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De Botton, Alain - *The News, A User's Manual*, Penguin, 2014, pp. 267, ISBN: 978-0-241-14647-7

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Imagine if a news organisation existed solely to enrich our lives. Political news would monitor not only those in power, but paint a sympathetic picture of the social realities of our nation and encourage action to correct its 'systematic ills'.

World news would create a detailed, sensory overview of other cultures and their idiosyncrasies, and in doing so help us break the shackles of our 'globalised provincialism'.

Economic news would keep us updated as to current economic developments whilst simultaneously introducing us to novel, alternate versions of market capitalism.

Celebrity news would inspire us to make the most of our limited talents with tales of triumph through perseverance.

Crime reporting would highlight chronic human folly and the need to both understand and temper our emotional impulses. News of accidents and disasters would remind us of the fragility of human life and inspire us to live each moment as if it were our last.

Fashion, cultural and special-interest news would alert us to the dangers of blind consumerism whilst directing our attention to products and services that best fulfil our needs. News would not only inform us, but also help to make us happy. Alain De Botton imagines this 'ideal news organisation' in his new book *The News: A User's Manual*.

The central theme of De Botton's work is borrowed from German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. The central theme asserts, with absolute confidence, that in developed countries 'the news now occupies a position of power at least equal to that formerly enjoyed by the faiths' (11).

Beginning with this idea, *The News* sets out on an all-too-brief quest to analyse news media and its impact on the psychological welfare of news consumers. It looks at samples of archetypal news stories – from political reporting and world news, to celebrity culture and the coverage of crime and disaster – in an attempt to, in De Botton's own words, examine the 'extraordinary capacity of news outlets to influence our sense of reality and to mould the state of what we might as well – with no supernatural associations – call our soul' (12).

De Botton punctuates his analysis with the principles of his ideal news organisation, which serve primarily to reinforce the book's message that contemporary news media is not suited to society's needs. Although we're reminded not to take these too literally by the acknowledgement that it would take a 'succession of miracles' (248) for these principles to become reality, one cannot help but draw parallels between De Botton's ideal news organisation and propaganda machines of days past. What exactly is the role of news in De Botton's imagination?

Putting discussions of the role of news media aside, on one level De Botton's exercise is a charming and engaging read. He dances from idea to idea with casual vigour, cleverly invoking the examples of art – mostly literature and architecture – to promote his view that bare facts provide little insight without proper context. His observation that news is 'the single most significant force setting the tone of public life' (12) is powerful, if not entirely his own, and the overriding hypothesis that news media's presentation of a particular worldview affects the outlook and psyche of its audience is an idea that deserves thorough investigation.

Much of his analysis of the archetypal news stories – and by extension our fascination with and reactions to them – is insightful and quasi-original, even if De Botton's views appear decidedly narrow. His explanation of our fascination with scandal, likening us to voyeurs watching an act of debauchery with unaffected curiosity, is one such view, as is his contention that 'dread' draws our attention to the news each day. It's interesting, yet all too convenient to his argument. He seems to assume every audience has the same motivations and aspirations as he, which, perhaps fortunately, is not the case.

It is around these points that De Botton's work begins to fall well short of its claim to be a 'manual'. Despite recognising that the book's primary purpose is to make audiences think deeper about their consumption of news, one cannot help but feel let down by the lack of depth, discussion and diligence presented. De Botton brings some interesting and novel ideas to the table – particularly in relation to political news – and yet utterly fails to convince the reader of their merits.

He wilfully neglects to define 'news', and in doing so, invites critics to question the very purpose of his work. He fails to undertake thorough investigation – and in fact appears loathe to get bogged down in any meaningful discussion of dissenting or even supporting views – and at times, can also appear to appropriate the ideas of others without proper reference. The parallels between De Botton's ideal news and the theories of positive psychology are not insignificant, and yet he does not qualify his arguments with the works of US psychologist, educator, and author of self-help books Martin Seligman. His ideal, 'world news' principles mirror the practice of literary journalism, yet makes no mention of it. His criticism of investigative journalism's focus on the critical appears straight off the pages of Thomas Patterson or Buzz Merritt or Cathrine Gyldensted.

Returning finally to De Botton's ideal news, in his own words, the ideal news organization 'shouldn't suggest an indifference to the current economic and social realities of the media' (15), and yet wholeheartedly does. A news organisation to enrich our lives is a nice thought, but one that completely disregards news media's role in contemporary society.

Whichever way you lace your shoes, it is not the role of news to enrich our lives or make them more fulfilling. Even the most ardent advocates of the fourth estate and the most altruistic of news commentators would choke on their Weetbix at the very suggestion. These claims are the domain of self-help gurus, reality television competitions and fundamentalist devotees. Whilst idealism isn't in itself a redundant thought experiment, a *manual* of news media without a thorough exploration of the definition, role, limitations, history and contemporary milieu of news just might be. Ultimately, despite some original insights, *The News* suffers irredeemably from a lack of refinement, precision and meaningful discussion.

About the reviewer

Louis Bowden is doing post-graduate research at RMIT. His research aims to examine the direct and indirect psychological effects of news. It is theoretical, cross-disciplinary research drawing on journalism, sociology, psychology, media affect and philosophy scholarship. In his spare time, he is a solicitor, a musician and a freelance writer.