

GETTING PUSHED AROUND BY THE NEWS

an essay by scholium



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As information technology penetrates deeper into our lives, the news cycle increasingly takes center stage in the public mind. Because we always carry little internet machines with us, we get news beamed to us at all times. In social media, where we go to socialize, we are bombarded with articles, reactions, and news-related memes. In text group and loops, our friends and family share articles with us that stirred some emotion in them, hoping they will do the same for us. Everywhere we go, there is no escape, we are followed by the news.

The omnipresence of the internet brings the news cycle into daily life. One needn't have a TV nearby, wait for a predetermined time, or open up a bulky newspaper to get the news. And unlike in the past, we receive it now in real time. This drastically changes our phenomenological experience. Instead of waking up, working, socializing, eating, consuming the news, and pre-sleep leisure, one's day is littered with vicariously living through uprisings in Hong Kong, trembling at the latest far-right show of strength, and feeling self-righteous outrage at mentally unstable suburban moms doing things our subculture currently finds disagreeable. The news bleeds through all other time.

Activists and radicals have made tracking and responding to the news cycle our starting point. It is seen as irresponsible, apathetic, privileged, and ineffective not to. When something we don't like is in the news, there is an implicit call to run in and try fixing it. Some believe that we can stop whatever heinous development is at-hand. Others give lip service to "building power" through struggles and protests they know are doomed from the start. Whatever our level of cynicism or belief, we share a priority to respond to novel situations documented by the news.

Because of their spectacular nature, news events end up eclipsing what really happens to us. We downplay the importance of our day-to-day experience in favor of events that, if it wasn't for reading about them on the news, would have no noticeable impact on us.¹

1 This notion gets hazy sometimes, like when the news echoes direct experience. The gruesome murder of George Floyd by a white cop touched the experiences of millions throughout the world. This may be because police violence directly impacts their lives. The possibility that they and their loved ones would suffer similar fates haunts them. So, witnessing Floyd's murder through the news was an extension of fear and oppression they always already experience. But situations like this are the exceptions that prove the rule.

Relying on the news is a shallow, fickle way of understanding the world. Initial reports never get it right and their images easily confuse context. Anyone who's been somewhere later reported on, like a demonstration, will understand this immediately. Journalists usually lack context, purposely portray events according to their ideology, or both. So rather than us being simply ignorant of the world, the news gives us a false sense of knowledge.

There are no deep analyses or ideas in the news. Articles lack time to present different concepts or ways of thinking without losing readers' attention, especially when skimmed on the internet. When there is no time to elaborate on different perspectives, that means that the dominant ideology's way of framing reality triumphs. If it's true that we are more occupied with the news than ever, then this means we are continually having capitalist common sense drilled into us.

The news excites hype but then immediately changes its spotlight. In this contradiction, everything is the most important thing until next week when we forget about it. Trumpisms and allegedly damning reports on Russian collusion in the 2016 election are prime examples. We are supposed to care about these things, but they change every week, and nothing becomes of them. Outrage over the news is thus usually impotent. The object of outrage fades from public concern as it becomes normal. Normalcy is not news, so focus moves on to the next outrage. For example, there was outrage and activism about sweatshops twenty years ago, but once knowledge of them became normal, people stopped caring and turned their attention elsewhere.

The news agenda is set by powerful institutions. There are numerous critiques of corporate media that need not be elaborated here, but a quick demonstration suffices: if a powerful person or organization wants something to enter the public consciousness, they simply feed it to a journalist struggling for a story. Or they spread it through memes, bots, and other disinformation tools on social media.

With the fetishization of news spectacles, people begin acting for the sake of appearing on the news. Actions lose their reality and thus potency. In modern parlance, we suspect people we see on the news of "LARPing." We wonder if they are actually accomplishing the task they appear to be doing or just staging it for the sake of being seen by others. Exhibition value reigns. (Scholium, 2019)

In order to attract attention, the news evokes fear and outrage. Whenever we are afraid of something we see on the news, we should pause and examine whether there's someone behind the scenes trying to get us to do something. While this critique is old and well-known, its ramifications for anarchy may not be. Fear encourages non-anarchist behavior by replicating helplessness, prompting us to seek protectors. Zen Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh writes that fear is often rooted in childhood dependence on parental figures. Being so powerless, we relied on them for survival, leading us to fear being without them. Our being afraid was a signal for us to go seek protection from them. So, fear makes authority look good.

Some people confuse following the news with being aware of the wider world. They think that paying close attention to the news is a way of understanding the world they are in. But, if the news is allegedly reporting on novel situations, then what of normality? What is the society and world around us when nothing spectacular is taking place? The news supposedly reports on abnormal happenings, novel developments that stand out from the norm. Even if we were somehow to negate the bias of the news and always be responding to raw reality that news claims to represent, why should responding to novel events be our priority?

At any moment, there are countless people slaving in sweatshops and non-human animals crammed in factory farm cages. Millions throughout the world are locked in prisons. Hundreds of millions, if not more, are hungry and lack access to food. The biosphere is dying. Everyone the world over feels powerless and anxious and lacks control over the basics of life. And of course, we are alienated in countless ways we have only just begun to fathom. There are banal tragedies and miseries happening all the time. During the popular insurrection of May 1968 in France, someone wrote on a wall "a single nonrevolutionary weekend is infinitely more bloody than a month of permanent revolution." Perhaps these everyday banalities and horrors are worth focusing on, perhaps not. This essay is not necessarily arguing for sustained activist campaigns. The point is that the news and novelty don't hold a monopoly on suffering.

The saturation of experience with news and novel events might cause a subtle but importance transformation in consciousness. Though the minutia of life was never much a spotlight in the public mind,

our immediate access to breaking news further emphasizes the importance of “the event” at the expense of normality. We fixate on novel events and downplay thinking about or transforming normal life. All this, even though the latter category takes up the vast majority of our experience.

A constant fixation on novelty reveals an emptiness that constantly needs something to fill it but is never sated. People who fixate on novel developments through the news clearly lack projectuality. (Landstreicher, 2009) They don’t have self-direction, so they look towards novelty to orient them. For those of us with an idea of the world we want and how to live against this one, there are endless possibilities for projects and initiatives. We develop ideas for how to structure daily life, fight asymmetrically against this society, experiment with relationships, and become powerful with those with trust. These projects often don’t need a manic awareness of the latest news. We may not always have one, but through reflection, conversation, and inspiration, we can eventually develop a project.

Fixation over novel developments betrays a kind of conservatism. It’s almost as if some people don’t have a problem with the world as it is. What they take issue with is changes to the norm, to crises. Perhaps normality under capitalism, with its petty leisure activities, unfulfilling relationships, and general passivity isn’t problematic to these people.

Radicals often rely on crises to foment social change. A popular attitude among us is that when sections of the public are upset about something that we are also upset about, we should go and try to generalize revolt. There’s nothing wrong with this at face-value if it doesn’t become the ultimate priority. But if all we do is news cycle entryism, to be the radical, pro-conflict wing of every stupid protest, then we will be continually exhausted with failure. Most social problems cannot be solved with protest, even militant protest, and we as a dedicated minority probably cannot escalate things successfully. If conflict emerges, we can be there to participate and help it along. But going to every protest trying to “build power” never works and wastes time at best.

Hearing critiques of the news and social media, some may call for pragmatism: “the world has changed, we have to get online or become

irrelevant.” Max Horkheimer critiqued this “instrumental reason.” Instrumental reason is what a mouse uses to navigate through a maze. It entails using rationality to adjust oneself to the reality at hand. The dominant form of reason in modernity, it focuses only on means, and never ends. Its ends, unspoken and implied, are set by capitalism: make money, secure competitive advantage, etc. But there are other types of rationality, like using reason to craft one’s own ends: to have an idea of what you want your life or world around you to look like. This type of reason is obstinate and defiant, it rejects conforming to the world as it is. (Horkheimer 1947)

In contrast, constantly adjusting oneself to the news mirrors how we’ve been trained to respond to the economy in the neoliberal era of “liquid modernity” where everything is temporary. With economic precarity through debt, budget cuts, and unstable employment, we are tasked with ongoing self-transformation for the economy. Your job is being automated, cut, or outsourced? Better re-educate and change your field. No more jobs in your field locally or you can’t afford rising rent? Better uproot your life and move elsewhere.

In romantic relationships, we say there is a power imbalance when one person adjusts to the other and not the other way around. The latter person sets the terms of the relationship, and that’s where the power lies. When we let the news cycle set the terms for us, we are yielding to its power. We are adjusting for its sake, not the way around. A rebuttal could be made that the overarching systems of the world are indeed more powerful than us, and constant responding is a pragmatic way of fighting them. But anarchists are supposed to connect means and ends. If we desire a life where we are not continuously pushed around by powerful institutions, then maybe we should start acting like it.

A person who is bold, willful, and unrelenting is often seen as difficult. But we respect them. Someone who constantly changes themselves for people, we don’t respect. Flexibility implies lack of character. Neoliberalism and activism then both make us something like people-pleasers.

Unlike changing oneself constantly for novelty, doing something for a long period of time can facilitate growth and evolution of your activity. You may realize how to do it better, especially when you’re

working with others. Constantly changing what you're doing to respond to news developments means sacrificing this possibility. If you learn anything, it is how to best adjust to changing circumstances, never to overcome them.

Sometimes events happen that we are glad to be aware of, like the George Floyd uprising, but one needn't be closely following the news to notice them. What if, instead of allowing ourselves to be dragged around by the news cycle, we tried to elaborate our own projects and initiatives based on our ideas? What if we made the world respond to us, rather than the other way around?

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