

FIRST THINGS

Why the News Makes Us Dumb

John Sommerville

October 1991

I

Strange as it may seem in a country positively flooded with the commodity, we don't always understand what News is. News is what has happened since yesterday's paper or broadcast. It is that *daily* budget of information that a person needs in order to be "informed," to feel tuned in to the world. It is also a product, and the truth of the News product is not a characteristic essential to it. Certainly truth is secondary to sales performance. And the fact that information is marketed in this way, that is, as News, affects the way we think about everything—politics, government, science, religion, values, culture.

What happens when you sell information on a daily basis? You have to make each day's report seem important, and you do this primarily by reducing the importance of its context. What you are selling is change, and if readers were aware of the bigger story, that would tend to diminish today's contribution. The industry has to convince its consumers of the significance of today's News, and it has to make them want to come back *tomorrow* for more News—more change. The implication will then be that today's report can now be forgotten. So News involves a radical devaluation of the past, and short-circuits any kind of debate.

Newspeople have been worrying recently about the fact that we Americans seem not to be as interested in the News as we used to be. Or as they think we ought to be. What could this mean? Is the American public showing some suspicion not just of the *kind* of News it is getting, but of the very concept?

There are many ways of criticizing the News: attacking the conservative bias of publishers or the liberal bias of editors, showing their techniques of manipulation or the dangers of oversimplification, grumbling at the sheer incompetence of reporters, complaining of the way the News is concentrated in a few networks and syndication systems. But these attacks all take the concept of News for granted, accepting its importance and calling for this or that show of responsibility and fairness. The real problem remains: the very idea of News.

The News can't be fixed. There is something about *daily publication*, all by itself, that distorts reality. That is why the addiction to News that so many of us share has brought on a kind of stupidity. Our whole society shares this stupidity, and so we have a hard time recognizing it. But several recent developments have caused even Newspeople to sense that something is wrong with their enterprise.

Take, for example, the editors' own complaints about our first national newspaper, *USA Today*. When it appeared in 1982 with its big headlines and little stories, its charts and color bars and sentence fragments, it was criticized as a vulgarization of the News, a trivialization of true journalism. But no one was exactly *surprised* when it arrived. Everyone seemed to realize that it simply accelerated existing trends. That is what made it so scary.

What was it that *USA Today* showed about the News? It gave us “reality” in simple, semi-literate terms, with a concentration on ourselves. By jumping from subject to subject, it showed very clearly that News is a concentration on the ephemeral—the flotsam and foam on the surface of history. It reminded us that it is not the job of the News to tell what all this means in the Bigger Picture. It's *nobody's* job to do that any more. That is why our concentration on the News is dumbing us down.

If News were just one of many things that we read each day, it wouldn't have the same impact. If we read philosophy, history, science, theology—regularly—we would be able to make much better sense of the day'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,” i.e., ephemeral, forms.

Of course, not everything in a newspaper is News. But the other stuff would not justify a *daily* edition. Even the investigative reporting—held up to us as the primary justification for a News industry—need not be spooned out to us in tiny, daily doses—except, that is, in terms of profits. The way we are induced to buy the product *every day* is by the offer of the excitement and change that is the News. Once the stock of News corporations is sold publicly, Wall Street will insist on the same profit level as from any detergent company or fashion house. There is therefore no chance of the *Washington Post* just skipping a really slow News day.

The other paper that sober people worry over is the *National Enquirer*. We treat it as if it were a caricature of Real News. Actually, the *Enquirer* shows the ripening of the News, and where the whole business is headed. Remember: News is what sells newspapers. In the old days, editors took a more high-handed approach and gave the public what they thought grown-up, serious-minded people would want to know about. But Newspeople have gotten smarter, and we've gotten dumber. They know that deep down, we don't care if our daily News is entirely authentic so long as it is entertaining—like pro wrestling. So we can expect to see even the most respectable newspapers gradually becoming more and more like the *National Enquirer*. Anyone who doubts that statement might take a look at a newspaper of fifty years ago to see how far we've come already.

There has been a change in us as well. We have become so jaded that we require an ever-increasing level of excitement and allow an ever-narrower focus in the News we buy. The show had better be good, or our minds may wander. Like any good entrepreneur, the industry 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 engage us in some way. What we get is a teeny bit of our times, vastly enlarged to fill our vision. The idea that this is the world's reality is, of course, childish.

The News has the magical quality that if you have a compartment in your brain that is set aside for it, it will always be full, whether the world is really whirling or not. Just one story can spread over the whole Front Page, seeming all-important—that day. Of course, tomorrow's story will be all-important tomorrow. Which means that yesterday's story is nowhere.

Even Newspeople themselves have some sense of what they have done to us. *The New Yorker* complained, on 15 April 1985, that by that time “young people” knew almost nothing about the Vietnam War, which had *filled* the News for ten years. It reported an army recruit who did not know that the U.S. had lost that war. By contrast, as the editors observed, the Poles, who have not trusted their press for many years, can remember their whole history, despite government efforts to suppress it.

Not even our universities fight the pin-hole vision that is part of the News concept. I used to be incredulous when I saw universities scheduling TV Newsreaders as campus speakers. I am wiser now, realizing that Newspeople really do make the News. They create it. They create a reality that we depend on, a miniature world which 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, choose a few developments that they think we might still be interested in, choose the words and the slant and the tone that will grab us, and poll us to see if they're succeeding. News may have little to do with a search for truth, but it is very revealing of our popular culture. And that is the new substitute for philosophy, even in colleges.

II

The reason that old newspapers and magazines often strike us as childish is that they are full of ideology instead of thought. That is, they just tell us what it was once fashionable to think. Old News reflects thinking that is no longer in vogue. Of course, all of us *imagine* that we are thinking for ourselves. It is just when we are suddenly reminded of what we *used* to think that 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* impressive the second time around. We are impressed again with the author's insight, not dismayed by an editor's shallowness. What passed for ideas in the newspapers once seemed daring and advanced (if sort of self-evident). Now they seem juvenile.

Once again, daily publication is to blame. There can be no real thinking in News reports because explaining takes time (i.e., space). So News is made up of statements rather than arguments, which has a serious effect on our minds. When News constitutes almost 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 only shows us a clash of opinions. As a result, we forget how to carry on a debate, and fall back on polls.

Daily News has space only for opinions or positions, not evidence or arguments. And so we have acquired the habit of thinking that all positions spring out of nowhere—the expression of vested interests, probably. This has contributed mightily to our wariness of the term “truth.” Nothing is more common nowadays than to have someone interrupt a serious discussion with the objection, “Who is to say what the truth is anyway?” Or, “If that's your opinion, that's fine for you.”

In his heart of hearts, to be sure, no one believes that the concept of truth is unreal in that sense. You can't contradict someone else's statement unless you think your own position is solid. But this flippant relativism has become a habit with us. It is a habit we've picked up from the “evenhandedness” of the News, where no one is allowed to get away with very positive statements.

Whereas a true relativism is self-canceling, the News version of relativism is very dogmatic. Skepticism, you could say, is the creed of the News. We might think that the evenhandedness of the News would mean a respect for everyone's opinion. Actually, it encourages *rejecting* whatever is stated with too much emphasis or self-assurance. Maybe this is our idea of being modest or democratic.

The idea that all “viewpoints” are somehow equal is the reason that we do so badly in arguing our great social issues. We are so used to the News' 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? We wouldn't know how to begin to answer. What is compelling about philosophical principles, for instance?

Sometimes, Newspeople will appeal to experts, as in “some experts believe . . .” That 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 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, would Newspeople actually know an expert when they saw one? Even experts can't always agree on who the other experts are.)

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 probably has less to do with wayward philosophical movements than with a simple fixation on the News. Of course. Bloom was right to worry about a society that is so intellectually feeble. There has been a decay of our ability to relate our ideas to each other in a logical manner, or to relate our institutions to each other in a supportive way, or to relate different rights to each other so as to create justice.

Take, for example, the issue of “values.” Actually, we have plenty of values. Our problem is that we don't have any agreed *scale* of values. You need to rank your values to be able to argue logically about which ones might override others. Some have to be more basic than others, or they will all be a jumble and no guide to action.

What happens nowadays is that the News makes every value absolute—for the time being. By “absolute,” we mean that all other values become relative to that one, and subordinate. The News alerts us to a problem that some group in the population is having. But there is no space in the story to assess that group's rights or needs against other demands on the treasury or law enforcement resources, or against the rights of groups that might be thrown into competition. Rather, the News absolutizes a particular group or value—for the moment—and silences anyone who might demur.

Now that we are a 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.

III

News and religion, then, are likely to be antagonists. For as we have seen. News only recognizes change, whereas religion tries to concentrate on eternal questions. This opposition, by the way, is one that non-Western religions insist upon even more than the Judeo-Christian tradition does. The idea that for every 24-hour period there is an hour's worth of reports requiring our attention would be considered a sign of being spiritually lost in any of the world's religions.

Of course, any historian will tell you that as far as real trends are concerned an hour would be sufficient to report any four *years* of human history. And any saint would understand that even abbreviated to that extent, this would be a distraction from an understanding of our being. The things that nourish that sense of Being are music, philosophy, science, art,

literature, and the like. Not *reports* about these things, much less reports of wars, business, politics, and other mischief. Anthropologically speaking, all those arts began in religion, as part of the celebration of life and the powers behind our lives. Sociologically speaking, all of them are now in danger as News threatens to crowd out anything deeply reflective.

This antagonism is quite unconscious. Newspeople do not recognize any conflict with religion as such. But they must be aware that the “religious leaders” who get into the News are usually pretty disreputable types. When religion becomes the subject of the News, it has not been behaving itself. News coverage of religion quite naturally tends toward stories about celebrity-evangelists who are caught in some scandal. Or reports will point up the religious dimensions of current conflicts and even wars. This is perfectly understandable, and even proper, given the nature of News.

Religion News, however, doesn't go to the heart of religion. There could be reports of how much of all charitable giving came through religious as opposed to other foundations. There could be reports of how many people attended religious services last week. But even that would tell us nothing of how many broken spirits were healed or families blessed. These things aren't News, by any definition. That doesn't make them unreal. To be fair, Newspeople never claimed that the News represented everything important. Unfortunately, that assumption has been made by the rest of us, so that the ultimate concerns of life have been steadily declining in intellectual status.

The last *theological* issue that got headlines was the controversy over the slogan “God is Dead.” Those theologians who were trying to wake up their churches by talking this way deliberately chose the slogan in order to make the News. It fit into a lot of headlines. But the theologians learned their lesson. They did not get their point across. How could they, given the constraints of periodical publishing? It was all a success from the Media's standpoint, of course. That is, it sold magazines.

Not only will you never learn anything about religion by reading the News, you will not even learn anything worth knowing about religious institutions. Remember how it goes? Reporters are sent to cover some denomination's annual assembly, while the participants hope to have as quiet a meeting as possible and make no News in the process. Reporters are not easily put off, however. They look over the agenda and find that one of the five study groups—the one on the Church in the World—has a task force on social concerns (one of three task forces) which has a committee on community relations (one of four committees) with a subcommittee on homosexuality in the Church. Another study group (on Ministry) has a task force on mission whose committee on worship includes a subcommittee on gender-specific terminology in the liturgy.

Guess what the News from this assembly will concentrate on. Why are the churches so preoccupied with sex, we wonder?

Religion is a large part of life for a large part of the population, but News just cannot cover the essence of the thing, no matter what a reporter's sympathies might be. It's the same with anything real—like work, recreation, family. To be sure, there are sections in the paper on all these things. They can't make News out of them, but if you find yourself drawn to those features more than to the Hard News, it probably says something good about you.

Every so often some pundit will suggest that he or she suspects that religion is about to have a quiet resurgence. Sometimes this seems like wishful thinking, out of a revulsion against the binge of irresponsibility and indulgence that we call “individualism.” But any well-wisher to religion will fervently hope that if there is any such revival, it will never get the News treatment.

Should it happen, can you imagine how the reports will go? Newspeople will locate the “spokesmen” for this movement of the spirit, or perhaps *create* them. Those persons will play to the cameras and become less spontaneous, less real. They will learn the usual ways of getting Media attention, and try to squeeze their message into a slogan that will be bounced around until the News senses that it is losing the public's interest.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a longtime journalist who came to repent this misspent life when he became a Catholic convert. He once ruefully admitted that “I've often thought . . . that if I'd been a journalist in the Holy Land at the time of our Lord's ministry, I should have spent my time looking into what was happening in Herod's court. I'd be wanting to sign up Salome for her exclusive memoirs, and finding out what Pilate was up to, and . . . I would have missed completely the most important event there ever was.”

Something has to be sacred, of course, and the News is now handling that side of things for us, too, with its own list of taboos. Belief in the First Amendment is not to be questioned. In fact, the faithful show their devotion by a hundred Talmudic expansions on that simple commandment. Censorship is blasphemy. Charity means entertaining our customers. Because boredom is Hell.

IV

Americans used to go to church to hear about their faults and they didn't think they liked it. Many started staying home and reading the Sunday paper instead. But the paper started criticizing them, too. Of course, the News is not authorized to offer mercy, but it compensates by inviting its readers to join in blaming others.

We seem to like being nagged, and the News has discovered this. Newspeople have found that concentrating on our faults sells a lot of papers. I suppose that many of the people who have consciously kicked the News habit have done so because they are offended (“sick and tired,” they would say) by being blamed for “everything.” But the rest, the real News junkies, must like this play of guilt and self-righteousness, because it is a constant feature of the News as we know it.

The basis of morality is the ability to see things from another's point of view (the Golden Rule, remember). At best, this involves seeing all sides so that one can be fair. Learning to take everyone's interests into account is the beginning and the end of moral education. In fact, newspapers could be very educational in this sense. But what they tend to do instead is simply identify a few underdog groups and follow their fortunes. It makes a more straightforward, and shorter, story.

Once the News identifies the disadvantaged groups, it doesn't really have to discuss their situation. It can just keep score. If you have to capsulize the day's events, you cannot debate situations fully. Discussing moral dilemmas is complicated and often discouraging. So News just reports on who has insulted, slighted, or supported one of the target groups in its morality play.

Usually we are happy to side with underdogs. At certain times, we *all* feel that we are part of some minority. Now and then we realize that in certain respects we are part of an overbearing majority, and we are prepared to accept some scolding. The News takes advantage of this by encouraging the habit of siding against ourselves. Morality often involves denying one's own wishes, and always involves seeing things from someone else's viewpoint. But when taking a scolding becomes too automatic, it begins to seem like a masochistic wish that other people wipe their feet on us.

Before I canceled my *Time* subscription, there was an issue (May 7, 1990) that had a cover story on how foul-mouthed and abusive our new crop of “entertainers” is. The article was typically ambiguous, not wanting to offend readers who might like this brand of entertainment, but not wanting to offend the others, either. In the final summing-up, however, the writer decided that there wasn't anything really wrong with this stuff: “It has always been the role of art to shock.” (Art?) In case we hadn't gotten the point, on June 25, the magazine headlined a follow-up article “Anti-obscenity campaigners are getting as nasty as they wanna be.” So we know who the baddies are.

The odd thing about the original article was that it was *immediately* followed by another big article on “Bigots in the Ivory Tower.” In it we learned that some college students were insulting others or doing things that were considered disparaging to certain groups. The report was full of outrage.

I was puzzled. What was the difference exactly? News justifies an entertainment culture that is filled with offensive gestures and cultural insults, and then is surprised when people become offensive and abusive. Shouldn't they have expected it? Why couldn't the editors see the connection? And why should they have had such opposite reactions?

Actually, the Newspeople were being perfectly consistent. In both cases, the News put the majority in the wrong. The “comics” were encouraged because they were abusing—what?—white, middle-class, middle Americans. The students were reviled because they were expressing—what?—white, middle-class, middle American frustration and bigotry. The reporters were probably white and middle class, too. If anyone is going to be criticized, let it be me.

This dopey morality is what one has come to expect from the News. To grab the reader, it's got to take sides. The easiest thing, obviously, is to side against ourselves. That may in many cases be the moral way. If it becomes the invariable rule, readers will rarely notice.

We've all become part of a conspiracy. Newspeople know that to begin to pass criticism around evenly might ease the guilt of the sucker majority who are their customers. Conscience is the only lever that the News has to get public support for its many campaigns. Doubtless you have heard the phrase. The Power of the Media. The Media's power over us is the guilt that I have been describing. For the last several generations it has been the News, and not the churches, that has cultivated this guilt. It keeps worrying us about *something*, working on our guilt a little each day, rubbing us sore. That is how one becomes sensitive.

The idea that the News likes to nag us might seem to contradict what was said earlier about its jumpy attention span. But the *focus* of moral concern can change every week. It's the *tone* of moral instruction that prods us along and proves the Power of the Press. Still, Newspeople can be persistent in their nagging. How many stories have you seen that begin, “Pressure is building on A to do B”? That translates into “We intend to keep running stories on this until we hound A into doing B.” Another favorite is, “This story will just not go away,” as in “Accusations of X against Senator Y, though regularly denied, will just not go away.” Meaning, “We hope that you share our obsession with this and will want more reports on the subject.” Actually, you *can* make the story go away: just turn off the tube.

Nagging is to help create change, and the purpose of change is so that the News will have more to report. If Newspeople want a change of government, for instance, they will keep calling it a “regime.” That sounds less legitimate, more temporary. If they object to a particular official, they will not call him by his title, which would suggest permanency, but may call him a “strongman,” as in “Panamanian strongman Manuel Noriega.” They can be a little arbitrary here. Arrangements they approve might be referred to as “the law,” but those

they want changed are “present regulations.” They may point out that the Supreme Court has frequently reversed itself when reporting a ruling of which they disapprove, but will express satisfaction at other decisions that are presented as “definitive.” Attitudes that the press hopes to change are said to “persist,” meaning that they should have disappeared from our enlightened world long ago. Practices that are said to “still survive” are obviously taxing some editor's patience.

All of this—the simplistic morality and the nagging tone—comes to a focus in the political cartoon. The *New York Times* doesn't usually print political cartoons. They have some sense that caricature reduces the dignity and even the truthfulness of the News. But when you think about it, the News is caricature by its very nature. We should recognize degrees in these matters—there is more responsible and less responsible journalism. But at best the News simplifies our view of every kind of reality to the point of distortion, and cartoons only show this at its most squalid.

The cartoon completes the News. Its purpose is not to inform, but to emotionalize the issues. Those who don't know how they should feel about recent events can find out by looking at the political cartoon. It boosts us above our leaders by reducing their scale, lest we become too respectful of authority. The tragedy is that we triumph too effortlessly. Once people have checked out the political cartoon each day, they see no need for any further action.

So cartoons take the place of political action in the same way that the old holidays of “inversion” did for peasants. Several times a year the lower orders were allowed to pretend that they were kings or bishops or great ladies, and might actually lord it over their masters or ridicule them. This let the steam out of social protest. Similarly, no sooner have we elected new leaders than we have caricatures that put them in their place. Every day we are treated to this inversion, watching our masters stand in the pillory among the editorials.

There is another form of caricature when the News treats ethical issues as political issues. Take the abortion “debate,” which has been the most deeply troubling recently. News treatment reduces such ethical debates to two sides—to sharpen the sense of conflict. Journalists may allude to the fact that there is a moral dimension to the issue, but they will not have space to air the arguments. After all, there might be a dozen positions to consider. Instead, the News shifts to the politics of the issue. How many people are on each side? Not, what do they think, but what is their voting strength and what are their tactics?

You see, the News just wants to keep the story going. There won't be any new *arguments*, after missing that first opportunity to spell them out. So the News turns instead to how the politics of the issue unfolds. We will learn about the escalation of demands, as the larger issue gets lost in a flood of lesser ones—whether abortion must be done with the husband's consent, or at the taxpayers' expense, or with parental consent, or with parental notification, or with counseling, etc. At each of these steps, there are again just two sides. That is how votes are taken.

True moral dilemmas are uncomfortable, involving the conflicting rights of several persons—no-win situations. We would prefer not to read about that, and are relieved to be able to side wholeheartedly with one party. The News helps by caricaturing the issue.

You watch. All our debates over constitutional amendments will flounder in this way. Those are the debates that cannot be decided on the basis of present law, but rather deal with what the law *should be*. They ought to be argued out on what we take to be moral grounds. But they aren't, because they are debated in the News. Knowing how poorly we handle moral debates, the News rushes on to the political level. Who has the votes? Or by what trickery can the minority get its way?

We have already mentioned why our secular culture can't argue about values any more, but is reduced to simply counting votes. To compensate, the News parades its concern for the ethical-issue-of-the-season. It follows the politicians who have seized the high ground, and reports the moral views of our celebrities so that we will know what some soap-opera star thinks of the future of marriage, for example.

Every New Year's we get a special lesson in what News really is, when *Time* magazine names its Man of the Year. For the next month, it keeps busy trying to justify its choice, especially when its choice turns out to be some world-troubler. But actually, *Time* is perfectly right to pick some obnoxious tyrant. Such figures are after all the ones who are creating change, which equals News.

The general public cannot seem to remember that that is what News is. Readers will complain that surely a Man of the Year should be an admirable character, a positive force. They don't really understand when the magazine explains that it never said that this was its favorite person, only the most Newsworthy; and some exasperated reader can be counted on to write in, "Well, what can we expect from a magazine that made Hitler its Man of the Year in 1938."

For all our conditioning, we can't quite absorb the idea that News is what upsets us, or upsets the world. Acts of moral decency are not News, because they are expected, and common. We need to keep in mind that packaged News has always been a distraction from real life. Perhaps, then, it is time for people to stop apologizing for ignoring the News. It would be nice if the declining interest in the ephemeral were being compensated by a growing concern for something more solid. I am not hopeful on this score; the damage our spirits have sustained through News addiction makes it unlikely. But the first step back to health is still to Just Say No. Only then can we begin to consider what our lives are all about and how our neighbor is faring. We build from that. Distracting ourselves with the News' purported trends is not improving our politics, our citizenship, or our spiritual insight.

Still dubious about all this? Consider the proposition: If it is no longer worth your while to go back and read the News of, oh, September 22, 1976, then it was *never* worthwhile doing so. And why should today be any different?

JOHN SOMMERVILLE is Professor of History at the University of Florida and author, most recently, of The Rise and Fall of Childhood.