

The Coasts and the Chasm

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An alarming thought went through my mind recently. What if the tidal pull of the earth's oceans is influencing our businesses and society in ways we don't even recognize? As I looked through my pile of reading material, and then considered my investment portfolio, I realized that the vast majority of the information generated today in print and electronically either originates in or is controlled by people located within 100 miles or less of the ocean(s).

Maybe there is some phenomenon bigger than the Internet at work. Most major book publishers are located in New York, Boston, or San Francisco. The same can be said for major magazines and national newspapers. Ditto the headquarters for major TV networks — nearly all in or around New York or L. A. Do "birds of a feather flock together", or is there some other, more mysterious force at work?

Then I realized that between San Diego, Silicon Valley and Seattle on one coast, and Boston to Washington, DC on the other, the coastal influence was even more striking. Check the market capitalization of companies on the major stock exchanges and see where the headquarters of the biggest and most valuable are located. Cisco, Microsoft, GE, Intel, IBM, Lucent, AOL, Time-Warner, and on and on—all within 100 miles (or much less) of the oceans.

Of course it is a given that much of the nation's policy originates in Washington, DC. Most of the country's financial wealth is brokered and traded on Wall Street, in NYC, where else? Then consider that many of the legendary universities: Stanford, UCLA, Harvard, Wharton, MIT and many others are all located in these two narrow bands of geography.

Is there anything wrong with this? Maybe, maybe not! There is not really a "chasm"—physical or intellectual—between these coastal bands of influence. A lot of very important stuff goes on in the middle 2000+ miles of the U.S. A. For starters, almost all of the food we eat is grown or raised there. Nearly all of the "creature comforts" that aren't made in the Orient are made in the good old central U. S. —the chasm. It is often called the "Rust Belt" but it isn't so rusty any more.

Try to do without furniture, carpets, beverages, automobiles, plastics, gasoline, steel, appliances, computers, pipes, wires, fiber optics, and the tools and machinery needed to actually produce all of this and much more. The vast majority of these are made in the "chasm"—nowhere near the coasts. People actually make physical things there, instead of just having ideas and reducing them to words on paper, policy in laws or digits in cyberspace.

But much less is said or written about those who reside and work in the chasm, except in the media that is mostly regional, local or of a "controlled circulation". This means they go primarily to the same people that they are created about and for. Of course there are

some national media in the chasm—WGN, Chicago's TV super-station comes to mind, as does Turner Broadcasting in Atlanta with its CNN, TNT, TBS, etc. MCI Worldcom is even a non-coastal company—for now anyway. UPS in Atlanta and FedEx in Memphis deliver the goods and are "chasm dwellers". Dell & Compaq actually make lots of computers in the chasm. But these are the exceptions, not the rule. They (mostly) make things!

There are even real cities located in the chasm: Atlanta, Charlotte, Nashville, Dallas, Houston, Phoenix, Denver, St. Louis, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and lots more of them. People from the coastal areas may know of them because their airplanes stop at these hubs when they can't go direct. There are also some major sporting teams located in the chasm's major cities.

Where am I going with this? Here's where. Anytime the vast majority of the creation and communication of ideas is localized to a few cultural areas; it can easily become biased and ingrown. That is decidedly NOT good. If a (relatively) small cultural area influences most of the financial markets in the country (and maybe the world), that also is NOT good.

Diversity is what made this country great. Diversity is what supports the richness of our social fabric. Diversity of thought can be threatened by the concentration of knowledge, wealth, and most of all information influence in the "coastal" cultures. If it isn't about dot.coms or e-commerce, financial markets or stock prices, the Fed or the government, it isn't news—at least not at quite the same level.

If you disagree, fire up your computer, go to a newsstand, or stop at a bookstore and do a random check. We are in danger of developing and promulgating a skewed, biased version of every kind of information, but especially that about our business world. Pick up 50-100 magazines that you recognize as the "biggies", and see where they are published—that means where the people live who decide what goes in them—and what doesn't. Do the same thing with books. Just choose 100 at random and look where the publisher's headquarters are located. That is where the decision to publish that particular book, on that topic, by that author was made—and in a lot of cases that's where the author also resides. Then check where the major TV networks and national newspapers originate. Sure, they all have local affiliates and branch offices—and we all know how much influence they have compared to the "home office".

Thanks to the Internet, it is possible to break down this coastal cultural bias—but it won't happen easily, if at all—because that is also where many of the powerful web sites originate, either at major publications and corporations or with portals like AOL/ Netscape, Yahoo, MSN, etc.

What must happen is for balance to be regained is for everyone in the "central chasm" to start taking a much more proactive role in ensuring the diversity, quantity and balance of information and perspectives needed to keep our country great. That means, start generating good, insightful, interesting information and getting it widely disseminated.

Build the reputation capital of the chasm-based colleges and universities. Take proactive positions and speak out. Otherwise, we all better move to one of the coasts and either get a subway pass or grow a beard and lose our shoes.