



Can Reading The Papers Make You Go Blind?

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'All you need to know about everything that matters' – strap-line on the front of *The Week*

A newspaper front page is, in essence, a religious object.

Of course that isn't what we think we're buying. But it's what we get.

Not with the bottom-of-the-market tabloids, maybe. But think about the *Guardian*, or the *Express*. What they (or the *Independent*, *Mirror*, *Times*, *Mail*) claim themselves to be is - more or less - a true statement of the most important things that have recently happened. They promise to tell us the things we most need to hear about; to tell us about the most important events in the world.

And that's where the trick gets pulled. That offer about what's 'most important' presupposes – and reinforces - a value-system; virtually indeed a worldview – a whole way of looking at life.

Not overtly, of course. But isn't the presupposition underlying the newspaper front page something like this: 'All over the world we have our people watching and listening. They have selected these items and stories as the most important things to tell you this morning. *These are the things you most need to know about and think about this morning.*' And isn't a set of beliefs about what the 'most important things in the world' are really a religion?

So then: what are the 'most important things' in this world that we are being trained to want to hear about? Politics, obviously; money; industrial relations; sport; sex - depending which paper you read. (And which day it comes out on: sex is more important than money on Sundays.)

And the big Omission is obvious, but never stated: He is not 'news'. The package of 'the most important things that are happening in the world' carries on without Him. And so, day after day, we are trained in a habit of thinking that leaves Him out. We begin to believe, don't we, that politics, money, strikes and sex really are the most important things in the world. God may, of course, be out there somewhere (Da Vinci Code? gay vicars?). But He never actually *does* anything noteworthy; He never affects anything in any way we need to give attention to.

A CHOICE OF HEADLINES

Personally, I remember catching on to this problem some years back, at a time when many British churches had gotten together to arrange for two gifted speakers, Luis Palau from Argentina and Billy Graham, to present the basics of Christian faith in football stadiums right across Britain. The events that followed were remarkable, with crowds clearly getting a grip on the Christian message on a scale we hadn't seen in this country for decades. Now, it was possible to argue at length about how all that happened. But still, if Jesus' teaching is a correct presentation of how humans come to a real relationship with our Creator, then amid all those events there were clearly thousands of people 'getting it' for the first time, and so (if Jesus' teaching is true) actually moving into a totally new phase of existence; as Jesus worded it, being 'born again', or receiving 'eternal life'. And, whatever one thought about Graham or Palau, if Jesus' teaching is really 'how it is', then a million years from now thousands of people will look back on those stadiums as the place where they passed from being 'dead' into a radiant 'life' that will be theirs as one millennium succeeds another.

So then came a bizarre thought, but also a matter of simple logic: if (as Jesus indicates) everything for each human being hangs on whether or not they come to that critical encounter with God: then something was going on in the football

stadiums that summer which made the rest of the news - Prince Harry and Arthur Scargill, as I recall - inside-page material by comparison.

But that wasn't what we were being trained to think at the time. What went on in those stadiums, Roker Park and Ashton Gate and QPR, might indeed have repercussions extending endlessly into the future; but it was a now-forgotten by-election in Portsmouth South and the budget hassles of the EU (or the EEC as it was then) that were put on the front pages. And underneath it all the big presupposition: these - party politics and money and so on - are the most important things you need to hear about. Not eternity smashing into people's lives.

It has to be so, of course. None of the major papers commands an audience unanimous about the eternal significance of people (even tens of thousands of them) being 'born again'. And that is precisely the point. Our humanistic culture reflects and builds in the assumptions of its worldview into all its substructures. But in *reflecting* these assumptions, it *reinforces* them; day after day into our lives comes a fairly authoritative piece of paper, *Guardian* or *Independent* or whatever, affirming clearly that anything 'spiritual' is far less important than by-elections or the EU budget.

Or put it another way: the news media do indeed reflect the world, but they reflect it *selectively*; the selections and prioritizations are based on assumptions ('these are the kinds of things that deserve to be recorded') that themselves constitute a belief-system. And by continually flooding us with summaries of 'how the world is' that are based on that system, they train us, day after day, to accept its scale of priorities. EU budget: important. People choosing heaven over hell, being 'born again', possibility of God calling a decaying UK very directly back to Himself, maybe even a last warning: marginal.

The way in which this works can be seen quite clearly if we compare, say, the things that are put on the front pages of the *Telegraph*, the *Guardian* and the *Mirror* over a period of two or three weeks. The selection is in each case governed by a different conception of 'what really matters among the events of the world'.

Of course none of the three escape the humanist

consensus that dominates our society, the consensus which assumes that everything that really matters can be stated in non-supernatural terms. C.S.Lewis apparently 'had little use for newspapers, which he believed created a taste for vulgarity, untruth and sensationalism'. And a charge of 'cosmic vulgarity' might indeed be based on the fact that in our culture the newspaper inevitably trumpets the importance of the trivial and dwarfs or silences the eternally crucial. But hey, that's the consensus we're being trained in.

WHAT THE SUN SAYS

But how does the *Sun* fit into all this? Suppose Gerald Priestland is right (*Dilemmas of Journalism*, p.33) that such publications are 'virtually *anti*-newspapers, deliberately leaning away from the more mind-taxing events of the day and towards what is relaxing and entertaining.' The basic formula, says a biography of *Sun* owner Rupert Murdoch, is 'banner headlines, crime, sex and trivia, with a minimum of weighty news' - plus occasionally 'the arousal of alarm in readers on the thinnest of pretexts ... a trusted tabloid technique.' (That's Michael Leapman, *Barefaced Cheek*, pp.75-76. His example is a headline from one of Murdoch's American papers: KILLER BEES HEAD NORTH. The bees had supposedly been sighted far to the south in central and south America.) The *Star's* first-ever issue featured a little girl's lost teddy bear, a football star's drinking problem, a denial of a rift in Bruce Forsyth's marriage, a lavishly-illustrated two-page feature on a priest who paints nudes, 'Model's Mystery Plunge' on p.1, and a couple of other naked women. That doesn't exactly amount to a statement about ultimate values, about what really matters in the world.

Or maybe it does. Maybe the underlying idea is still the same: 'These are the things that repay your attention this and every other morning.' You don't need to bother your pretty little head about world politics; and certainly not about God.

The *Sun* and *Star* seem to bear out McLuhan's assertion that people don't actually *read* newspapers, they get into them every morning like a hot bath. But what kind of a bath? Refreshing? Corrosive? 'These pin-ups are the things that deserve your attention this and every

other morning.' Visual prostitution, of course (the girl bares her body for her consumer's lust; her boss pays her money; the voyeur pays him even more money). But what kind of mental breakfast is this? There's a fearful irony about a paper that can print (taking as example a copy belonging to the man opposite me on the tube - honest), 'Raped: then left to drown' on p.1 and 'Terror ride with a sex monster' on p.5, and then can complement these outrages with a p.3 pitched precisely at the impulses that make men rapists. True, it's possible it would only inflame those already predisposed to sexual violence - but one wonders how many of these there are in a readership as massive as the *Sun*'s. More to the point, p.3 is a day-by-day training of its consumer to participate in sexual stimulation separated from a context of mutual, marital love. And much of the rest seems to be a process of reclassifying sin as 'naughty but nice'.

But what about the things the *Sun* doesn't say? What assumption underlines the omissions? One obvious assumption is, You don't need to bother your head too much about the details of what goes on south of Bognor Regis. (Obviously there are some political priorities embodied here.) Just keep taking the tabloids. And, especially, you don't need to bother your head about the actions of God. He's not been doing anything worth reporting.

But as we've seen, it's not just the *Sun* reader who is bombarded by material continually training them, moulding their thinking day by day, to consider that the only important events of the world are politics, money, sport and sex. For all the major papers, the basic approach involves selecting events for reportage according to the belief--system of the dominant, God-ignoring, humanist consensus; and thereby, day after day, reinforcing that consensus, making it harder to think any other way.

Now it is true that the action of God is something intangible. The problems of identifying it specifically in front-page headlines ('God Has Been At Work In Scunthorpe') are blindingly obvious. But these difficulties don't remove (even if they excuse) the mental training the day-by-day diet involves for us, the consumers. And there is another point. Take any important set of events. If biblical Christianity is true, all kinds of causes are

at work - political causes, economic forces, sociological, psychological, and also the purposes of God himself and the powers of the supernatural universe. The latter aren't at all easy to specify ('Demons Thought To Be Active Throughout Tory Conference?'). But when an analysis in a 'quality' paper takes major events, draws out their background over a period of years, gives us what is presented to us as an adequate account of their causes, and then omits any hint of the 'vertical dimension' altogether; what sort of mental education is that? Economic forces: basic to an adequate description. God determining the fates of nations and cultures, so that they seek Him and reach out for Him (Acts 17:27): marginal or non-existent. The selection of forces that achieve recognition as 'important background causes' is as big a problem as the selection of 'important events demanding attention'. Both mould a mindset that is in practical matters a-theistic. 'The media is the massage.'

Christians need to do a little learning from the more self-critical voices on the New Left. Their alternatives and agenda are not the same as the Christians', but their problem is: that the media are dominated by a liberal-humanist consensus, and reflect and so reinforce the values and priorities of that consensus, squeezing out anything else. Stanley Cohen and Jock Young edited a classic collection of essays entitled *The Manufacture of News*, and a great deal of this volume makes enormous sense 're-read' in terms of Christian concerns about the suppression of the 'vertical dimension' of the supernatural universe. We read of the problems of criteria in news selection and of objectivity; and the problem is identified as 'neither a calculated distortion of the real world, nor an accurate reflection of real events, but rather a *translation* of reality into stereotypes' (p.18) - humanistic, God-ignoring stereotypes, the Christian may add. 'Unusualness', they note, may be the criteria used in the selection of news, but 'it is not unusualness in some *natural, objective* sense, but the unexpected in terms of what is thought of as usual'; thus the items selected may be presented as unusual, but all the time the consensus view of reality is being expressed, reinforced. (And as Gerald Priestland writes elsewhere, a paper's editorial staff 'have arrived at a set of news standards which allow very little room for eccentricity or non-conformity ... as a result of

years of adaptation to their circumstances'; and the pressures of deadlines would become intolerable if they stepped outside that framework (*Dilemmas of Journalism*, p.20.) 'The net is aimed only at certain pools of events... the mesh is geared to pick up only certain topics' (Cohen/Young, p.26). (And God and the supernatural virtually always get left out.)

'Along with the more blatant censorship by others... goes the more important "self-censorship" of the journalist as he or she systematically attempts to fit events into a particular world view whose basic premises are seen as embodying a faithful portrayal of society', say Cohen and Young. 'So "objectivity" becomes a matter of interpreting and analysing the event dispassionately in the light of the accepted paradigm of "how things happen" and "what the social universe looks like"... The question whether the paradigm prevalent in the media may be *false* is one which occurs openly on very rare occasions.'(p.23) Only certain types of interpretation and explanation are permitted, and these become perceived as the only ones that are really worth taking into account. And meanwhile, Cohen and Young continue, 'minority events' that don't fit into the consensus paradigm will 'tend to have their messages and implications recast. Such messages, with their lack of... consonance with the media, must pass a greater threshold before they will be selected as news items' (p.31). The resulting picture is persuasive 'because it makes cognitive sense to the audience. This is not manipulation, nor a simple reflection of reality, but a one-sided accentuation...' (p.167).

Because you don't hear about the most important things, you forget they're there. You don't notice their absence. The most effective censorship is one you never realize is happening.

GIVE US THIS DAY OUR DAILY

So what is to be done? Do we just keep taking the tabloids?

One response that isn't really viable is to stop reading the papers. It might indeed be questionable whether a disciple of Jesus can justify handing over money for the *Sun* or the *Star*, given how they handle women; but somehow we must get some detailed information

about what is going on in our world. (Web-based news services alleviate the situation, but many of these problems recur there too unless we use a very wide range of sources.) The newspaper may be a selective mirror, and a distorting mirror, but for many issues and events it's the most in-depth mirror we have; it gives us perceptions that are admittedly as seen from particular angles, but are still often the most in-depth clues we have about the issues in terms of which we must live our lives. (And for the Christian, when all is said and done, the newspaper is our indispensable prayer bulletin.)

But there are things we can do. One is to liberate ourselves by educating ourselves; learning to decode what we read. A trick loses its power once it's revealed for what it is. Once we've truly perceived the one-dimensional character of the picture our newspapers present, we're able to complement it with other kinds of awareness; if we see that we're being brainwashed into ignoring or marginalizing the most ultimate aspects of reality, that very awareness can turn our attention back towards those vital aspects.

It will not be easy; the picture coming at us from the papers can seem so vivid, so authoritative. So we will need to expose ourselves in depth to the alternative and 'entire' world-picture of the Bible, prayerfully and reflectively, if our thinking isn't going to be swamped, day by day. We will need to be reminded, in depth, 'what the world is really like', if we are to 'decode' rather than be deceived by the partial pictures from the news media. For it is first of all the 'total picture' as described and interpreted in the Gospels and Acts, rather than the 'total picture' as described and interpreted by the *Mail* and the *Independent*, that we should expect to encounter, extending into our own lives.

Another step is to relativise for ourselves the authority of what the papers say. Read just one newspaper and it seems so obviously right - so balanced, so authoritative; so plainly the voice of normal, consensus commonsense. But to stroll into the library and spend a few minutes looking at the different ways the *Telegraph*, *Guardian* and *Mirror* portray and prioritize the events of just one day is to be forcibly reminded that these aren't neutral, objective, trustworthy pictures of the world. It is then an easier step to the awareness that the Christian often stands as a radical outside

the consensus that all three papers join together to reinforce. And we can recognize that the world they present to us is not the world as perceived by most of the human race throughout history (and much of the two-thirds world today), but one whose most vital aspects have *become* those things we can see, touch, hear, taste and buy: but no active God, no unseen forces, no supernatural. We can learn to decode these deceptions by asking questions: What am I being offered today as the most significant types of events in the world? What kinds of values and concerns are being reinforced here? What kinds of explanations are offered as adequate and sufficient for the events being described?

And if I'm a Christian, how do I pray into what God is surely doing in the newspaper industry? We need to pray for the journalists who are Christians; that - even within media constrained by the mechanisms of publishing and selling to a secularized readership - they will find creative ways of 'opening the skylight', of 'making space'; of hinting sometimes that the kinds of analyses and interpretations that are being supplied aren't absolutely exhaustive; that it isn't as simple as that, that there are other dimensions, other causes, higher dimensions. It is a lot to ask of the journalist, that besides everything else, she or he should be something of a creative artist (and something of a subversive). But, after all, there is a (spiritual) war on.

For the rest of us, the consumers, there is simply the challenge of recognizing that war: to unmask the claim embodied (not entirely tongue-in-cheek, either) in the Telegraph's self-advertisement as 'The Earth Dweller's Guide to Life, the Universe and Everything'. 'Everything' is not what we find in any of the papers; despite their self-presentations to the contrary. The biggest and most indispensable aspect, that of connection to God our Maker and Father, is being systematically excluded. With that omission, realism collapses in an all-important way; and what we are given is dreamworlds. But unfortunately, those who feed entirely on a dreamworld will eventually starve.

NOTE: Cohen and Young suggest the following exercises: Compare the *Sun's* reportage of an

event with the *Guardian's*. What is selected, what is made prominent (by headline size, order of appearance, page position)? Compare BBC news with ITV, northern to southern newspapers, British to American ones. Compare a TV documentary treatment to a news presentation, or a general presenter as against a specialist (eg a women's or industrial correspondent) on the same topic. Compare the change of treatment across time (p.493). <p">