

The Quest for Better News in a World of Chaos

Shôn Ellerton, July 16, 2020

How to deep-dive for balanced, objective, and neutral news in a world of chaos.



If I were to time-warp myself back to December 2019, I would never have believed that it could be possible to have a smorgasbord of mind-bogglingly bizarre, destructive, petty and divisive events imaginable in the timeframe of just a few months. Nationwide bushfires in Australia. Coronavirus pandemics and enforced lockdowns. Global protesting and riots attributed to racial inequalities and police brutality. An American president who tweets and posts in the style of a confused adolescent. Conspiracies of 5G spreading disease. Judiciary bodies too afraid to mete out fair justice for fear of being unpopular with the masses through social media. Australia picking fights with China (our largest trading partner) because they want to investigate labs in Wuhan. The dismantling of special freedoms for Hong Kong under Chinese oppression. Social media platforms censoring rational thought that bucks against the trend of the narrative of the day so as not to offend anyone. Entertainment streaming services removing material which, if you have read this one year ago, would seem utterly absurd. Statues of founding fathers being torn down or vandalised because they cause offence and trauma. Infantile politics at play with Trump and Biden playing tit for tat like disgruntled teenagers. And, more recently, to add further craziness to all this, Elon Musk backs Kanye West's tweet of his announcement that he would like to run for candidate as the next US president. Let us also not forget the cataclysmic issues we *could* face with someone playing around with the nuclear weapons arsenal, which is quite conceivable given the heightened skirmishes between superpowers, the most recent being between India and China over disputed border land. I could not think of

anything worse than a real-life version of Nevil Shute's [*On the Beach*](#), a story of nuclear bombs going off in the northern hemisphere leaving Australia unscathed until the nuclear fallout arrives leaving the Australians little choice but to die in agony or take the suicide pill. Thankfully, we do not have those problems... yet.

Each new day brings an astonishing wealth of lunacy and madness as portrayed in our TV screens and our electronic devices. Many of us, perhaps most of us, are stepping away from monitoring these events around the world and at home being thoroughly jaded to the point of displaying nonchalance and ambivalence to any further tiresome negative news. For those events which are not life-threatening, I have started to take up a more bemused stance on the craziness and lunacy of many of the events which have been occupying the news headlines. Some of it simply does not make sense, much like watching a strange cult movie after which, you start questioning yourself what on earth was that all about? The weird and wonderful 1970 movie, [*El Topo*](#), springs to mind.

What makes all this worse is that we are often bombarded with heavily biased, highly politicised and, frankly, crap journalism in our mainstream news sources. Never mind that a rich array of alternative news sources is available at the click of the button, the vast majority of us do not take much in the way of energy to research these other sources, instead taking the easier path of relying on the morning and evening mainstream news on the TV or the radio, or worse, read a social media post and the associated headline without taking the time to read the content. Certainly, there are a multitude of alternative news sources which are very poor sources of information; however, there are many others which are very informative and objective. Moreover, we have, at our disposal, access to a lot of raw footage captured on video, although one must take allowances for those clips which are edited or abridged. It is easy to lose the context of what is happening in video footage if it is not shown in its entirety. The practice of hosting shortened, tampered or edited video clips is a common occurrence on platforms like Twitter, Facebook and TikTok unfortunately.

The challenge, of course, is to find worthy news but it requires critical and rational thinking along with exercising common sense. It also takes effort as we are, in general, lazy creatures at heart. Many hunting for a movie to watch, some music to listen to or a book to read tend to find it far easier to take recommendations from the status quo rather than looking for something less well-known by doing one's own research. Being a fan of cult movies and alternative music, much of which is not accessible through mainstream

streaming services, I took the same approach with alternative news sources. I mention common sense above because this is a precursor to finding news of a greater degree of reliability and veracity. To explain. It is the very nature of a journalist to exact a high degree of emotion from the reader. This is first achieved by providing a catchy or sarcastic headline or, what many of us consider as, 'clickbait'. Once enticed, the journalist's intention is to align the reader's opinion to suit the message and bias of the article which is often dictated by the political and ideological narratives of the publisher. It is worth remembering that many publishers rely on funds from political lobbies. It is often mistaken to believe that only those pieces which are tagged as *opinion pieces* are blighted with intentional bias. Common sense is vital because it empowers the reader to not jump to unnecessary conclusions without having to properly think through the process. For example, if an article, in its headline, states that a town or village of primarily X ethnicity committed atrocities to those in an adjacent village of Y ethnicity, it would not make an awful lot of common sense, based on the gravitas of the content, to read this one article without researching from other sources. The same applies to various field 'experts' in the world of pandemics. If an article (even a mainstream one) claims that an expert proclaims that sunlight kills off a certain virus, is this to be taken as verbatim without thinking through with common sense? Many of us are more educated than we think when it comes to common sense; however, many are often too quick to let go of the reins to empower a proclaimed expert with providing all the right answers. There are many experts in any number of disciplines but far fewer experts when it comes to making decisions across a *wide* range of disciplines. Coming back to the point of bias, it would be grossly unfair to suggest that all journalists and publishers are heavily biased and that they side with a political, religious or ideological narrative. Unfortunately, the downside of least-bias journalism is that it is often portrayed as being boring and dry, most of which is read by a relatively small percentage of news consumers.

I am deeply concerned with what is happening in the space of free thought and critical thinking. Heavily biased, or simply, crap journalism in the news and in social media have much to blame for this as headlines and sound bites have been amazingly effective in convincing the general population that what they portray is real and ought to be believed without question. Mainstream news outlets seldom broadcast inaccurate facts; however, they often create their own bias by omitting essential facts or shunting stories to the front of the queue to fit

their reader's taste. To get a reasonable perspective of the news, one must trawl through multiple news sources and not just be reliant on one. As for social media sound bites and memes that resonate emotionally with the reader, the gut reaction for many is to comment and share it with scant attention paid to the nuances and underlying details behind it. I try, to the best of my abilities, to exercise rational thought to such occurrences; however, I have been caught in this trap along with so many others who pride themselves in dealing with the facts and being critical thinkers. It is incredibly easy to criticise someone's post or to share one which reflects your very thoughts at the time.

I have found our bias in the news astonishing and most interesting, particularly in the way that facts can be contorted and manipulated in line with the author's viewpoint as to be nearly universally accepted by its loyal reader base. Especially by those who harbour the mentality that their trusted news source simply cannot be wrong. Call me a stalwart or a cynic, but I do not trust *any* story written by one news source in its entirety unless it can be backed up by other news sources. And why should I? If something happens to me health-wise, I would like to get a second, or even third, opinion by another doctor. Most stories in mainstream media portray the correct facts but either conflate the issue with the burning narrative of the day or by omitting prudent facts. Take for example, the re-emergence of COVID-19 cases in eastern Australia. Reports from ABC News will conveniently leave out any mention of the recent protests against racial inequality as a possible vector for spreading the virus, whereas Sky News has no issue in including them as a possible factor. After all, not many weeks ago, police in Victoria have been warning or issuing fines for those having picnics out in the open or walking on the beach. And now, in our world of confusion and frenzy, it seems acceptable to stand up to civil rights and gather around in large groups to attend organised protests of movements which are popular with the most vocal of the status quo. Take New York City's mayor, Bill de Blasio, and his bizarre decision to allow a BLM protest to take place during a pandemic. De Blasio, himself, even takes part by helping to paint BLM in big yellow letters on the road in front of Trump Tower. What makes this action completely illogical bordering on insane is that a restriction of up to twenty-five people was already put in place in the city. Anyone who supports a mass gathering, protest or otherwise, and then supports or has the intention to enforce any further lockdowns due to the pandemic is displaying, in my opinion, irrational and bigoted behaviour.

I have written about the subject of news bias in various articles; however, during the last two to three months, the sense of division and polarisation across multiple mainstream news sources has been amplified to such an extent, that it is entirely possible to visualise the world through differing lenses of parallel universes. Respectable media outlets like the BBC, ABC Australia, and the New York Times have, in my opinion, become less informative and more narrative-driven than the historically right-wing biased and trashy Fox, which, paradoxically has become more centrist and unabridged with its news coverage than it has in the past. Fox's Hannity, along with Sky News Australia's Andrew Bolt are, of course, notable exceptions in remaining very biased in their opinions. For those who dislike Trump, it is worthy to note that he has condemned Fox as not being a reliable news source anymore as it no longer ties in with all his political beliefs as much as it used to, although it is still far more bias towards Trump's point-of-view rather than, say the New York Times, which is, in turn, more in favour of anyone's position that opposes Trump. In my childhood, the BBC had my highest praises, but that same BBC simply does not exist anymore. I have had open debates with die-hard BBC and ABC Australia supporters over the quality and bias of its news. Most supporters of BBC and ABC Australia I have debated on this subject proclaim that these outlets deliver the least-biased news and that other news sources that differ in their stories are highly biased and should be held in lesser esteem in terms of good journalism. The least flexible and most obstinate of them are those who discredit an entire story *solely* based on the fact it was put out by a news outlet which they do not approve of.

We need to think differently about how we consume our news. If the news item is worthy of attention, it is imperative that other news sources are consulted. If there is video footage, be very cautious and do not take immediate judgment on it *unless* it is unabridged and that one has access to the underlying facts taken from various sides of the argument, if there is any to hand. Personally, I think it would be a great idea if filmed interviews had a clock sitting on a mantelpiece in the background to assure the viewer that the production has not been tampered with. It is also worth noting that 'doctoring' video to make things look real is surprisingly easy with today's technology making it quite easy for the uninitiated to get caught out with artificially created video coverage. The other tactic often used by the press and in social media is using video footage from another, similar, earlier event. Too many viewers get fooled by that one.

Of late, two news sources have been reasonably good at publishing unabridged videos to YouTube. They are, surprisingly, Fox and [The Sun](#). Yes, for those living in the UK, The Sun of Page 3 girl fame, although whether she still exists, I am not sure anymore. Moreover, The Sun have hosted some very informative full-length interviews as those on their [Burning Questions](#) playlist in YouTube. What started out as a tabloid newspaper for the working class has, oddly enough, become an equal source or better source of reliable information than the lofty BBC forcibly paid for by the UK residents. Amidst the heavyweights of journalism and mainstream news media, there is a myriad of valuable alternative and independent news sources available on the Internet; however, many are simply too small to be noticed by many. Recently, I have discovered a surprisingly good free news source called [The Conversation](#) which is refreshingly neutral and, largely, uncontroversial in nature. There are, of course, many good ones out there for the taking but there are others which are clearly extremist, single-biased or even dangerous. In short, many news services which have historically been considered trashy, tabloid or right-wing are making commendable efforts to be more neutral and informative while some of the incumbent mainstream, broadsheet heavyweights have been lazier by adopting the narrative of the day as the haven of journalism.

Allow me to discuss a source of information which is invaluable. It is that of commenting. There are news articles which do not permit comments of any kind, those which host comments selected by moderation and those which contain free comments. The comments section can be a very ‘noisy’ area, especially with topics of a controversial nature. There are abusive comments. There are misinformative comments. There are irrelevant comments. Practically every known type of fallacy can be found in the comments section. However, the comments section can be an extremely valuable tool because it often provides a wide range of opinions, many of which can be followed up through other news sources. It is a common mistake to assume that the content contained in the article is the ‘gospel of truth’ and any of the commentary is ‘just an opinion’. Common sense often dictates how to balance the content of the article against the comments. I tend to dislike publications that disallow commentary for the obvious reason that the subject matter contained is not meant to be challenged. Commentary can be very useful, but it can also be misinformative and misleading, especially that from trolls presenting themselves anonymously.

News has always been biased throughout the recorded history of mankind, but we do now have the luxury of being smart in how we obtain and balance our news. Living in a modern-day [panopticon](#) where so much is being watched and recorded through smartphones, CCTV cameras and other forms of video surveillance, we have unprecedented access to raw video footage of events *before* they are reported in the news. It is a double-edged sword insofar that we have unedited footage of a particular event in question, yet, at the same time, it can also raise the problem of tainting the course of justice by not offering a fair trial but rather one by social media and the press. The Internet is a powerful tool at our disposal and one with a seemingly bottomless lake of data but limited with useful information. It takes rational and critical thinking along with patience and common sense to mine the data and build that information. Listening or reading how others interpret that information for us is important, but it is equally important to try to interpret the information independently, within reason. For example, someone with little or no knowledge on astronomy may find it difficult to independently interpret a precis on how the overall effects of multiple quasi-planets sharing the same elliptical orbital path has an overall effect on adjoining planets! However, there are many topics of discourse where we can form an opinion and interpret independently, at least to some degree, the information presented to us. Only by doing this, can we get a balanced approach of the news.