

Today's News

June 23, 2004

I just read the newspaper for the first time in over six weeks.

That may not seem like too big of a deal, but I've been reading the paper every day there was one available since I started my first paper route when I was 10. That's 37 years of reading at least one paper a day, 365 days a year. That's about 13,505 consecutive days of newspaper reading.

Why did I give up reading the paper for the last six weeks? Because I wanted a clean perspective for this tour of the Islamic world, and I had determined I wasn't going to have it if I was reading Western media.

It all started earlier this year when we visited southern Asia. During that trip, I was reading English language papers from India for the duration of our tour. During our four weeks in the region, the local papers were filled with news of the Indian elections, which I found interesting, and a good assortment of international news regarding the region. What was striking was the dearth of news regarding the United States. In all the papers I read I found only three stories about the U.S. and two of them concerned the outsourcing issue being trumpeted as a political issue in the American elections.

Missing from the papers were stories detailing death and destruction in Iraq and editorials decrying America's agenda for Imperialistic world domination. This was a refreshing change from many of the world's papers that I regularly read online and the local papers I subscribe to in the U.S.

When I got on the plane to fly home from Delhi, I picked up an English language paper and was immediately struck by the strident anti-American news content, with story after negative story featuring American "atrocities" and failures. The editorials were a long parade of calls for the suppression of American interests and initiatives and a litany of reasons why everything wrong with the world is America's fault. I'm pretty used to reading this type of material, as I strive to search out news sources and opinions from across the political spectrum and you can find some pretty extreme anti-American material in papers from Central Asia the Middle East. In this case, however, I was struck by the extent of the skewing of the reporting, the selection of which stories would be run and the uniformity and political conformity of the editorials, especially considering that the paper was the International Herald Tribune, the overseas organ of the New York Times.

I'd only been away from the daily immersion of indoctrination by the Western media for four weeks, but it was enough to notice an obvious political filtering and positioning of the news and editorial content of that publication. I wondered what a longer term isolation from media as a whole would be like, so on this trip I have avoided all news media, including newspapers, magazines, television, radio and internet for over six weeks. I have not read any email reports from friends or internet news feeds and have forbidden my wife from sharing any news of any type short of Armageddon.

My only contact with the news has been from Andrew Weeraratne, an American working on the recovery effort in Iraq who I have corresponded with via e-mail concerning their efforts. I also learned some news from Paul Kell, an American in charge of infrastructure recovery and reconstruction for USAID in Iraq, who I interviewed while we were in Jordan.

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Here's the total of my world news for the last six weeks:

Andrew Weeraratne:

"I personally feel that Iraq is going to be the Hong Kong of the Gulf. That's what the Iraqis tell me.

People are quite smart and so far I interact pretty well with them. My goal is to bring international joint ventures here and to set up proper (and transparent) accounting and internal control systems to protect their investments.

Almost all in our office (Trade Ministry) are working fifteen hours a day 7 days a week. I won't even dare to ask for time off from my boss for the next few weeks."

Paul Kell:

"We've spent most of our time, money and resources for the last year patching together existing plants and equipment that have been neglected for decades. We have fewer water treatment systems running than before the invasion but are producing significantly more clean water than they were then. We have 11 sewage treatment plants that were built in the 70s using 1950s technology that had essentially zero maintenance since they were built. In addition, Saddam used the sludge digesters in these plants to hide diesel fuel, so all of the treatment systems were non-functional when we arrived.

We've got about six megawatts of electrical generating capacity, as well as significant additions to clean water and waste water treatment capacity, all coming online in the near term.

I've found at least 90% of the Iraqi people want to build their nation; the other 10% are working on other agendas.

We know that you'll never hear about the 90% of good Iraqis or the new infrastructure capacity, such as more people having clean water now than before the war. The track record of the news media clearly demonstrates they will seek out the last person in Iraq without clean water and do a feature story on them before they would ever tell the story of what we've accomplished."

Paul's last comment on the media and their methods is an especially chilling one for anyone seeking information in today's world. Why does the media operate like that?

My friend, Mark Kuyrkendall, calls this the "Gap Tooth Gladys (GTG)" phenomenon. He's noticed that if the media arrives to cover a car hitting a tree, they will ignore the twenty normal people in the crowd and seek out Gap Tooth Gladys, the slightly batty lady who lives in the trailer at the end of the road and is missing two front teeth. While the normal people in the crowd might respond to an interviewer's question with a well reasoned "the car was going too fast and hit the tree," Gladys will provide color, entertainment and interest with her response of "I was a milkin' my goat in the kitchen when I heard a ruckus of squealin' and a crashin' so's I skedadled right out here and saw this here car half way up the tree. Looks like they was chasin' possum to me."

The media has extrapolated the GTG phenomenon of seeking out color and interest versus reasoned and informed discourse to the highest reaches of news coverage, including international relations and geopolitics. For example, the media will feature the comments and opinions of Hollywood celebrities who barely graduated high school, and treat them with reverence and veneration, while ignoring Rhodes scholars and career diplomats who might actually add to the advancement of the dialogue and enrich the intellectual framework of the issue. Why? Because drug addled Hollywood celebrities whose tenuous grasp of reality is limited to what they see flash by their limousine windows are more entertaining to viewers than stuffy intellectuals who want to discuss issues instead of struggle to string together four consecutive multi-syllable words.

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In addition, the purveyors of the media have fallen prey to self-aggrandizing pursuit of fame and fortune in its own right. There's not a television newscaster alive, from the lowliest cub reporter in the 185th largest market to Dan Rather who doesn't want to be the next Walter Cronkite, who brought down the presidency of Lyndon Johnson with his reports from Viet Nam. There's not a newspaper reporter alive who doesn't want to be the next Woodward or Bernstein, who brought down Richard Nixon with their reporting of Watergate. The celebrity and fame these news professionals achieved elevated them out of their profession and into iconic status in American culture. Since then, the measure of success for the once noble profession of journalism has had little to nothing to do with reporting facts and everything to do with achieving fame and fortune on an individual level.

Nothing exemplified this sad state of affairs more than the recent scandals at the New York Times and USA Today. In both cases, reporters falsified and fabricated stories that their editors eagerly accepted and their publishers greedily celebrated. How could this happen? Because the reporters knew that to advance their careers, they had to get their work in the paper, and not buried on page 20. They knew that to be a success, they had to get on page one, above the fold, and stay there. They knew the best way to do that was to provide stories that fit the agendas of their editors and their publishers. By matching their stories' content to the political and social goals of their superiors, they landed on the front page and stayed there, sacrificing facts, morals and integrity in the bargain. Their editors and publishers, hungry for any material that would pass their filters and match their agendas to further their social policy and political goals, pumped the falsified stories into the papers, turning the reporters into stars along the way. The reporters' careers flourished, the editors and publishers advanced their agendas, and everyone was happy, except the citizen seeking unbiased, non-skewed facts upon which to base social and political decisions.

After extensive travel throughout the world over the last nine months I regret to inform you that the vast majority of what you see and read from the Western media, regardless of which end of the political spectrum it is championing, is skewed and filtered to such an extent to make it nearly useless for anything other than lining a bird cage. After having the chance to see with my own eyes what is actually happening on the ground, after having the chance to interview farmers, teachers, businesspeople, laborers, students, soldiers, government ministers, entrepreneurs, bankers, housewives, executives, school headmasters, NGO aid workers, doctors, taxi drivers, mechanics, and yes, even journalists, I regret to inform you that what is actually happening out here has very little relation to what you are told by the media.

The left thinks the media are toadies for Carl Rove and the NeoCon machine being controlled by the Trilateral commission from the Star Chamber. The right thinks the media are all ultra left wing America haters secretly working for the socialist revolutionary command bunker in Beijing. I regret to inform you they are both wrong. From what I have personally witnessed out here on the ground, the media, regardless if they are championing the left or the right, are more interested in advancing their own careers and their own agendas than they are in communicating anything remotely resembling the facts.

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So, what can you do?

- 1) Develop a healthy case of cynicism towards anything you read or see from Western media.
- 2) Seek out and pursue opportunities to see for yourself what is actually happening in the world.
- 3) Pursue opportunities to personally interview people from around America and around the world to learn for yourself what is driving national and world events.
- 4) Read books and seek out information sources beyond mainstream Western media. Read international newspapers via the internet. Pursue alternative points of view, especially ones diametrically opposed to your current one.
- 5) Stop giving credence and credibility to celebrities regarding issues that matter. If you want to know which brand of champagne tastes best when slurped from Cubic Zirconia encrusted slippers, then they are a valid source of information. For anything beyond that, seek out people with education and experience that extends beyond junior high and tinsel town.
- 6) Never stop asking yourself the most important question, "when was the last time you changed your mind?"