

How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society

C. John Sommerville

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First heard a few years ago, the outcry that the U.S. tax code and IRS are beyond fixing has steadily grown louder—and given the general dissatisfaction with the media nowadays, Sommerville's work on the Fourth Estate could have the same kind of drumbeat. But whereas the tax reformers all have ideas on how to start over, Sommerville maintains in the case of the media, it's preferable not to. His reason why is original and simple: the problem with the news is that it is daily. "News used to come along irregularly, when something happened that was really important or interesting. To be honest, most days? news is neither...The only reason for making news daily is to create an information industry."

As a commodity, news depends on repeat customers. Contrary to its claim of informing people, Sommerville says, news ensures that repeat customer by describing a world of constant change, one where we must keep reading and tuning in or miss out. Campaign and medical news are two examples he cites, noting how the media reports every latest poll or study. They never determine which is right and final, he says; after all, that would mean the end of the story.

It is likely this book will not receive a warm reception, since Sommerville is an outsider critiquing an inherently suspicious industry. Also, some supporting examples are dated—as much as ten years old. That does not invalidate them, but if the media is in the irreparably sorry state he says it is, more current examples should be given. An occasionally snide tone toward both the media and its consumers probably won't endear him to many readers and reviewers, either—even though Sommerville includes himself among media audiences.

Some might also see Sommerville as self-promotional. A historian at the University of Florida, Gainesville, Sommerville entitles one chapter "Why News Product Looks Nothing Like History," and dismantles one of the adages the industry is most proud of: that journalism is a rough draft of history. If readers look past these objections, however, they just might want to pick up a pair of drumsticks and fall in behind Sommerville.

CARI NOGA (March / April 1999)

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