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Bob Garfield on “The Chaos Scenario”

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KENNEALLY: There’s nothing the devil loves more than confusion and chaos, which makes media guru Bob Garfield a good candidate for separated at birth with old Beelzebub himself, because Bob Garfield in his new book, *The Chaos Scenario*, just published by Stielstra Publishing, comes across as devilishly gleeful about the absolute chaos now wreaking havoc on newspapers, radio, TV, and, well, you name it. Bob, welcome to Beyond the Book.

GARFIELD: Thanks, Chris. Our next guest is Satan. He joins us now. Satan, welcome to Beyond the Book.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) Absolutely. Well, I mean, while there’s still time before the end of the world, Bob, you say that we are in the midst of total collapse of the media infrastructure as we know it, otherwise known as the death of everything. I know you’ve been asked this before, but it’s the obvious question. Is it really that bad out there?

GARFIELD: Yeah, it’s that bad. I mean, we’re not at the beginning of the collapse, we’re in sort of the middle of the collapse. But you know what it looks like when a building falls down. It seems to happen in slow motion, then all of a sudden, kaboom. And we are just before the kaboom. And the reasons are very simple. It has to do with, first of all, the fragmentation of audiences, so that any given medium, whether it’s CBS television or the *Boston Globe*, have a smaller audience than they had before, and therefore the publishers are able to fetch less per – less advertising revenue, and the value of advertising itself is going down, so they can no longer create the content that we have grown accustomed to for the last three and a half centuries with the revenue coming in. And that is a vicious cycle.



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The second problem is, the Internet has created – taken barriers of entry into the media business down to near zero, so Courtney the eighth-grader has equal access to an audience as CBS. And she doesn't have the billion dollar of plant and equipment and capital infrastructure. She can just make her blog and get at it, or post on YouTube, or her blog, or what have you.

And the third thing is, in a world of endless inventory, CBS, Courtney, and everybody else online, that naturally drives – with the supply in the ultimate glut, that means the demand has to diminish, which drives down prices, which means not only the audience is smaller, but the amount of money you're able to fetch for a single audience member goes down. And next thing you know, full-blown collapse.

KENNEALLY: Yeah, disaster. And it's a disaster, as you say, in the making for some time now. Your book itself likewise in the making for something like five years, and maybe five years ago it could be understandable if someone in the business said, well, Garfield, you're exaggerating, or it's not going to be that bad, or we'll find some way to monetize that content, or whatever. But in 2009, that kind of talk is getting less and less believable.

GARFIELD: That's true. I mean, people would say to me over and over and over, oh, we have the audience, all we need is a business model. (laughter) And all we need to do is conquer the speed of light – only, you know, you can't do that, and there is no business model. Audience in a digital world does not guarantee you anything. Nor does the desire of everybody to not lose the things that we've had all this time – free high production value TV, quality journalism, and slick magazines, and everything else that we've come to expect as a birthright. Nobody wants to give up new episodes of *Lost*, but you know, Chris, I've pored over the 10 commandments. There is nothing in there that says you're entitled to free and subsidized media. Nothing.

KENNEALLY: Well, then what's a media person to do at this point? There has been talk recently about trying to switch over on at least the news Websites to a pay-per-play or pay-per-view model. What do you think about the potential for that?

GARFIELD: I hate clichés, but this is sort of the quintessential case of trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube, because the newspapers in particular made a decision about a decade ago. They said, look, this is going to be an advertising-supported medium just like all the previous media had been advertising-supported, and the key to ad support is to maximize your audience. So they gave everything away free, and sure enough, they got a maximum audience. I mean, the audience for the *New York Times* is much, much, much, much, much larger than it ever was, by one



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or two orders of magnitude, at any time in its history. But the value of the audience to advertisers goes down, down, down, down, down, down. And they just fail to take into account the very simple but very pesky law of supply and demand. In an infinite glut of advertising inventory, the price you're going to be able to set for that inventory is going to be depressed. And that's what the *New York Times* and every other newspaper has discovered. They can't make the money for the online no matter how big their audience is.

But that's a decision they made a decade ago. They made the wrong bet, and now they're going to try to say, oh, you know what, our bad, we will try to charge you for content. But – sorry, no can do, because we have all come to believe that stuff is free. You give something away for free for 10 years, and then you tell your audience, oh, by the way, now we're going to charge you for it, they're very, very, very unlikely to say, oh, well – oh, sure, OK, sure, thanks for the 10 years of free content, here's my credit card. No, we've been trained to believe that all content is free.

KENNEALLY: Well, again, that's the sort of thing that produces, I'm sure, plenty of glum faces around the offices in Manhattan and elsewhere. But in the book, *The Chaos Scenario*, you offer some more optimistic ways of looking at the situation. And you certainly, while you predict the demise of the current scenario, the sort of pre-chaos scenario, you also point to where we may be headed in the future. And there's a phrase that you've got here, listenomics. Can you define that for us, and tell us why listening is going to make a difference?

GARFIELD: Sure. Well, before I tell you about listening, let me tell you – let me describe the – listening is the way of – for all institutions in the brave new world. In the cowardly old world that we're leaving behind, listening was held in poor regard. It was a dictation world. The people at the apex of power structures dictated to the customer, to the audience, to the electorate, to the congregants, exactly what they had to say. They said, this is how it's going to be, and we were all kowtowing before the man – whether the man was the TV networks, which were going to tell us which shows to watch, or the Procter & Gamble, which told us what kind of toilet paper we were going to use, and so forth. And everything is reversed. The power flow has reversed, because we are all connected now, we all have a voice, and not only can we talk back to the institutions, we can talk to one another about the institutions, and create quite a fuss doing it.

So in the first instance, because we can now talk back, it behooves institutions – let's just say Comcast, the giant cable corporation – to stop being arrogant, and stop assuming that it has the last word. They discovered the hard way – there's a whole chapter in my book about this – that if you piss the wrong person off, they



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can take that anger and coalesce, essentially, a mob to force a gigantic corporation into submission. And I know that, because I was the one who got pissed off, and I was the one who (laughter) formed the mob. It took a year, but eventually, this little David slew the Comcast Goliath.

KENNEALLY: Can I just say, it really does sound like you enjoyed that whole thing.

GARFIELD: Well, there is a certain – what’s the word – I don’t know –

KENNEALLY: There’s a devilish pleasure you –

GARFIELD: Yes, there is a devilish pleasure into taking a gigantic, soulless corporation and making it bow to your will, yes. I’ve got to say it appeals to your vanity. But more to the point, it was a lesson in the power of the crowd.

So as I was saying, in the first instance, organizations, whether it’s the US Government or Comcast, have to understand that the crowd is empowered in a way it never has been before in human history. And secondly, once they embrace that idea and internalize it, they’ll discover that it is also the greatest treasure trove of ideas and energy and passion and commitment and evangelism ever coalesced in all of human history. And the aggregated IQ, the aggregated energies of this crowd can, once you mobilize them, can give you astonishing value, more value than you could have ever gotten in-house, or from your network of consultants, or whatever. It’s a fantastic resource, the largest institutional resource ever, and now you can – if you only take time to listen, oh, the things it offers you.

KENNEALLY: Well, there’s a danger in it, though, it seems to me. And while I’m as fascinated as you are, by the way, the crowd does talk back now. I’ve become addicted to the comments section in the *Boston Globe* online news site. No matter what the story is, people are commenting. They comment on coverage of Little League baseball games the same way they comment on coverage of the Obama healthcare initiatives. And if you really do want to know what your neighbors are thinking about – and, as you say, what they are thinking not only about the issue, but about the *Boston Globe* coverage itself – it’s just terrific. It’s immediate access. You’re taking the temperature right there.

But there seems to me to be a real trick involved, because on the one hand the crowd can get you by the throat if you’re the media provider. On the other hand, as the media provider, you’re trying to walk arm in arm with the crowd. It’s tough, isn’t it?



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GARFIELD: It is tough, and leave us not forget that when you start listening, you're going to hear a lot of stuff that is dispiriting. Some of it is hateful, some of it is stupid, some of it is partisan and ideological to a fault, some of it is hateful, some of it's illegal. And there's a signal-to-noise ratio, and it can be difficult to find the signal. But in a digital world, there are tools out there that enable you to sort through all the chatter, much like the NSA does with its listening posts around the world, and find the nuggets of very important, actionable information. And some of this is done with computer software, and some of it's done with common sense. But the whole point is, there's tons and tons and tons of stuff out there that you now have access to that you never did before.

KENNEALLY: Well, in fact, you were talking about listening, and you're putting it into practice with this book. And the interesting aspect to book publishing is that, because it hasn't been as dependent on advertising as other forms of media, it seems to stand apart. But it's not so far off from all of this that it's entirely unaffected. Tell us a bit how your book is an experiment in putting listenomics into practice.

GARFIELD: Well, thank you for that question, because I've been dying to answer it. This is a book about embracing the art and science of listenomics, of not talking to the crowd from atop the mount, but by dealing with my audience as participants, stakeholders, fellow travelers. So in many ways this has manifested itself in how we're creating, publishing, marketing, distributing the book. Just a small detail, the cover. First, we crowdsourced it to a Website called crowdSPRING. And instead of going to a single cover designer and sort of living with the results, we sent it out to the world at large, and got 200-some solutions, and chose the three best from our perspective, and then put it out to our crowd, the audience of potential chaotic, as we call them, and let them vote on which they thought was the best expression of the chaos scenario, and that's the cover for the book. So crowdsourced to create, crowdsourced to the finalist. Almost – the book has 12 chapters in it, but it actually has a – it's a 13-chapter book, because the last chapter is being written as we go through the publishing process, and it will appear eventually online in something like finished form. But there is a blog online where we are keeping track of our success in publishing this book the way we're doing it. And we're highlighting our successes and our failures, our assumptions, our misassumptions, and it's all fully transparent, in full public view, when I triumph and when I step in a bucket of drek. And eventually, this will be sewn together into the online-only 13th chapter of the book, and I do not know how that's going to come out.

On the Website, which is called thechaosscenario.net, it is a news hub for all information that's going on with respect to all things chaos. There is a blog there in which people can go back and forth and kind of hash out the issues that are



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attendant to the death of several major industries and the creation of new ones. When the Website is in its final form, we're going to have a – kind of a old-media graveyard, and an old-media intensive care unit so we can keep track of who has succumbed and who is on death's door, and many other features that invite the group formerly known as the audience to participate at every stage, as we try to figure out what this is all about.

And in October we're doing this unprecedented event – it's called 30 Days of Chaos – in which these huge national and actually international membership organizations like the Public Relations Society of America and the Direct Marketers' Association and the American Advertising Federation and the American Marketing Association will fan out the chaos questions to all of its chapters worldwide, and they will devote the month of October to figuring out what this all means, chaos and listenomics means in their own markets, their own communities, their own careers. And there will be a national, actually international conversation about these issues. And all of this – but none of this happens in a vacuum. The hub is this Website in which everybody participates, and the community decides what's important and what isn't.

So we'll see. We're selling the book – originally the book was available only on Kindle for 30 days, then – that was in the month of July. We're in the month of August. As we speak, the book is available at Amazon in paper form, and also through – directly through our Website, thechaosscenario.net. In the month of September we will fan out to brick and mortar stores, and by October, for 30 Days of Chaos, we should have pretty much full distribution. But it's – we had to invent a publishing company to do this. No traditional publisher was willing to market the book according to the principles espoused in the book, so we've had to do it ourselves. And that's what Stielstra Publishing is all about.

KENNEALLY: Right. Can I ask you, though – I mean, it's funny when you say that no publishing house was willing to do it this way. Are they so confident in the model they have – I mean, if you look at it, it's the world's most insane business model, it would seem to me. You write a book, you publish it, you think the world wants this book, and then you put them in bookstores, pile them high, and watch them fly. There's very little research done on what the market is going to think of this project. And here you're doing something that I would think would give a publisher exciting, useful information to help them sell the book. And they turned you down?

GARFIELD: Well, let's say they – I got 50 letters, approximately, from publishers who declared me a genius, and then said, but we don't want to do it this way for the following reasons. And – the audience is not going to be interested in this subject,



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we've heard it all before, it's – where are the takeaway points, how is this news to use, blah blah blah blah blah. And this may have had to do with the fact that I just don't have the right mix in the manuscript. Or it could have to do with the idea that this is a hidebound industry doing business in 2009 approximately the same way it did business in 1909. And the status quo is a very, very powerful force, and change is difficult. And change is particularly difficult in the midst of economic decline, in the recession. For whatever reason, the publishing industry is doing all the same things it ever did, just less of it. It's just publishing more titles, putting more money behind a few titles, instead of spreading the risk as it has done traditionally by – the publishing business, until now, has been about buying a lot of titles, throwing them out into the marketplace, and seeing where the market connects; with a little bit of promotion on the margin, putting stuff on shelves – I'm sorry, on tables in the front of bookstores, and paying a fee to retailers to display stuff that way with hopes of priming the pump. But basically, publishing hasn't changed dramatically in the last century, and what I'm proposing is a dramatic change, and who doesn't resist dramatic change?

KENNEALLY: Yeah. Well, I guess the book publishing industry can. We've been chatting with Bob Garfield, who is a co-host of National Public Radio's *On the Media*, a columnist, critic, book author, author of the recently published *The Chaos Scenario*, coming out in various stages over the next few months. And, finally, Bob, let me just ask you – it's a book that has been in the works for some time, and as a writer, I have to ask you the question – given how fast everything's moving, and how in 2005 YouTube didn't really even exist yet, how much rewriting, how much rethinking did all of this demand of you, or did you pretty much get things right from the beginning?

GARFIELD: (laughter) I got it right from the beginning. I mean, the central premise of the book, it has not changed in five years. That is, that the old media structures are going to collapse before the new digital world is built out enough to begin to replace what we're going to lose. So that's the chaos scenario, and that hasn't changed. The only thing that has changed is just about everything else. I mean, as you said, when I started writing this, there was no YouTube. Not there was no Twitter, not there was no Hulu, there was no YouTube.

KENNEALLY: Facebook, for crying out loud.

GARFIELD: Yeah, which is – these things have changed human behavior and the media dynamics on a grand scale. So it's been hard. Writing a book about the transition – actually, transition's not the right word, but – because it's an abrupt shift, a tectonic shift from the old media world to the new one – is approximately like trying to sketch the Kentucky Derby in progress, because every time you lift your



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head up, it's – the picture has dramatically changed. So that's why it took me more than four years to do. This is a 300-page book. I probably could have done it in 18 months, push come to shove, but that I had to constantly, constantly, constantly go back and revise and update and so forth. And I think I finally got it distilled to the point where, no matter what innovation comes along in the next 12 months, they will be covered, in principle, in the chapters of the book, if not in the particulars. So I'm feeling pretty comfortable now that the issues I'm discussing are on the verge of being timeless, even if the details are not.

KENNEALLY: Well, predicting the end of the world is a lousy job, Bob, but somebody has to do it, and we're very glad that you did. We've been speaking with Bob Garfield, author of the book *The Chaos Scenario*, published by Stielstra Publishing. We'll put information up on the Beyond the Book site all about it, how you can get it, and how you can join 30 Days of Chaos. And despite the title for it, it doesn't sound like we need to be too worried about what your plans are for October. Thanks again for joining us on Beyond the Book, Bob.

GARFIELD: Thanks for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: And this is Chris Kenneally for Beyond the Book. Thank you for listening.

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