and introduced computers and telecommunications to Point Foundation. He teaches new media at New York University.

I feel like I've been suckered by information.

I've spent the past 12 years practicing journalism — pursuing facts that explain how the world works, hoping to educate myself by finding patterns. I bought the prevailing mood of the 1970s, the spirit of new journalism — remember? The Sixties had convinced us that reality was stranger and more interesting than anything fiction could dream up. (In fact, it took the traditions of fiction 15 years to get rid of the bankrupt, half-dead attitudes which current events had already proven wrong.)

Facts in *The Pentagon Papers* proved a war to be deliberately malign. Facts, coming to light after Watergate, toppled a presidency. Facts, dissecting every splinter group in America from car customizers to Elvis followers, convinced most people that most everyone else was irredeemably loony. If the facts could only be spread around and made available enough, they could change the world.

At the time, who could blame the writers, planners, prognosticators, politicians, and publishers who, in other times, might have become reasonably respectable liars — but now, instead, chose fact-gathering as a way of life? Truman Capote, Joan Didion, and Tom Wolfe inspired us by making facts sing. What's-his-name who wrote *Megatrends* became a corporate hero by clipping newspapers. We too lusted for the power we thought facts would give us. The data bank was mightier than the pen. By the early 1980s, even the jargon of psychobabble mimicked the jargon of information: "That tantrum informed us all, Mort, but I'd like to collect some more reactions before we evaluate it."

It was all made more seductive, of course, by the looming shadow of computers — particularly for me because information technology was my beat. I gathered facts about the world of fact-gathering, and facts about those facts. I thought that buried somewhere within, I would delve out the greatest story ever told, a story of redefined passions and reshaped relationships, forged around the glowing campfire of the phosphor screen. But I kept getting sidetracked. To learn about the reshaping of culture, I had to learn about computer networks. That meant learning about software. And privacy. And health hazards of computers. And on, and on . . .

Plus, I was working for *Whole Earth*, a magazine devoted to facts almost to the point of addiction. Have you ever noticed that the tone of this magazine is often like that of a smart-ass little brother, reminding you of all those facts you didn't ask for? "Wiring your house? There's a book on that — and it knows more than you do."

*Whole Earth* taught me that, to write about facts effectively, you have to have confidence in your interpretation of them. I remember composing the preface to the second *Next Whole Earth Catalog*, saying that our book contained some more-or-less arbitrary opinions. Stewart crossed it out. "Our opinions aren't arbitrary," he told me. At the time, I thought that



was an attitude of sheer bravado. Then I came to feel that the effort we put into researching the facts behind our judgments justified our self-assurance. There was a book on wiring your house, and it did know more than you do, dammit!

Now I'm not so sure. I'm inclined to agree, as Ronald Reagan blurted out this summer, that facts are stupid things.

In a traditional essay I might continue by preaching that we countercultural baby-boomers, we independent freethinkers, tend to wrap ourselves so deeply in facts that we lose sight of their deeper meanings. (Apparently the Vincennes sailors suffered from the same problem.) But that's just another factual point, and even if I cared, nobody else would. The juice of journalism (especially "interpretive" journalism) is dry; it's been done to death. What's fresh is the juice of storytelling. Truth is no longer more interesting; the compelling understandings are now in fiction.

Maybe the facts are too depressing — especially if you live in the New York region, as I do, and see how the ordinary glory and dignity of daily life has been diminished. (Here, your wealth is measured by your ability to escape daily life.) Or maybe the "whole systems" of the world are too complex to understand as simple agglomerations of facts; they can only be understood as mega-agglomerations, which most people lack the skills or machines to sift into something meaningful.

Or maybe we're just not biologically equipped for evaluating so much information. Ivan Illich recently said that the idea of "junk" — that some things are just not worth having — is only 200-odd years old. In the case of information that means that discriminating among facts is alien to our innermost natures.

Or maybe it's just me. Maybe I'm downhearted because twelve years of gathering facts has made me rusty at telling stories. I console myself by thinking that the skills of information-gathering and storytelling are not that far apart. Or maybe what I'm looking for is the greatest story never-to-be-told. Hell, I don't know what that means either, but who cares? The heat wave's over, and so are my 800 words. They've cleared the algae out of the lake. I'm going swimming. Hit a serve for me, and say hello to Fred. ■

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