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You're Not as Original as You Think

"UNPRECEDENTED" IS A MATTER OF SEMANTICS

Since becoming a professional writer in 2013, I've used the word "cutting edge" in 660 drafts, "unprecedented" in 302, "novel" in 227, and "groundbreaking" in 85. Looking back, I usually didn't mean those words or want to use them. When you're a ghostwriter, though, sometimes you give the client what they want.

And what did the client want?

To be the first and only. To have everyone believe they had "redefined" or "transformed" an industry. To be original in thought and deed. Because if whatever they offer isn't cutting edge, unprecedented, novel, or groundbreaking, that means someone else has done it and can do it. And if those conditions are true, then investors must question why they gave that not-cutting-edge startup $10 million, or why they should give another $20 million.

For my clients, this pining for originality often crept beyond the work of building and differentiating a company. Many became convinced that their daily routine was special; that their advice to other founders was unique; that their take on macroeconomic events was one of a kind; that everything they thought and did merited attention. As these thoughts became intertwined with their identity, reputation, and self-worth, many lost the willingness to question themselves or be questioned.

Admittedly, my partners in the PR industry and I encouraged this. When brainstorming op-eds with clients, I often had to interrupt. "I've heard this argument many times before," I'd say. "If you want this published, you need to say something new and different about this topic."

New and different don't necessarily mean good. The mistake was to equate originality with quality.

Just because it hasn't been done, that doesn't mean it represents progress and improvement. Ever been to a modern art museum where there is a canvas painted one solid color? Or seen a Sundance film that got extra weird? Originality didn't make it any more meaningful or interesting.

For the most part, our thoughts, problems, and aspirations aren't original. Our words and ideas aren't original. Our ideas for startups, ads, TV shows, restaurants, and movies aren't original. Chances are, someone else has experienced it, said it, thought it, and maybe done it. That doesn't mean we shouldn't strive to be original. It means we should do so with humility and perspective.

Read history and you will run into people, places, and challenges that sound familiar. Nerd alert: I've been reading A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century, a history by Barbara Tuchman focused on France. It's foreign in some ways, familiar in others.

The 14th century French debated the origins of a pandemic, the Black Death, and how to counter it. Like present-day warlords in failed states, knights plundered and extorted peasants and ransomed captured opponents for profit while professing their commitment to higher values. Fashion trends and the pressure to keep up appearances led nobles to make terrible financial decisions. And like many disillusioned people today, the French often questioned organized religion and tried to find spiritual meaning outside of it. Different century, same stuff. Human beings fear death, crave power, and succumb to vanity wherever you go in written history.

If we want, though, we can qualify any idea or event to a point where it becomes original and unprecedented. It just takes semantic gymnastics.

We do this with records. In the 18th and 19th century, you could be the first person to climb a peak. No one summited the Matterhorn until 1865 or Mt. Everest until 1953. Yet between the Guinness Book of World Records and Wikipedia, there are hundreds more records related to Mt. Everest. Does "First astronaut to summit Everest" add anything? Why didn't the first proctologist or taxidermist get recognition?

After the first solo skydiver jumped over Everest in 2008, I don't think anyone needed to recognize the first German who did it two years later or the first Argentinian who did it eight years later. Germanness and Argentinianness don't change the nature of the feat.

A difference doesn't always make a difference. In framing everything as original and unprecedented, we risk overlooking things that are meaningly different and that do change everything.

The 14th century wasn't that materially different from the prior 5,000 years. But if you lived between 1875 and 1925, everything did change. Among other things, the lightbulb, toilet paper, machine gun, automobile, zipper, movie camera, vacuum cleaner, air conditioner, tractor, airplane, and radio were all invented in those 50 years. Those were unprecedented. But a former client's app for scalping tickets or an 800-word blog on how to "ideate" startup ideas—not so much.

