

10 November 2010



What is the purpose served by our knowing of a kidnapping in Italy or a triple murder in the USA or the conviction of a politician for fraud in the UK or an avalanche in the Andes? How does any of this information change our lives, our behaviour or our beliefs?

Does it make any difference that the avalanche injured an Australian or that the person kidnapped used to live in Australia? If so, why? If we don't know either person and have never met them, why would it affect us any more than if they were Armenian or Austrian?

Of all the events that happen in this country and in the wider world, which ones do we need to concern ourselves with? Certainly we can treat all this the way we would a book or a short story: for its entertainment value – most 'news' probably has no value outside that of entertainment in any case. There is also the voyeurism many of us indulge in – this is gleefully fed by many of the popular 'social' magazines and the 'social' pages of the newspapers. There is often more interest shown in the relationships and extracurricular activities of sports people and entertainers than in their acumen or talent in their chosen fields. The headline "Stars' belly dance" and the accompanying story appeared in the *Opinion* pages of a major city newspaper.

When we learn of a stabbing in a nightclub area of Melbourne, does this in any way change our behaviour? Does it even change the behaviour of people who would frequent that area – would they hesitate to go there anymore or would it attract them to go and have a look? Do we just "tut-tut" and shake our heads and say "What is the world coming to?"

When more people lived in villages than is now the case, people knew much more about what went on in their limited world, without having to read about it in the newspapers, and there was no television. Now, the majority of all people in the world live in towns and cities¹. Perhaps we are hankering after that knowledge of what goes on around us. However, the information we are fed has little if anything to do with the community we live in, if it can be called a community.

The suburb I live in, fifty kilometres south of the centre of Melbourne, has an area of shops and cafés, hairdressers and real estate agencies, banks and restaurants. We refer to this precinct as 'the village'. It is a place where people gather and commune, perhaps as they did in years past on the village green or in the local tavern. In the cafés, one does overhear conversations about other people's lives and what their neighbours are up to. If this is the norm in other suburbs of this huge city, then we may still have local communities. If so, what is our fascination with the carryings-on of people we don't know and, probably, wouldn't care to know? Do we learn anything from what we hear or read about them? Most of these people are poor role models and we cannot, or should not, be inspired by them. As I suggested earlier, it could all simply be entertainment.

Our thirst for information also encourages the dissemination of what is often comically called 'news' or 'current affairs'. The latter is an apt term when applied to the activities of

many celebrities. But why should we celebrate their ill-considered behaviour? Much of this information is neither new nor current. The ABC (the Australian national broadcaster) now has a 24-hour television news channel. A lot of what is broadcast is repeated from news bulletins of up to a week before, presented unchanged and without further comment, the original event having long ago developed into something new or the issues having been resolved. Even at the current level of our prurience there is not enough going on to fill a never-silent 'news' channel.

This is indicative of the inability of many people to enjoy silence, emptiness, the absence of stimulation. The natural rhythm of life involves peaks and troughs of activity, including mental activity. I see it in young people: the filling of any possible void with electronic entertainment or just noise. They no longer feel comfortable sitting with themselves, allowing their bodies and minds to mend and grow.

While young people (those in their first quarter century of life) are desperate to soak up more and more, those in their second quarter century, and older, are prepared to encourage this by providing ever more, possibly because there is money to be made from it and they control the means to do this. And those of us in our third or fourth quarter century of life can only shake our heads and wonder where it is all heading and look for a quiet cave.

1. <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/urbanization.htm>