

Weekly Must-Reads Bids Farewell

**November 9, 2018:
The News Reader's Manifesto**

Today we bid farewell to our readers and close down the Weekly Must-Reads shop. We have won great victories, with the help and enthusiasm of all Indivisible DuPage supporters. Our Illinois county, once called "Republican stronghold DuPage," now is represented by six Democratic Congress people and several Democratic state legislators. We gained a real foothold on our County Board, with seven wins, unprecedented in modern times. Every DuPage County resident now has a Democratic representative in Congress and at least one on the County Board. So we helped to turn DuPage Blue.

Here we thank you all for your support and activism. But there is much work ahead. We would like to take a moment to explain what we have been after in our weekly curated reviews of news sources, and what you can do in the future to stay vigilant and stay informed.

We are very appreciative of the many supportive comments we have had from our readers. You have kept us going when the news was so horrific that even to report it was too dispiriting to call us to the keyboard. And we heard from many who said they could not bear to read our reports in full (which prompted us to add some cute animal videos). But you kept us going, the readers who said they depended on us for summaries they could trust.

We had hoped, to be frank, that more of our readers would have clicked through to the news articles themselves (as recorded by our spies at MailChimp analytics). But then many of you told us that our summaries were good enough that you did not need further enlightenment.

We hope, though, that you will keep it up, with some of the resources we have offered. These times of crisis have brought thousands of new readers to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. But we also have reported on the perspectives of *The Guardian* in the UK; of Toronto's *Globe and Mail*; responsible news websites like *Politico*, *The Huffington Post*, and *Vox*. Even a glossy like *Vanity Fair* has developed a sharp political section. The very best magazine in America, *The New Yorker*, has broken important stories in its investigative reporting. And the oldest news magazine in America, the progressive weekly *The Nation*, has become an invaluable resource for all of us. We hope you will give them your support.

Indeed, it may be time to think about subscribing to your newspaper of choice, which needs your support in the digital age. Several of you told us you have begun subscriptions to *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*. We have also suggested that you support newspapers' paper editions, or at least print out some articles to read on paper. Why? We are not Luddites here: we have mastered a number of digital means to support and transmit Indivisible's activism. But research has shown that paper is still an important means of transmitting and retaining information, superior to screen reading (see, for example, the defense of paper reading, including evidence that it encourages better concentration and memory, in Nicolas Carr's 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is doing to our brains*). At the very least, we believe that phone reading of extended essays is not the ideal way to study—and "study" is the best word here—the nuances of a complex issue.

Which brings us to the larger question: why trust those Mainstream Media so derided by those with a grudge against elites? Does the Mainstream have any monopoly on truth? Are they to be trusted anyway?

For the most part, yes. Certainly mainstream papers have got it wrong in the past. In the run-up to the Iraq War, *The Times* was on the wrong side of history. They did not break the story of the My Lai massacre in 1968. But they also published *The Pentagon Papers* in 1971. They did not publish the Edward Snowden story. But they did publish "Anonymous"'s revelations about insider opposition to Trump. So what is responsible journalism, anyway?

All professions have their share of knaves and fools. Some journalists are fawning, but some are courageous; some are haphazard, but some are meticulous; some are callow, but some are wise. All journalists, in analyzing public affairs, suffer from several handicaps that do not affect historians and political science scholars. First, the pressure of the deadline means that even with the best intentions, facts that may later come to light are missed. Second, under that pressure, the virtue of reflection and further consideration is unavailable, as it might be to the scholar. And third, clearly the editorial policy and emphasis of a commercial employer, no matter how benignly deployed, can pressure what gets covered and how a story is treated.

But responsible news organizations, such as the ones we consult, are not overall haphazard or intentionally regardless of the confirmable facts. They try to be measured in evaluating large or scandalous or inflammatory claims (what used to be called "yellow journalism"). And they should retract or apologize when they are wrong. What this leads us to is the recommendation that a reader trying to keep informed should consult a number of responsible sources. We mean not only newspapers but also news magazines, books, and book reviews. That has been

our goal here: to curate and to inform, based on the best approach to the truth that can be found through journalism alone. And journalism alone will never be enough. But until history and historians take over (and they too will disagree in interpretation), journalism is all we have. And we live in a time of crisis. So stay vigilant. Stay informed.

We hear that we are living in a world without truth. But it would be more accurate to speak of a crisis of authority. Truth has always been elusive, a metaphysical term that engages definitions of objectivity and reliability. But we can get close enough to the facts of human events and of nature to help us get by and acquire what knowledge we need to make good predictions, acquire good judgment, and dispense justice.

The quest to approach closer to knowledge that helps us navigate the world is why we have science and scholarship. The goal is not infallibility but to gain a coherent, reliable narrative, devoid of superstition, enabling us to live in the light and not in the cave of fear.

The alternative is an oral culture of legend, myth, and rumor. That would have its aesthetic charm. It is not just laziness that draws us to that world but rather the comfort of the campfire.

Still, in the end, there are those elusive, stubborn facts. Even the campfire was about them: sharing the facts of the natural environment, of the hunt, of the spots to find food. Facts actually nourish the tribe.

Now, around our campfires, huddle millions. Our oral culture is a screen culture, the dim comforting light where we imagine we are with our tribe; but we are in the dark, alone. We are told the “social” networks draw us together into communities. But in the end, our oral culture’s stories spread like telephone games, and even a hint of an authority intervening to test the stories is suspected of tyranny. These are not communities but too often are lonely places of resentment and fear.

So the myths and legends smother us. No tribe of hunter-gatherers could survive the false stories that nowhere offer real nourishment.

Trump, the self-made billionaire. Trump, who tells it like is. America, once strong and united, is destroyed by alien cultures. The others who threaten: blacks, Hispanics, women.

Globalists. Jewish bankers. European socialists. Effete intellectuals.

Sucking our blood.

Inescapably, though, the screen culture is an important, for some people central, mode of communication. It can help organize an underground or fuel a resistance to the status quo. Sometimes oppressing myths get overthrown and realignments happen when speech outside the mainstream narrative demands greater justice for those marginalized by mainstream discourse. But the degree to which social media or networks can become a force for liberating democracy is beyond our scope here.

What must be faced clearly and honestly is that *traditional authority had failed us*. This became evident after the crash of 2008. But it had happened before: in Vietnam, in Iraq. The bright boys of Groton and the Yale clubs too often just represented the interests of their class. And as wealth became more concentrated and the elites purchased both political parties, as jobs for the less educated vanished and the social engineers seemed to sneer at them, as the privileged pulled up the drawbridges against the mob, laughing at their ignorance, there remained no one in power to trust.

As legitimate authority erodes—seeming to be the privilege of a sneering few—anger, rumor, violence, even fascism claim the space where knowledge and education seem to have failed. There is no simple response to this crisis of trust. That is because, contrary to what conservatives say, it was not brought about by spiritual malaise but by vast material upheavals, the likes of which the world had not seen since the early days of the Industrial Revolution. A progressive movement needs to analyze these causes and address them boldly. The causes include massive technological shifts in employment; the demands of marginalized groups for recognition; the threats posed by climate change causing economic dislocation; and the increasing inequality of wealth and concomitant corruption of legal and political processes.

We can only encourage our readers to adopt what might be called a new seriousness in times of crisis. We are already seeing that play out in the demands for more and better information and for politicians and elites to respond to crisis with informed and meaningful solutions. This must continue. We have all had a rapid education in the last few years in how we must intelligently respond to the breakdown of social, economic, political norms. Our enemies are old: ignorance, superstition, and fear. We are continually challenged to respond with knowledge, reason, facts, compassion.

A very wise and courageous journalist, Edward R. Murrow, once said, “We hardly need to be reminded that we are living in an age of confusion — a lot of us have traded in our beliefs for bitterness and cynicism or for a heavy package of despair, or even a quivering portion of hysteria. Opinions can be picked up cheap

in the market place while such commodities as courage and fortitude and faith are in alarmingly short supply.

“There is a mental fear, which provokes others of us to see the images of witches in a neighbor’s yard and stampedes us to burn down this house. And there is a creeping fear of doubt, doubt of what we have been taught, of the validity of so many things we had long since taken for granted to be durable and unchanging. It has become more difficult than ever to distinguish black from white, good from evil, right from wrong.” That was in 1951, during the Red Scare. In 1954, Murrow’s reports, along with those of other journalists, were instrumental in bringing down Joseph McCarthy. Murrow said of him, “*No one can terrorize a whole nation, unless we are all his accomplices.*”

As we sign off, we again call on our readers: *Stay vigilant. Stay informed.*

Or, as that great journalist said, “Good night. And good luck.”