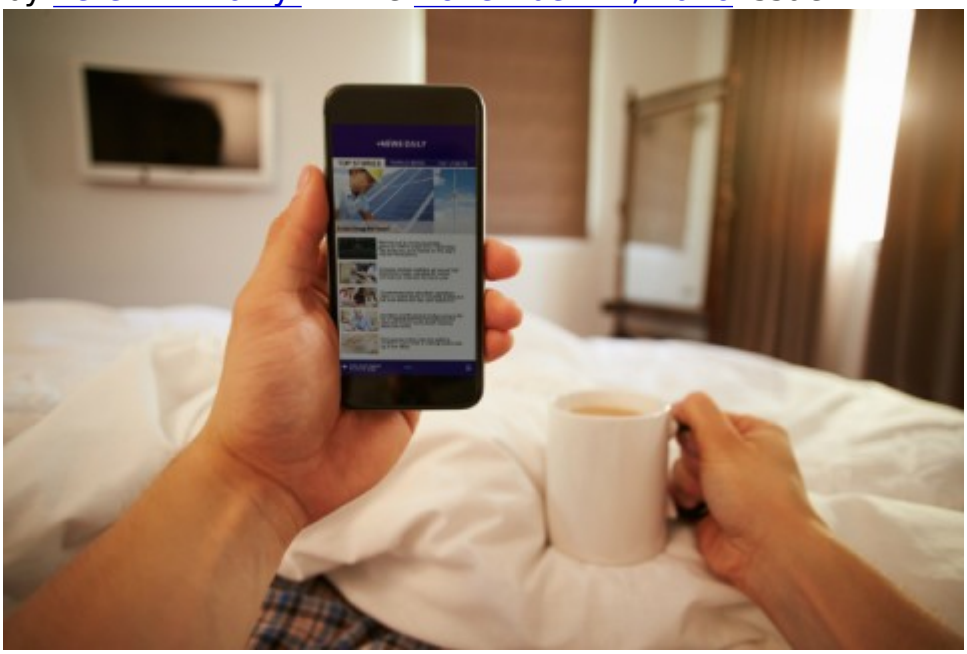
Consumed by the news

Does being a good citizen require keeping up with current events?

by Peter W. Marty in the November 22, 2016 issue



Ever since I started using my smartphone as a morning alarm clock, my wake-up habits have shifted. Instead of engaging in prayer to open my day—once a regular feature of my rising—or paying attention to the chipmunk that chirps outside my window, or conversing softly with my wife, I check the news. When I lean over the edge of the bed to shut off the alarm, I notice my screen displaying news alerts that arrived overnight. Of course I click on them, wondering what I might have heroically saved in the world had I stayed up all night.

While this reflex to tune into the news immediately is not as frightening to me as living in a household where Fox News or CNN saturates viewer eyeballs 24/7, it still troubles me. Like a billion other people, I'm consumed by the news. By the way, do we actually consume the news, or does the news consume us? Either way, it's hardly a noble activity.

Alain de Botton, a British-based philosopher and author of *The News: A User's Manual*, believes that in contemporary culture news has largely replaced religion as "our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority." The news—not scripture, tradition, or inspired ritual—informs how we handle suffering and make moral choices. A desire to know what's going on all hours of the day and night actually makes us more shallow than we may want to admit.

I have long thought that keeping up with the news is part of what it takes to be an engaged and enlightened citizen. But is this really true? An avalanche of news lends pessimism and cynicism to our perspective. (I will die of cancer by age 60 because I've eaten the wrong brand of canned tomatoes.) How often does hearing the news prompt us to take action on big issues? Waves of tragic stories are more likely to paralyze than motivate, especially when we remember there is always more news waiting for us. The preponderance of negative stories—"If it bleeds, it leads"—can easily lead us to prize the sensations of vicarious experience and forget local goodness and beauty.

Our obsession with wanting to know what's going on at any given moment in the world may be a status symbol of sorts. We can plot who is up or down in the news and how people are faring elsewhere, all of which gives us the inspiration to speak articulately about world affairs and the geopolitical realm. But is that status really virtuous wisdom, or is it mostly a means of comparing ourselves with those who do not keep up as well as we do?

De Botton offers sound reasons why we ought to ponder our obsession with the news. Is there a strange desire in us to experience catastrophe vicariously? Is it possible that we yearn for something big to happen, but not so big that it will overwhelm us?

Our brains tell us: "You cannot afford to miss any news, lest you fall behind." My faith tells me: "You can afford to miss all kinds of news, Peter, especially if you want your life back."

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