



# VICIOUS CYCLES

Theses on a philosophy of news

By Greg Jackson

*This is what I feared, that she would speak about the news . . . about how her father always said that the news exists so it can disappear, this is the point of news, whatever story, wherever it is happening. We depend on the news to disappear . . .*  
—Don DeLillo, “Hammer and Sickle”

*What a story. What a fucking story.*  
—Dean Baquet, on the election of Donald Trump

## A CIRCULAR CONVERSATION

What is the news? *That which is new.* But everything is new: a flower blooms; a man hugs his daughter, not for the first time, but for the first time *this time . . . That which is important and new.* Important in what sense? *In being consequential.* And this has been measured? *What?* The relationship between what is covered in the news and what is consequential. *Not measured.* Why? *Its consequence is ensured.* Ensured . . . ? *It's in the news.* But then who makes it news? *Editors.* Editors dictate consequence? *Not entirely.* Not entirely? *It matters what people read and watch—you can't bore them.* Then boredom decides? *Boredom and a sense*

Greg Jackson is the author of the short-story collection *Prodigals*.

*of what's important.* But what is important? *What's in the news.*

## I.

In his 1962 book *The Image*, Daniel J. Boorstin explains, “There was a time when the reader of an unexciting newspaper would remark, ‘How dull is the world today!’ Nowadays he says, ‘What a dull newspaper!’” The first American paper, Benjamin Harris’s *Publick Occurrences Both Forreign and Domestick*, committed to appearing only once a month—or “oftener ‘if any Glut of Occurrences happen.’” Clearly, things have changed. “We need not be theologians,” writes Boorstin, “to see that we have shifted responsibility for making the world interesting from God to the newspaperman.” The chief tool in this new labor is the pseudo-event.

What is a pseudo-event? They are everywhere; we hardly notice. Some familiar examples: the speech, the rally, the press conference, the briefing, the ribbon cutting, the political announcement, the political response, the interview, the profile, the televised debate, the televised argument, the televised shouting match, the televised roundup of other televised events, the official expression of outrage, remorse, righteousness, fear, sanctimony, jingoism,

smarm, or folksiness. The talking point is its handmaiden. News analysis is a second-order pseudo-event, not an event per se but the dissection of pseudo-events: that is, theater criticism. It is not that pseudo-events are always uninteresting or meaningless but that they are always *not news*. They only exist to be reported on. To supply a format. To make up for the non-glut of occurrences. Take away the pseudo-event and what is left to fill the news?

## II.

To meet our demand for newness and stimulation, we re-fashioned public life as a ritual sequence of pseudo-events. This transformed politics from an industry of policy and legislation into an industry of emotion and entertainment. If the news covered only the proposal and passage of specific legislation—or the proposal and enactment of specific policy—we would have little news, and audience interest would quickly fade. But the work of politicians might become the work of governing. As things are, the job of politicians is to feed the emotional-entertainment industry that we call “news,” which is accomplished by grandstanding and self-promotion. Reporters and pundits cover politics

by analyzing how politicians succeed and fail as spokespeople and media figures. Interest shifts, by turns, to how the game is played, how the media fits into this game, and, eventually, how journalists do their jobs. The news today, properly understood, is about the careers of politicians and journalists. It is career drama.

### III.

Television news aims to alert you to problems. In life, when someone alerts you to a problem, the problem's meaning takes shape within an implicit context, answering: (1) How important is this problem? (2) Where does it fit into the rest of my life? (3) What should I do about it? News shows cannot answer these questions because their format and their content are at odds. Their content says, "This is very important," but their format says: (1) No more important than the next segment; (2) In a time slot; (3) Keep watching. If you are a teacher or a car mechanic or a doctor, your job is not simply to identify a problem but to connect people to a solution. The news media doesn't do this. It *believes* it does—insofar as its audience members vote—but hundreds of hours

spent consuming news in a given year put to the service of one vote in one election is a terrible use of any person's time. Consider what all these people, with all these hours, might otherwise accomplish. Consider that most viewers would vote similarly, and not necessarily less well, with much less information. The principal effect of TV news is to create engagement through distress. News shows cannot connect viewers to meaningful actions they might take in their own lives to relieve this distress because these actions would mean ceasing to watch TV. And this is the goal to which all others will be sacrificed: to keep you watching.

### IV.

Entertainment is the supra-ideology of all discourse on television. No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it is there for our amusement and pleasure. That is why even on news shows which provide us daily with fragments of tragedy and barbarism, we are urged by the newscasters to "join them tomorrow." What for? One would think that several minutes of murder and mayhem would suffice as material for a month of sleepless nights. We accept the newscasters' invitation because we

know that the "news" is not to be taken seriously, that it is all in fun, so to say.

—Neil Postman

Analyses of the news tend to focus on how the internet has changed things, and there is no doubt that the intrusions of Facebook's news feed and Google News, online aggregation and free content, real-time reporting, YouTube, blogging, podcasting, and Twitter have roiled and remade the news business. But the crisis in news *as an industry* is not the same as the crisis in news *as a cultural institution*. The latter took root long before we connected online. It is for this reason, because so much media today represents the continuation, even the culmination, of trends that originated in the late Seventies and early Eighties, that writers such as Neil Postman remain relevant. They saw that the news was moving in two directions even then: toward entertainment and away from the local reality of people's lives. For all the intervening technological change, entertainment on TV remains the dominant modality of all twenty-first-century news.

And while the news may not feel like fun, it is fun in the sense that it is stimulating without demanding effort—that doing anything else would require more energy and commitment, even turning off the TV. Watching television leaves no meaningful residue of knowledge or skill. When I visited Amsterdam many years ago, kids staying at the hostels liked to tour the Heineken brewery for an afternoon. They wanted to do something "cultural," an activity that justified having traveled to the Netherlands, but really they wanted to drink beer. This is the logic of all infotainment, all TV and most internet news: it soothes the mind's demand for constructive activity while delivering entertainment—a sugary drink sold on its vitamin content. Prestige TV works the same way: by convincing people that they are engaging with art. Make no mistake—well-wrought entertainment can require as much talent as art to create, but that alone does not make it art. Likewise, not all experiences of information are the same,



since more or less passive forms of learning involve us differently. What distinguishes art (or knowledge) from entertainment (or infotainment) is that art asks something of its audience, and that its form serves the artwork, and not the other way around. Until the news can say, “We have no show (or paper) today because there is nothing of significance to concern you,” the news will build its monument to truth on a lie.

V.

When you think you are doing something serious but you are doing something trivial and fun, you grow to believe that serious things are effortless and enjoyable. You are experiencing a format, while believing you are experiencing a content. The content suggests you are learning about truth, when you are really learning how to *feel*. You are learning how you should feel in the presence of certain information. These feelings go on to determine your expectations and worldview.

The formal message of the news is simultaneously the vital importance and utter triviality of everything that is happening. For weeks leading up to the 2018 midterm elections, the media covered the “migrant caravan” as the central story of the moment. Journalists understood that its salience as a crisis had been manufactured, and they devoted pages and segments and podcasts to debunking this salience, to exposing it as, in effect, a peripheral real event being turned into a central pseudo-event. These debunkings of course contributed to the critical mass of coverage, until the story, or nonstory, took up significant space in our minds: in our idea of the world “out there.” Then the election took place; the migrant caravan had served its purpose as an object of media attention, and it disappeared. Presumably it did not disappear from the face of the earth, but to judge by the sole connection it had to most people



who attended it—its life as a news item—it might as well have.

Which was the truth: That it was news, and it did belong in our minds? Or that it was an irrelevant side-show? What we can say for certain is that this question was not decided in the real world of human necessity but in the virtual world of the news. The caravan story may be notable for how precipitously it disappeared, but the same uncertainty hangs over every news story: What space does this deserve in the limited sphere of our awareness? Since media attention rarely solves the problems it fixates on, in time the news must move on, letting every story vanish like the caravan—even wars. The raw matter and proportions of the world “out there” take shape in our minds in relation to the imperatives of an industry. This proportionality, rather than fact or truth, decides the image of the world we construct: what Jean Baudrillard calls a “hyperreality,” the inseparable amalgam of the virtual

and the real. The news narrativizes the world, but distortedly, according to the proclivities of its format, and so the story the news tells is always at heart the story of news: the story of curating what we recognize as news.

VI.

Is it a problem that our mental representation of the world is the product of a for-profit entertainment industry? Yes. Our government, for instance, cannot be dully competent if what we demand of it is that it isn’t boring. (After the first day of open testimony in the impeachment hearings, NBC News noted that the witnesses “testified to President Trump’s scheme, but lacked the pizzazz necessary to capture public attention.”) Journalists often rightly claim that the engaged polity should focus more on state and local politics, but people follow national politics for the same reason journalists and pundits do: because it’s interesting. Were

we to take their advice, they would be out of a job. Our attention sustains them, as it sustains politicians, and so when journalists wring their hands over the unfortunate necessity of covering Trump's tweets—to choose another example—they mistake their own complicity in what they, again rightly, find toxic. For there is no noncircular logic that ordains the newsworthiness of the president's tweets. As the celebrity is famous for being famous, so Trump's tweets are news because they get covered as news. If the news media chose only to report on concrete actions and orders emanating from the White House, the activity of governing would once again become the proper object of political contemplation.

What news outlets appear to mean by insisting that they must cover Trump's tweets and other provocative ephemera is that if they don't, someone else will and will thereby steal their audience, or that they feel obliged to report on what their audience seems to want. But this only draws attention to the central flaw in their industry. They are not, they reveal, reporting "the news"—an expert and principled curation of what they believe is important—but seeking to win audience share, like any other entertainment business, by trading on the inherent prestige of and misconceptions about what we have come to call "news."

On the podcast *Stay Tuned with Preet*, Preet Bharara asked Christiane Amanpour whether the media underestimates people in assuming they want to be entertained rather than informed. It is a confused question and received a confused answer:

I think maybe that was the case in the past several years. But I do believe that since we've entered this vortex of a different kind of politics, I think many, many people are actually looking for real news, facts, truth. Clearly, there's a lot who don't really care, who buy into conspiracy theories, who still go to Facebook and other places where they can find fake news. I do think that people have to take on a responsibility of their own right now.... They go out and they shop around, and they get the best that they can. And they

must do that right now when it comes to information because we are being inundated by charlatans who don't give a damn about the effect they're having on people. And they just care about clickbait and just care about racking up their own dollars, their own profit margins. It is a disgrace. It is immoral. It is the marketplace. So I think that people need to be responsible and choose their destination carefully, and come to people like us who are tried and true and tested and proven brand names in this sphere.

Amanpour's show is on PBS, which may partially insulate it from the market. Still, her assumptions and elisions

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### AS THE CELEBRITY IS FAMOUS FOR BEING FAMOUS, TRUMP'S TWEETS ARE NEWS BECAUSE THEY GET COVERED

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are striking, if predictable. She does not ask whether meaningful or essential truth may be different from "real news, facts, truth" as dictated by a TV news show. She glides over the question of whether she is supplying facts and information to an audience that would otherwise not have this information or fall prey to conspiracy theories and fake news. She assumes, against all reasonable belief, that people are drawn to her show because they are searching for truth or facts in a morass of confusion and deceit. She suggests, with no apparent irony, that being "responsible" means choosing your TV news "destination" carefully. Finally, while denigrating the charms of less "true and tested and proven brand names in this sphere," she seems utterly (or conveniently) incurious about what people actually get out of her program and others like it. What she must know—just as Bharara knows it—is that she is not principally the purveyor of unique information but a media personality, someone people like to spend time with, and that her show, while presumably made up of real news and facts and truth, is a fantasy, a shimmering hyperreality, one that in this case happens to be a

fantasy *about* how facts and news and truth are treated, with emphases and mores that signal seriousness and importance within well-understood and fairly rigid parameters. What she is selling, in other words, is not an experience of reality but of what her viewers wish reality were like—that is, therapy, not news.

#### VII.

**T**he coincidence of trauma and therapy, alarm and comfort, is the essence of today's news, which requires emergency, high-stakes drama, breaking stories, updates, and alerts to keep its audience engaged, but which must then solve the problem it has created by offering explainers and analyses to give coherence to so much terrifying chaos and by employing informational docents, in the form of likable media figures, to soothe our fear of a world on fire with their good humor, their intelligence, and the reassuring whisper embedded in their format: *the news exists so it can disappear*. And the news does disappear, inevitably, because its salience in the virtual sphere of our apprehension is so disproportionate to its salience in our lives. But what does not disappear is the residue of the experience and how this primes us for our next encounter with news of politics and the world out there.

One consequence of inflating the stakes of ongoing political activity in order to fill formats and draw audiences is that people are afraid of politics: afraid of politicians—the government—actually doing anything. Large constituencies stand ready on either side to denounce any new policy or law as the end of everything they cherish. The potential effect of policy gets subsumed into the virtual space of the news, where it languishes as an untested proposition, an object of endless, futile debate. Instead of implementing policy and evaluating it in practice, we remain paralyzed, and the more paralyzed we get—the less able to enact or amend policy—the more the case for paralysis grows, since the chances of fixing a mistake diminish. This grants an asymmetric power to the

forces that want the government to do less, not more.

But the more pernicious effect is a psychic cancer introduced into the culture as a whole. The extreme coincidence of urgency and irrelevance, terror and impotence, turns into a maddening unsettledness and contradiction in the conceptual sphere of life, authoring fear, anger, and confusion everywhere. The essential experience of a hyperreality is angst: dread, hushed panic, ambient foreboding. A disturbing fiction at least comforts you that it is fiction. A needling friend may finally admit, "I'm just fucking with you." The news is, on balance, just fucking with us, but it can never say so because it draws its stimulating power from the pretense that it isn't entertainment, isn't just "fun," but is deeply consequential. It rigorously blurs the line between entertainment and public service, since its market share and prestige depend on this confusion. But when you ask yourself what you can *do* with what you have learned on the news, you see that it only permits you to consume subsequent news more conversantly.

#### VIII.

Whether as a news show, a podcast, or an article, chances are today the news came to you through a screen. Online news platforms differ from traditional broadcast media and newspapers in significant ways. When clicks and engagement define the metrics of success, prompts and alerts, listicles, clickbait, most-read or "top story" sections, and otherwise manipulative headlines and teasers become predominant aspects of the experience. The graphic layouts of news on TV and on websites converge, with chyrons mimicking banner ads and vice versa. Red-letter "breaking news" gets more common (and less likely to be urgent, or even news) as the thirst for constant stimulation grows. When you buy a physical newspaper, what you do with it next—what you read—is your business. Not so with news on the internet; here the publication's interest does not end but begins at the "point of sale," and everything about the architecture of the product is designed to attach you to more of it.

But even old-school newspapers succumb to the tyranny of format, worshipping, in their way, a less glitzy hyperreality we call "the news of the day." This is what a newspaper is and has been—a kind of composite pseudo-event—since the telegraph and other technologies of communication freed information from limits imposed by space and time. The news of the day comprises real- and pseudo-events and even, sometimes, real news, but it is only one of infinite possibilities of how we might narrativize the world. It strives to be factual but adheres to strict conventions of format about what can and can't appear. It collapses the dimensionality we rely on to judge the world around us so that the proportions of the world it presents cannot agree with the proportions of our lives—"cannot" because the news is above all else this proportionality, this idiosyncratic condensation of the world out there.

This is what Neil Postman meant when he wrote, "The news of the day is a figment of our technological imagination." Our means of apprehending reality determine the reality we apprehend. What few could foresee was that, as technological and business pressures drew the news further toward stimulation and away from representing immediate life, at a certain point the value of the news' being true, its hewing as close as possible to an accurate picture of the world, would fall away. The news' relationship to people's lives had grown perilously virtual and its meaning, on an emotional level, nearly indistinguishable from entertainment. That no feedback mechanism existed to discourage people from getting their facts wrong, or to correct them when they did, underscored how deeply insignificant and remote the subject matter of the news—trumpeted for its significance and immediacy—was to the lives of its audience. In the immediate and practical sense, news and fake news became a distinction without a difference.

#### IX.

What we call "news" is less and less the meaningful historical facts—*this happened*—and more and more "opinion": argument to substantiate an ideology or worldview. Have you noticed a

recent profusion of ideology? Here's why: ideology is an answer to the problem of conceptual questions destined to remain in the conceptual sphere. It fills a vacuum of action. You can argue using ideology, but you can't build a bridge with it. If you spend more time arguing than building bridges, it's very useful.

One way to tell you're in the presence of ideology is when an entire industry of opinion exists to bolster and substantiate beliefs that people do not know how to justify on their own. Its nature is to confuse the question of who is thinking for whom and where thought or belief began. Ideology flatters people that their beliefs are their own precisely when they are not, and thus the sort of opinions and analyses that present themselves as ideology's correctives are in fact its enablers. The consumer of opinion does not ask himself "Why do I believe this?" but "Who can remind me why I believe this?"

Much has been made of the dichotomy between news and opinion in the case of Fox News or the *Wall Street Journal*, but almost all news today comes with a lacing of opinion or ideology, a framing, at the very least, that helps sort through the implications of a piece of information and put it in the context of a prior ideological framework. Rarely are you left to wonder whether a given idea matches Republican or Democratic, conservative or liberal ideology. Rarely are you left to wonder what you yourself think, or what else you would like to know before forming an opinion, without someone swooping in to think for you.

Guidance from those who know more than you do is often a good thing: the substance of education. But education means to empower you to think for yourself, not indoctrinate you. The signs of education and of ideology mirror each other inversely: curiosity, open-mindedness, and self-doubt on the one hand; quickness to anger, defensiveness, and tenacity of belief on the other. One welcomes new information; the other fears it.

Most Americans are not significant consumers of news and are not especially ideological. One might hope that if news were performing the educational function it sets for itself, news-savvy, high-information Americans would be still more open-minded

and less ideological. Studies suggest the opposite is true—that more “informed” voters are more partisan and often have less accurate, more ideologically skewed ideas about the world. This isn’t necessarily the news’ fault. Nonetheless, the news seems not to counteract or mitigate but to abet our ideological drift. It gives us the tools not to interrogate but to taxonomize belief, not to develop policy preferences but to identify to which political identity and tribe a policy belongs. In the internet age it gives us just enough to cobble together our own take—demonstrating our wonkish bona fides, unleashing a snarky dismissal or the sickest burn—just enough, that is, to pass off the scraps of other people’s expertise as an ersatz identity of our own.

# X.

Ideology grows stronger for our belief in a lie: that information has an additive property whereby at some point it becomes knowledge. This simply isn’t true. Outside the contextual frameworks that give information a place in life and a relationship to other information, it is quite literally meaningless. Would more state-issued facts about the Soviet economy in 1980, or more pages of talking points from an industry lobby, get you closer to the truth simply for not being untrue? Does knowing more trivia help someone build a better car or advance particle physics or write a more touching ballad? If we judge the “informed” as those who possess more information—more disembodied or decontextualized bits of trivia that are “true” in the sense of not being demonstrably false—we may find we have created a vacuous category (“conversance”) and that we need invented contexts, like the proliferating “news quizzes,” to put these incoherent facts to use. “Think You’re Smarter Than a *Slate* Senior Editor? Find Out With This Week’s News Quiz,” *Slate* suggests. “Did you stay up to date this week?” the *New York Times*’ news quiz more gently wonders. It’s only one step further to propose the news business itself and the practice of journalism as the proper object of the news connoisseur’s attention and interest. Asking such people’s opinions in polls, then, may do less to draw out “informed” com-

mentary than to hold up a mirror to the culture’s own confusion.

“Truth” and “fact” in isolation do nothing to combat ideology and error. It merely benefits the news industry to pretend they do. I understand why people object to false equivalencies between MSNBC and Fox News, but to focus on veracity blinds us to the deeper effect of opinion and punditry per se. The pertinent question concerns the terms of the implicit contract between audience and commentator. If commentators serve the sensibility of their audiences—which the necessity of attracting and retaining viewers (or listeners or readers) in a competitive media environment ensures—it hardly matters that they traffic in fact or avoid untruth since the overall message people receive is: *Your worldview is substantially right, and here are the arguments to insulate and fortify it.* The purpose is to justify ideological frameworks as a way of dealing with uncertainty and to reinforce the complex social agreements on which these consensus are built. When Fox News anchor Shepard Smith debunked what conspiracy theorists had dubbed the Hillary Clinton “uranium scandal” in 2017, his audience did not thank him for elucidating the truth, but suggested he belonged on CNN or MSNBC and that, for exposing a false story, he was anti-Trump. In other words, he had violated the terms of their contract, which was not to provide fact or best judgment but corroboration. Truth was welcome, but only truth that confirmed one view.

Thus while ideology and entertainment may seem at odds—entertainment is reputedly fun and lighthearted, where ideology is deadly serious—they are in fact flip sides of the same coin. Entertainment means to transfix, to keep you in place: watching, tuned in. It cannot ask you to endure discomfort, and the comfort it offers is often an uncomplicated intimacy, even a vicarious identification, with a celebrity—in the case of news, with the commentator or host. Because this person’s primary concern is your comfort—which is to say your attention and approval—a subtle con exists at the heart of the exchange. This person does not know who you are or, in any but the most superficial sense, care about you. But the illusion of a relationship is nonethe-

less paramount. It goes one step further, since part of the illusion, in the face of political confusion and distress, is that the news celebrity’s competence and clarity are your own. Her power is briefly yours, and while you inhabit the aura of her expertise you are safe from your own ignorance and the frustration of life among other people. The most fervent devotees of a cult or demagogue are those who mistake courtship for love and the power of a leader for their own. But when you step outside the aegis of a leader’s power, the aura of a pundit’s companionship, you realize, suddenly, that you are alone and unprepared. You were misled into thinking you were getting help when you were giving worship. Ideology takes root in this disappointment because the alternative is more painful: accepting that you’ve been conned.

# XI.

Newspapers begin with the most serious and sober news, which, though it has little to do with your life, understands that you show up with good intentions. You mean to do something civic, or at least to cast a glance over those more serious headlines on your way to controversy and gossip, celebrity and human drama.

The news, like a fractal, repeats this betrayal of good intentions on every scale. This is the poignancy and tragedy of the news. We need it: the Fourth Estate, complement to government, scourge of corruption, orchestrator of public discourse. No one thinks we could get by without a press. No one who understands the work of journalism has anything but admiration for its honest practice.

But this work—to hold power to account, to safeguard the truth, to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, in Finley Peter Dunne’s immortal words—has entered into a fatal bargain with an effluvium that demeans and yet supports it. Traditional reporting becomes the loss leader. It exchanges its status for a subsidy, and slowly a reluctant embrace of this co-optation—by the very forces a profession that stands in opposition to power should repel—turns into an

erotic grapple, because the apotheosis of market logic is the jittery Stockholm syndrome that makes the prisoners of the market insist that it has set them free.

So we find ourselves in a situation in which an entertainment industry of specious value (called “news”) subsidizes a much smaller and less popular subindustry (real news), which lends its prestige to the former and permits it to call itself by the same name. As this entertainment industry subsumes and replaces the news industry, a little game takes place, more or less in public. The game involves pretending—journalist and audience alike—that they have gathered to discuss a truth that exists outside the media, when, except in the rarest cases, they intend to discuss the processes of the media itself: the drama of how information and sentiment evolve and are influenced within a media environment. Like sports fans, news consumers learn the subtleties of the game. They grow “media-savvy,” and media-savvy becomes the hope of an industry. Members of the news business (and practically they alone) call for greater “media literacy”—a solution to a problem they have created that expects the reformation of their audience but not of their industry—because they do not want to choose between responsibility and popularity, or principle and career. They are selling a healthy product, they imply, which people are using the wrong way. But this is confused. No one *wants* the healthy product. They want its misuse. They want to believe something so stimulating can be healthy, and they rely on media members to help perpetuate this lie.

As civic discourse—the news—becomes increasingly shaped by media-savvy and game-play, as it becomes a metadiscourse not about actual events but about the translation and distortion of actual events within a virtual sphere, the little lie about what the news is and why we follow it permits bigger lies. Charlatans, con men, demagogues, and cheats crawl out of the woodwork and operate with impunity, knowing they need not win on truth or merit, but simply win the news

cycle, win within the rules of a con-fected game. Playing the game well, being stimulating and likable in a media environment, suffices to justify one’s ascendancy within it, because—despite protestations to the contrary—this logic of celebrity explains why anyone is a media figure in the first place, and why we attend them. The sober, responsible news, now in its watchdog guise, enters here—when the mechanism of its own industry has elevated a crook or a scoundrel to a position of power—promising to solve, through exposure, a problem it helped create. But it can’t undo the media mechanism without relinquishing its own power and profitability by copping to the lie on which its prestige rests.

## XII.

**B**ut we need the news, don’t we? We need information spreading through society. We need people digging into convenient stories to check the facts. We need to uncover what power seeks to hide and discourage those who can abuse their power from doing so.

Of course, we can’t judge the soldier, the police officer, the watchdog only by what they do, but also by what would happen without them.

And yet no one would suggest we fund the military by watching it wage war on TV, that the size of its audience should determine its budget. We understand where such incentives would lead.

But this is the way the news works. Its greatest social benefit rests in discouraging the sensational and scandalous from happening, but it needs the sensational and scandalous to attract the audience that supports it. No one would propose we fund cancer research through tobacco sales or link heart-disease treatment to McDonald’s revenue. No one would say that the CIA should partner with TMZ to run a celebrity-gossip site. But with the news we are not so far from these fanciful scenarios. *Breitbart* and right-wing talk radio belabor fake scandals to create a salable emotional product, but the mainstream media, for all its understandable concern about Trump, cannot stop helping him when it



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boosts their bottom line. They can't limit themselves to reporting on concrete actions by the White House but must breathlessly amplify every ephemeral utterance, every remark designed to cause a little flurry of reporting and nothing more. They can't stop saying "Trump" and broadcasting his likeness, when his likeness has nothing to do with the news and when they could as easily say "the White House" or "the executive branch." They are puppeteered by their own game, caught in a bind whereby their abhorrence of Trump and their audience's abhorrence of Trump elevated him to such cacophonous prominence that he had a shot of winning the presidency. And when he did win and the mood among reporters at the *New York Times* turned bleak, the paper's executive editor, Dean Baquet, was surprised at the response: this was the story of a lifetime. "Great stories trump everything else, right?" he says in the documentary miniseries *The Fourth Estate*.

But only someone besotted with the news as an end in itself could believe that—another executive clinging to the delusion that he's a celebrity and a civic hero at once. The privatization of a public good has progressed to a far-gone place when market success and moral success are so confused that you congratulate yourself for selling both antidote and toxin.

### XIII.

**T**he news may be judged by what it crowds out. DEMOCRACY DIES IN DARKNESS, the *Washington Post* motto reads. For billions who live in countries without a free press, this is true. But our problem in the United States is not an absence but a glut. Truth dies in darkness, but it also dies in blinding light. Separating what's important from what's trivial is as essential as revealing what's important. A needle in the haystack isn't much better than no needle.

The problem of distinguishing the important from the trivial is a problem for all of us—for our educators, our politicians, our leaders, for us as individuals, as citizens, as friends. To lay this problem at the feet of the

news industry is unfair. The news is trapped in a business model that makes no sense, that rewards it for its worst behavior and refuses to pay it for what of greatest value it contributes. But the news can be blamed for confusing the issue. We need to know when we are being entertained and when we are having a different experience. Being fed trivialities when we need importance, like empty calories when we need nourishment, makes us sick. We grow to mistake bigness for importance, when importance is a measure of our involvement. Big trivialities make us psychically obese, with nowhere to expend this pent-up energy. "What a story. What a fucking story," Dean Baquet said, watching Trump's inauguration.

The essayist Lauren Hough writes about being a "cable guy" and describes the clenched-teeth white-knuckling of a customer who hears he will have to forgo Fox News for a week. A junkie without a fix. What is this hunger, this addiction? An addiction is a hunger briefly satisfied, then redoubled, by its object. But hunger for *what*? Hunger for something much more significant than the news. An answer to the incommensurable. To the incommensurability of the scope of the world and the scope of our lives. The vastness of our hopes and the range of our capabilities. Meaning and place. I feel it, too. It does not begin in anger or fear, but it can be twisted into these by a cynical exchange—too many cynical exchanges, one after the next. Too many trivialities passed off as sustenance. Too much fake intimacy. Too much stimulation to no end.

William Carlos Williams writes:

My heart rouses thinking to bring you news of something that concerns you and concerns many men. Look at what passes for the new. You will not find it there but in despised poems. It is difficult to get the news from poems yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there.

Good luck getting anyone to turn away from the news to a poem, but this is the lack—and the surfeit, the glut—of which we die miserably every day.

### SOMETHING MISSING

**W**hen we turn away from the news, we will confront a startling loneliness. It is the loneliness of life. The loneliness of thinking, of having no one to think for us, and of uncertainty. It is a loneliness that was always there but that was obscured by an illusion, and we will miss the illusion. We will miss the illusion that we had a place in history, the sense that we were celebrities ourselves, actors on the grand stage. We will miss the voices and images that came to us daily and convinced us they were our friends. We may, if we listen closely to the echo inside this loneliness, hear the expectant beating of our own hearts and understand that what we longed for, what we asked for, and what was given us was a story—a story of such grand metaphysical proportions that reality could never meet it. Reality could only meet it by inflaming itself, and this was the danger—the danger that made our hearts beat faster and the story grow stronger. Then we will see the news for what it was: the narrator of our national epic. "The news of the day" was the next chapter in an evaporating book. And we will miss tuning in each day to hear that voice that cuts boredom and loneliness in its solution of the present tense, that like Scheherazade assures us the story is still unfolding and always will be. I don't know whether we can give it up. We may need it too much, miss it too sharply. We may never get to the quiet place where we can read a poem, because this will mean distinguishing happiness from pleasure and understanding that happiness means boredom, means loneliness. Means life among one another, in the world: a place where drama subsides and horizons of time stretch to months, to years. Are you not bored already? Who will narrate our epic now? Will we have one? What will bind us? No one knows. What we do know is that some part of us longs for our dreams to come true. Dream of monsters long enough and you bring them into being. We make what we imagine real. And who then reminds us—and what must happen before we remember—that the drama we want in our stories is not the drama we want in our lives? ■