

ST ANDREW'S JUNIOR COLLEGE

JC2 PRELIMINARY EXAMINATION



GENERAL PAPER

8807/02

Paper 2

Friday, 26 August 2016

INSERT

READ THESE INSTRUCTIONS FIRST

This Insert contains the passage for Paper 2.

This document consists of **4** printed pages.

Alain de Botton writes about how we respond to the news.

- 1 The news does not come with any instructions, because it is meant to be the easiest and most unremarkable activity in the world, like breathing or blinking. After an interval, usually no longer than a night, we interrupt whatever we are doing in order to check the news. We put our lives on hold in the expectation of receiving yet another dose of critical information about all the most significant catastrophes, romantic complications and trends to have befallen mankind anywhere around the planet since we last had a look. What we do receive is news about heavy rain in the tropics, a celebrity's extra-marital affair, the latest cartoon-inspired cafe... 1
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- 2 The news is committed to laying before us the most unusual and 'important' issues in the world. For all its determined pursuit of the peculiar, the surprising thing about the news is that it skilfully avoids training its eye on itself, and the predominant position it has achieved in our lives. 'Half of Humanity Daily Spellbound by the News' is a headline we are never likely to see from organisations that are otherwise devoted to reporting on the remarkable and the noteworthy, the corrupt and the shocking. 10
- 3 Societies become modern when the news replaces religion as our central source of guidance and our touchstone of authority. In the developed economies, the news now occupies a position of power at least equal to that formerly enjoyed by the faiths. It demands that we approach it with some of the same reverence we would once have harboured of the faiths. Here, too, we hope to receive revelations, learn who is good and bad, understand suffering and the unfolding logic of existence. The news knows how to render its own mechanics almost invisible and therefore hard to question. It speaks to us in a natural unaccented voice, without reference to its own assumption-laden perspective - it fails to disclose that it does not merely report on the world, but is instead constantly at work crafting a new planet in our minds in line with its own often highly distinctive priorities. 15
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- 4 From an early age, it is deemed more important for us to know how to make sense of the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* than how to decode the front page of *The Guardian*. We are more likely to hear about the significance of the famous painter, Vincent van Gogh's use of colour than to be taken through the effects of the celebrity photo section of *Daily Mail*. We are led to theatres and museums and solemnly informed that certain works by long-dead artists could transform our perspectives and change our lives. Yet, it is disturbing that people seldom attempt to educate us about the words and images proffered to us every hour by the news. We are not encouraged to consider what might happen to our worldview after immersion in *Vanity Fair* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines, *South China Morning Post* or *Hokkaido News*, *The New York Times* or *Sydney Morning Herald*. We are never systematically inducted into the extraordinary capacity of news outlets to influence our sense of reality. 25
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- 5 For all their talk of education, modern societies neglect to examine by far the most influential means by which their populations are educated. Cocooned in classrooms for only our first eighteen years or so, we effectively spend the rest of our lives under the tutelage of the news entities which wield infinitely greater influence over us than any academic institution can. Once our formal education has finished, the news is the teacher. It is the single most significant force setting the tone of public life and shaping our impressions of the community beyond our own walls. It is the prime creator of political and social reality. As revolutionaries well know, if you want to change the mentality of a country, you do not head to the art gallery, the department of education or the homes of famous novelists; you drive the tanks straight to the nerve centre - the news headquarters. 35
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- 6 Why do we, the audience, keep checking the news? Dread has a lot to do with it. After even a short period of being cut off from news, our apprehensions have a habit of accumulating. We know how much is liable to go wrong and how fast: an A380 plane may rupture its fuel line and cartwheel into the bay in flames, or a virus from an African bat may leap the species barrier and infiltrate the air vents of a crowded Japanese commuter train. In the immediate vicinity, there might well be stability. In the garden, a breeze may be swaying the branches of the plum tree and dust may slowly be gathering on the bookshelves in the living room. But we are aware that such serenity does not do justice to the chaotic fundamentals of existence and hence, after a time, it has a habit of growing worrisome in its own way. Our background awareness of the possibility of catastrophe explains the small pulse of fear we may register as we wait for news notifications to appear on our phones. It is a version of the apprehension that our distant ancestors must 45
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have felt in the chilly moments before dawn, as they wondered whether the sun would ever find its way back into the skies.

- 7 Yet there is a particular kind of pleasure at stake here too. The news, however dire it may be – and perhaps especially when it is at its worst – can come as a relief from the claustrophobic burden of living with ourselves, of forever trying to do justice to our own potential and of struggling to persuade people to take our ideas and needs seriously. It can be an escape from our preoccupations to locate issues that are so much graver than those we have been uniquely allotted, and to allow these larger concerns to drown out our own self-focused apprehensions and doubts. A famine, a flooded town, a serial killer on the loose; such outer turmoil is precisely what we might need in order to usher in a sense of inner calm. 55
- 8 Today the news informs us of a man who fell asleep at the wheel of his car and drove off an overpass, killing a family of five. Another item speaks of a university student, beautiful and promising, who went missing after a party and was found in pieces in the trunk of a minicab five days later. These occurrences, so inconceivable, invite us to feel sane by comparison because of our predictable routines, and how we have successfully restrained our darkest desires of never yet having poisoned a colleague or classmate. 60
- 9 What does all this news do to us over time? What remains of the months, even years we spend with it in aggregate? Whither those many excitements and fears: about the missing child, the budget shortfall and the unfaithful general? To what increase in wisdom did all these news stories contribute, beyond leaving behind conclusions, for example, that India is over-populated and that women are different from men? 65
- 10 To ask why the news matters is not to presume that it does not, but to suggest the rewards of approaching our intake more critically. 70

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