How the News Makes Us Dumb
THE DEATH OF WISDOM IN AN INFORMATION SOCIETY
C. John Sommerville
1

Why
the News
Can't Be Fixed

Why on earth would we need another critique of the news when there have been so many recently? Critics have come at the subject from every possible angle, one would think. Some concentrate on an alleged bias—the conservative bias of publishers or the liberal bias of editors. This book is not about that or about the techniques of manipulation. Others criticize the irresponsibility of journalists who are trying to attain celebrity status; that won't be our main point. There could be more books on the sheer incompetence of reporters, who cannot hope to become expert on all they try to cover. Other books have been about the oversimplification of TV news and still others about the corporate concentration of news in a few networks and chains. We won't get into any of that.

These are things to worry about, for sure. All the abuses that critics complain about have become more obvious recently. That is because accountants have learned better how to calculate the bottom line for publishers fixated on profits. But there is something that all of these critiques have missed and that goes deeper than any
of them. It is that our news is daily.

It will take a short book to show all the ways that daily news constitutes a bias all by itself. Of course, dailyness is necessary if we are to have a news industry. And that is why the news can't be fixed. Consuming this industry's "news product" actually makes us dumb.

In the last few years the tempo of news has increased, and now TV offers us hourly or even continuous reports. This adds to our problems. There is less time to check out reports, for instance. But that relates to sloppiness, which is not our theme. We want to concentrate on something deeper that is just as characteristic of our most respected newspapers as of our much-maligned networks. So I'll have just as much to say about our print media, to make sure I'm not misunderstood. TV only exaggerates the problems of periodicity.

All previous critiques of the media are full of blame and futile advice on how to fix the news. They are written by people who think news is important and who imagine that everyone reads it or at least watches it. They would be surprised at how many are giving it up and lie to pollsters about how much they read. Intellectuals—these critics and their audience—are unaware that they are leading a parade that has disbanded, for people have gone home to start building local communities to take the place of the pseudosociety constituted by our news.

This book will explain why we are losing interest in the news and why this is actually a positive sign. The American public may be showing a healthy suspicion not just of the kind of news we're getting but of the whole concept of daily news. So it would help to consider what news really is, as an industrial product, and how consuming too much of it has affected our minds.

This is the only critique of the media that welcomes its decline and that makes none of those futile recommendations for its im-

provement. News as we know it is developing in line with its essential nature. After three hundred years the news industry has reached its maturity and demonstrated its essential flaw. (I've traced part of this history in a more academic book.) It is now apparent how it deconstructs our experience of the world and blocks the higher mental processes.

We cannot hope to break the news addiction of generations that were raised to mistake daily news for a part of nature. There are even philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas, who think that the issue is not the periodical character of the news but rather who controls the media. They do not see how daily news cannot help being "colonized" by industry, with all that this means for the adulteration of its product. But if there are readers who are searching for an alternative to a debilitating news consciousness, this is the book.

If you are one of those people who doesn't like the news and doesn't exactly know why, this book should explain it. If you are one of those people who likes the news and thinks that it keeps you informed about the real world, you have an even greater need to read this book. But be warned that I won't be blaming the news, which is only fulfilling its essential nature. I am blaming those of us who still consume it. I am not arguing that the news is dumb but that we are.

We take the news industry and daily news production so much for granted that no one has tried to analyze the effects of dailyness. Unofficially, news just means things that you want to hear about and tell others about. News in that sense is a natural part of life. But what I am critiquing here is the product created by the news industry, which has a bad record of mental pollution. It is scary to realize that it is this news product that holds our society together, or pretends to do so, by creating a kind of virtual community.

The world hasn't always had a news industry. News used to come
along irregularly, when something happened that was really important or interesting. To be honest, most days’ news is neither. But the industry has to work on whatever they’ve got because they have to market their product daily.

And here we’re getting to a main point. The only reason for making news daily is to create an information industry. You can’t have a news business unless you pretend that the news is daily. If publishers waited for something important to happen, they might be idle for weeks and their capital assets would get rusty. So they have convinced us that every day is worthy of the same attention: “In the next thirty minutes your world will change; Headline News will be there to report it all.” Actually it didn’t, and of course they couldn’t. But “the world” of Headline News has become the world we live in, our virtual reality. Editors and broadcasters prod us along for the sake of their profits rather than for our enlightenment.

Defining News as a Product
By definition the news is what got into today’s paper or broadcast. There were undoubtedly several hundred “events” yesterday with as great a claim to newsworthiness as the dozen that we heard about. After all, the real world is a big place—180-some countries, five or six billion people. The fact that the staff of CNN probably doesn’t even know the names of a quarter of those countries doesn’t mean that nothing important happens in them. But the events that didn’t make today’s papers will never be news. They might become part of the history of our time, being more important than most of our news in the long run. But news is what publishers think they can get us interested in and get us to pay for.

We can’t even say that news events are more important than others. In fact, there is reason to doubt that. Important people don’t like to be in the news. Power could probably be defined as the ability to keep oneself out of the news. Celebrities like to be in the news, and the media have found that we will pay as much to read about them as about important people. So we fill our minds with a lot of fun stories, while the powerful go about their business.

For two weeks after Princess Diana died in that sad accident in 1997, one might have assumed that nothing else was happening in the world. We didn’t hear about it if it did, since only a few events get to be news. We only have the patience for a few minutes of broadcast news or a few pages of a paper. Historians may eventually tell us that the world turned a corner at just that time. Maybe in some embassy or boardroom or laboratory or monk’s cell some lever was pulled that set history on a new course. But it will never be news if it missed that first opportunity.

Really important information still circulates by word of mouth, not in the news media. Really important information circulates privately, among elites. That is what elites are—groups that control a certain kind of information. Important information is information that costs a lot, one way or another; what is left over gets into the newscast. The irony is that we imagine that news product is so much more.

I once saw a televised interview with actor Michael Douglas in which he was asked why he had such a reputation for erudition in the otherwise ditzy world of entertainment. His answer was that he read four newspapers each day. In other words, his mind is absolutely crammed with ephemera. The interviewer did not think to ask whether he had time to read anything in depth. Michael Douglas is not unintelligent; he just shares the dumbness of a society that has pretty much given up the serious investigation of any topic. We prefer the news treatment, which is careful not to tax our patience or our intelligence. But no number of newspapers will add up to real knowledge; the daily character of news treatment structures it to keep our minds small.

If you don’t like my definition of news, take someone else’s:
News is, first, what is interesting to the public and, second, what is new, always remembering that “newness is measured in newspaper offices in terms of minutes.” In the university where I work we were given “A Guide to Working with the Media,” which reminds us that “reporters are usually under extremely tight deadlines, and a delay of a day, or even an hour, can mean the difference between favorable coverage and a lost opportunity or a reporter disinclined to turn to our university for help.” I’m sure our philosophy department has never been any help to such an enterprise. Even if they were asked, they would be defeated by the fact that—as the guide warns—“Few ‘sound bites’ are more than 20 seconds long.” It follows that universities are becoming more and more irrelevant to our “culture.” None of the “big questions” will ever be news. Perhaps we should worry more about how we are spoiling our appetite with news and never getting around to the main course.

The product of the news business is change, not wisdom. You need to go elsewhere for wisdom. Wisdom has to do with seeing things in their largest context, whereas news is structured in a way that destroys the larger context. You have to do certain things to information if you want to sell it on a daily basis. You have to make each day’s report seem important. And you do that by reducing the importance of its context. If readers were aware of the bigger story it would diminish today’s contribution to that story. So news-industry profits absolutely depend on dumbing us down by deconstructing our world by dailiness. In reporting today’s news they have to make us want to come back tomorrow for more news—more change. Tomorrow the implication will be that today’s report can now be forgotten. The rest of this book will describe how this affects our thinking about politics, values, science, culture—everything. Bias and incompetence will have nothing to do with it, only dailiness.

I won’t be proving all my points (whatever that would mean).

Why the News Can’t Be Fixed
I’ll only be reminding you of things you’ve seen in the news and asking you to consider their likely effect. We won’t need statistics on news stories or on reader response to recognize some things we’ve all been ignoring.

There are no villains in this story. I am as disappointed about this as you are, but in a fundamental sense the industry can’t help itself. Once you accept the idea of daily publication, a lot of other things follow. If there were villains, we could sentence them to several months of community service or send them back for refresher courses in the liberal arts. Ultimately, it is the consumers of news who are to blame; we have acquired an addiction, and newspeople are just supplying the market.

The News Goes into Free Fall
Several recent developments have caused even newspaper people to sense that something is going wrong with their enterprise. For instance, they still complain about our first national newspaper, USA Today. When it appeared in 1982 with its big headlines and little stories, its charts and color bars, it was scorned as a vulgarization of the news, a trivialization of true journalism. But no one was surprised when it arrived. Everyone seemed to realize that it simply accelerated existing trends, which is what made it so scary. Newspeople were quick to realize that everyone would want to copy it. And they have.

What did USA Today show about the news? It gave us “reality” in simple terms, with a concentration on ourselves. By jumping from subject to subject it showed very clearly that news deals in the ephemeral—the flotsam and foam on the surface of history. It was pretty clear that it did not see its job as telling us what this all means in the bigger picture. Nobody has that job anymore.

If news were just one of many things that we read each day, it wouldn’t have the same impact. If we would read science, the classics,
history, theology or political theory at any length, we would make much better sense of today’s events. But we don’t. We’re too busy to manage anything but the news, and we’re getting almost too busy even for that. So the papers and the TV stations are learning to package it for us in ever more “attractive” forms.

My local newspaper, the Gainesville Sun (a New York Times subsidiary) has taken on the USA Today look. Less than 20 percent of the space on the front page is actually devoted to small print. The other 80 percent is given over to what might be termed “visual excitement”: large headlines, color photos, directions on what you will find inside. Most of this visual excitement is crammed into the space that can be seen through the vending-machine windows to grab customers who are deciding which of the papers promises the most excitement. What does this excitement have to do with news? you ask. It is the news: change, variety, shock.

Of course there is more than excitement in newspapers. There is entertainment and edification in “Dear Abby” and Doonesbury. There is information of importance to your life, such as notices of gatherings and sales and events that you won’t want to miss. There are sports reports and health tips. Not everything in a newspaper is news. But this other stuff would not justify a daily edition. The way you are induced to buy the industry’s product every day is by being offered the excitement and the change that constitutes the news of the day.

I’m not going to argue that we were better off when the whole front page was small print and long gray columns. The effect of that news was the same. All I am saying is that the industry’s desperation to sell today’s and tomorrow’s news is beginning to make us more aware of what has always been wrong with news—its desire to please and flatter and excite us so that we will come back for tomorrow’s issue.

You might ask, “Well what do you expect? Of course the media have got to make their product attractive. They have to make a living.” If you don’t like the word greed, you could say they have “a responsibility to their stockholders.” Just so. Once the stock of news corporations is sold publicly, Wall Street insists on the same profit level from them as from any detergent company or fashion house. We should be under no illusions about the fact that the point of news is profit and not, say, “truth.” If the goal were enlightenment, there would be days when the paper would have to be several times bigger and others in which publishers wouldn’t bother printing one.

If one admits that the media are mainly in the business of selling something, of getting people interested, then one begins to erase the line separating the New York Times and the National Enquirer. In fact, we are frequently reminded that where the tabloids lead, the “respectable press” will soon—actually must—follow. “You get sucked in,” Leslie Stahl admits. “Everybody knows how hard the Washington Post worked not to print the Paula Jones story. There does come a point when a story is so ‘out there’ that a news organization is foolish if it doesn’t.” News is what it is. What we need to be reminded of is that things of first importance cannot be made into news.

It’s nice that philosophy is not organized in corporations that need to show a competitive profit margin. Philosophy would certainly become more lively if it had to be produced and marketed daily, but something else would be lost. Fortunately, our philosophers are still as pure as hermits. And just as lonely.

Media critics like to worry over the National Enquirer, and they shame other papers by making comparisons. We treat it as if it were a caricature of real news. Actually, the Enquirer shows the ripening of the news and where the industry is headed. Remember our definition: news is what sells newspapers. In the old days some editors took a high-handed approach and tried to give the public
what they thought grown-up, serious-minded people should know. But the dynamics of the enterprise have defeated them. Newspeople have gotten smarter about the business they’re in, and we’ve gotten dumber. They know that deep down we don’t care if our daily news is entirely authentic as long as it is entertaining, like professional wrestling. So we can expect to see even the most respectable newspapers gradually becoming more and more like the National Enquirer. And if you doubt that statement, take a look at a newspaper from fifty years ago to see how far we’ve come already.

There also is much worry about how sketchy TV news is in comparison with the more respected papers. But the same dynamics are involved, as we will see. The commercial possibilities involved in both enterprises depend on the commodification of their product, chopping information into periodical reports that we can be forced to pay for, one way or another.

Despite increasingly frantic efforts to keep us entertained, there is evidence of several kinds of decline in the news business, especially among the rising generation. The news itself sometimes reports figures on a decline of consumption for newspapers, newsmagazines and newscasts. And if the decline in sales and viewership were not troubling enough, newspeople also find that their credibility is declining “significantly” among the public. And beyond that, we are showing ourselves to be less “informed” as a result of media efforts. Editors are bewilderded by what they have done to us. The New Yorker complained on April 15, 1985, that by that time “young people” knew almost nothing about the Vietnam War, which had absolutely filled the news for ten years when the writer of the article was growing up. He reported on an army recruit who did not know that the United States had lost that war. By contrast, as he observed, the Poles, who had not trusted their press for many years, could remember their whole history despite government efforts to suppress it.

Is News a Business or a Profession?
When newspeople begin their soul-searching about these trends, they start to wonder whether they even have a soul. On March 5, 1990, Carl Bernstein (of Watergate fame) wrote an agonized essay in Time that lamented how celebrity millionaire Donald Trump and his wife had crowded statesman Nelson Mandela off the front page. Bernstein kept referring to “real news,” “the truth,” “real journalism” and “appearance as opposed to substance,” implying that there was a time when journalists could actually decide—from among the thousands of things that happen each day around the world—which half-dozen were most “important.”

This is a fantasy. The thinking of industry bosses, from the seventeenth century until now, is revealed in the speeches reported from an April 1989 meeting of publishers. Those speeches pointed up the need to appeal to a generation that has almost given up reading. Market analysts had told them that a new generation’s buying habits depended more on packaging than on content. The solution seemed to be a mix of “traditional news” with useful information such as lists of daycare centers and instructions on where to register to vote. It doesn’t take a prophet to foresee that the trend will be not toward Bernstein’s effort at greater seriousness but toward an even more frantic glitziness.

(“But,” you ask, “what about Bernstein and Watergate? Didn’t his reporting do a world of good?” I would be the last to deny it. The question is whether that sort of crusade was best done in daily newspapers. Might daily reporting actually have been a poor way to conduct such an investigation, except in terms of profits? The muckraking journalists who made such an impact in the Progressive Era published their reports in magazines and books, not in newspapers. We’ll come back to this question.)

We will not join the mourners for the noble ideal of real news. In the history to which I referred, one will find that as soon as
newspapers started in Europe, around 1620, the primary concern was not the search for truth but rather excitement and profits. And the complaints with which we are familiar began within five years of the origins of the periodical press. There was a difference between then and now, to be sure, but the difference was in the audience. In those days news was a very small bit of what people took in, being balanced by a rich culture, books and conversation. We are now seeing what happens when one depends entirely on daily reports, with their decontextualizing and deconstructing tendencies.

If you insist on news, there is only one kind: an addictive substance that you never get enough of. And we have become jaded, requiring an ever-increasing level of excitement. It had better be good or our minds may wander. The industry, like any good entrepreneur, does its best to give us what we want, and what we want is a limited number of stories that we can follow for a few days and that involve us in some way. What we get is a teeny bit of our world, vastly enlarged to fill our vision.

"From CNN—this is the world today." What do you think would follow such an imposing introduction? Lengthy reports on those 180-some countries and their countless inhabitants, the joys and miseries and humdrum of real life in all its boring variety? Hardly. Who wants to hear about the whole world today? We only want a little excitement. So depending on the network, we get nine to thirteen stories in a half-hour span, stories that can seem pretty sensational if you give them a particular slant. This news has a magical quality: if you have a compartment in your brain that is set aside for the news, it will always be full. Even if there were only one story per day, that story, however trivial it might seem later, would absolutely fill your screen. Just one story can overspread the whole front page, seeming all-important—that day. For news has no sense of scale. It concentrates the mind when we thought it was to broaden the mind.

Why Intellectuals Are Clueless
The greatest irony in our story is the fact that our intellectuals are less likely to have turned against the news culture than others. While they might scorn the low-calorie product that the networks provide, they often lament the ignorance of those who aren’t following the reports in the prestige press. Of course, if the masses were to give up on news altogether, this elite would not be able to demonstrate its superiority, which is gained from feeding higher on the news chain. But it is surprising to see them more concerned about identifying with the news-fact discourse than with the cultural heritage in which many of them were trained.

Our universities do not fight the narrowed vision that is part of the news concept. I used to be incredulous when I saw universities schedule TV newshounds as campus speakers. Why would anyone be interested in what they had to say when no one was handing them a script? I am wiser now. I now realize that newsmen really do make the news. They create it—a reality that we depend on, a miniature world that we look in on every day to assure ourselves that everything is under control or at least that we know the worst. These people, or their handlers, decide on a few developments that they hope we will be interested in and choose the tone and the slant that will grab us. Then they poll us to see whether they’re succeeding.

News may have little to do with a search for truth, but it does reveal our “popular culture.” And that is the new substitute for philosophy, even in colleges. Some elite institutions (Harvard, for instance) ask their applicants which newspapers or newsmagazines they read regularly. Others (Davidson, for example) make their accepted freshmen read some newspaper—usually the New York Times or Washington Post—during the summer before they arrive at school. This is so they will be “informed” and so the student body will be more challenging and vibrant.

Actually, reading these papers will create confused and scatter-
brained students. Think I’m kidding? Consider the following headlines:

- *New York Times*, same day: “No Sabotage Clues Seen in Zia Crash”
- *New York Times*, same day: “5 Years Later, Grenada Is Tranquil and Thriving”
- *New York Times*, same day: “Profits Fall at Washington Post”

I’m not making this up. These quotes were collected by the readers of the *New Republic* over the course of a few months. But wait, things get worse.

- Same paper, same day: “Drexel Case Likely to Have Serious Impact on Wall Street”
- Same paper, same day: “U.S. Vehicle Sales Are Sluggish”

Why the News Can’t Be Fixed

What if you relied on one of these papers as your window on the world? What if you relied on both of them? What if sometimes you just skimmed headlines without getting into the fine print? And what makes you think that either one of these papers got it right?

Did you notice, by the way, that the examples given above were taken from a period of just a few months? Think how confused Michael Douglas must have been. And the problem was not only with those two papers.

- *Sacramento Bee*, same day: “Wright Holds Olive Branch for Bush”
- *Guardian* (London), same day: “Lack of Jewish Political Outcry Causes Surprise in Washington”
- Same paper, same day: “Bond Prices Get Big Lift from Stronger Dollar”
- *Chicago Tribune*, December 7, 1988: “Gorby Fever Sweeps Manhattan”
- Same paper, same day: “New Yorkers Take Soviet Visit in Stride”

You might think that we have only demonstrated that headline writers get sloppy and don’t always read enough of the story. No doubt that can happen. But that is not the most likely explanation
for the high number and regularity of these contradictions. There is a more disturbing possibility.

Newswriters can’t know which way things are moving. The dynamics of periodical publication create a world that is lacking a time dimension. But reporters have to make a guess as to the future importance of present events, or else those events cannot be assigned any importance. Readers want to know how today’s events fit into a bigger picture; they want prophets to lead them. Unfortunately, the bigger picture is exactly what news destroys in hyping today’s report. So to suggest the historical significance of today’s event, newspeople put some kind of “spin” on the story that amounts to their guess about future developments. To give the story any kind of conclusiveness they must decide which part of a story to emphasize, and hence these different headlines—not just different but directly contradictory.

In 1730 the Grub Street Journal, a London periodical, was started for the very purpose of printing conflicting reports from rival papers side by side in its pages. It became popular. Oddly enough, people kept right on buying papers. Will we make the same mistake? Even when we catch the papers in distortion—just about any time they report something of which we have personal knowledge—we still come back to them for more. We know it is insubstantial fare, like enchanted food, but we need that daily fix. Why can’t we “just say no”?

Perhaps we could if we delved a little deeper into how the news operates.
BUT FIRST, THESE HEADLINES

- *Financial Times*, same day: “Central American Peace Plan Puts Ball Back in U.S. Court”
- *San Jose Mercury*, same day: “Cadets Ignore Controversy over Quayle”

How about a warning label on the news that reads “This product has been shown to cause dizziness and memory loss”?

I have already alluded to the fact that intellectuals, of all people, seem the most addicted to news and the proudest of being “informed.” How can I be arguing, then, that news makes us dumb? How can getting information on a daily basis interfere with the higher mental processes? Does being informed differ from being wise—an old-fashioned word for seeing things in their widest context?

For starters, when people say that the news keeps them “informed,” we can presume that they mean they are learning about the most significant events from all around the world. And further, the idea of being objectively informed implies that people in different countries would find some agreement in listing the most important events. They might not be in perfect agreement, but if it makes any sense to speak of “world news,” it ought to look pretty similar from wherever one stands on the globe.

On April 11, 1994, *Time* listed the top four stories on the leading TV networks in eleven different countries for March 29, 1994. I don’t know why they did this, since it called their whole enterprise
Being Informed Versus Being Wise

Being “Informed” Is Impossible

Let’s face it. There is simply no way to be “informed” in the sense that we imagine. If you stopped reading the paper tomorrow, you would not suddenly become uninformed; you are already uninformed about anything as big as “the world.” You learn this when you actually visit one of those 180-plus countries. Travel helps you realize that your previous notion of being informed was simply infantile.

Stopping this pretense would mark a gain in realism. If we used the time we spend sampling news product to read something more substantial we would start becoming informed—about a few things, anyway. We would be admitting that not one of us is God, and that would be a big blow to people who thought that their news consumption made them effectively omniscient.

This pinhole notion of “the world” is a fantasy. It is equivalent to the mythological cosmos that earlier civilizations imagined, except that theirs didn’t deconstruct itself every day. (We’ll come back to this point later.)

It turns out that being informed really means knowing what the people around you are talking about. Our reality is the news, not the world. It is true that we need topics to talk about if we are to have civilized society. But those talking points don’t need to come from news product. If you really want to go upscale, there are infinitely more important things to talk about than the plane crashes, shooting rampages and party bickering that fill the news—philosophical and religious questions, science and social values, for example.

We ignore these topics because the news ignores them. And the news ignores them because they wouldn’t bring us back for more tomorrow. The more successful the answers, the less we will have to revisit the question again. News specializes in questions we will never be able to answer conclusively—not because they are so big
but because they aren’t real questions.

When we don’t visit our most basic beliefs, our thinking be-
comes shallow. The reason that old newspapers and magazines
often seem childish is that they are full of ideology instead of
thought. That is, they just tell us what was once fashionable to think.
Of course we all imagine that we are thinking for ourselves. But
when we are suddenly reminded of what we used to think, we
realize that we change our ideas like we change our hats. We
weren’t argued out of those old ideas; we just haven’t heard them
in a while. So reading a stack of old papers is nothing like rereading
a classic novel, for example. We might find the novel more striking
the second time around, whereas what passed for ideas in the
newspapers may now seem juvenile.

Once again, daily publication is to blame. There is no extended
thinking in news reports because it takes too much space to explain
something. We find statements rather than arguments, and this has
a serious effect on our minds. If news constitutes all of our reading,
we fall into the habit of thinking that opinions are the same as
thoughts. The news alludes to a debate but can only show us a clash
of opinions. As a result, we short-circuit discussion by falling back
on polls. Polls have replaced debate in news reporting because they
don’t need to be explained. A poll just counts heads; it doesn’t tell
us what is inside them. But it may be that the smaller number of
heads contain the best thinking on the subject at hand. Daily news
has a way of making us forget that there is any thinking going on,
implying that all positions spring out of nowhere—the expression
of someone’s vested interests.

The most that news can do to introduce a little sophistication is
to offer quotes from opposing sides. This always means reporting
on two extremes with the implication that the truth must lie in the
middle. But there is no reason to think this is justified. The truth
might lie at or even beyond one of those extremes.

Absolute Relativism
Let me test you on this point. Are you wary of the term truth in a
discussion like this? Nothing is more common nowadays than to
have someone interrupt a serious discussion with the objection
“Who’s to say what the truth is anyway?” or “If that’s your opinion,
that’s fine for you.” Why do we say this? Nobody in their innermost
heart believes that standards of truth are unreal. Academics, who
often describe themselves as relativists, would lose their authorita-
tive, elite position if relativism were taken seriously, and their
students would have to grade themselves. But a flippant relativism
has become a habit with us, a habit encouraged by the “evenhand-
edness” of the news.

If we say, “There is no absolute truth,” we expect others to accept
this as a true statement—or else what good is it? So whereas a true
relativism is self-canceling, the news version of relativism is very
dogmatic. Skepticism is the creed of the news, if that is not a
contradiction. One might think that the evenhandedness of news
means a respect for everyone’s opinion. Actually, it means under-
mining whatever is stated too emphatically by reporting that there
are those who disagree. Maybe this is our idea of being modest or
democratic.

We argue our great social issues badly because we hold the idea
that all “viewpoints” are somehow equal. The sketchiness of news
coverage encourages this notion. We are so used to its juggling
approach to ideas that we have lost the patience and the humility to
submit our opinions to true argumentation. Is abortion murder?
How would one decide? Should we try to deduce an answer from
philosophical principles or from our feelings or from polls? How
could we consider theological insights? We wouldn’t know how to
begin to answer. What is compelling about philosophical principles,
for instance?

Sometimes newspaper will appeal to experts, as in “some
experts believe . . .” This is a step in the right direction, because there are people who have devoted real attention to most of our issues. But there won’t be space in the story for the experts to tell us why they believe what they do, which is vital. And what about the other experts, who may not “believe . . .”? Come to think of it, how do newspaper know an expert when they see one? Even experts can’t always agree on who the other experts are.

In the chapter on science we will return to the question of how daily news deals with experts—by predigesting them for us. For the moment I will only remind you that we still have deep thinkers among us. They are pretty much ignored by reporters, though. What would be the point of calling on them if they can’t sum up their philosophical position on the current subject in a sound bite? If a Nobel Prize were given for philosophy, we would at least know the winners’ names, for news is good at giving us such irrelevant information. But the news would probably be more interested in their hobbies than their ideas.

When Allan Bloom wrote The Closing of the American Mind, he made his story a lot more complicated than it had to be. The sad state of our nation’s intellectual life has less to do with wayward philosophical movements than with a simple fixation on the moment. Of course Bloom was right to have been concerned with a society that is so intellectually feeble. There has been a serious decay of our ability to relate our ideas to each other in a logical manner and to relate our institutions to each other in a supportive way and to relate different rights so as to create justice. But all of these failures may simply stem from consuming all ideas daily.

Take, for example, Bloom’s issue of “values.” Actually we have plenty of values. Our problem is that we don’t have any agreed scale of values. You need a scale of values, a ranking, so that you can argue logically about which values should override others. Some have to be more basic than others, or they will all be a jumble.

Traditional cultures have scales of values, but in a news culture the news makes every value absolute—for the time being. Absolute here means that all other values become relative to and subordinate to that one. The news alerts us to a problem that some group with whom we can all sympathize is having. There is never space or time, however, to assess that group’s needs against other demands on the treasury or law enforcement resources, or to weigh its rights against those of groups that might be thrown into competition. Rather, the news absolutizes a particular group or value—for the moment.

In our secular culture we can absolutize any value we want—a new one every week. It is the sort of thing that comes naturally to news reporting. Odd, isn’t it, that a medium that has such a relativizing effect on our mental activity finds itself absolutizing values this way? But it’s only temporary. There will be another paper tomorrow with something else to wring our hearts. The news never needs to argue us out of a former concern or into another. Daily publication has conditioned us to forget last week’s concern. Concentrating on the news has trained us to live in an absolute present.

If the news makes us scatterbrained, what would the opposite of news be? Meditation, I suppose. Imagine that one day you opened your newspaper and found just one word in the whole paper. One word, like

charm
FOR THOSE OF YOU WHO THINK
IT'S ONLY THE HEADLINE WRITERS
WHO GET CONFUSED

• *International Herald Tribune*, January 21, 1989:
  After an initial burst of anxiety immediately after his election,
the financial markets have greeted the ascendency of George
Bush to the White House with a joy bordering on euphoria.

• *Same paper, same day, same page*:
  Currency markets and Wall Street showed little reaction to
George Bush's swearing-in as president and currency dealers
said his inaugural address had been mainly neutral for the
dollar.

Which was the first draft of history?

---

Y
ou might think that if news has as little sympathy for
religion as I have indicated, then it might be fairly en-
couraging to science. We would be hard-pressed to re-
member any slighting comments newspapers have made about
science per se. But actually what news does to real science is as
destructive as what it does to religion.

Remember our theme: having to sell a paper every day or a
magazine every week requires that the news industry treats every
interim report as if it were real knowledge, worthy of our full
attention. In other words, news must treat each discovery as if it
were in some way final. Think how the "results" of science appear
in your paper. We see more and more about nutrition, for example.
"Studies show" that decaffeinated coffee is "bad for you." We heard
it on the news, we say. But is that actually what the scientists said?

Maybe you've never read a scientific paper. Reading them can
be a letdown for those of us who have been overstimulated by news
reports. Take a journal report in psychology, for instance. It will tell us that a study was conducted using thirty-seven freshman psychology students at the University of Wisconsin (really some teaching assistant’s discussion section). This study used the XYZ Attitude Survey, which differentiates liberal and conservative leanings, in order to show possible correlation with those same students’ self-report of certain activities. A correlation of, say, .123 proved “significant” at the .12 level of probability, which prompted some scientific journal to print it, in order to stimulate further research. But the headline reads: “Study Links Conservatism and Bed-Wetting.” There is no fine print, only the usual slashing style of the journalist. “Reasons” are advanced as to the cause of this interesting “link.”

These days we are getting wary of such reports. For one thing, we are aware of the rapid changes in the diets suggested by nutritional reports. We remember the frequent scares over eating certain foods that that were reversed later. But when the news reverses itself and reports the “all clear,” we believe that too. We believe anything we are told that scientists believe. The trouble is that scientists don’t “believe in” the results of their efforts in the same way that the news does. For newspeople, science is a new belief system. And it has the advantage—unlike other belief systems—of changing pretty frequently.

There aren’t any factual discoveries in philosophy or religion. Philosophical and religious developments come primarily through the broadening of perspectives and refinements in expression. But science is something one needs to keep abreast of, and the periodical press offers to help us do that. Actual scientists must wince when they see how their work is reported in the media. For they don’t think of their studies as final. They recognize the disappointingly small scale of their interim discoveries and know how many studies are needed before one can make a simple—that is, a general—statement.

Newspeople rush in where scientists fear to tread. We had a taste of this at the beginning of the reporting on AIDS. Editors didn’t want us to be unduly alarmed—just alarmed enough to buy tomorrow’s report. It seemed that AIDS was very easy to catch or very hard to catch, depending on the story. If they were emphasizing the epidemic crisis and addressing potential victims, AIDS was easy to catch. If they were addressing the rest of us and emphasizing the lack of humanness shown by nurses or schoolteachers, then it was almost impossible to catch, if all went well.

Newswriters couldn’t decide whether to terrorize us with talk of an epidemic or shame us for shunning those who were infected. So they did both. Nothing was more common than for them to tell us all the ways that one could not get AIDS—say, from mosquito bites. But no scientist had concluded that. The most that a scientist could say was that no case had yet been reported that could only have resulted from such a bite. In other words, a case might have been caused by a mosquito, but because the subject also was exposed by another factor—which was known to be the cause in other cases—the bite seemed redundant and unlikely. But if the scientists were not altogether definite, the newspeople were.

What does all this have to do with periodicity? The news wants to report the future of science. It is typical high-risk journalism, reporting from the “leading edge.” So the science that is newsworthy is the science that is still half-baked. And if our memories were not so enfeebled by periodicity, we could all remember when “science” had changed its mind.

I remember several news reports from the winter of 1988 that cast doubt on the idea that alcoholism is a “disease.” This disease theory had been the orthodoxy of several generations, as the news had helped to create greater sympathy for alcoholics. I suppose there had always been “experts” who had doubted that the metaphor of disease was really appropriate to this complicated issue.
But if there were, they weren’t the experts that the news cited. (Have you ever noticed how even the experts don’t get to complete their sentences in news reports? Like others, they are cut off as soon as they’ve said what the news wants us to hear.)

Anyway, suddenly this view—that alcohol addiction involved a “character disorder” if not moral failure, not a disease—was getting a hearing. For decades it had only been expressed by spokespersons for the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union, who were exhibited as examples of what scientific enlightenment was up against.

So what was happening? Had experts changed their minds? Actually, what had happened is that one of President Reagan’s cronies (remember Michael Deaver?) was using the addiction-as-a-disease defense in his influence-peddling trial, and newspeople weren’t going to let him get away with it. So they turned to the other school of thought for its expertise. This theory was now news not because science had changed its collective mind, but because newspeople decided to give it a hearing. We should be prepared, however, for another reversal of all this some time down the line, when a new view will sell papers.

Who Are These Experts?

By the way, who are these experts? How do we know that they are really experts? I have some personal experience of being mistaken for an expert. Newspapers and radio stations sometimes call my department for academic expertise on a variety of subjects. This is doubtless a good thing for them to do. But our busy secretaries have been known to pass reporters along to any one of us, just to get rid of them. In half the cases they send to me I am not an expert, and sometimes I have only a bare knowledge of the subject. Think of the havoc I could wreak if I decided to string the reporters along. If they liked what they were hearing, their readers might be badly taken in, thinking they were getting expert opinion.

Sometimes the news wants to report on a very uncertain area in which experts differ more noticeably than usual. Editors or producers may bring in a couple of experts and let them “debate” the issue for us, which is perhaps as much as the media can do. But the forum (parallel columns in print or a whole ten minutes on TV) is rarely enlightening. We may like one expert better than the other for any one of a dozen reasons. Or we might never learn who was more truly “expert.”

The news can’t judge expertise in most fields. On April 4, 1991, columnist Tom Wicker wanted to consider the climatic results of the Kuwaiti oil fires. “Some authorities predict a global warming effect . . . Others foresee a sort of ‘nuclear winter,’ ” he told us. “Other experts dispute such predictions.” Now wait. Those are pretty big differences. If experts predict either a warming or a cooling trend or they deny the validity of predictions, what makes them experts? They must be experts on something else. Apparently Wicker decided it was better to offer speculation than to be silent. Publication schedules mean we’ve got to say something. News marches on, whether science does or not.

Of course experts can differ and still be “experts” in the sense of knowing much more than the rest of us. I’m just arguing that newspeople can’t know who the experts are without being experts themselves. All experts are not equal, and it is unfortunate that editors make the final judgments between them so far as public perception is concerned.

Sometimes in its search for expertise the news gets so intrigued by really cooperative scientists that these people become news items in themselves. News likes to personalize its reports, and since science can be a little abstract, reporters will build up certain scientific celebrities. The trouble with scientific celebrity is that it tends to involve quirky ideas on other subjects. A gabby astronomer, for instance, might have “interesting” views on spirit travel. Which
of the astronomer's comments do you think the news will begin to focus on?

You might think you have caught me in a contradiction here. I said that scientists must not like dealing with sensation-mongering reporters, and now I'm suggesting that they may like a little publicity. I still think the general principle holds. And I also suspect that there is a distinction to be made between those who work in the "hard sciences" like physics or genetics and those who work in the social sciences. I haven't done a study to prove it, but I sense that the temptation toward publicity is greater with sociologists and psychologists. Theirs is the kind of science that touches us most directly. We look to them for wisdom about life, and some of them do not seem to mind being called on to pronounce on our social issues.

Scientists who aspire to media celebrity know what is expected of them—they must be original. This results in a tendency toward mildly sensational "scientific" reports on societal issues. A few years ago the news was full of reports about the waning of the "traditional family." We were told repeatedly that only a dwindling fraction of American families were of the traditional kind—"with a working father, an at-home mother and their children. It was no longer the "norm" in American life. So it seemed to follow that one shouldn't take that family pattern as an ideal any longer. Certainly one shouldn't look askance at other "models" of family relationships. After all, one of them might become the new norm. The journalists seemed to want to save readers from any guilt or shame for not conforming to an outdated pattern.

How would a real scientist view all this? Some of them noticed that the journalists' figures were simply mistaken. A director at the National Institute of Education had claimed that "in 1955, 60 percent of the households in the U.S. consisted of a working father, a housewife mother and two or more school-age children. . . . In 1985 it is 7 percent, an astonishing change." It turned out that he was wrong and the figure for 1955 was closer to 22 percent. But in order to really understand these figures, one would also need to know how many families did not yet have two or more school-age children but would someday, how many families that fit the old pattern had children past school age, how many mothers or fathers worked part time in an effort to preserve part of the traditional pattern, how families with adopted or foster children were being counted and so on.

Scientists might also want to know how those parents felt about their situation, how hard they were trying to maintain some ideal pattern or how willing they were to change. This is part of the objective situation too. But one had the feeling that the news had an agenda in concentrating on changes. It is in the interests of the news industry to give us the feeling that change is coming fast. That will mean that we'll need more news than ever, since only the news can be our guide in a revolutionary environment.

News reports from the social sciences inevitably are disturbing to anyone who is comfortable with the present situation. That is the only reason for such reporting. There would be no point in confirming the conventional wisdom unless somehow this would be surprising. News is about surprises, and journalists are successful when they have convinced us that our world is about to be overwhelmed by change. It means we'll need to see their next program or read their next issue.

For example, if half of all marriages are "working," that would not be news; they are supposed to work. If half of all marriages aren't working, however, that is news. These are two ways of looking at the same situation! What it means is that a story like this one has to be reported in the latter way—to the disadvantage of custom. Even if only 10 percent of marriages didn't succeed, they would still be the newsworthy ones, rather than the 90
percent that were “supposed to” succeed.

Unsettling news of this sort will be repeated until we get the sense that marriage will soon be a thing of the past. This may become a self-fulfilling prophecy if the power of suggestion can change our behavior. It will certainly affect children who hear it often enough. Thus what purports to be social science becomes part of the media’s self-serving campaign for change.

**Norms Versus Ideals**

Those who feel that the press is nagging them to change should remember that real science stops short of making choices for us. What I’m getting at is that we should make our choices according to our *ideals* rather than according to the statistical *norms* or averages that are so much easier for the news to report.

Ideals and norms are often confused in our society. An ideal is what you are trying to do, whereas a norm is what you are already doing. Or more accurately, the norm is the average behavior of the lot of us. Ideal behavior might not be reached by any of us but may still be very important. We could be tugged in the direction of the ideal even though we aren’t there yet. Scientists can study ideals as well as norms. But the news doesn’t seem as interested in ideals, and one can see why.

Reporters are mesmerized by trends and cannot help suggesting that we should be guided by the movement of norms. News has less to say about our ideals, because these are more resistant to change. You might be convinced that some present trend is destructive. You might think that some current norms can never prove to be a viable practice. A few good examples—or even an unreachable ideal—might be a more powerful force than the social trends that impress our journalists.

News has little to say about our ideals. They change too slowly to be part of the news. But norms do change, back and forth, which qualifies them as news. Stories speak of those who “cling to” unfashionable ideas or practices “in the face of recent trends” as if they are social fossils. Newspeople are not getting this from social scientists, who know that a norm is not a guide to life.

When we feel bad about trends, it means that our norms and ideals are pretty far apart. That is nothing new; it is part of being human. People have always had to struggle to reach their ideals, but we need not give them up just because we have not yet reached them. The news often seems to want to relieve us of guilt by showing that our ideals are not a universal reality. It is not doing us a favor in this, and it is not being scientific. Nor are legislators doing us a favor by thinking that they need to adjust the law to the norms they read about in the news.

What does periodicity have to do with all this? The media are not willing to leave any of us behind. They want their audience to move together into the future. The news is not going to admit that a large number of us do not intend to “move with the times.” Yet without the news’s prodding, people might simply remain divided on questions like family patterns. In short, you can choose whether you want to join in the trends that news promotes. But if you don’t join in, you may not find your world represented in news discourse.

**How News Drives Science**

The news and politicians who follow it most closely have a marked impact on science as well as on our image of science. For example, legislators may direct government funding of medicine and social science toward trendy topics. Ambitious scientists know how to design studies that will play to these trends so as to ensure funding.

Perhaps the most notorious instance of how news can corrupt science was in the launch of the space shuttle *Challenger* in 1986. NASA was founded in part to create publicity for the government and to show our tax dollars at work. Congressional favor could have
gone to a lot of other science projects that might have brought a greater return in human welfare or knowledge, but the results would not have been as newsworthy. So NASA was given a sixty-person staff to manage press coverage and to convince viewers (voters) of NASA's need for support. It was acutely embarrassed, therefore, at the repeated delays in the shuttle launches during the 1980s. If those officials had responded to actual scientific and technical concerns, they would have taken the time and the pains to do things right. Unfortunately they were tuned in to the news.

The New York Times called one of the delays in the Challenger launch a "comedy of errors," and the Washington Post began its story of the aborted launch on January 27 with a parody of "For the want of a nail the horse was lost." ABC's World News Tonight said sarcastically, "Once again a flawless liftoff proved to be too much of a challenge for the Challenger." CBS Evening News seemed exasperated: "Yet another costly, red-faces-all-around space-shuttle-launch delay. This time a bad bolt on a hatch and a bad-weather bolt from the blue are being blamed. . . . Confidence in NASA's ability to maintain a launch schedule has been rocked by this series of embarrassing technical snafus and weather delays." A director at the Kennedy Manned Space Flight Center later said in an interview with the Washington Post that such news treatment created "98 percent of the pressure" to go ahead with the disastrous mission.3 You may remember that the Challenger shuttle was carrying along a teacher to ensure news coverage. This is what happens when science gets too close to the news. Scientists manipulate the politicians through the news and its viewers. But their own research agendas get distorted, and they may pay a heavy price when their science is judged by a fickle public.

While awaiting actual discoveries NASA entertains us with speculation on whether the universe is going to collapse into a great heap or continue expanding infinitely. In 1992 the NASA public-relations staff claimed that data collected by the Hubble Telescope offered evidence for infinite expansion. Actually it only confirmed something scientists had known for fifteen years but which they did not think proved anything of the sort. But NASA treated it as a new discovery, since they needed some good news about Hubble. In 1993 there was another report, using data from an X-ray satellite, supposedly confirming the opposite—that there was enough "dark matter" and hence gravity to indicate that the universe would eventually constrict. Scientists, again, must grind their teeth when they see these conflicting headlines. But as one of them said, "How else can you get closing the universe to compete with Michael Jordan's sprained ankle?"4

As it is presented to us in news reports, science is little more than superstition. Readers see figures on social norms, for example, and assume that they are something one could find in nature. They are not; they are statistical abstractions. The range of responses or conditions is what is "real," not the norms. But that range is too complicated to report. Nor does the news tell us how limited the evidence was on which the scientific report is based. Correlations are understood as perfect rather than merely suggestive. Results are looked upon as conclusive rather than indicative. Whereas true science must always hold itself open to new evidence and new conceptualizations, news science must hype today's report as if it were definitive.

**Knowing Everything**

Behind the news hype is the illusion that all these sciences are just about complete and that we may soon know just about everything. As you've noticed, the anticipated "theory of everything" is finding its way into news reports, threatening to chase black holes off page one. It is never made clear that scientists do not even pretend that such a theory (accounting for basic forces) will actually explain everything.

Sad to say, we cannot know how close we are to "finishing" any
of the sciences, whatever that would mean. Only when such a body of knowledge is “complete” would one know its full dimensions. Until that time, we cannot know whether we are about done or have only just begun. But the news gives us the impression that scientists are getting near to closure—real certainty—and are engaged in a mopping-up operation. For what would be the point of reporting scientific formulations that will prove to be initial instead of conclusive steps? If there still are scientists two hundred years from now, they may be showing how primitive our present notions are.

Scientists are in this for the long haul and will look puzzled if you ask them when their sciences will be finished. Social scientists are in an even worse situation, since they are tracking a moving target; the answers to their questions about society will have to be different one hundred years from now, when societies are different. Yet the news won’t grab us if it doesn’t treat scientific reports with an air of conclusiveness and closure.

It’s odd when you think about it. It would seem natural for periodicals to give the opposite impression—that science is in considerable flux. But newspapers know we want to be assured of progress, so they puff each discovery as a step toward human omniscience. As a result we are getting dizzy as we stumble down the twisting paths of our media nutritionists and child psychologists. In fact there is only one science really suited to daily editions—it’s in the papers every day. Astrology.

EVIDENCE THAT IT TAKES SOME SOPHISTICATION TO READ AND REPORT ON SCIENCE

- *Chicago Sun-Times*, same day: “Southpaws Left to Ponder Earlier Death”

- *Detroit Free Press*, November 17, 1988: “Pill Doubles Heart Disease Risk, Study Finds”
- *Detroit News*, same day: “Encouraging News for Users of Pill”

Clearly, you’ve got to be careful which paper you subscribe to. It must have been treatment like this that confused the judge in New York:

- *New York Daily News*, same day: “Judge OKs DNA Tests for Court”