

Bikes, Feuds, and Fat Suits

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“It's amazing that the amount of news that happens in the world every day always just exactly fits the newspaper.” -Jerry Seinfeld

Head over to MSNBC.com, Fox News, or CNN, and you'll see a smattering of headlines: “Airline Finds Cat Missing for 2 Months”, “Biker Feud Erupts at Starbucks”, or even “Who's Behind the Fat Suit?”. Keep scrolling, and you'll find reports on everything from celebrity foreclosures to petty theft. While some of these articles are fun and interesting diversions, can anybody really argue that they strongly impact the American people? The news constantly follows us through our daily lives; whether it be in print, on TV, online, or via a 140-character tweet. However, as we are constantly bombarded with information, our ability to discern fluff from what really matters may be lost among the sea of words. A substantial proportion of the news is spent covering scandals and gossip of little value, but rarely is there an indicator as to the actual importance of the event. Look at the Huffington Post's Most Popular articles – at the time of this writing, only one of the top eighteen concerned the presidential election of 2012, and not one spoke of the economy, but *ten* were about once-influential celebrities like Steven Tyler and Jessica Simpson. To fully understand this problem, we must ask ourselves: Why is the news, in the words of Jon Stewart, “lazy and sensationalist”? What are the effects of being informed in this manner, and how can we reverse the trend?

Firstly, the “sensationalism” of news has been around just as long as news itself. The first commercially successful newspaper to be sold in America was the Penny Press, an affordable source of information even the middle and lower classes could

purchase. While earlier, less-successful papers were generally direct and to-the-point, offering only absolutely essential information, the Penny Press was more or less a tabloid, chock-full of scandalous rumors and stories whose basis in factuality were shaky at best. This made it a massive hit, and as it turns out, the people of the mid-1800s were not so different from ourselves, as evidenced by the abundance of shows solely devoted to reporting on the 21st century equivalent: Hollywood gossip. Programs like *Entertainment Tonight (ET)*, *TMZ*, *Access Hollywood*, *Inside Edition*, and *E! News* all essentially serve the same purpose, but that does not stop any of them from being incredibly popular – it's not unusual for ET, which doesn't even air on primetime, to perform better in ratings than well-known shows in far more preferable timeslots. Other times, the news may be inflated with meaningless information simply because there isn't enough newsworthy information to report on a 24/7 basis - entire sites like The Onion are devoted to satirizing the media's desperate efforts to make the mundane seem important, with faux headlines like "Burger King Trainee Tipped by Grandparents" and "Man's Trainer Once Saw Rob Lowe at Gym" mocking these often shameless attempts. From all this, we can see the rationale behind the drive; news corporations must remain profitable by holding viewer interest, which forces them to "give the people what they want", whether or not it is of value.

So what are the effects of this style of reporting? The lack of prioritization of information leads to a less informed population, which can only contribute to the international stereotypes that portray Americans as crude and ignorant. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, nearly 1 in 5 Americans believe Obama is a Muslim and a stunning 41% of Americans could not identify Joe Biden as the Vice

President of the United States. Americans are also less involved in national politics than other developed countries - according to the IDEA (International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance), in the 2010 United States congressional election, only about 38% of all eligible voters cast ballots, whereas in Western Europe, an average of 77% of the eligible voting population participates in parliamentary elections. The United States' democratic-republic government in which representatives are chosen "by the people, for the people" is a paragon for other nations, but its success relies upon a well-informed constituency that actively participates. We are the citizens who choose the president and the representatives who make our laws – the fate of our country lies in our hands, a responsibility that cannot be taken lightly.

This brings us to the important question – how do we fix this? Since we are the viewers channels like CNN, MSNBC, and Fox News so desperately want, there are a few measures we can take in order to get organizations to cut the fluff out of their news; emailing executives and watching more programs similar to C-SPAN and less like *The Hollywood Reporter* could help get the message across to corporations, but also it must be accepted that the media will always resort to bawdy sensationalism and scare tactics to some extent in order to win viewers. In our quest to find the truth, we must become discerning members of society, who can think critically and separate fact from fabrication; in doing so, we will continue to preserve America as a land of freedom, knowledge, and opportunity.