

Vanity Fairs: Competition in the Service of Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Vanity is an intriguing motive for competition. Whether you take it to mean excessive self-regard or just craving for attention, it denotes a drive that is both strongly self-centered and eminently social. It is self-centered since it is, in the last analysis, pursuit of self-esteem; it is eminently social since the self-esteem we can afford depends on our income of appreciative attention. The pursuit of self-esteem thus includes that one has to compete for attention. Vanity fairs are socially organized competitions for attention.

Competition for attention is no one-way affair. You have to offer something if you want to be paid attention. This means that the organization of vanity fairs can be functional regarding the generation of some sort of supply. Vanity fairs thus wait to be utilized by society as exchange systems where goods and services are exchanged for attention instead of money. Since the pursuit of self-esteem is both tending to high standards and highly capable in mobilizing energy, vanity fairs wait to be utilized by society as markets for particularly challenging demands.

The paper goes into two cases in point: modern science and post-modern celebrity culture. Both scientific communication and advertisement-financed media are information markets where information is not sold for money, but directly exchanged for attention. Scientists working for publications work for the “wage of fame”, celebrities are the new class of attention-wealthy who live from the masses of attention collected by media leaving the exchange of information behind for money. Both science and media culture lie at the base of contemporary culture in economically advanced societies. Vanity fairs play a constitutive role for this culture.

1. Vanity and Its Moral Handicap

The most immediate social manifestations of the unspoken passion called vanity are elegance and fashion. Elegance and fashion concern what people love to look like. Even though the goodness referred to by

“looking good” is a matter of individual taste, elegance and fashion are eminently social phenomena. Looking good according to one’s individual taste cannot be separated from one’s feeling attractive, which, in turn, cannot be separated from finding oneself involved in a competition for attention. Accordingly, there is no vanity without attractiveness contests and thus vanity fairs.

Seemingly, elegance and fashion are mere luxuries. In fact, they are pure phenomena: it is only appearance that matters; substance is immaterial. Accordingly, they are suspect to the honestly down-to-earth. Since relying on nothing but individual taste, they seem to resist objectification. Remarkably, though, they do not resist measurement altogether. They prove powerful in mobilizing preparedness to pay, which is a measuring rod, to be sure. Needless to say, this power renders the cult around attractiveness all the more scandalous. Nevertheless, the scandal proves a constant when we look down in history. As old as moral instruction is as a literary genre, as old is the vanity fair as a literary trope. As old as the moral preached, however, is the futility of the preaching. Vanity is as immune against education programs as is sex.

In order to access the phenomenon in the context of the social sciences, the effects susceptible to measurement have to be accounted for. Such an effect, e.g., would be the turnover of the industries that supply the goods that vanity demands. It would be extremely interesting to know this figure in order to ask what it is in the last analysis that the preparedness to pay for the goods is a measure of. Regrettably it is hopeless to measure the turnover that is due to vanity goods. It would require to sort out “conspicuous” consumption from consumption in general. Conspicuous consumption, a notion coined by Veblen (1899), means to buy things that are not necessary, but make people notice. It is, to put it differently, consumption in the service of attractiveness. The reason why it is hopeless to sort out this segment of consumption is not only that the borders are blurred, but, above all, that it will be hard to find consumption not infected by conspicuousness. In affluent societies, it is only the consumption of the really poor that promises to survive the subtraction. Even before scrutiny we thus see that the predominantly bigger part of consumption outlays are in the service of attractiveness.

What, accordingly, is the rationale behind this predominant motive of spending? Just vanity? Yes: just vanity. Vanity, however, is poorly described as nothing but excessive self-regard and overblown pride. It includes capable appetite for attention, thus the propensity to compete for attention. For us, as humans, this appetite is of immediate relevance to our moral feelings. In order to feel moral responsibility, self-esteem has to be intact. Decaying self-esteem leads to cynicism. Self-esteem, however, eminently depends on what others think of us. The self-esteem we can afford is a question of the income we earn of appreciating attention

(cf. Franck 1993). By virtue of this connection of self-esteem and received esteem, self-regard finds itself coupled to empathy. It pays to pay attention to the attention others pay. Hence, vanity, far from being a mere vice, is what first turns us into pleasant fellows.

What, then, is the morally pejorative undertone in the meaning of vanity due to? We need a minimum income of attention to entertain an intact self-esteem. The higher, however, the income of attention, the bigger the ego can grow. The growth of the ego knows no organic limits. The appetite for attention, accordingly, knows no saturation. Hence, there is a constant excess demand for attention. This means two things. First, self-regard gives rise to competition in attractiveness. Second, this competition is shot through with temptations to excessiveness. This is what the moral reservations rightly refer to. This is, too, what makes vanity fairs so iridescent, lively and entertaining. This, however, might be the reason as well why scientists hesitate to take vanity fairs as seriously as they need to be taken for understanding the contemporary worlds of business and culture.

2. Scientific Communication: A Vanity Fair?

A source of energy as fertile and inexhaustible as the craving for self-esteem proves to be should find its way into social uses beyond beauty contests and conspicuous consumption. Or, put differently, vanity fairs should be met wherever sizeable amounts of attention can be earned. Since ever, artists and scientists have been known for working both for the wage of money and for the wage of fame. They have to serve two kinds of markets at the same time: markets where goods and services are exchanged for money and markets where information is exchanged for attention. Since antiquity, the latter kind of markets has been observed to become independent from the former and to grow into self-sufficient fields of professional occupation. Examples are rhetorically trained public speech and athletic sport (i.e. sporting competitions performed for reasons of entertainment of an audience). It was not before early modernity, however, that markets having become independent of money-mediated exchange had developed up to the level of industrial markets.

In early modernity, science underwent a fundamental change.¹ In the textbook theory of science, this change is described in terms of methodology (such as experimentation à la Bacon and rational method à la Descartes). There is a change in social organization, however, which is no less remarkable. The crowd of migrant scholars, populating medieval science, started to self-organize into what later should be called an industry: an overall co-ordination of productive efforts, where specialized

¹The ideas of this section were developed in more detail by Franck (2002).

lines of production produce inputs for other specialized lines of production. The catalyst triggering this self-organization was the emergence of the open scientific publication. An industry where specialized lines of production produce inputs for other specialized lines of production relies on the re-integration of the differentiated lines through markets that couple exchange with evaluation of the output. It is only by this coupling of exchange and valuation that the advantages of dividing labor can be fully exploited. The condition for the possibility of this coupling had first to develop, however. Publication means to offer the information one has produced laboriously for free. Why communicate a discovery, why share it with other researchers if you can sell it to some ruler or patron in order to earn your living? Since knowledge is power there is a constant temptation to monopolize it (cf. Rescher 1989, p. 34).

This temptation had to be overcome by novel institutions of information sharing. Ironically, it was a novel branch of entertainment business that proved innovative in scientific communication. The entertainment of noblemen was the purpose of the academies and learned societies that mushroomed in early modernity. Aristocrats were supposed to observe a code of conduct different from that of researchers and businessmen. The scholar, accordingly, did not risk to be stolen his right of authorship and priority when presenting his findings to an audience of noblemen. As long as there were reliable witnesses around, this risk was minimal even when other scholars were in the audience. Testimony of a noble audience, rather, became the first step to what later came to be called intellectual property (see Ravetz 1971, and the literature cited there).

As soon as scientists work for publication, they work for the wage of fame, i.e. for being paid attention. Publication puts intellectual property at the disposal of the general public under the sole condition that its processing into the user's intellectual property is credited by citation. In terms of attention, citation is not free of cost. It means, rather, transfer of a part of the attention that the citing author earns for her or his work to the cited author. Citation thus tests the preparedness to pay on the part of the scientist looking for per-processed information as a means of production. Since the account of the citations a theory or a theorem earns measures its productivity as a means of production, the process of citation amounts to a measuring process of the pragmatic value of scientific information.

Measurement of the pragmatic value of scientific information is the condition for the possibility of an efficient self-organization of the division of cognitive labor. By virtue of the development of scientific communication into markets coupling exchange with evaluation of information, science could grow into the knowledge industry capable of fully making use of the division of cognitive labor. The increase of productivity distinguishing modern from ancient and medieval science is due to the proverbial

unleashing of productivity that industrialization is known for. Or, to be precise, science even anticipated for a century or so what then should be called industrialization.

The crucial step in this evolution consisted in the assimilation of a vanity fair as a catalyst for information exchange. It resulted in an institutional setting in which scientists are doing exactly what they are supposed to do when they maximize citations – and thus maximize their documented income of expert attention – in the way entrepreneurs maximize profits (see Franck 1999). The collective progress of knowledge is maximized, in the eyes of those capable of judging it, when the ruling motive of the working scientist is the maximization of the attention he or she receives from his or her peers. Since attention is the wage of fame, working for attention is interesting not only for the curious and confident, but also for the ambitious and the megalomaniac. It is safe to say that science, without its inbuilt vanity fair, would not have been able to attract so many brilliant heads and to enjoy such a phenomenal success as it did in modern times.

3. Media and Mass Attraction

The irony of the origin of modern science in entertainment business has a mirror image in media history. Entertainment itself grew into an industry not before media were available that allow technically to reproduce the information supplied. It was media such as rotary printing, film and musical record that transformed traditional folk art into what we now call popular culture. Popular culture today is culture distributed by mass media. Introduction of the technical media was a significant innovation regarding both the efficiency with which the business of attraction could be operated and the technologies developed for professionalizing the service of attraction.

Traditionally, techniques of attraction had been cultivated in crafts involved in fashion and furnishing. By virtue of the technical media, mass attraction became a matter of calculable costs and results. Vast sums of attention could be collected by cheaply disseminating technically reproduced patterns if only the right stimuli were coded. By thus collecting attention in novel orders of magnitudes, wealth in attention could grow into novel orders of magnitude. A new class of attention-wealthy appeared on the scene: the stars. With stardom, vanity fairs acquired a new paradigm case. At the same time, entertainment had grown into a full-fledged industry.

But this is not the end of the story. The mirror irony to the origin of modern science in the entertainment business finds itself engendered in another revolutionary change that the entertainment industry underwent

only recently. Traditionally, media supplying entertainment were information markets where information was sold for money. In the meantime, a new type of media sets the pace. Characteristic of the new media is that they have left the selling of information for money behind. In media theory, the breakup of old and new media is predominantly described in terms of technology. Old media – press, books, cinema, concert, theater – rely on analog technology, new media – commercial TV and the internet – on digital technology.

Over and above technology, however, there is a difference in the business model. The new media have assimilated the business model of scientific communication. In commercial TV and on the internet, the information supplied is disseminated for free, only to catch attention. The production of the information is financed by selling the service of attraction to the advertising industry. The business model of scientific communication thus finds itself translated from a producer's market into the context of a consumer's market.

In the same sense, in which pre-modern science considered it irrational to forego selling the information one has produced laboriously for money, the entertainment business considered it irrational until recently to disseminate the information one has to offer for free. In both cases, however, the conversion of the exchange of information for money to the exchange of information for attention proved extraordinary successful. Science grew into modern knowledge industry, new media outperform old media in both attention and money turnover. Suppliers such as CNN and Google are without rivals on the part of the old media. Rather, the old media get under existentially hazardous pressure wherever they have to compete with the new ones. The records industry has already faded away, the press is fighting for survival, the books sector is trembling with fear. Who's next?

Leaving behind the exchange of information for money, the new media perform a decoupling from the "real" base of the economy strikingly analogous to the one that finance in money economy performed when developing into what then came to be called the financial industries. The financial industries do not sell credits to borrowers to be turned into real investment, but only package such credits to derivative capital that entitles to subscription for profits. Trading with derivatives has proved much more profitable than the retail trade of loans (since the main business is now betting on fluctuations on globalized on-line markets).

By the same token, the new media do not sell the information to the consumers demanding it, but package the attractive force of the information disseminated into the derivative form of a marketable service. Again, trading with derivatives has proved much more profitable than the retail trade of information. The analogy, above all, is not by chance. In both cases, we have to do with a second-order kind of capitalism (for more detail see Franck 2016).

4. Mental Capitalism

In the economy of attention, capitalism enters with stardom. For ascending to the heaven of stars it is not enough to be extraordinarily talented or to look stunningly good. You have to become known also for being known. You have to grow conspicuously rich, you have to proverbially swim in attention. Not only those immediately fascinated by your talents have to pay attention, but those also who mind what others pay attention to. In order to be elevated up to the starry sky you have to grow rich up to the order of magnitude where wealth starts to reinforce itself. Nothing seems to be more appealing for the masses than the display of prominence. Prominence means not only to be known, but also to be known for being known. Prominent are those persons you can talk about in a conversation without needing to ask your partner whether she or he knows her. Prominent people are those attention-wealthy who are paid attention for just being so wealthy thereof.

Economically, prominence means wealth of attention that pays for itself. Wealth paying for itself is wealth yielding interest, i.e. wealth activated as capital (see Franck 2005). With stardom, the economy of mediated attention reaches the level of “big business”. Big business is the management and investment of wealth that reaches the critical mass to trigger self-enhancement. For reliable mass attraction, the medium should have access to a troupe of celebrities. Since celebrities cannot be carried off from the road, the prominence to be displayed has first to be built up. For an individual, however talented she or he may be, it is hopeless to accumulate wealth of attention up to the critical mass without financial support.

Who, however, can grant credits in terms of attention? It is only those media that are themselves successful in mass attraction. They dispose of the presentation space and time warranting in advance certain circulation figures or audience ratings. Circulation figures and audience ratings measure the attention the medium attracts. The medium, accordingly, can grant credits in terms of attention income. By means of this credit, the borrower can generate revenue which otherwise would remain fantastic. She or he pays the credit back by sharing the attention earned through the presentation with the medium. The medium, thus, acts as a bank granting credits for co-earning from the investment. The distinguishing feature of big business, so it transpires, is not just its focus on mass attraction, but also its working as finance.

The profits thus generated are what stars are built up from as well as what the popularity of the medium relies on. The medium’s popularity is what the value of the presentation space and time it disposes of – and thus its power in finance – depend on. The medium can re-invest the profit realized by creating further credit or sell it as service of attraction

to the advertisement industry. In either case, attention profits precede money profits. It may pay therefore to weed out anything impeding the maximization of attention in the value chain – and be it the selling of the information offered to the consumers.

Due to the lacking barrier of the sales counter, the new media are free to focus exclusively on the maximization of attention, including development of the technology of attraction. They can, moreover, fully make use of information and communication technology for addressing the preparedness to pay attention waiting in the population. They have turned this technology into an infrastructure that supplies information, like water or electricity, to every household, only to collect the attention spent in realizing the information. By measuring the attention collected via audience ratings and visitors' clicks counting, they come out with a social product corresponding to the Gross National Product in money economy. This gross national product of anonymously paid attention is what the new class of attention-wealthy, called celebrities, live from. This class has grown enormously, both in personnel and in average income, since the advent of mental capitalism.

5. Celebrity Culture

Celebrity culture is the phenotype of today's "high society". It is the common denominator for today's still discernible elites. Even here, however, we observe the aforementioned decoupling of business from the "real" base of the economy. In this case, it is the decoupling of elite and merit. Once, the elite comprised those who could claim extraordinary achievements in a field of sophistication. Today, there is no general rule about high performance. Nor are there generally acknowledged criteria of sophistication. Media society, to put it differently, has no single peak – it has, if any, many. What unites the many peaks is the conspicuously high income of attention.

In media society, celebrities are made by the media. It is only the media that can distribute the amounts of attention needed for being included in the peerage of celebrity. The media, however, is not a charitable institution. The media ennoble those with celebrity who promise to enhance, through their own popularization, the popularity of the medium. Since it is prominence as such that proves to be the superior attractive force, this means that whoever manages to be funded by the media and to build up a fortune of the critical magnitude, can be admitted to the club (see Franck 2011). Accordingly, there are celebrities who just have managed, by some clever speculation, to turn an initial *succès d'estime* into a fortune. Paris Hilton, to name a case in point, is truly a celebrity. But to which elitist standards should she comply? Or do we have to recognize that this question is simply *passé*? At any rate, she is proof of the

overwhelming power of self-enhancement, i.e. of the growth of wealth out of nothing but wealth, in the capitalist economy of attention.

Celebrity culture is the ultimate vanity fair. It is the club of the top earners of attention, the club that those must be admitted to who want to rise to the top of media society. Be it in politics, business, entertainment, the arts, science, sport: Only celebrities can be called to be really on top. The new upper class of attention-wealthy is thoroughly different from the long-established property class that Bourdieu described as the upper class not long ago. Celebrity culture, in contrast to old elitist high culture, is thoroughly competitive. Due to the self-enhancement of prominence capital, there are increasing returns to scale, which means that the competition is monopolistic.

Since wealth of attention cannot be bequeathed to posterity, as can material wealth, there is no danger of self-destruction of competition in monopolistic elimination. Monopolistic competition is characteristically hard and dynamic. Celebrity culture, accordingly, is far from the superior composure of classical high culture. It is a culture of fashion, not of elegance. Fashion is quick, eye-catching and novelty-ridden, elegance is exclusive and reserved. Elegance is a luxury that those scrambling in mass attraction hardly can afford. In celebrity culture, elegance assumes a distinctly old-fashioned tone. It finds itself replaced by a less reserved and less discreet alternative: glamor. Glamor is what remains of elegance after subtracting elegant restraint. Glamor can be noisy, lusty, showy, shrill, it can, in short, be anything raising competitiveness in the struggle for attention. Elegance cannot. Celebrity culture, therefore, is good news to fashion, but bad news to elegance.

6. Conclusion

Vanity fairs are what the interpersonal competition for attention results in on the level of social systems. They prove to be capable catalysts of the self-organization of social change. They have catalyzed, in particular, the self-organization of the most advanced business fields in knowledge and media society. The competition for attractiveness is highly capable in mobilizing psychic energy. It is energized by the most powerful drive to be found in the upper part of Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs: the desire for self-esteem. The energy fueling the competition is mobilized by the exploitation of the dependency of self-esteem on the income the person earns of appreciative attention. This dependency is the anthropological base of the cultural evolution of what calls itself post-modernity.

Economically, the post-modern condition is characterized by the predominance of information production in value creation. As a result of the phenomenal success of modern science, knowledge production has inherited the role of the basic sector from the extractive industries. This

change remains poorly understood as long as the success of modern science is explained by epistemic motives alone. In order to grow into the cultural superpower that it represents today, science had to grow big in terms of labor force and organized productivity. This growth dates back to the 16th century when science began to assume traits of an industry that makes use of labor-saving technology and socially organized division of labor. It was only then that science began to work in the industrial mode of production where specialized lines of processing inputs produce inputs for other lines of specialized production.

Triggered by innovations that look purely methodological at first sight (such as the use of mathematics as descriptive language and the substitution of instrumental measurement for visual observation), the development was fueled by the efficiency gains that the emerging mode of production entailed. These efficiency gains are far from purely methodological, they rely on production technology also, and on the incentive structure inherent in the novel mode of production. Looked at from an economic point of view, even those methodological innovations appear to be efficiency enhancing measures in the first place.

The incentive structure introduced by modern science was that of a well-organized competition for attention, utilizing the process of citation as a measurement process of both the income of attention and the productivity of scientific information. It was not before this incentive structure became effective that knowledge production experienced the productivity thrust separating modern from medieval science. The elevated level of productivity, moreover, proved sustainable. This sustained level of productivity is what knowledge society owes itself.

Even celebrity culture has its forerunner in the scientific economy of attention. Since the citation process is monitored and charted statistically, a remarkably uneven distribution of citations is observed. There are few who receive many citations and many who get only a few. Merton (1968) called this obviously uneven distribution the “Matthew effect in science”. The Matthew effect refers to the biblical parable of being entrusted with talents, the text reading that “those who have will be given and those who have not will be taken away” (Matthew 25, 14–30).

The skewed distribution of citations is not reducible to the uneven distribution of publications authors call their own. The explanation lies in the working of reputation as an income-generating asset. The Matthew effect denotes the role that hype plays in science. It is due not to extraordinary productivity, but to the homage paid to renown, prominence, fame. To receive attention for being renowned means to be given because one is rich in attention. The Matthew effect, accordingly, is an indicator of the self-enhancement of prominence. It foreshadows the strategies of activating wealth of attention as capital in the big business of mass attraction.

Big business of mass attraction is where the wealth of attention is created that the post-elite called celebrities lives on. Big business of mass attraction itself relies on the supply of advertisement-financed mass culture. Part and parcel of this novel mass culture is celebrity culture, thus resisting the traditional division of popular and elitist culture. Rather, the new media have become the generally dominant media of cultural consumption. Summing up the roles that science and media play in today's western-style culture, we face the remarkable fact that this culture, in both its power of shaping the view of the world and its power to shape the life-world, roots in competitions for attention that fairly are called vanity fairs.

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