

## **The Cucumber Season: Reflections on the Nature of Information when there isn't any.**

*By Espen Andersen*

I would like to introduce a new term to the English language: "Cucumber season". The term, from Norwegian, refers to the period from sometime in early June, when Parliament and the public schools recess, until mid-August when the schools start up again and people return from their summer holidays. The name of this season comes from the observation that during this period, newspapers have little to write about – since nothing much happens – and so are forced to report on non-news, such as oversized and/or weirdly shaped vegetables such as cucumbers. By extension, the term refers to newspaper articles as well – a padded-out news item of dubious importance and inflated headline is referred to as a cucumber.

Which (since the cucumber season is in full swing for this august publication as for any other) gives me reason to reflect: How does the nature of information change when there is little of it?

Information content is actually subject to laws, much like Newton's laws of physics. The Newton of information theory was MIT professor Claude Shannon, who in 1948 wrote an article called "The Mathematical Theory of Communication" in the *Bell System Technical Journal*. (Incidentally, Shannon was known as the epitome of the eccentric (he was interested in juggling and unicycling) and absent-minded professor, once asking a colleague he had met and conversed with at length in MIT's "endless corridor" which direction he had come from. When so informed, he said "Good – then I have had lunch," thereby proving (or, at least, illustrating) his own theory, as we shall see later.)

The Mathematical Theory of Communication (later popularized and expanded into a book with Warren Weaver) forms, as the title says, the mathematical underpinning for much communications technology. One central statement is that the value of a message (that is, the information content) is inversely related to the probability of receiving it. That is, the less likely you are to receive a message, the more important you will think its contents.

Let's pause for a small illustration here. The town Bergen is located on Norway's West coast, facing the North Sea and hemmed in by high mountains. Consequently, it rains a lot. In fact, if you go there, you are likely to be told the story of the tourist couple who jokingly asked a small boy whether it always rained in Bergen, and got the answer "I don't know – I am only five years old.)

Clearly, the message "It will rain tomorrow" does not carry much value in Bergen. In the Sahara, however, a sage wishing to establish his clairvoyance (or access to the latest communications equipment) predicting rain would establish hard core credibility, provided that the expected downpour materialized, of course.

(If I may go out on a tangent here, knowledge of this law may give you a good time the next time you attend a corporate strategy presentation. These are usually rather dull affairs with an executive dishing out platitudes and calling them strategies, such as "Our goal is profitable growth" or "Our strategy is to satisfy our customers." Neither of these statements are strategies, of course, since strategy implies choice. So, next time you hear a CEO droning on like this, raise your hand and ask him or her: "That is a very good strategy, but what alternative strategies have you rejected by settling on this one?" A good time is guaranteed.)

So, there is more information in a message the less likely you are to receive it. And this helps you pick out what is important in the constant torrent of information that now surrounds us. You remember that which surprised you. Consequently, a purveyor of information needs to surprise you to keep you interested. The degree of surprise is a function of the legitimacy of the source itself (think *National Enquirer* vs. *The New York Times*) and to what extent the same message is coming from other sources at the same time (thus accumulating legitimacy.)

When there is little information around, however, we tend to overfocus on what little information there is. Attention is a finite resource, and information items compete for it. Less information around, more attention directed to each item.

Astute message senders know this. Some authors have succeeded in increasing the weight given to their emissions by either cloaking their personal lives in secrecy (J. D. Salinger and Thomas Pynchon, for instance) or very publicly cutting off output (Tom Lehrer). (A learned and prolific writer friend of mine was considering this strategy over a glass of wine recently, concluding that it might be a good idea but that he would not be able to contain himself long enough for the hiatus to have promotional value – his personal limit of two weeks offline before reappearing to a thankful world simply doesn't cut it.) Joe Klein, anonymous writer of *Primary Colors*, undoubtedly increased sales of his book first by his anonymity and then by his (apparently unwilling) unmasking by Don Foster – who used techniques based on information theory to do it. Deliberate confusion can also work: John Twelve Hawks, the pseudonym behind the writer of the science fiction/spy story *The Traveler*, has invented a whole identity for himself, claiming to live "off the grid" without identifiable information, and including tips on how to do so in his book. (For practical training, see the web site at <http://www.randomhouse.com/features/traveler> My guess? Probably a publicity stunt – the author will turn out to live in a suburb with three kids, an urban assault vehicle, a broadband connection and several other books to his real name. Just wait for the text analysis).

The fact remains: When news is scarce, we may lower our attention but still have enough to give more to each item. Since senders and receivers have a shared interest in keeping the communication going (in case any real news happens) they collaborate by lowering the bar on what is considered newsworthy. That opens opportunities for anyone with a message: The publicity-seeking and availability-offering politician, the organizer of the less than stellar cultural event, the company launching yet another me-too product, all know that when news is slow, access is possible.

There are, to quote the well known web log *Marginal Revolution*, "markets in everything." In the information market, the currency is attention, and the amount of attention given to a message (absent access to other reader's attention scores) determined by the inverse of the probability of getting it, adjusted for other, available messages.

Hence this essay – which may not be improbable or unexpected, but at least, given the season, might qualify as an oddly shaped cucumber.

*References:*

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John Twelve Hawks: *The Traveler*. Doubleday, 2005

*Espen Andersen (www.espen.com) would dearly like to withhold information on himself in order to increase his importance, but fear that it is already too late.*

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