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‘No News Today’: 24/7 fatigue and the welcome gaps in reporting storylines.

Abstract:

After an interval, usually no longer than a night (and often far less; if we’re feeling particularly restless, we might only manage ten or fifteen minutes) we interrupt whatever we are doing to check the news — Alain de Botton¹

In his recent contribution to public discourse, Alain De Botton’s text *The News: A User’s Manual* critiques the privileged position that news now occupies in a ‘news addicted’ age. He references a time when the main ways an audience accessed news was via ‘thirty pages of a paper’ or ‘half an hour of a bulletin’.² Obviously, media convergence and the 24-hour news cycle have crossed these containment lines to produce boundless data—we deliberately employ the word data here as opposed to the mediation of meaningful information that is often sacrificed in the commodification and commercialisation of news as product. The more traditional editorial practice used to determine whether a storyline constitutes ‘news’ involves a mapping to at least one or more standard news values. These now often run second to the pressing agenda of media entities needing to present something, or anything, continuously to the public domain. Taking as our case study the disappearance of Air Malaysia’s MH370 flight,³ this paper explores the ethical intervention of Misha Ketchell, managing editor for *The Conversation*, in deciding early in the news cycle not to post any more stories on the missing plane until there was something more newsworthy to report.

Biographical notes:

Sue Joseph, PhD, has been a journalist for more than thirty five years, working both in Australia and the UK. As Senior Lecturer, Joseph teaches across the undergraduate and postgraduate programmes at UTS, in both the journalism and writing schools. She has published three books: *She's My Wife, He's Just Sex* (1997); *The Literary Journalist and Degrees of detachment: An Ethical Investigation* (2009); and *Speaking Secrets* (2012). Her research interests have been around sexuality, secrets and confession, framed by the media; HIV and women; literary journalism; and creative writing, including poetry and short stories.

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Introduction

This probably seems an unlikely place to begin this particular discussion – a tribute to Susan Sontag written by a *Time Magazine* journalist shortly after her death in December 2004. But we would like you to read the following reflection from Richard Lacayo in two ways: first, and most importantly, with the primary function of acknowledging the extraordinary qualities of Sontag, the public intellectual; and then second, as both a figurative and literal envisioning of the way in which quality news stories might be (re) produced:

She emerged as the intellectual plenipotentiary of American cultural life, militantly contemporary, insatiable in her appetite for culture and truly, madly, deeply, conversant with every new development in fiction, philosophy, film and art. ... With great turbines of her critical judgment turning, Sontag patrolled the latest edges of world culture, bringing back news ... (Lacayo 2005).

And now, with the same images symbolically reapplied to a journalism context – imagine the ultimate news gatherer/maker as someone possessing an ‘insatiable appetite’ for knowledge, who is ‘deeply’ immersed and ‘conversant with every new development’. And then, uses ‘critical judgment’ as the standard by which cultural agendas are judiciously set and circulated. And this gatherer/maker is out ‘patrolling the edges’ – here the connotation is of a deliberate and active search – attentively looking for what needs to be found. This intent is matched by the duty of returning – and most importantly – ‘bringing back news’ for those who are not able to witness the ‘edges’ of the ‘world’ first hand.

Central to this analogy of news gathering/making/mediating as one of an extended journey, is the idea that each of the associated travel activities (identifying, pursuing, reflecting and bringing) is neither a rushed nor superficial one. This starkly contrasts the current online and broadcast paradigms of news delivery with speedy turnovers and a never ending quest to fill webpages and airwaves. Also, in this idealised scenario of how news might be intelligently sourced, made and circulated, is an implicit suggestion that ample time and resources are the prerequisites for any process involving pioneering, investigation, contemplation and critique. The other complementary part of this idealised scenario is the sensibility and expectations of

those waiting for the news to arrive. Andrew Pettegree's observation explains the reciprocal dynamic well: '[this] desire to be informed, to be in the know, is ... as old as human society itself' (2014: 2). But the desire for someone to 'patrol the edges of the world' for us and bring back essential news – to 'put us in the know' – is also part of ensuring that a wider range of psychic and social needs are also met: 'We need news to live our lives, protect ourselves, bond with each other, and identify friends and enemies' (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014: 2). In explaining how we have come to understand this dynamic, and why this matters to us, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel conclude:

What we came to call journalism is simply the system societies generate to supply this information about what is and what's to come. That is why we care about the character of the news and journalism we get: News influences the quality of our lives, our thoughts, and our culture. (2014: 2)

'Whatever is supposed to be most unusual and important in the world'

In *The Sociology of News* Michael Schudson cogently frames the role and function of the processes we have been discussing in this way: '...journalism is the business or practice of producing and disseminating information about contemporary affairs or general public interest and importance' (2003: 11). Or as Alain De Botton succinctly posits in *The News: A User's Manual*: 'The news is committed to laying before us whatever is supposed to be most unusual and important in the world ...' (2014: 10). There is already a body of substantial scholarship interrogating how what is 'important' in the world is determined by news organisations, and how the judgement around a story's news value will shape the content and circulation of information coming to us from media outlets.⁴

Given the specific focus of this paper, we will not be offering here a lengthy theorisation and analysis of the early work of Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge. Based on their research sample of international news stories, they produced a list of common characteristic features evident in circulated 'news' stories. However, for our purposes here, a rudimentary understanding of basic news values and how these continue to inform (or misinform) current journalism practice would be helpful. In assessing whether potential information, or an event, might be constituted and

circulated as ‘news’ and whether this ‘news’ is the kind to engage an audience, the following criteria is typically applied by media organisations: impact or relevance, proximity, prominence, timeliness, conflict, currency, the odd and the unusual (White 1996: 11-21).

‘Working hard to get off the 24-hour news merry-go-round’

Standing in stark contrast to the scenario of the more stately paced and patient tradition of news gathering and audience reception that this paper began with, is ‘the now-constant 24-hour news cycle’ which ‘means that we get daily chunks of news, often disconnected from a time contexts’ (Hirst and Patching 2007: 41). With this urgency – the refusal of waiting for news to be brought back – news consumers demand instantaneous access to information. And convergent media are expected to deliver ‘breaking’ news, and ‘exclusives’ on cue: ‘Newspaper websites have joined broadcasters and their websites in reporting news as it happens – often as it is happening’ (Lamble 2011: ix).

As a consequence of the 24-hour news cycle and its ‘as it is happening’ pace, there are individuals and organisations now critically appraising the superficiality (and at times inaccuracy) of news presentations, and how the compulsive and ubiquitous presence of unrelenting reportage can saturate and exhaust consumers. Peter Laufer, an American journalist and an academic, is one such consumer reacting to media surfeit. In an online post titled ‘Join the ‘slow news’ movement: It’s OK to read yesterday’s news tomorrow’ he writes:

I’m practicing what I call “Slow News”. ... I’m working hard to get off the 24-hour news merry-go-round because – despite the fact I am a journalis – I’m convinced most news can wait ...

We need to decide for ourselves what so-called news is worth our while, not just allow ourselves to be subjected to the endless barrage of unfiltered media assaults. We’re in danger of missing the story because of the noise. (2013)

The concept of slowing both the pace and consumption of news offers a counterpoint to the current journalism era of ‘speed and communicative abundance’ where ‘the imbrication of industrial journalism with turbo-capitalism and instantaneous media

technologies' has left those wanting less noise and more substance seeking an alternative (Masurier 2014:1).

'When it's time for the media to ... shut up'⁵

Adding to the growing numbers of media practitioners calling for 'slower news' is UK-based journalist Marie-Catherine Beuth. In her role as a journalism fellow at Stanford University, she has undertaken a project that aims to raise issues surrounding timeliness and news consumption. Beuth sees the practice of 'slow news' as a vital strategy for producers and consumers wanting to break 'away from the 24 hour news cycle slavery'. On her 'Slow News Movement: time to change the pace' website's homepage she advocates for this shift:

Instead of making their users fight to keep up with the 24-hour news cycle, I believe the media should make it easier for their (otherwise busy) users to be well-informed, *especially* when everything is reported in real-time. It is very pretentious to keep assuming we have our readers/watchers/listeners attention at all times. It would be safer to bet on the fact that often enough people have missed bits and pieces of unfolding stories. And they don't have a lot of time to catch up on news. I believe that solving this equation will make the media experience more valuable to its consumers. And hopefully improve the economics of journalism. (Beuth 2012)

Building on Laufer's and Beuth's resistance to the barrage of media stories that self-reflexively and endlessly (re) produced and (re) circulated themselves in real time, we want to briefly look at some of the reporting issues this raises with reference to the disappearance of Malaysian Airline 370 flight in March 2014.

'Would you prefer silence or speculation?'

In an article titled 'Malaysian airline tragedy highlights challenges of 24-hour news cycle' ABC reporter Peter Ryan articulates some of the reporting concerns linked to this event:

With journalists under pressure to feed the 24/7 news cycle, reports from both Kuala Lumpur and Beijing have had nothing tangible to add apart from unconfirmed talk and images of distressed family members ...

In today's world of hi-tech communication, it feels unusual not to have instant reasons and outcomes given public expectations that television news will produce instant pictures of wreckage and final words from a black box recorder. (2014)

Writing nearly two weeks later, the plane still not found, another ABC journalist, Stephen McDonnell, filed another piece called 'It's about the media, not the plane'. Here, he candidly critiqued the way in which the demand for coverage was compromising news practices:

The drama around the missing Malaysia Airlines passenger jet has attracted enormous attention. There has been almost around-the-clock coverage of the search though often with very little solid information to report on ...

That, however, has not stopped the world's media outlets going into considerable detail about all manner of theories as to the circumstances of the disappearance and potential reasons for it. And, when in doubt, make the reporter the story. (2014)

Finally, revealing the consequences of a reporter trying to feed the voracious MH370 news cycle, he concludes:

The hard thing for all of us though has been to admit at various times that there has been simply nothing new to say. Yet the nature of these mass international stories has changed forever. Journalists will file a piece based on thin air. (2014)

The 24/7 news-cycle-induced problem of journalists and media outlets having to

manufacture ‘something to say’ when there is nothing to say or show was also probed by Poynter Institute’s Craig Silverman in a piece he called ‘MH370: Would you prefer silence or speculation?’:

A major factor driving speculation is that the central character is missing. The story is the fact that the plane is gone. There is nothing to train a live camera on, to tweet in real-time, or crowdsource... This story is about something that has disappeared – and what a terrible mismatch that is for the way the news cycle, social media and the human brain work. (2014)

A later reflection in the same article demonstrates the self-reflexivity of a journalism practice that not only needs to respond to the commercial imperative of filling in reporting gaps, but also, in the case of MH370, to fill in psychological ones:

In this respect, the media coverage mimics our innate desire to fill the empty space with *something*. People are demanding answers. They are hitting refresh again and again, looking for new information. (Here I am, doing much the same thing – except I’m covering the coverage of the thing that’s disappeared, and trying to make sense of why we’re seeing so much rumor and speculation. (Silverman 2014)

The Conversation

This case study is a startling reprieve from the discourse constellating the MH370 tragedy on March 8, 2014. Ironically, in many ways it was thrust upon the subject by a 24-hour news cycle organisation, desperate for more news, and different news, regarding MH370. Paradoxically, the episode polarised a moment within the news cycle of a more considered and timely response to the barrage of non-stop reporting around the incident. As le Masurier writes: ‘...the proliferating examples of

independent journalism using Slow as a way of approaching production suggest... that we are witnessing a new and critical alternative in the media landscape' (2014, p.1).

Misha Ketchell is the Managing Editor of the web-based site *The Conversation*. It is not a news site with the impetus of speed but offers commentary and expert opinion about the news on a daily basis, sourced from the academic and research communities. Launched in 2011, it is an open access site. Ketchell has been Managing Editor since its beginning. Before that, he worked as a researcher and producer on ABC TV's *Media Watch*; as an editor for *Crikey* and *The Big Issue* (Australia); and as a reporter for *The Age*. Ketchell says of *The Conversation* mission: 'Our main sort of raison d'être is to use the expertise of academics to provide context and background and explanation of events' (*ABC News 24*, 2014).

Ketchell was invited on *ABC News 24* for a live interview on March 27, 2014 – 19 days after MH370 disappeared. The *ABC* superimposed over the interview: 'Missing Plane: *The Conversation* has decided not to publish any more articles until they have something to say'. Ketchell did not know of this super at the time; a friend told him later (author interview: August 12, 2014).

He explains:

A producer from *ABC News 24* rang me up and ... said that they wanted to interview me, and as part of the interview process, they ... said: 'What stories do you have coming in on MH370?' And at that point we just didn't have anything in the pipeline, so I just made a comment of saying 'look there's nothing yet, we're not going to say anything right now, but we'll certainly tell you when we've got something to say'.

And then I went to the studio and was interviewed ... like it was this sort of big policy position, or we made some sort of stand or something like that, and it wasn't really like that. I mean it wasn't *inaccurate*...It's just our general policy, editorial policy always, which is if you don't have anything to say, don't say anything – wait until you've got something to offer to the public discourse.

I mean people are busy, they're inundated with information. There's no point just trying to fill that air, we're just not going to have stories for the sake of

having stories, and that really is sort of an entire philosophy that underpins what we do. (ibid)

As unknowing as he was, what Ketchell said goes to the heart of deepening problems about the 24-hour news cycle; its speed and the quality of the product in terms of news values. Ketchell explains his remedy:

And for me that is fact checking, transparency, disclosure, standards, and also the capacity not just to give people undifferentiated torrent of information, but the capacity to give people information that actually helps them understand and make sense of what's going on. (ibid)

In the first 17 days after the disappearance of MH 370, beginning March 10 with its first coverage, until Ketchell was interviewed by *ABC News 24* (March 27, 2014), *The Conversation* ran 23 stories, with five days in total without coverage. After the *ABC* interview, for the next 17 days, *The Conversation* ran 10 stories, with 10 days in total without coverage. From March 10 (two days after MH370 disappeared) to July 30 this year (when this data was collected), *The Conversation* had run a total of 44 stories across 29 days. Overall, there were 103 days of no coverage out of a possible 132 days. Compare this to a simple key stroke search of *Sydney Morning Herald*: 835 results found for MH370; *The Guardian*: 143,000 results found for MH370; and *News Corps*: 360,000 found for MH370.⁶

Ketchell says:

We have had lots of experts who have provided really valuable expertise like an oceanographer talking about how the search for debris will go or a psychologist talking about how you talk to people about trauma but there are certain times in an unfolding story like this when news developments actually run out and what we don't want to be doing is talking just to fill the air or just to have stories that we know are going to be well read. We think we want to give people things when there is actually something important to say. (*ABC News 24* 2014)

During the *ABC* interview, he was asked: ‘Do you think some media outlets are just running it for running its sake?’⁷ Ketchell answered:

I think to an extent yes. With a story like this there is always immense pressure to continue to provide updates and additional information and sometimes in that search for that additional information you end up going to people who end up not having a significant amount to add. So I think there is a risk of that. I wouldn’t be overall massively critical of the media’s coverage – I think this has been covered... reasonably responsibly and reasonably well – but it is a risk that with the hunger for information you are going to overstep the mark and provide something that is not really valuable to your readers.
(*ibid*)

Ketchell says that the *ABC 24 News* model has been at the heart of debate for a long time within the organisation. Basically, *ABC 24 News* was set up strategically at the time for several reasons, one of which was to contend with *SkyNews*.⁸ There was a perception that the organisation needed to create a similar product, in a similar space, to capture some of the market back from *SkyNews*. But Ketchell says that once an organisation commits to a 24 hour news cycle, it becomes ‘television wallpaper’ (Author interview: August 2014). He says:

You are committing to having something on the news all the time. What it does, it sets up a certain value or hierarchy of things that editors value and that produces another journalist value. So if it’s something that’s good at filling air for 10 minutes, even when there’s nothing to say, that becomes an important skill...My own personal view is that I wonder about the value of it in a way. I wonder whether it would be better to be focusing on trying to produce a different kind of product and communicating with people? But then only when you’ve got something to say. Because I’ve heard lots of stories around the *ABC* of people who are on a plane with the prime minister and they get called by the producer and told ‘we need you to do a cross from *ABC News 24*; you’ve got to fill six minutes of air time’. And there’s nothing to say, so the whole spiel becomes about talking, filling the air, feeding the beasts.
(Author interview: August 2014)

The irony of the interview with Ketchell on *ABC News 24* is a case in hand. Searching to ‘fill the air and feed the beasts’, *ABC News 24* subverted a comment he had made earlier in the day during a briefing with a producer and imposed on him two and half minutes of air time, further discussing it. Thankfully, he did have something to say.

Joining the revolution

The pressure on journalists to fill air time and come up with new and different angles to a story; to keep up with social media; to not miss a thing, is fraught with danger. When Malaysian Airline MH17⁹ was shot from the skies above the Ukraine – by what US intelligence forces believe to be pro-Russian separatists – just months after MH370 disappeared, it created an international media melee. When *SkyNews* journalist Colin Brazier was at the crash site and rummaged through a child victim’s suitcase, there was outcry around the globe. He is heard to say on camera ‘we should not be doing this’. What was not heard was the fact that he began to cry, overwhelmed and horrified by where he was and what he was seeing. ‘The sights were shocking. I could not comprehend what we were seeing. Bodies and body parts everywhere. I phoned my wife. "It's a butcher's yard", I said’ (Brazier 2014). *SkyNews* immediately apologised, as did Brazier publically in a *Guardian* article on July 22. He wrote:

Certainly it was a serious error of judgment. I acknowledged that and so did Sky...They were supportive and keen to stress that they understood the context of the gaffe. And what was that context? What can mitigate the seemingly indefensible? I doubt many of my more roar-throated detractors on Twitter feel there can be any justification for such morally insolvent behaviour. But, as we move into a world where excoriation comes quickly and explanations come slowly, I would like to offer another view. The crash site of flight MH17 is like the set of a horror story. Except that movies are never allowed to show what we saw over the weekend. As I type I can smell the nauseating scent of death that clings to me still...

Too late, I realised that I was crossing a line. I thought aloud: ‘we shouldn't be doing this ... this is a mistake’, an instant apology that was only selectively

quoted by those determined to see what I did as a powerful example of journalistic vulturism. (Brazier 2014)

It is his phrase ‘as we move into a world where excoriation comes quickly and explanations come slowly’ that struck us. As McBride and Rosenstiel write: ‘Journalists and those who value journalism are in the midst of a great diaspora. They are picking up the remnants of a belief system and carrying it forward to new places’ (2014, p.2). Patrolling ‘the latest edges of world culture, bringing back news’ as Lacayo (2005) so poignantly wrote of Susan Sontag, is not the job it used to be; is not the model it used to be. Perhaps we do have to reassess, to slow down and aim for quality assurance, rather than speed; wait for the whole story, rather than get it incrementally, over and over again. Not place our journalists in impossible spaces, expecting decorum, and elegant and true reporting to emanate out of a quagmire of speed and scoops, in the face of traumatic events. We need to be able to differentiate between real news and the chattering news, or news that is ‘filling the air, feeding the beasts’, as Ketchell says. As Laufer writes:

I want us to question the value of the perpetual fast-food-like empty-calories news that is processed to keep us addicted to it and instead consider that, for most news events, some time to ruminate is valuable for both the journalist in the field covering the story and the news consumer back home. (2013)

As we began this paper with the eloquence of Alain de Botton, so we finish it. He writes:

The hum and rush of the news have seeped into our deepest selves. What an achievement a moment of calm now is, what a minor miracle the ability to fall asleep or to talk undistracted with a friend – and monastic discipline would be required to make us turn away from the maelstrom of news and listen for a day to nothing but the rain and our own thoughts. (de Botton 2014:16)

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Endnotes:

¹ 2014, p.10

² 2014, P.243

³ Kuala Lumpur to Beijing flight; disappeared on March 8, 2014

⁴ For a discussion on Johan Galtung and Maria Holmboe Ruge's original study (1965) that analysed common news agendas emerging from international news stories, please see Tony Harcup and Deirdre O' Neills's 'What is News? Galtung and Ruge Revisited' in *Journalism Studies* (2001) Volume 2, Issue 2, pp 261-280.

⁵ This is the title of a post from Beuth's Slow News Movement website. See <http://www.slownewsmovement.com/?s=shut+up&submit=Search>

⁶ Data collected from March 10, 2014 to July 30, 2014; would include some reproduced stories under different mastheads

⁷ Question by Kim Landers

⁸ the first Australian produced 24 hour television news channel; launched February 19, 1996

⁹ 283 passengers and 15 crew members were killed