

Selective Consumption: The Fashionable News Diet



"Will ignorance of [news and current affairs]. . . come to be seen as a sign of a disciplined resistance to the blandishments of the current noise?" (p288)

Throughout history news has been accessible using a variety of media forms. These have ranged from smoke signals and the banging of drums to newspapers and television¹. In "A History of News" (3rd edition) Mitchell Stephens critically analyses the history of news and its development. The final chapters contain interesting discussion on the future of news, how its current values effect innovation and society, and particularly; the notion of selective consumption.

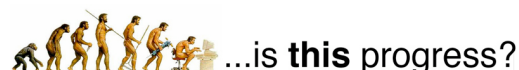
Stephens claims that the world's middle classes have transitioned from being underexposed to news to being flooded by it (p297). In the 21st century we have constant access to news and current affairs due to the impact of the Internet and mobile phones alongside traditional

media. However, Thoreau argues that these “new toys” are only an improved means to an unimproved end”²; essentially asking the question: “is this progress?”

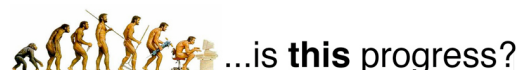
According to Schultz³, the press today is primarily concerned with “entertainment, amusement and titillation” and therefore must take on entertainment values⁴ even if it sacrifices quality content⁵. Stephens recognised this as a result of news becoming marketable commodity with journalists as its gatekeepers that will do anything to make it sell (p208).

This phenomenon is largely due to the major news media funding artery: advertising⁶. It results in a commercial need to understand (and in the process, define) what makes stories sell. Former President of NBC news Reuven Frank once said “joy, sorrow, shock, fear, these are the stuff of news” – news is about sensationalism⁷.

“The result of all this is that Americans are the best entertained and quite likely the least well-informed people in the Western world”⁸



While news and current affairs have been adopting many characteristics of soap operas⁹, there has been an interesting trend of traditional entertainment taking on the role of the news; informing the public sphere¹⁰. These new “post-journalism” media forms such as CNNNN and Frontline define themselves by their separation from contemporary news conventions. Recent research indicates, “young people prefer to derive their news and current affairs information from entertainment formats rather than from news and current affairs programs”¹⁰.

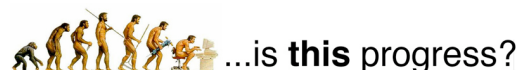


Broadcasting clings to the “least challenged social values”¹¹, and regulates society by informing what is, or more likely is not, acceptable¹². This process is the catalyst for news becoming a form of social surveillance that increasingly fosters homogeneity¹³. Stephens (p272)

argues that the proliferation of dominant cultural values through news and current affairs leads to the expansion of larger cultural practices at the expense of their smaller counterparts⁶.

When commodity prices began being reported in the press there was a noticeable shrink in their disparities. Stephens ^(p291) emphasises this trend when applied to the constant commentary on public life by the media¹⁴. This can only lead to the question of what happens to disparities in culture with the explosion of news and current affairs exposure.

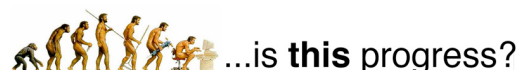
"News has allowed us to feast on the world's diversity, but we risk exhausting the supply" p291



Western society is suffering a disturbing case of “premature publicity” as the news media reports on deliberations, plans, predictions and potentiality rather than decisions, actions, votes or actuality ^(p292). It is facing Booristin’s “hyper-reality” where symbols and images are seen as more real than the things they represent¹⁵. There are becoming less quiet places, “dark corners,” where anything significantly new can fully develop ^(p292).

There have been significant developments in news media technologies; however, Stephens questions the progress in their content ^(p267). Many of their developments are channelled towards eradicating the tiniest imperfections of data ^(p295).

"We have seen new wars. We have seen new atrocities. We have not seen that many new ideas" p295

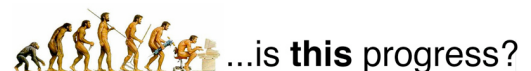


In 1626, “The Continuation of Our Weekly Newes” published the first correction in a newspaper ^(pXV). This marked the birth of the news media obsession with facts. The proliferation and nurturing of ideas requires a degree of speculation; an overload of facts does not allow room for speculation ^(p293). Stephens argues that facts stifle creativity. Dyson¹⁶ goes

as far as stating that: “human progress may be endangered” as a result of information overload.

Boyce¹⁷ claims the notion of news media as the “Fourth Estate” to be nothing more than a myth. It is widely accepted that understanding does not require recognition of facts but rather their relationships¹⁸. News, unlike history, does not seek to relate events but rather provide a digestible moment in time¹⁹. Stephens notes, for information to become news it must be simplified and de-contextualised (p290). This presentation of isolated facts leaves society disillusioned and the de-contextualised facts lose their significance.

Current newspapers are packed full of pseudo-events¹⁵, filling pages and airwaves with too many options (or “noise”) to make much sense of it²⁰. Although journalists pride themselves in their reporting of verifiable facts²¹ they are masters of disinformation, “misleading information - misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information - information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing”²².



"Hourly immersions in a selection of tragedies so unrelievedly black that the world itself, always grim when viewed through the news, may appear actually to have darkened." p289

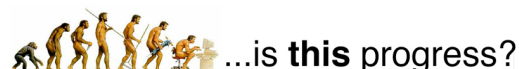
Negativity is used to ensure that the news is unambiguous²³. For example, it was widely agreeable that the Indonesian Tsunami in 2003 was a “bad thing” therefore was a very popular news topic as the angle could be widely accepted. Drama has popular news value, often achieved by the conflict of opposing viewpoints⁷ or the juxtaposition of an “innocent victim and a guilty party”¹⁴.

Stephens’ argues that the harmful nature of sensationalism in news negativity is closely related to a 19th century pamphlet about masturbation that stated:

“the short-term guilty pleasure we get from wallowing in prurience and sensationalism has the harmful, long-term effect of desensitising us, making us immune to outrage”²⁴

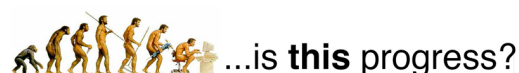
Tabloid journalism has been praised for its ability to bring private issues into the public sphere so that relevant resolutions and policies can be implemented²⁵. However, this kind of journalism has many negative effects on culture. Tabloid media commonly replaces experts with average people as their source of information²⁶. The trend of news and current affairs is distorting our view of “the world as a serious place”²⁷. News, by nature, is de-contextualised and is leading to a perception of serious issues and events as banal²⁸. Stephens argues that according to popular press, the world is heading simultaneously to utopia and apocalypse (p266) – triumphant progress and catastrophic decline (p255). Golding asserts that news “portrays a world which is unchanging and unchangeable”²⁹.

*“News is society’s deeply dissatisfied spouse: always complaining, never leaving”
p294*



The consumption of news is a habit and, like many rituals, is intrinsically satisfying although performing very few functions³⁰. According to Thoreau³¹, “to a philosopher all news, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea.” Whilst accepting this view Stephens reminds us that news still seems to have significant political and social ramifications (p267-8). News and current affairs are increasingly clouded by advertising

and entertainment values. Young people are getting their news from non-traditional sources. Media is moving towards narrowcasting and communities of interest. Selection of news is increasing homogeneity of culture. Creativity and ideas are being stifled by an information overload. News, regardless of its de-contextualised state is still affecting political and social behaviour. The public is lost without a feeling of connected events. The world is therefore grim in the eyes of the news.



How does society cope with the world displayed through the eyes of the news? Leaving aside any recurring discussions of “progress” – the real questions asked should be: “is this healthy?” and “is there an alternative?”

We have a world so grim and full of hyper-reality¹⁵, simulacra³², de-contextualisation and (mis-)representation. Understanding and selective consumption of these images and realities is essential. Our ancestors “struggled to feed themselves; our struggle is to resist the temptation of rich foods and excess calories” (p287). Stephens argues that this can be applied to our consumption of news and current affairs - that we can resist our instincts (p289). Whilst “plumpness is still preferable to malnutrition,” thinness is fashionable. There is still hope that, with a conscious effort, news will fulfil its goal to “enlarge a mind” (p279) but first humans must be rewire our innate desires and practice self-control. Piece by piece we need to ask ourselves: “is this healthy for me to consume?”

"Perhaps access to so much information will make us more selective in our consumption of this information" p297



...is this
healthy?



Endnotes

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|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Allan 2004, p8 | 12. Bird 1997, p337 | 23. Galtung 1981, p58 |
| 2. Thoreau 1951, p67 | 13. Golding 1999, p637 | 24. Gelbart 1995, p42 |
| 3. Schultz 1998, p30 | 14. Schudson 2003, p119 | 25. Lumby 1997, p118 |
| 4. Golding 1999, p634 | 15. Boorstin 1992, s32 | 26. Lumby 1997, p129 |
| 5. Turner 2005, p70 | 16. Dyson 1979 | 27. Postman 1985, p105 |
| 6. Herman 2006, p257 | 17. Boyce 1978 | 28. Postman 1985, p104 |
| 7. Golding 1999, p633 | 18. Schudson 2003, p113 | 29. Golding 1999, p643 |
| 8. Postman 1985, p106 | 19. Park 1999, p12 | 30. Carey 2002 p41 |
| 9. Lumby 1997, p122 | 20. Galtung 1981, p52 | 31. Thoreau 1951, p110 |
| 10. Turner 2005, 72-3 | 21. Hersey 1981, p25 | 32. Baudrillard 1987 |
| 11. Golding 1999, p641 | 22. Postman 1985, p107 | |

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