

Are you addicted to the news?

 By Eugene Yiga

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"We have a right to know!" That was the basic argument against the Secrecy Bill. But what exactly does this mean? And does having a *right* to know mean we *need* to know as well? The answer may shock you.

Insatiable curiosity

It was recently reported that coverage of the [Oscar trial](#) exceeded that of the [national elections](#). Perhaps that's not surprising. For some reason we're really obsessed with the stars. It's why tabloid garbage gets passed off as newsworthy material and why trashy publications outsell the respectable ones.

Perhaps it's because we love focusing on other people (I'm surprised one magazine is not called *THEM*) so we don't have to focus on ourselves. Or perhaps it's because we love watching the high and mighty fall so that we don't feel bad about our own lives. Whatever it is, Oscar Wilde was right: "The public have an insatiable curiosity to know everything except what is worth knowing."

What concerns me most is the fact that normal news is constantly pushed aside. Instead of honouring the victims of the terrorist attacks in Norway, attention went to Amy Winehouse's death. The same thing happened when Michael Jackson's 24-hour funeral coverage stole focus from the Honduras coup and when Lindsay Lohan's arrest overshadowed the BP oil spill. And it turns out the cake and coffee I found in the boardroom on the last day of my last job wasn't to bid me farewell; it was to celebrate the royal wedding of William and Kate.

Screaming headlines and intrusive tittle-tattle

To make matters worse, normal news has embraced the world of "[screaming headlines and intrusive tittle-tattle](#)" just to keep up. (I can't be the only person who found it ironic that the media reported *News of the World's* downfall with the same journalistic viciousness that was being condemned.)

Just look at the newspaper promos on a lamppost near you. I've mostly learned to ignore them the same way I've learned to ignore online security alerts from banks I don't use; maybe you've done the same. But pay attention next time you're driving (assuming you can stop texting long enough to actually focus on the road).

Isn't it ridiculous how everything is completely hyped up? A fender-bender is a FREAK ACCIDENT! Walking away from that is a MIRACLE ESCAPE! Of course that assumes the fire (INFERNO!) didn't spread (TOWERING INFERNO!).

It's like they want us to feel anger, disgust, depression, or fear - anything negative just so we'll buy a copy of the paper and feel it even more. Do you need that kind of toxic energy every day of your life? Then why do we keep eating it up?

Chasing an eternal Twitter trend

It's clear that we don't need to know everything. Most news is beyond our control, either because it's about events that have already happened and can't be changed or because it's about things from which we're so detached that there's nothing we can do. I'm not saying we should ignore the world's problems simply because they don't directly affect us; I just don't think we should get so worked up about every little thing to the point that we're too overwhelmed to take any action at all.

Besides, [none of it even lasts](#). Can you honestly remember the top news story from this time last year? What about six months ago? If we forget so quickly, what's the point in getting so upset? Sometimes it's like we're chasing an eternal Twitter trend. One day, something's huge; the next, it's something else. Even the outcry over the Secrecy Bill quickly turned into boredom once fighting "the man" got old. So we got emotional over COP17. Or was it all that Selebi nonsense? I forget.

Decide what is relevant and let go of the rest

If you ask people why they spend hours consuming news, they'll come up with a bunch of reasons. But is it really about being an informed citizen and responsible adult? Or is at least part of it about gathering conversational nuggets to show how smart you are? That's silly. People don't stop you on the street, quiz you on current events, and laugh at you for giving the wrong answers. So why are we so afraid to let go of all the news we think we need to know but honestly don't?

It's not like we even enjoy consuming news. So why force ourselves to consume it? Obligation and habit aren't good reasons. That's because there's nothing stopping us from making a change if we want. I'm not saying we should live in a bubble and know nothing at all; I'm just saying we should decide what matters to us (not what other people tell us matters) and let go of the rest.

Set limits on when you access

Once you've decided what news matters to you, take it a step further and set limits on when you access it. Trying to follow a story the moment it breaks is worse than responding to every single email the moment it arrives. Unless you're a journalist who actually needs to be glued to Twitter so you can quickly report on the latest news, there's no reason to be there first.

Besides, following a breaking story on Twitter is a confusing waste of time. It's like building a puzzle. Every minute, you get a new piece. You don't know where it fits because you don't know what the puzzle looks like in the first place. You also don't know if this piece is exactly the same as the piece you got a few minutes ago or if it fits into a different puzzle entirely. The piece might even change because it's not correct! Hours later and you're exactly where you started.

Playing "spot the difference"

It's the same with watching news on a 24-hour channel. Trying to tell apart one bulletin from the next is like playing "spot the difference" in those children's puzzle books. So why not just watch a bulletin once a day? In fact, why not take it another step further and access the news only once a week? (Insert gasps of outrage here.)

This is beneficial for a number of reasons. First, all the facts will be checked and all the stories will be put in the proper context. Second, it'll let you confront your fear of missing out. If you're a normal person who interacts with real people in the real world, you'll soon realise that the biggest stories are discussed offline too. That means you'll eventually hear about them anyway.

Third, and most important, catching up on news only once a week means you won't get as emotional. For example, if you woke up from a coma after sleeping away 2013, would you really get upset when learning about [all the news from the year](#)? Of course not! You'd spend ten minutes getting a neutral overview before moving on with your life (and getting an overdue

shave).

Spend your free time doing things that matter

As American journalist A.J. Liebling once said: "People everywhere confuse what they read in newspapers with news." And since we won't be on our deathbeds wishing we'd spent more of our lives catching up on it all, I'm encouraging you to start your own Secrecy Bill. Stop consuming what you don't enjoy, even if it's just for a day to start. Instead, spend your free time doing things that matter.

As much as I'd love for us to live in a world where Malcolm Gladwell isn't the highest level of reading to which we aspire, not everyone will join [my epic quest to explore classic literature](#). That's okay. Just find something that's meaningful to you. Start a journal. Learn a language. Take a walk. Do whatever you want! Just take the time to explore what will be meaningful throughout your life. That definitely beats chasing what goes stale faster than organic milk.

Stop being constant harbingers of doom

Finally, I have a request for my fellow writers and journalists. Our words reach hundreds and sometimes thousands of people every single day. We have the potential to impact what they think and how they feel in a very profound way. That's powerful. Unfortunately, I don't think we respect this. I've [said it before](#) and I'll say it again: we need to raise our standards.

Sometimes it feels like all our talk about corruption and racism is as original as yet another hit song about a night in "da club". Dude, we get it! Isn't there anything else to cover besides the same stories we've seen and heard a thousand times before? I'm not saying we should ignore the negatives and fill the news with more panda bears that usually get shown at the end; I'm just saying we need to stop being constant harbingers of doom.

At the very least, we need to report responsibly. More specifically, we need to stop SCREAMING at people with our headlines and words. (Would somebody please tell Sky News to stop calling everything "BREAKING" long after it broke?)

Sometimes it's like we're taxi drivers who think hooting longer and louder will convince people walking in the opposite direction (!) to change their minds and jump on board. Guess what? It won't. If people want what you're offering, they'll come and find it. If they don't, all your hooting will simply annoy those who might have considered you in the first place. So shut up before people stop listening. Let your writing speak for itself.

Write what we can be proud of

Ultimately, we can't fight for media freedom and access to information if we're simply going to turn around and fill the airwaves with junk. That makes us as hypocritical as the bored trustafarians who "occupied" the world, complaining about being poor while holding a Starbucks latte in one hand and a swanky new iPad in the other.

Let's stop producing the same garbage just to get people worked up. Let's stop writing what we think they want to read only to turn around and shove it down their throats because it's not actually what they want. Our readers deserve better from us; we deserve better from ourselves.

Instead, let's write what we can be proud of. It doesn't matter if it's not as sensational as before. At least the sincerity will come through. Plus you'll be able to hold your head up high knowing you're making the world a better place, one reader or viewer at a time.

Simply put, too little information can be just as dangerous as too much. And unless we writers and journalists raise our standards, government censorship is the least of our concerns.

ABOUT EUGENE YIGA

Eugene graduated from the University of Cape Town with distinctions in financial accounting and classical piano. He then spent over two-and-a-half years working in branding and communications at two of South Africa's top market research companies. Eugene also spent over three-and-a-half years at an eLearning start-up, all while building his business as an award-winning writer. Visit www.eugeneyiga.com, follow @eugeneyiga on Twitter, or email hello@eugeneyiga.com to say, um, hello.

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