SLOW NEWS

A MANIFESTO FOR THE CRITICAL NEWS CONSUMER

PETER LAUFER

Slow News

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Slow News

A Manifesto for the Critical News Consumer

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Contents

With love to Sheila

who questioned my priorities
whenever I drove our old Chevy pickup
17 miles across the Nevada desert
just to buy the latest edition
of the *San Francisco Chronicle*

Preface

Imagine summertime in Milan, and a leisurely lunch *al fresco* at the Villa Necchi Campiglio. I was meeting with Martha Fabbri, the publisher of the Italian edition of my book *The Dangerous World of Butterflies*. Later that day we were going to the Natural History Museum, where I was to talk about my experiences while researching the book.

But for now, the pasta was steaming and the wine was flowing. It wasn't quite a Fellini film, but we were enjoying the cinematic atmosphere we created (in fact, the venerable mansion itself stars in the film *I Am Love*, directed by Luca Guadagnino): an Italian-American literary lunch in the villa's quiet garden—an oasis in the noisy, crowded city. All we needed to complete the scene were over-sized movie star sunglasses and a Vespa or an Alfa Romeo to taxi us over to the public gardens.

Our talk drifted to the luxury of our luncheon. No television blasting in the courtyard competing for our attention, no *telefoninis* and their demanding rings. We weren't checking our Blackberries and our iPhones between courses.

Instead, prompted by the languid atmosphere, I mused to Martha about my nascent Slow News Movement, and the manifesto I was writing. "Yesterday's news tomorrow," I suggested, and Martha thought for just a moment, took a sip from her iced Cinzano or her pungent macchiato (at least that's what my Italian cliché-ridden imagination wants to remember), and announced that she wanted to publish this book.

Perfect.

It was, after all, Slow Food that inspired Slow News, and Carlo Petrini founded that compatible movement not far from where we were finishing our slow-motion meal. We agreed that the book should be launched in Italy, and in Italian. Where better to yell out, "Yesterday's news tomorrow!" than a land where the current political leader controled too much of the news media, where the lunches can linger for hours of Chianti and gossip, and where Julius Caesar is credited with founding that precursor to screaming tabloid headlines and incessant CNN droning, the *Acta*

Diurna—his daily news roundup distributed around the empire, complete with a sports section to divert the masses: the results of gladiator fights.

Martha and I closed the deal with a couple of Italian *baci* on the cheeks and an American handshake, and we ambled out of the villa into the frenetic streets of Milan with a book and a cause.

Introduction
Extra! Extra! Read All About It!

I'm sitting in a café, my iPad tossed over to the far side of the table while I write these words in a notebook I bought this morning for $2.99 at the local grocery store. With practiced strokes of my right hand, I'm making marks on the blue-lined white paper, using a Staedtler Mars Lumograph 100 pencil that rests with familiar comfort on my middle finger, held in place by my thumb and index finger. The Staedtler is filled with a 2B lead, a weight that softens as I write. Already my block letters are getting fatter and fatter. But as they thicken, the pencil slides across the paper with increasing ease, and the all-but-impossible-to-hear sound of pencil on paper gets even quieter. In fact, as I think about it, I'm not sure it's a sound of paper and pencil I hear over the ambient café clatter—it may just be the subtle vibration of the pencil on the paper that I perceive as a sound.

The pencil is about a third worn. The blue, black, and white paint on its six sides is worn, and raw wood shows through in places. When this one is worn down to a stub, I've got another in my satchel.

When the pencil point dulls, as it does now, I take a brief break from writing and sharpen the Staedtler. I use a heart-shaped blue plastic sharpener that I bought years ago in Mexico City for one peso. No batteries required. No moving parts. Just a blade held in place by a setscrew, so it's removable. The sharpening blade can be sharpened or replaced! The sides of the sharpener are scored, and I find myself feeling the sides of the plastic blue heart in my left hand and clicking my fingernails along the ridges as I scrawl these words with my right.

Okay, the Staedtler again is pin-prick sharp. The point scrapes against the paper for a few words until it—again—wears down a tad and flows on the paper like soft butter on bread. I look back on what I've written and I see my all-but-immediate rewrites: strike-outs, added words, arrows, and lines marking where changes were made minutes, even seconds, after the first draft was sketched into the notebook.

Meanwhile, my iPad sits on the table, dark. Its battery saver timed it off. Had I written this on its touch screen, I would see no handwritten history of my editing. My fingers would have been banging on its glass screen, not caressing my plastic heart (making me think of Mexico) and forming each letter as I see it appear on the heretofore-blank notebook paper, my poor penmanship a documented element of my personality. Were I writing this on my iPad, all I would be leaving besides the rapidly processed words would be my fingerprints on the glass. I would have been tempted often to check my email whenever I completed a thought rather than pausing to press the sharpening blade against the lead and the wood—a process that leaves me a moment to think instead of lusting after more incoming matter from the unending ping of my email inbox. Were I writing this on my iPad, I would have been chastised by Microsoft Word for misspellings, or for what Microsoft's programmers deemed were grammatical errors. I would have been tempted to Google "Chateau," the brand name embossed on my plastic heart pencil sharpener—a French brand name from Mexico, a romantic image for me that could have been Google-shattered with raw corporate data about pencil sharpener manufacturers.

I do not dismiss the utility of my iPad, word-processing programs, or Internet searches. On the contrary: I use them all the time. This is the first book that I've started to write by hand since 1988. But in the spirit of the idea that I would like to share through this manifesto, I'm setting aside the pixels for a moment and embracing the tactile value of slow handwriting—the luxury of taking time away from the seductions of computer-assisted writing to escape to this café with my notebook, pencil, and languishing still-dark iPad.

Writing by hand while the computer stays dark exemplifies what this book is all about. I am convinced that we need to learn how to slow down the hyperactive influences of news media on our lives. But this book is not an argument against the wonders of the technology revolution of our contemporary era. I embrace the potency of instant communication and of global Internet connectivity. Still, we need to recognize the frailties of innovations like the twenty-four-hour news cycle and so-called citizen journalists.

In this book I present what I consider the rules for a balanced and nutritious daily news diet, and launch my Slow News Movement, with its motto "Yesterday's News Tomorrow." Obviously its name is influenced by the Slow Food Movement. I want us to question the value of the perpetual fast-food-like empty-calories news that is processed to keep us addicted to it and instead consider that, for most news events, some time to ruminate is valuable for both the journalist in the field covering the story and the news consumer back home. And this book was inspired by Michael Pollan's *Food Rules*, a slim volume packed with sage advice, a compilation of wisdom from a journalist who specializes in what we eat and what it does to us. There are chapter titles like "Avoid foods that are pretending to be something they are not" and "Don't eat anything your great-grandmother wouldn't recognize as food." I realized as I was reading Pollan's book that there is an integral relationship connecting food and news. We must eat in order to survive. But accurate information can be another requirement for our survival. News reporting, I am convinced, vies with that other job as the world's oldest profession. In fact, I wager ours is the oldest. Customers seeking carnal diversion needed reporters for a question about the news critical to their quest: Where are the women?

Time to sharpen the Staedtler again.

Part One

On What News Is & How It Is Made

Rule 1: Just the facts, ma'am

All news materializes immediately. As soon as it reaches you, no matter the mode it travels, no matter how long it takes to get to you, you grasp it immediately. A letter arrives and the stamp or the postmark or the return address of the sender announces its origin. Usually you know enough—the context is strong enough—that these indicators provide at least strong hints about the content. The news, even via an old-fashioned letter, starts immediately: whom it's from is quickly known. Tear open the envelope and scan the page. Key words like "killed," "I married," "money," spring out at you. Read the details just to fill in the blanks, but you get the gist of the news immediately.

E-mail can be even faster. A name or a place in the subject line and those receiving the message know something changed and it's probably not for the better. For example, if the subject line says, "Still no word from Johnny," the message probably is bad news. Good news too often is not considered news, but blessed routine.

The other day I was eating dinner in a restaurant with a colleague who is a crazed baseball fan. His favorite team is the New York Mets. Throughout the meal he was checking his mobile phone, not just for the score, but for developments as the game progressed. He has not purchased the service that allows him to watch the game live on his telephone. Instead, he receives messages that indicate things such as when a batter hits the ball. Then he must wait a minute or two before updated news comes to him about what occurred next. Did the batter get on first base or did the shortstop grab the grounder, fling it to first, and force the batter out? The news came to him delayed, which at least gave us a few undistracted minutes throughout the game to talk while we ate.

Whether it is a sports play, your cute little daughter's first ice cream cone all over her face, a revolution in Egypt, what your wife is cooking for dinner, or a bomb attack on the London Underground, news today travels to us almost as fast as it occurs—and sometimes instantaneously. Even if

no journalist is present, passersby and participants in news events control technology to spread the word as the event happens.

So what's not the news in the post-Twitter world?

Before that question can be answered properly, there's an antecedent query. What's news?

Intriguing how close these two questions are: What's the news? What's not the news?

The news is anything that changes the status quo. (Although sometimes a status quo can be the news, as in the hopeful mantra, "No news is good news.") The glib definition that's served journalists for generations is: Dog bites man is not news, but man bites dog is news. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers a broad definition: "The report or account of recent (especially important or interesting) events or occurrences, brought or coming to one as new information," and an elegant, poetic synonym: "tidings."

For the news to reach us, someone must report it. Think about the literally thousands of reporters who mass at events like Michael Jackson's funeral in 2009 or after disasters like the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, and the earthquake and tsunami a year later in Japan, or dramatic stories with inspirational endings like the 2010 rescue of the trapped Chilean miners. Most of those journalists reported essentially the same story, while around the world news was breaking and going unreported because there were no witnesses—professional or amateur—who chose to spread the word about what happened.

Is it the news if it occurs and it is not reported? Is it the news if what occurred is not in some database and available to the public? That's a question that concerned Italian journalist Tiziano Terzani, who noted in his investigation of Asian mysticism, *A Fortune-teller Told Me*, "There is one aspect of a reporter's job that never ceases to fascinate and disturb me: facts that go unreported do not exist." Making facts exist fueled his career and gave meaning to his own existence. "The idea that with every little description of a thing observed one can leave a seed in the soil of memory keeps me tied to my profession," he wrote.

Adding Terzani's premise to mine, the news is anything that changes the status quo and gets reported as the news. Nonetheless plenty of things change the status quo and—*Gott sei dank*—don't get reported as the news no matter how hard political propagandists, public relations agents, advertising artists, and others with ulterior motives may labor to get their clients' opinions and products into the headlines. Such orchestrated events, if not of consequential importance, with luck get shucked to the editing-room floors.

But there is another factor for the definition besides something that changes the status quo and gets reported as the news. We—the news consumers—are in partnership as never before with news reporters. The audience must agree that what happened is the news; otherwise, a variant of Tiziano Terzani's worry occurs. The news happens, it is reported, but no one pays attention to the change.

With this working definition of the news in place, what's not the news?

The news is not that which we already know. The news is not endless repetition of inconclusive elements of a news story that are of little relevance until a complete picture of that news can be reported. The news is not out-of-context factoids, pieces of information that tell no story but are just isolated pieces of information. What my son Michael calls "brain clutter."

Here's one of my favorite examples of a well-reported event that was not the news. A few days after the revolt began in Libya in February 2011 against Muammar Gaddafi, a ferryboat was loaded in Tripoli with American citizens and other foreigners wishing to leave the country. For a variety of reasons, the boat's departure was delayed for a couple of days. As the boat and its refugees approached the dock in Malta, CNN and Fox News both broadcast repeated live reports, their announcers standing on the dock, pointing to the approaching ferry, saying over and over again, "Here comes the boat, here comes the boat!" It was a script that changed only slightly once the boat had docked. The breathless reporters looked earnestly into their cameras and announced, "The boat is here, the boat is here!"

Of course television relies on dramatic pictures to tell news stories in a manner that practitioners hope will attract audiences. But these were not dramatic images. A ferry boat approaching a dock at night with a cargo of unknown Americans who chose to leave a country in turmoil maybe deserves a line or two—but not nonstop live coverage. And that's what my local newspaper gave it the next day. Under a photograph of the boat at dockside, the story simply read, "A ferry carrying 167 Americans and 118 other foreigners arrives at the harbor in Valletta, Malta, on Friday. The passengers were fleeing Libya's escalating turmoil."

So here's the Slow News rule: If it's going to be just a line in the back pages of tomorrow's newspaper, don't waste your time with the story in progress. All-news TV channels that linger on partial details and Internet news websites offering moment-by-moment updates of news story sidebars should be avoided or sampled with suspicion. There really are better things to do with our time than watching a ferryboat approach a Maltese dock. Go for a walk, draw a picture of the view out your kitchen window, practice the piano, re-read *War and Peace*.

My first journalistic trip to Korea forced me into the role of an enabler, a reporter perpetuating empty calories of news. It was 1983 and Ronald Reagan was president. I was an NBC news correspondent working out of the network's Washington, D.C., bureau. I was assigned to travel with the president and to report on what was a tightly choreographed journey. This trip to Asia was logged a few years before President Reagan made his famous "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" speech on the west side of the Berlin Wall. The White House wanted a similar backdrop for us news reporters who were sending dispatches back to the States. Of course that meant a ride up Freedom Road to the DMZ. Camp Liberty Bell and Guard Post Collier were gussied up to impress the visiting Commander-in-Chief and watching world. The paint was fresh and the concertina wire was glistening. The Great Communicator made a typically appropriate speech to soldiers of the U.S. Army's 2nd Infantry Division on DMZ duty.

Looking north he said, "Communism is not the wave of the future and it never was—freedom is." With a nod to America's war in Vietnam

he told the troops, "Yes, we, too, have our faults. But we've got a heck of a lot more to be proud of, and we're not afraid to say so." It was a good talk, as most of Reagan's speeches were, and reporters noted his remarks, and photographed him looking across the DMZ and speaking to the assembled soldiers.

Nothing wrong, of course, with reporting the news that President Reagan was at the DMZ. He was the first American president to do so, and Presidents Clinton, George W. Bush, and Obama all followed him to what Clinton called "the scariest place on Earth." But there was no need for so many of us journalists to follow Reagan around Asia, just as there was no need for news consumers around the world to be subjected to seeing the president's image—over and over and over again—holding binoculars while looking north and saying—over and over and over again on television screens and radio broadcasts worldwide—"Communism is not the wave of the future."

The idea behind the Slow News Movement certainly is not to ignore the news. That Ronald Reagan announced at the DMZ, "Communism is not the wave of the future," is an important historical footnote, still germane today. But imagine what other hidden news stories we could have uncovered and discovered had a majority of the horde of reporters who were tagging along on Reagan's tightly scripted trip broken away from the tour. Imagine what viewers, readers, and listeners could have learned about Korea—its history, culture, and contemporary society—had we international journalists been deployed elsewhere that day besides along the DMZ.

My own lasting memories of Korea are limited because the stopover I made with President Reagan was so brief: the highway to the DMZ lined with tank traps, the sparkling concertina wire at the 38th parallel north, a rushed shopping trip to a swank department store and its vast array of ginseng products, a store where I bought a vibrant silk outfit for my wife. Was it a *hanbok*? I can't remember and it's long gone from her clothes closet.

I want to take my own advice and return to Korea as a journalist practicing the Slow News doctrine. I want to study Korean history, culture

and contemporary society—and then report, as the Slow News Movement motto preaches: "Yesterday's News Tomorrow."

News purveyors are increasingly skilled as carnival barkers, enticing us to keep connected with them while their advertisers try to sell products to us, products we likely did not realize we wanted until we were exposed to the clever and repetitive advertising. "Don't dismiss us" is the relentless message from the news companies. "Stick with us or you'll miss what's happening, and the details are coming soon, right after this commercial." Once the details eventually do come to us, we're told that there is more: further developments, analysis from "experts," speculation about what may happen next. We simply do not need most of this patter, and what we may need, we can learn at a pace we set for ourselves.

The BBC's Director-General Mark Thompson, before he decamped for the New World to take charge of the *New York Times*, in the introduction to the BBC's official policy book, proclaims that "in a perfect world the BBC Editorial Guidelines would consist of one sentence: use your best judgment." His recommendation was directed at his employees, but it is sound advice for news consumers. The BBC Editorial Guidelines go on for a couple of hundred pages of specific rules and regulations. Their goals are lofty and serve as another clear definition of news, from the point of view of a news purveyor. "We seek," says the Beeb about itself, "to establish the truth of what has happened and are committed to achieving due accuracy in all our output."

We news consumers need to consciously and carefully moderate our media—news and other media. I've experimented with writing letters in cursive with a fountain pen and sending them through the post. I try to avoid responding immediately to incoming email messages. I force myself to leave my mobile telephone in the car when I go out to eat in restaurants. I've closed my Facebook account, and I shut down my Twitter account after just a few "tweets." We need to decide for ourselves what media are worth our while, not just allow ourselves to be subjected to an endless barrage of unfiltered media assaults. We're in danger of missing the story because of the noise.

When I visited the Herman Hesse Museum in Switzerland, near Lugano, I lingered over the displays of his typewritten correspondence. Even were it salvaged and printed, it's difficult to imagine our contemporary email traffic as a compelling graphic exhibit. It all looks the same, and despite sophisticated digital storage facilities, it is all so perishable: the quartermasters at Facebook and Google can wipe it out with a few keystrokes. Let's write more with pen or pencil on paper and leave a lasting literary legacy of the personal news that happens to us.

Therefore, here's a second version of the first Slow News rule: Follow the advice of the veteran American journalist David Brinkley, who informed his public via an interview, "News is what I say it is; it's something worth knowing by my standards!" Decide for yourself what constitutes the news you can use. Don't waste your energy with the rest of what is promulgated as news. We don't have time for it.

With this provocative and concise book, journalist Peter Laufer launches a Slow News movement, inviting us to question the value of the perpetual empty-calorie news that accompanies our daily lives.

Slow News: A Manifesto for the Critical News Consumer examines the nature of news in the context of the increasingly frenetic pace of modern life in the twenty-first century. Taking a cue from the Slow Food movement, Laufer suggests that we step back from the constant barrage of instant news to consider news thoughtfully and thoroughly. He argues that it is valuable for both the journalist in the field and the news consumer at home to take the time to ruminate on news events.

Writing with clarity, conviction, and wit, Laufer offers twenty-eight rules—including "Trust accuracy over time," "Know your sources," and "Don't become a news junkie"—to guide us in a gradual quest for slower, more meaningful news.

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"In *Slow News,* Peter Laufer authoritatively assails my fellow broadcasters with vigor and good humor. He criticizes the mindless chatter that often displaces important information. Perhaps we could all learn to harangue our audiences a bit less—and they, in turn, could learn to turn us off a bit more. Slow news? OK, as long as it's not no news." —**TERRY PHILLIPS, former CBS News correspondent**

"Emphasizing the core values of freedom of speech, the book simply defines news as 'anything that changes the status quo.' It is this elegant writing that makes Laufer's book required reading." —**JOHN PAVLIK, Professor of Journalism and Media Studies, Rutgers University**

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An award-winning author, journalist, broadcaster, and documentarian, **Peter Laufer** has written more than a dozen books, including *Organic: A Journalist's Quest to Discover the Truth Behind Food Labeling*, *Forbidden Creatures: Inside the World of Animal Smuggling*, and *The Dangerous World of Butterflies*. He reports from around the world, and wrote and produced several documentaries as an NBC News correspondent, winning the George Polk Award for his study of Americans incarcerated overseas. He is the James Wallace Chair Professor in the School of Journalism and Communications at the University of Oregon.

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