Your on the
Street Reporter

Uyless Black

Trivial Pursuits:
"Borrowing" Trivia and Publishing it on the Internet

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Hello from Your on the Street Reporter. Last week, I came across an article about a young entrepreneur named Emerson Spartz and his website, www.dose.com.[2] Clearly an intelligent man, at the age of 12 (1999) he created MuggleNet, a website about the Harry Potter books. It became the most popular Harry Potter site in the world.

He is known to be an avid reader, but admitted he is losing interest in books. His focus is not on content of, say, the books on a website, but on how many viewers he can entice to go to the Website and be exposed to its advertisements:

> …traffic [at dose.com] is generated almost entirely through
> Facebook…Most of the company's innovations concern not the content
> itself but how it is promoted and packaged.[3]

Little original content comes from dose.com. Most content is user generated. Spartz's multiple sites have sixty million hits per month. The contributors to the web's content get their few seconds of fame. Dose.com and other sites run by Spartz get the advertising income from websites that, once up, pretty much run by themselves.

One of Spartz's investors says, "I keep hearing people around town talking about this young man as a Steve Jobs kind of guy. I think his stuff is indicative of where digital media is headed."[4]

Steve Jobs? Mr. Jobs created something. Mr. Spartz…well, let's let him speak for himself:

> [One of Spartz's early websites, Brainwreck] "leaned more toward
> originality," Spratz said---they featured novel combinations of images,
> with text that reflected at least a few minutes of online research----but with
> Dose "we've stopped doing that as much because more original lists take
> more time to put together, and we've found that people are no more likely
> to click on them."[5]

At least he is honest about the matter. And he is correct: Creating something takes more time than not creating something. Also, in a sense he is a Steve Jobs kind of guy. He is the Steve Jobs of using others' content and making big money on it.[6]

I am writing this report as a biased party, as I am a content creator. I believe that content thieves, those who purposely steal *for profit* and do not share that profit with the content creators

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[1] Thanks to http://youthvoices.net/discussion/when-someone-looking-over-your-shoulder
 the image in the thought cloud on the cover.
[2] Andrew Marantz, "The Virologist," *The New Yorker,* January 5, 2015.
[3] Ibid., 21.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 22.
[6] Of course, Mr. Jobs got a few of his ideas (mouse, trash icons, etc.) from the Palo Alto Research Center (PARC).

are breaching the laws of ethics and fair play. Nonetheless, making money for the sake of making money, going viral for the sake of going viral seems to be a popular trend. Much of Wall Street's greed and near demise in 2008 came through the creation of financial instruments that had no social value to America.

I do not mind if my content is used by others, as long as I am cited, and for commercial use (beyond the Fair Use laws), and receive compensation. Each year, I receive a check from a European firm that extracts material from my books, distributes these extractions to others in the EU, and sends a check to me.

As a content creator of commercial material, I am compensated for my work; no less than a plumber or a CEO is compensated for their labors.

Bottom of the Food Chain: The Creator of Content

In a digital world as dynamic as the Internet, content is shuffled around among websites, servers, archives, and end-user machines at astounding speed and volume. Regardless of copyright laws, ownership of content can become murky or even lost. Given this situation, it becomes almost impossible to credit the source of some content, especially if the content creator is a small-time player, in contrast to, say, NBC. Here is a typical example:

- Dose's most successful list is titled, "23 Photos of People from All Over the World Next to How Much Food They Eat Per Day." The page cited a source (sort of) with a "hat tip" to Elite Daily.

- The citation itself linked to Elite Daily, a website that had earlier published, "See the Incredible Differences in the Daily Food Intake of People Around the World." This page was linked to UrbanTimes, thus implying Urban Times was the authoritative source.

- Note: Urban Times did not create the content, yet Urban Times was cited as the source by Elite Daily. The original creators of the content became lost in the morass of a software-driven, copy-and-paste digital world. This non-attribution tree had additional roots:

- Urban Times' page proclaimed, "80 People, 30 Countries, and How Much They Eat on a Daily Basis." Urban Times credited the Amusing Planet website and its list of: "What People Eat Around the World."

- The Amusing Planet site made reference to a radio interview of two people who actually created the content that these websites used: Peter Menzel and Faith D'Aluisio and their book, *What I Eat: Around the World in 80 Diets.* The Dose site mentioned these authors but did not mention the book's title.[7]

Menzel and D'Aluisio and spent four years and almost a million dollars (of their own money) to bring this book to the market. They hoped to regain their investments of time and money with book sales. Obviously, the value of their information was diluted with these website postings.

The U.S. Fair Use laws likely protect these websites for using a small extract from the book. But Dose.com (and others) make their living by extracting small amounts of information

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[7] Marantz, "The Virologist," *The New Yorker*, 23.

from *hundreds of sources*, repackaging the information, and selling the entire set as value-added work.

The websites likely have the right to use this limited material from Menzel and D'Aluisio's book. My criticism is not about the content itself (to each his/her own taste, so to speak). My criticism is the off-handed citation of the source of these lists. The authors are being denied their just due, but given the scope and magnitude of the digital Internet, their protests are little more than noise in the "Information should be free!" spectrum.

It is bad enough that content creators, such as Menzel and D'Aluisio do not get income from their efforts, but they also lose the much of the satisfaction that comes from their creation: acknowledgment of their intellectual feat. I would not be surprised if it is Spartz who eventually appears on Charlie Rose, but not Menzel and D'Aluisio.

Lists and Short Sayings: Mental "Sound" Bites

The success of websites such as Dose, Elite Daily, and Urban Times come from their attractive packaging of short pieces of information, such lists and terse quotes. In keeping with the sound bite world of today, they mimic Twitter and MTV's abbreviated shots of information.

Below is a screen showing an example of the approach used by Dose. The emphasis on provocative words and phrases (circled in red) in the list's title is the key to enticing the viewer to click on the link and discover: There are almost as many advertisements as there is content.
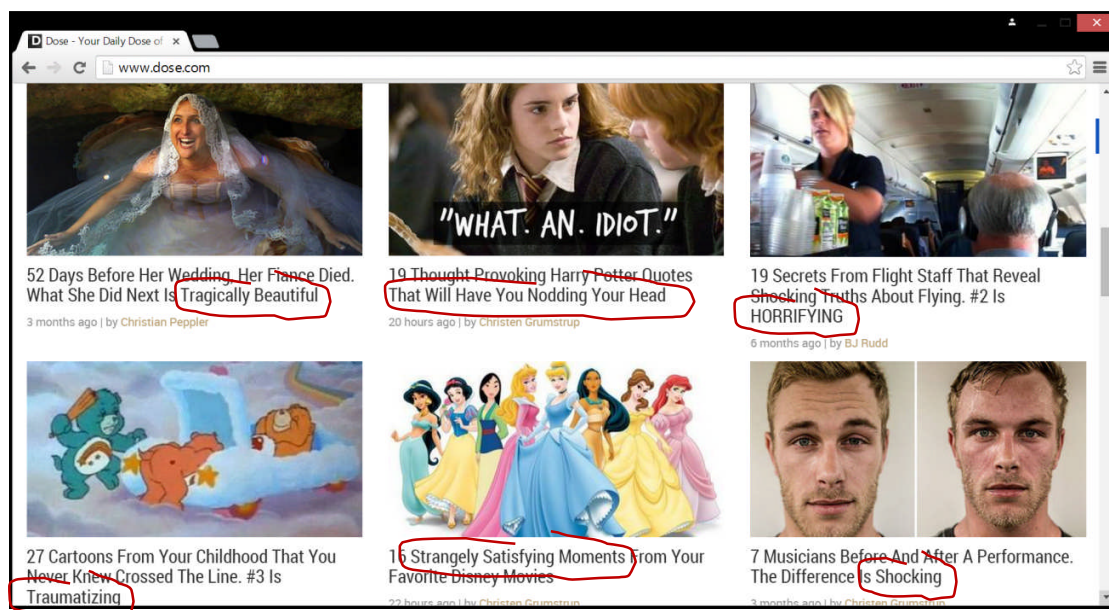
I clicked on the topic about musicians' appearance changing during a performance. Other than their hair being wetter than before, I could not tell much difference. Nonetheless, the two images were more of an enticement to look at the list than the dry declaration of "7 Musicians Before and After a Performance. The Difference is Shocking." I admit the word "shocking" got my attention. Our son is a musician. I opened the link in hopes of not finding his face in this far-ranging study.

Shocking? No, Trivial? Yes. How about comparing the faces of coal miners before and after their shift? Or the faces on Marines and SEALs after extracting a terrorist in al Queda

country? Firemen? Policemen? How about comparing Uyless Black's face before and after looking at these websites?

Granted, Dose and others do not attempt to do hard journalism. Nor do they do much content creation. They substantiate the old saying that everything is derived from something else. Not completely, Dose spends time and effort creating catchy titles and headlines. That is where creativity comes into play.

So, it is not about the content that matters to these people. It is about the content's packaging. Is this a new concept? It is as old as the advertising profession itself. The digital and software world of today simply make this practice much easier to carry out.

Which Would you Rather View and Read?

Let's do a test. Read the four lines of text below (a check mark is next to them). Think about the four ideas (which are unrelated to one another) and ask yourself: Did the idea make an impression on me?

- ✓ Why do we think we are superior because of a genetic roll of the dice?

- ✓ Our memories of past pleasant times become our own personal folklore.

- ✓ Upon our births, you and I had no choice as to which womb contributed to our skin color.

- ✓ Those who do not look back to their past are often blind to their future.

Now, look at the next page.
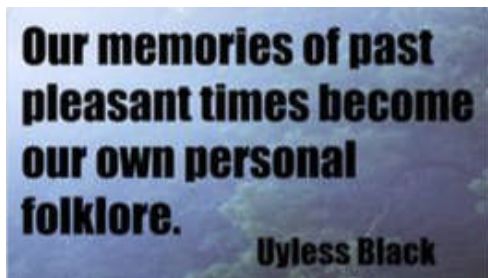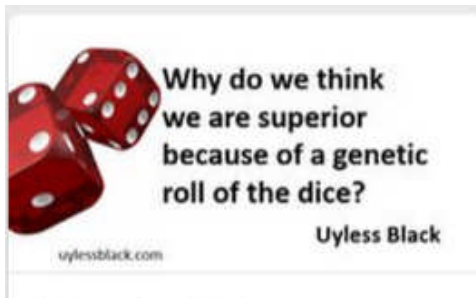
Both formats carry identical thoughts. However, the list on the previous page is not as jazzy as the images above. Perhaps Spartz and company have it right after all. It's not the content that counts, it's the glitz surrounding the content that matters.