

News. What is it good for?

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Once upon a time, news was regarded as the lifeblood of democracy, empowering the people with the sort of up-to-date and accurate information that enabled them to act as citizens in the political process. Nowadays the news is looked upon with a degree of circumspection by academics, politicians and journalists themselves. And if we are to go by the declining newspaper sales and viewing figures, the public also seem disappointed in the product.

Health warning: news impairs your understanding

While criticisms levelled at the news are as various as the people who make them, the overwhelming verdict seems to be that watching or reading the news can impair your ability to understand what’s going on in the world. And lately plenty has been going on, although you probably won’t have been able to make much sense of it—certainly not if your primary source of information is mainstream news.

The American humorist, Oscar Levant, once described the typical newsreel film as a ‘series of catastrophes followed by a fashion show’.¹ Judging by the news agendas of the BBC, ITN, CNN and Fox News, little has changed. These broadcasters present a dispiriting vision of international affairs, one in which the world seems to defy rational explanation—a point illustrated by the reporting of the South Asian tsunami disaster in the past few weeks.

Such mystification usually serves the purposes of the powerful. As Greg Philo and Mike Berry argue in *Bad News from Israel*, the dominant frameworks for reporting the Israeli/Palestine conflict have skewed public understanding of what is really going on.² For example, TV viewers surveyed in their study believed that the death rate on the Israeli side was five times higher than that on the Palestinian side—the opposite of the actual statistic. It’s that sort of reporting that endorses Israeli violence as a justifiable reaction to apparent Palestinian aggression. This in turn reinforces the Israeli monopoly of power and authority over information management and public relations.

The symptoms: No context, no explanation, no investigation.

At the root of all this misinformation is a lack of historical and political context in reporting. Whether it is conflict on picket lines or the latest crisis in the peace process in Northern Ireland, the explanatory potential of the news is found wanting. All too often journalists rely on being drip fed by ‘official’ sources or fall back on lazy clichés that present conflicts and carnage in terms of tragedy or evil. Robert Fisk of the *Independent* describes how normally sane journalists appear to lose it in the midst of conflict. He remembers a colleague reporting from Bosnia where “you can

see evil and smell evil”, while another stood solemnly to camera and intoned: “Behind me, unimaginable horrors are taking place in our time”.³ But of course, wars and conflicts represent the failure of politics and have avoidable causes and consequences. They cannot be explained by the metaphysical category of ‘evil’.

John Pilger knows why the news is failing to illuminate the real causes of conflict. As he explained to Andrew Marr on BBC Radio 4’s *Start the Week* (1 November 2004), investigative journalism just isn’t on the news agenda anymore.

Investigative work is more time intensive and expensive, although it seems that broadcasters can always find money to spend on a studio revamp and new corporate logo, while newspapers are never short of funds to encourage confessions from C-list celebs or revelations from their ever-helpful ‘friends’. However, what really counts against investigative journalism is its potential to bring newspapers and broadcasters into conflict with the powerful.

News corporations have left the risky business of uncovering the machinations of the powerful to the media bards and jokers. The most probing questions are being posed by comedians such as Michael Moore and Mark Thomas. As George Monbiot remarked in the *Guardian*, Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* asks the questions that should have been asked everyday for the past four years. The success of the film testifies to the rest of the media’s failure’ (13 July 2004).

The prognosis: the corrosion of democracy?

The consistent failure of the news to ask the appropriate questions of those in power has had a corrosive effect not just upon the traditions of journalism, but upon the democratic process itself. In the West voter turnouts are falling as people disengage from politics. After all, who would waste their time going to the polls in the world of ‘one damn thing after another’?

Even the high turnout for the US elections conceals its own indictment of news. A recent poll, released by the Programme on International Policy Attitudes, showed that the overwhelming majority of Bush supporters still believe that Iraq had ties to al-Qaida or the September 11 terrorist attacks and weapons of mass destruction or a programme to develop them. Bush, his entourage and his supporters should have been confronted with the error of these assumptions at every step in the election contest, by journalists determined not to let such nonsense prevail in public.

One has to wonder, then, what *use* mainstream news really is to the democratic process? Received wisdom would indicate that its role is to serve to inform the public, to encourage public debate, and to scrutinise the actions of the powerful and hold them to account, but it has palpably failed on critical occasions to fulfil any of these important functions.

The cure?

News is not history or politics: those are different discourses. News is an institutional and professional selection of contemporary events that produces nothing more than an inventory of proceedings. Curtailed by time and space, it has no opportunity to expand upon or explain the events and issues it presents each day. In short, news just isn’t up to the job of making the world intelligible. So here is a radical proposal: let’s abolish it! And in its place let’s invent a new media genre that can be relied upon to investigate, contextualise, inform and scrutinise.

Notes

- 1 Cited in Greg McLaughlin (2002) *The War Correspondent* (London: Pluto Press), p.35
- 2 Greg Philo and Mike Berry (2004) *Bad News from Israel* (London: Pluto Press)
- 3 Cited in McLaughlin, pp.166-7

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