

Why I Don't Read Newspapers

(written in 1971)

by Richard Kostelanetz (March 2016)

A prime blight of serious political discussion in this country is newspaper literacy, which is to say that too much talk and writing reveals facts and awarenesses gleaned largely, if not exclusively, from daily newspapers. The surest sign of newspaper literacy is a sense of worldly significance reflecting a journalistic distribution of emphases, particularly with the inference that the lead stories on the front page report the most important occurrences of the moment.

Newspapers have one major deficiency as a source of information—quite simply, they function to record what happened yesterday. The nature of the medium's operation favors events that began after today's editions appeared and will conclude before tomorrow's go to press. Preferably an event should take no more than a few hours, so a reporter can witness its entire duration; yet it should provide sufficient information ("news") for a full-length story. A baseball game, a press conference, a theater opening, a brief military operation are all ideal newspaper stories. Even though the event may lack particular importance, the experienced journalist has usually developed a "flair" for creating the impression of significance—after all, no newspaper wants dull, or blank, columns. Television news programming also has an essentially journalistic emphasis, mediumistic (and sensory) differences, notwithstanding, for the wrap-up at eleven aims to present the "news of the day."

Fittingly, a well-staged and enthusiastically publicized political demonstration which has no practical effect usually makes more news than the day-after-day activities of field workers; and, for this reason, some political groups and individuals have been known to initiate occasional displays of themselves simply to verify their public existence. Senator Joseph McCarthy, as Richard Rovere describes him, had extraordinary talent for concocting such pseudo-events as, for instance, calling a morning press conference to announce that there would be an important disclosure in the afternoon, thereby providing the afternoon papers with an enticing headline. "Newspapers do not choose to distort," notes Fiedler; "they simply do not know how not to."

Reporters are habitually responsive to such organs of publicity and to voices that seemingly resound in chorus (though, of course, they also decide which ones *not* to hear); so that what appears in print as passionate public interest often turns out to be a journalistic creation built not upon outright dishonesty but upon the medium's innate capacity for fabricating interest in the course of innocently "reporting the news." Once an individual or group achieves notoriety, it develops a vested interest in preserving its life against the threatening death of public disappearance. Thus, to public figures and the like, making something reportable happen every day creates an illusion of significant activity, although the real events often consist of nothing more than fabricating, transmitting, and publishing the newspaper copy. The rule here is not *cogito ergo sum*, but because my (our) name appears regularly in print.

What takes a week or longer to happen is more appropriately the stuff of magazines; yet serious periodicals in this country exemplify the deficiencies of newspaper literacy, perhaps because (as many writers have noticed) most political editors spend more time scanning newspapers than books or other sources of information. Even book publishers, one observes, feel obliged to read newspapers dutifully—"to know, what's happening" is their rationalization. A reporter might be assigned to summarize important long-term developments in, say, a scientific field; but given the newspaper's limitations in space and expository style, this report is inevitably too short, too superficial, and too simplistic, if not trivialized and misleading as well, no matter how fine the knowledge or intentions of the reporter. With all this in mind, it is scarcely cheering to learn that Americans devote, on the average, fifty minutes each day to perusing newspapers.

Newspaper literacy is pernicious, because the events prominently featured in the daily press are not necessarily fundamental in the contemporary' world; and certain events persistently emphasized are, in the ultimate analysis, part of larger, more significant political tendencies developing over longer periods of time. At their worst, newspapers emphasize yesterday's scandalous and frivolous occurrences—the murder in Brooklyn, the marriage of a luminary (his third, her second); but the better papers, even the great *New York Times*, are not immune from the limited perspective intrinsic in daily journalism itself.

Persistent reading of *The Times* in the late 1960s and early 1970s would lead one to believe that the war in Vietnam was the most significant contemporary

activity; for nearly every day, the lead story, as well as at least one other on the front page, reported events relating to the war. *The Times* coverage created a hierarchy of emphasis that has informed its own *Sunday Magazine*, other magazines of opinion, and even discussions among "radicals."

If we take a larger view of contemporary phenomena, however, what are the standards for regarding the Vietnam war as so important? It does not inflict more human damage per day than curable diseases or automobile and household accidents. As a dimension of foreign policy, U. S. engagements in Vietnam are entwined in such larger issues as the purposes and limits of our involvements abroad; it is less a cancer than a festering sore symptomatic of systemic malaise. "Winning" the war itself is patently not a primary desire of either the U. S. or the U. S. S. R. or China, as practically nothing outside the field of immediate conflict will rise or fall on tomorrow's actions. The most immediate measure of the war's historical unimportance is the sense that both sides have implicitly agreed to fight it out at less than maximal levels; hence, it is no more likely to escalate into nuclear holocaust than are several other tension points.

My point here is not that the war is acceptable—definitely not—but that policy discussions based on newspaper literacy obscure its larger context. Even the possibility of "pulling out" is entwined in a larger issue—namely, in the question of when the U. S. need no longer honor entangling alliances. Journalistic emphasis upon the small problem, needless to say, postpones necessary discussion and decision on the larger one. Therefore, those who think that ending this war is our greatest aim have one thing in common with those who favor its continuance at all costs—a myopic view of its contemporary significance. Indeed, the history of journalistic overemphasis partially explains why objections to Vietnam serve to unify a great diversity of dissenters; poor Spiro Agnew was not unperceptive in blaming the press for current protests, no matter how much he misunderstood how, journalism influences, or what might be done about its mysterious power.

Why does the war get so much attention in the press? The battles of one day are hardly different from the skirmishes of the next, while decisively new revelations are few and far between; and I doubt if many people read Vietnam stories regularly. The primary reason seems to be that wars are the kinds of events particularly appropriate to the processing capabilities of newspapers.

There also seems to be a newspaper tradition holding that each one, no matter how distant or inconsequential, should receive amounts of space proportional to the degree of American involvement.

The dominance of newspaper literacy explains why significant developments that happen over a year's or a decade's time take so long to penetrate political discussion, or why many prolonged tendencies still remain invisible to the reportorial eye. Social discrimination, for instance, was not "news" until certain publicists discovered its existence for newspapers; the same was true of poverty or "ecology" in America. The impression of 1969 offered by the *Britannica Book of the Year*, say, is considerably different, especially in its distribution of emphases, from that found in 365 issues of the *New York Times*.

Journalistic language also corrupts worldly understanding; for example, the phrase "Negro problem" and its variants obscures the fact that the predicaments of colored peoples are, as human problems, 80 per cent similar to those of noncolored Americans—the earning of a decent livelihood, preservation of the public peace, caring for one's loved ones, making ends meet, and so on. The social issue here is really discrimination, which includes more factors than race. It afflicts the very young and the very old, the lonely, the handicapped, and the culturally deprived; and the racial inequalities so emphasized in the press will be most thoroughly and equitably alleviated by ecumenical social policies that transcend race or sex. "Another disadvantage of fallacious problems," perceives Jorge Luis Borges, "that they bring about solutions that are equally fallacious."

"In our information-ridden world," notes Herbert A. Simon, "it becomes especially necessary to distinguish between fundamental and transient knowledge." Where do we learn of such long-term and continuing realities as the population explosion, new developments in agriculture, the revolutionary possibilities implicit in molecular biology, more extensive uses of the computer, the information explosion, new knowledge about man and the environment, the generation gap, the extent of pollution, the development of better methods of mechanical control, and so on? About such realities there is, and will be, unquestionably more pertinent information in books than in newspapers.

By neglecting currents that do not gush to the surface daily, newspapers

encourage a superficial view of contemporary reality, providing a pathetically inadequate base upon which to build a knowledgeable and comprehensive political awareness, let alone a radical vision. Myself, I hardly read newspapers, not only because much of their information is redundant—a rehash of the background I could have (but did not) read before—but also because, as someone committed to long-term radical change, I am not particularly interested in what happened yesterday.

Individual entries on **Richard Kostelanetz's** work in several fields appear in various editions of *Readers Guide to Twentieth-Century Writers*, *Merriam-Webster Encyclopedia of Literature*, *Contemporary Poets*, *Contemporary Novelists*, *Postmodern Fiction*, *Webster's Dictionary of American Writers*, *The HarperCollins Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*, *Baker's Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Who's Who in America*, *Who's Who in the World*, *Who's Who in American Art*, NNDB.com, Wikipedia.com, and Britannica.com, among other distinguished directories. Otherwise, he survives in New York, where he was born, unemployed and thus overworked.

To comment on this article, please click