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How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

How the News Makes Us Dumb: The Death of Wisdom in an Information Society, by C. John Sommerville (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1999) ISBN 0830822038, 155 pp. Reviewed by Tim P. Vos, Instructor of Communication, Dordt College.

If you want to know what is truly going on in the world, if you want to live in true community, and if you want truth or wisdom, C. John Sommerville recommends that you begin by tuning out the news media. While Sommerville clearly has a low view of the news, he warns his readers from the beginning, "I am not arguing that the news is dumb but that we are" (11). The pages that follow attempt to show how it is that the news makes us dumb.

Sommerville's central thesis is that the daily delivery of news is essential "if we are to have a news industry" (10), but that daily delivery also makes it impossible for us to understand anything meaningful about our world. Sommerville, a professor of history at the University of Florida, Gainesville, makes his case on two fronts. First, daily news produces a disjointed view of our world because it precludes any sense of historical judgment. The news industry makes each day's news look as important as every other day. Sommerville concludes, "The dynamics of periodical publication create a world that is lacking a time dimension. But reporters have to make a guess as to the future importance of present events, or else those events cannot be assigned any importance. Readers want to know how today's events fit into a bigger picture; they want prophets to lead them. Unfortunately, the bigger picture is exactly what news destroys in hyping today's report" (24). Second, daily news has displaced resources that are better equipped to help us think meaningfully about our world. For example, Sommerville states that if we want to know what is meaningful, we would be better served by reading books. "If we would read science, the classics, history, theology or political theory at any length," he says, "we would make much better sense of today's events. But we don't. We're too busy to manage anything but the news" (16).

The implications are many. For example, Sommerville argues that the news industry has wrought a presumption and an illusion of social change. While society is healthy only when there are "fairly settled assumptions about what [is] reasonable, natural, expected or good" (132-133), "the news industry has encouraged the assumption that ceaseless, churning change is the normal state of society" (58). Subsequently, we lose sight of stable ideals and focus on changing norms. And the news, Sommerville asserts, invites us to mistake these changing norms for ideals.

Sommerville concludes that the news industry is a hopeless cause. "We cannot ask the media to reform; it is operating according to its nature" (139), he argues, adding that "the worst feature of the news is its essential feature--its timeliness. So really, it can't be fixed" (141). He allows that we might want to attend to the news from time to time when something of value is occurring, but he proposes a new set of habits. Sommerville recommends that we read biographies, then broader histories, and eventually quarterly public-policy journals as a means of becoming more "informed, in a more mature understanding of the term" (143). Only then will we overcome the disjointed view of the world that the news creates and only then will we give attention to "the great truths, the age-old topics" (145). Meanwhile, he wants us to forsake the virtual society created by mass media and engage in a more real form of community: "Active citizenship should mean individuals concentrating on the affairs that involve them and that they can influence--that is, local issues" (144).

Although I cannot endorse Sommerville's ultimate conclusion (that the media cannot be reformed), I do recommend a thoughtful reading of this book. For anyone who holds to the conviction that the news media can and must be re-formed, *How the News Makes Us Dumb* dispels any notions that the task is a simple one. A Reformed understanding of social institutions would make the case that the news media are a human response to the divine call to communicate, and we are required to communicate in obedience to God's laws for communication. Sommerville's analysis pushes us to see the profound sense in which disobedience to God's law for communication has resulted in a malformed communicative institution. However, this is not the explicit intent of this book. In fact, the book would steer us away from such a course. In this respect, Sommerville appears to support a fundamental dualism. He concludes, "religion should not try to get into the news or try to tame it. Instead it should offer another kind of discourse in the place of the flawed news discourse" (149). Likewise, he is apparently willing to abandon the news media to industrial forces and to have it supported by "people who need to fill empty lives with news product" so that it is available for the rest of us "when something interesting is going on" (141). A Reformed understanding claims that if the news media

do have a task to perform in society, that task is ultimately a God-given task and thus must be done in obedience to God's call.

Sommerville has succeeded in demonstrating that it's the news media as an industry that requires daily delivery. But, he has not convinced this reader that daily delivery explains all that is wrong with news. While the title points to a causal connection between daily news and our dumbness, other causal factors need to be considered (as Sommerville acknowledges). And this is why much can be gained from this book, for we are indeed being pressed: if not simply daily delivery, then what other factors misshape the news? Sommerville's own description of the problem suggests his quarrel should be with a flawed modernist epistemology, which creates a disjointed view of the world and marginalizes the nonmaterial matters of life.

Some of the best studies of the news media have come from fields other than journalism or mass communication, e.g., psychology, political science and sociology. In fact, sociologists Herbert Gans, Gaye Tuchman, and Michael Schudson revolutionized the study of news in the 70s and 80s. As an historian, Sommerville also brings a fresh perspective to his analysis of the news media. However, while scholars like Gans, Tuchman, and Schudson have interacted significantly with journalism and mass communication scholarship, Sommerville has not. For example, Sommerville could add considerable theoretical sophistication to his assertion that news confuses changing norms for stable ideals by drawing on George Gerbner's "cultivation theory." Sommerville also needs to deal

with a major counter-argument to his thesis that the news destabilizes society via its fixation on change. Several communication scholars have argued rather convincingly that beneath the thin veneer of change emerges a very stable view of reality rooted in basic ontological assumptions that shape news narratives. In fact, these scholars argue that the news creates obstacles to change through its daily reinforcement of North American liberal, democratic assumptions.

A warning to those who are willing to assume the worst about the news media. The book jacket promises that Sommerville "seeks to criticize news at its best and argues that even then at its best it is beyond repair." Judging the book by its back cover may be a stretch, but Sommerville fails to keep this promise. In fact, Sommerville offers a cynical view of news at its worst when he concludes, "much of our news is written right off 'press releases' and 'briefings.' The well funded news industry's contribution sometimes seems to be little more than adding a tone of suspicion" (141).

But this warning is not the last word. As Christians called to distinguish between obedience and disobedience, we are serious about discerning an obedient response to God's call to communicate. We recognize that this discernment is a difficult task, and books like *How the News Makes Us Dumb* make a helpful contribution.