ADRIENNE MOMI

Surf Riding, 2013
Mixed Media Gilded Monoprint, 30 x 30 in.

courtesy: R. Blitzer Gallery

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Yesterday's News Tomorrow!

Join My Slow News Movement

Sitting in the glow of neon lights in Luckey's Club Cigar Store, I sip a Double D Blonde. I'm plotting revolution. A slow revolution. The bartender and a woman play a slow game of pool. My Sunday newspaper lies unread back on my kitchen table. I'll get to it later today or tomorrow. There's no hurry. I listen to the bar talk. "My connection with Christ is supernatural," says a patron in a large voice from the far side of the barroom. "Christ and the Grateful Dead."

Luckey's is a bar near the University of Oregon campus. I'm scribbling down these thoughts with a Mont Blanc pen I bought on a Lufthansa flight from Ankara back to my home in Berlin after covering the 1988 earthquake in Armenia. I rushed to the Turkey-Armenia border to report the story. Journalists had to get word out to the world about the devastation in Yerevan to stimulate donations to aid the Armenian victims. It was important to spotlight that disaster since the expiring Soviet Union was overwhelmed by the rescue and recovery crisis. Sometimes you have to act fast.

But more often than not, most news can wait. So I invite you to join my revolution against instant news and join my Slow News 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.

The Double D beer I'm drinking was brewed locally, in the town of Springfield, just across the Willamette River from Eugene. I remember a story about Springfield that ran in *Parade* magazine in 2011. According to *Parade*, which as an insert in newspapers from coast to coast and border to border claims a circulation of more than 32 million, Springfield offers the most strip clubs per resident of any city in the United States. I've noticed a few seedy-looking establishments in Springfield, but I wouldn't have pegged it as the raciest place in the country.

Sure enough, a few days after the *Parade* story ran, Niel Laudati, the community relations manager for Springfield, insisted the story was false. In response, *Parade* acknowledged that it based its story on a report in a magazine called *Exotic*. Check out the *Exotic* website and it's hard to imagine that you would rely on it as a credible source

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for assessing a city's commercial offerings. *Parade* did not bother to do its own reporting, a job that could have been done with a few well-placed telephone calls. And although it admitted its error when queried by offended Springfield boosters, it also did not bother to tell its own readers about the mistake in the next issue of the magazine. "We regret not doublechecking before publication with the Springfield mayor's office, which brought this error to our attention," was the official statement from *Parade*'s editor, Maggie Murphy.

That's "not very helpful," Laudati replied. "Before you do this to a city, at least check it out." So that became one of the rules of my Slow News Movement: Check it out! *Rely on news outlets and news sources that have proved themselves to you to be reliable.*

My movement is 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. Reading its 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 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. Yet our quest for instant information has made it more difficult to find the truth and see the larger picture behind breaking events.

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.

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.

Back in the mid-1980s I was privileged to work as an NBC News correspondent during a golden age of radio journalism. I was posted to the network's Washington bureau. My role was what we called a *fireman*—assigned to rush off to cover breaking news wherever it happened. My wife might not know where I was (in those pre-iPhone days) until the slot editor found a moment to call her and inform her what flight I was on and where I was headed.

Between adrenaline-kicking races to crime scenes, wars, accidents, and natural disasters, I reported documentaries. One of our basic tools in that era was the luxury of time. A prime example was a show that investigated the plight of Americans incarcerated in foreign prisons. Free of routine assignments to cover what we in the newsroom called "the dismal details of the daily downer," and armed with a no-limit American Express card, I headed to the airport with a PanAm around-the-world ticket in my satchel.

Six weeks and 21 countries later I was ensconced in the network's DC studios with a researcher and technician as we employed another few weeks producing the work.

Not that all contemporary journalists are slaves to the clock and the voracious appetite of the unending news cycle. In 2012, after exhaustive research and intrepid reporting, the New York Times uncovered a massive Walmart bribery conspiracy designed to fuel the retailer's expansion in Mexico. Nonprofit newsgathering organizations such as ProPublica are taking up some of the investigative journalism slack created by the collapse of newspapers nationwide. ProPublica won Pulitzer Prizes for reporting in 2010 and 2011. The *Register-Guard*, newspaper of record in the little university town I now call home, ran a thorough series on what escalating tuition costs mean for today's college students.

Yet we news consumers are conditioned to flick on the TV news and let the so-called twenty-four-hour news cycle dictate its interpretation of a day's events to us. But we can break that habit without losing touch with the common curriculum of news shared with friends and neighbors. We need to take breaks from the assault of nonstop news. Just because all-news radio stations offer "all news all the time" does not mean you must listen to "traffic and weather together" every ten minutes. Just because newspapers perpetually update their websites doesn't mean you must keep reloading their homepage, follow their tweets and smartphone app alerts, and read their e-mail updates.

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Consider a story I heard reported on the all-news radio station in San Francisco, KCBS. The announcer sounded beyond excited—his delivery was almost frantic. It had been suggested that one way to reduce automobile traffic in San Francisco and raise needed revenue for the city would be to charge a toll for each car that crosses into the city limits from adjacent San Mateo County. The radio report on this proposal included excerpts of speeches by lawmakers. Politicians from San Mateo County were decrying the arrogant elitism of the San Francisco policymakers. Lawmakers from San Francisco were bloviating about crowded streets and city debt. The story was repeated throughout the day on the radio, relentlessly.

The next day I found a follow-up to the story buried deep on page three of the third section of the *San Francisco Chronicle*. By the close of business at city hall, the idea had been dismissed as a nonstarter. Nonnews. When I saw the truncated story deep in the newspaper, I could dismiss it with a glance at the headline, which announced in conservative small type: "San Francisco Supervisors Back Away from 'Southern Gateway' Toll." The Slow News technique for dealing with breaking-news hysteria blasting out of your car radio is a simple one. *Shut off the all-news channels whenever you can.*

The same thing applies to television news. A few days after the beginning of the revolt against Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in February 2011, 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!"

Television relies on dramatic pictures to attract audiences. But these were not even dramatic images. A ferryboat 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 it does not call for 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,

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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 incomplete 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, reread *War and Peace*.

We need to ask ourselves what news is important and why. Quasi-hysterical news presentations—especially on broadcast outlets—can lead consumers to believe that the information being foisted on viewers and listeners is critical to know (and to hear and see repeatedly), even though it may warrant only those few lines in the back pages of tomorrow's newspaper, like the ferry-to-Malta story.

Think about some of the important news stories you've lived through, and perhaps personally experienced. The September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, for example, or the fall of the Berlin Wall and the lifting of the Iron Curtain. The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq might be on your list, or the demise of Osama bin Laden in his Pakistan redoubt. How about the 1986 nuclear power plant disaster at Chernobyl, or—if you're old enough—the day Pope John Paul II was shot in St. Peter's Square or President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. But even these history-making news events need not result in our punishing ourselves with a battering of repeated images and incomplete reporting.

How many times was it necessary for you to see the footage of the airliners crashing into the Twin Towers and the victims jumping to their deaths? No question that viewing those pictures once is a requirement. We should feel the need to see the horrifying reality, and our incredible technology allows those of us thousands of miles from such an event to view vivid images that might otherwise be difficult to imagine. A second time is understandable: it was such an unexpected and initially incomprehensible act that a second look helps us accommodate and accept the reality of the event. But looped over and over again?

Of course ratings-hungry CNN and even the venerable BBC replay such dramatic pictures. It is hard not to look at the flicker of the television even when something mundane and banal is broadcast. When the images are of human tragedy, it's extremely difficult to look away, no matter how many times we've seen them.

Disasters captivate us. Television seeks ratings. Newspapers are in the business of selling the next edition. Websites seek clicks that register usage and help sell advertising. When horrifying pictures keep us watching and reading, that's what will be printed, broadcast, and posted. Tabloids like the *National Enquirer* in the United States and *Bild* in Germany base much of their story choice on a simple formula: each article is designed to make the readers either wish they experienced a life like that of the protagonist of the story or else feel relieved that their lives are not consumed with the tragedies reported.

There is another reason for the repetition of words and pictures, particularly on all-news television broadcasts. Especially early in the development of a breaking news story, reporters and editors suffer from a limited supply of information. So the first draft of history being reported is repeated to fill the news hole until more detailed words and pictures are available to explain what happened and why, and what it may mean to your personal life.

In this case, the Slow News rule is simple, if hard to enforce: Unless the earthquake or war is in your own backyard, *when news breaks, sample those initial reports and reject the repetition.* Check in with a radio newscast every few hours at most, look at one cycle of an all-news TV channel once or twice a day. Read a news website with the same frequency that your grandparents read the newspaper—daily, not hourly. Reject the option for news "alerts" to be delivered to your phone. Don't make the homepage of your laptop a news site; a museum makes a comforting alternative.

"First reports are always wrong" is the considered opinion of Victoria Clarke about dispatches from war zones. She served President George W. Bush as a Pentagon spokeswoman. "It's a fundamental truth in military affairs," she said. Add that it's a fundamental truth regarding most breaking news.

Why was it necessary to be barraged with minuscule details and speculations about the car crash that killed Princess Diana? "If it bleeds, it leads," we in the news business like to say about story placement, because that's what attracts attention from the audience. Broadcasters fill television screens and radio speakers with macabre tales that usually matter directly only to the victims and their friends and families. But our lives should be full enough so that we don't need to wallow in the misery of anonymous others. Car crashes, murders, and celebrity divorces are the sorts of stories that might be worth a footnote in our common curriculum of the daily news, but we should spare ourselves the gory details of these common occurrences, especially when they are repetitive and superficial. So this is another Slow News rule: *Allow your news time to marinate.*

I can think of a lot more rules for the Slow News Movement:

Question news reports that promise simple solutions to complex problems.
Don't avoid news and commentary that you disagree with.
Embrace fairness in news reports.
Avoid echo-chamber reporting.
Know your sources.
Seek information about news stories from multiple sources.
Find primary sources.
Look for news close to home.
Evade newslike assaults that merely convey commercials.
Avoid news reports pretending to be something they are not.
Chew your news well.
Don't become a news junkie.
Don't allow inelegant journalese to infect your personal lexicon.
Read past the jump.
Exercise free speech.

And so on. But those rules can wait. There's no hurry. Join my Slow News movement. But take your time: think about it first.

Peter Laufer is a journalist, broadcaster, and documentary filmmaker working in traditional and new media. His many books on social and political issues range in topic from immigration (*Wetback Nation*) to talk radio (*Inside Talk Radio*) to the pleasures of an intriguing American art form: neon signs (*Neon Nevada*, with Sheila Swan Laufer). Laufer's books include one that focuses on American soldiers who return from Iraq opposed to the war, *Mission Rejected*, and *Hope Is a Tattered Flag*, written with Markos Kounalakis, offering scenarios for recovery post-Bush. His *The Dangerous World of Butterflies: The Startling Subculture of Criminals, Collectors, and Conservationists* grew out of Laufer's speaking tour for *Mission Rejected*. He is the James Wallace Chair in Journalism at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication.