

Four Years Without News

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In the autumn of 2016 I was teaching an evening course in Critical Thinking at the local branch of a state university. This was during a presidential election in the United States, and I found myself continually aggravated that one of the candidates in particular was committing logical fallacies on a daily basis that directly violated the rules of informal logic that I was teaching my students. Some teachers might have considered this situation an opportunity to make the rules of logic relevant to students by using these fallacies as examples for analysis in the class. On the contrary, I saw this as a potential trap, essentially inviting some student or parent to complain that I was bringing politics into the classroom by criticizing one candidate consistently over the other.

Instead, I decided simply to stop exposing myself to this continual barrage of fallacies by avoiding the news altogether. And so I did. For an entire month, I did not watch or read any news, whether about the election or about anything else. The night of the election, I did check to see who had won the presidency. Then I decided to continue my news blackout indefinitely.¹

Four years later, I write this summary of my experience, just as another presidential election is no doubt injecting a new stream of logical fallacies into the news media. I am not here advocating that everyone follow me in avoiding the news, but for those who are interested, I show how it is possible and what were the impacts on me.

The logistics of avoiding the news are in some ways easier than they would have been in earlier decades. There now are many more media outlets, which means that fewer outlets feel that they need to be all things to all people by providing news, entertainment, and sports. Furthermore, with the advent of streaming media services, the possibility of receiving only the media content that one actually wants has significantly increased. Therefore, avoiding the news simply requires avoiding media outlets that are likely to force news into one's consciousness.

Clearly television channels and radio stations that provide nothing but news need to be avoided, but I was never particularly inclined to spend much time on such news outlets anyway. There were brief periods of my life where I would turn

¹This was not my first news blackout, though. An earlier attempt to avoid the news lasted only a few months, after which certain events brought me back to the news. That period was too short to evaluate its impact.

on one or other news channels while I was doing something else, such as taking a meal, but I noticed that the need of such channels to fill 24 hours with news meant that what was being presented at any given point in time would often stray into very trivial matters that did not interest me at all. Consequently, I eventually stopped turning to such news channels at all, so avoiding them as part of a deliberate effort to escape the news was already easy for me.

More problematic were other channels, such as local television broadcast stations, that could interrupt a program with breaking news, or that would tease the viewer with some putatively tantalizing piece of news during a commercial break, encouraging the viewer to tune in to the regularly scheduled news program for details. To be safe from such unwelcome intrusions of the news, I stopped watching broadcast channels entirely.

The only radio stations to which I continued to listen were classical music stations, where I was more likely to hear anecdotes about Brahms than any current news, so I was not at risk for intrusive news from the radio.

With the general decline of print media, it is much easier to avoid newspapers and magazines now. I do not really remember ever hearing newsboys on the street corner shouting “Extra! Extra! Read all about it,” except in old movies. Furthermore, vending machines offering newspapers for sale by displaying lurid headlines seem increasingly rare, at least in places where I am likely to go. For those machines that remain, my eye still seems attracted to the large black headlines, which is precisely their function, so it took some discipline to treat any passing newspaper merely as a grey rectangle. Fortunately in this regard, my eyesight is not as strong as it was when I was younger, which helps to blur out unwelcome parts of the world, if I choose not to focus on them.

News on the Internet is surprisingly easy to avoid, simply by not navigating to news web sites, so long as one does not also frequent web sites that link to those sites. To make this avoidance easier, I removed all bookmarks in my browser that navigated to news web sites or to other sites likely to link to them. I had never arranged to have news pushed to me via email, so I was not obliged to take any special measures to block news arriving in my email inbox. Any junk email that might have referenced news seems to have been successfully caught by junk mail filters.

I understand that social media is an especially common way for people to receive news or what pretends to be news, and that some people even pride themselves on receiving news via social media before it is published on traditional media channels. Fortunately for me, I had never thought that social media was a good idea, so it took no effort on my part to block out this way of receiving news or news-like messages. My disdain for social media would require separate exposition, since it far exceeds the scope of this article. At one point, I had considered writing a critique of social networking, but I did not want to be associated with social networking even as a critic.

Note that my goal in avoiding the news was not to prevent any news whatsoever from reaching me. Clearly some news is practically, even vitally, important. However, I found that all such news inevitably reached me by other means. I

started hearing about the coronavirus in the course of my regular work, ultimately receiving emergency alerts on my mobile phone when my city of residence implemented shelter-in-place and other emergency orders. On another occasion, I received another alert indicating that a curfew was implemented in my city. Curious why a curfew was needed, I checked the details on my city's website and learned that there was rioting downtown in the wake of protests. Once I learned what I needed to know, I found that was sufficient for me, without feeling obliged to tune in to the news to get the "full" story in excruciating detail.

In other cases, I cannot remember exactly how certain pieces of news reaches me. I understand that there was another impeachment, though I am not aware of the exact charges or whether those charges were justified. The impeachment apparently did not result in the removal of the President, so it does not seem to have much impact on me personally, as though the removal of the President would have had any impact anyway.

Some friends and acquaintances really want to discuss the news, regardless of my attempts to avoid it. In such company, my presence often seems almost unwelcome, so I learned not to attempt to stifle such discussion of the news. What I found was that hearing bits of news as recounted directly by people I knew had a different impact than receiving such news on the standard media outlets.

When I was teaching Critical Thinking, I cautioned my students against arguments relying on testimony, which can sometimes be mistaken or misinterpreted. Hearing news from people in conversation raised precisely that level of skepticism regarding what I was told. Perhaps the news that was being recounted to me was correct, or perhaps the testimony I was hearing was mistaken or was misinterpreting the facts. This experience served as a reminder to me that even those reporting the news in standard news channels are mainly providing or transmitting testimony as well, which could likewise be misinterpreting the facts. Furthermore, some news is apparently being blatantly fabricated to influence people, or at least so I am told. As with arguments from testimony, arguments from authority can be problematic, if one does not establish the grounds for authority. Consequently, my avoidance of news has served to raise my level of Critical Thinking, even though I previously considered myself already to be a fairly strong skeptic in general.

While it was not my primary intention to avoid advertising, the avoidance of media outlets that are likely to push news at me has significantly decreased the amount of advertising to which I am subjected. I see this as a benefit contributing to an increase in my level of Critical Thinking as well. Advertising can be rather insidious in the ways it attempts to influence people, and the practice of advertising has become very sophisticated in the ways it capitalizes on patterns of cognitive weakness in people. I know that despite my best efforts, I am not immune to those patterns, and I can be influenced just as anyone else can. However, if I am not exposed to the advertising at all, it is easy to resist attempts at manipulation that do not even reach me. Have I seen the crazy new commercial featuring such and such? No, I have not, and chances are that

I am not buying that product.

Besides an improvement in my critical judgement, the impact of avoiding the news on me was mainly an increase in time and serenity.

With regard to time, it seems obvious that ceasing to perform an activity that takes time would thereby make more time available for other activities. I am not sure how much time most people spend engaging with the news. I did not think that I had spent much time at all. I recall that I previously would watch the *PBS NewsHour* every weekday evening, then perhaps another 30 minutes throughout the day reading various news articles found on the Internet. However, that amounted to over an hour every day on average. Nor was that time spent pleasantly, since the news inevitably brings annoyances at other people's actions, and for me, annoyance at other people's faulty logic, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article.

With regard to serenity, I just noted that the news inevitably brings annoyances, so clearly avoiding those annoyances tends to increase one's overall sense of serenity. It seems that some people become addicted to a sense of outrage. Whatever the issue and whatever the ideology, it seems that people can become so fanatical about their side of the issue that they actually seek out occasions in which they know that they will be outraged. Anger is an energy, or so I have heard from Johnny Rotten. Anger clearly has a physiological impact that some people seem to feed upon. For my part, I know that people are continuing to do and to say things that would outrage me if I would see or hear them, but not seeing or hearing them has diminished their impact on me. It is not a serenity born of ignorance, but of insulation.

I have joked to friends that I am planning to start a new religion based on the avoidance of the news. Like all jokes, there is a measure of truth here. Not that I could ever be the founder of a religion, but there is something deeper in the avoidance of news than merely a sense of serenity.

There is a pattern of religious thinking that holds that the temporal and material world of everyday life is in some sense not "real", and that reality is grounded in a separate eternal realm. Mircea Eliade discusses this pattern in several of his books.² This pattern appears, for example, in Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime, in the Christian notion of the Kingdom of Heaven (particularly in what Jesus says in the Book of John about not being of this world), even in Plato's realm of perfect Forms.

Eliade also refers to the idea of an Eternal Recurrence to describe the revitalization of the eternal realm of reality within the everyday life of a community by means of rituals. For example, the Eucharist in Christianity is often interpreted as a renewal of a covenant mediated by Jesus and as a reminder of the link between Christians and the Kingdom of Heaven. Nietzsche also used the idea of an Eternal Recurrence, but in a more philosophical sense.

In my secular way, I am tempted to apply the idea of an Eternal Recurrence, not to any sacred realm, but to the banality of what continues to be reported in

²*The Sacred and the Profane, Cosmos and History, and Patterns in Comparative Religion*

the news. I have thought about writing a generic newspaper with non-specific events that would generally describe the state of the news at any given point in time.

Some headlines might be:

- Disfunction in Washington. Political Parties Strongly Divided.
- President Says Something Controversial. Opponents Criticize.
- Terrorism Strikes. Radical Group Claims Responsibility.
- Mass Gun Violence. Community Leaders Urge Unity in Time of Tragedy.
- Natural Disaster Devastates a Region. Governors Seek Federal Funding for Recovery.
- Sports Team Wins Major Contest. Home City Rejoices.
- Celebrity Misconduct Surfaces. Many Fans Outraged.

If COVID-19 has not developed into a pandemic this year, I think these headlines could have served for most days out of the year. Yet even the COVID-19 events that seem so exceptional are not unprecedented, so a special generic edition might likewise be written to cover pandemics, global wars, and other major upheavals. I am not here rephrasing the saying that there is nothing new under the sun, but I think if there is anything genuinely new in the world, it will be found in the progression of ideas, not in the recurrence of events. I do not remember the last time that ideas *per se* made news headlines.

My new religion would therefore preach that the world of the news is unreal, that political trends and the statement of politicians are just as unreal as celebrity antics and trends in fashion. The banal recurrence of headline patterns demonstrates the relative poverty of such a world. What is real is to be found elsewhere.

Putting this joke about a new religion aside, it is unclear at any given point in time exactly what is consequential and what is trivial, what is insightful and what is misinterpreted. I think it takes time and reflection to understand the importance of events, so I have not given up reading history or watching documentaries. Consequentially, I value all the more such programs as PBS's *Frontline* or *American Experience* for providing sufficient perspective on events, much more than any current news program and anything reported in the daily news cycle.

Were I involved in government, of course, the world of politics would be my everyday world and therefore would be more real to me. Yet I am not in government, and therefore I do not need to follow political events so closely, except when it is time for me to act as a citizen, namely at election time. Then I research the candidates and ballot issues and vote accordingly. Perhaps others may think that since they have been following the issues on the news, they do

not need to do any additional research before voting, because they already know how to vote. Yet who is more likely to be manipulated, the active researcher or the one who simply accepts the information that happens to arrive via the news or political advertisements?

Some may object that my avoidance of the news simply constitutes an escapist strategy to evade the harsh facts of the world by refusing to hear news of those facts. If I am pursuing an escapist strategy, then that is nobody's business but my own. There is a long tradition of hermits escaping the world to devote themselves to higher matters. If I can accomplish that without having to retreat into the wilderness and relinquishing the benefits of modern sanitation, then I count that as a good thing.

On the contrary, though, I claim that my strategy serves not to escape but to enable authentic engagement with the aspects of the world that I consider to be important, not those aspects about which others would want to manipulate my opinion. There are issues that I still follow; for example, I track the COVID-19 infection numbers.³ However, I am not following anyone's commentary or interpretation of those numbers.

I may once again read or watch the news in the future, but I think that after my experience of avoiding the news for four years, my engagement with the news will be even more critical and more skeptical. If I am not satisfied with the quality of information I am receiving, I can always walk away again.

<http://www.markressler.com/doc/Four-Years-Without-News.pdf>

³Through the World Health Organization, not any news outlet.