

Extra! Extra! Don't Read About It!

The news can be overwhelming. Almost everyone has to take breaks from the unending cycles of breaking headlines. Erik Hagerman has gone even further: he decided to opt out altogether. After the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, Hagerman “swore that he would avoid learning about anything that happened to America after Nov. 8, 2016.”¹

Hagerman, a retired corporate executive from Nike, lives on his Ohio farm, works on art projects, and avoids the news. He’s abandoned social media. In his free time he listens to music, relaxes in coffee shops, watches Cleveland Cavaliers games (always on mute), and steers away from any conversation about politics. (He’s trained his friends, family members, and even the local baristas never to discuss politics in his presence.) Hagerman’s strategy is partly a protest, and partly an “extreme self-care plan.” “I’m emotionally healthier than I’ve ever felt,” he says.

But is Hagerman achieving peace of mind at the expense of his ethical obligations? On one hand, you might think that this is entirely Hagerman’s prerogative. It is up to him whether or not he engages in the news, particularly if it is distressing to him. After all, many of us avoid things that cause us displeasure.

On the other hand, we live in a democracy, where the policies and institutions which make up our government, and affect people around the world, depend on the actions of ordinary citizens. For a democracy to function, citizens must play an active part, and must therefore be informed about issues of political import. Abdicating this responsibility, you might think, amounts to becoming a civic deadbeat: Hagerman should endure the stress and pain of the news because it is his duty as a citizen. You don’t get to just opt out. Hagerman himself sees this side of things: “The first several months of this thing,” he admits, “I didn’t feel all that great about it. It makes me a crappy citizen.” As his blockade continued, however, Hagerman began to think somewhat differently, concluding that being a news consumer does little to enhance society, and that he could make genuinely worthwhile civic contributions by other means.

Even if Hagerman is able to screen himself off from the news in this way, others are not so lucky. Hagerman’s sister sees his blockade as an exercise in privilege: “He has the privilege of constructing a world in which very little of what he doesn’t have to deal with gets through...We all would like to construct our dream worlds. Erik is just more able to do it than others.”

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What value is there in paying attention to the news?
2. Is it ethically permissible to opt out of hearing news about political happenings?
3. Do other people have a moral duty to respect Hagerman’s “blockade”, by, for example, refraining from political talk in his presence, if he asks them to and explain why it is important to him?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/10/style/the-man-who-knew-too-little.html>