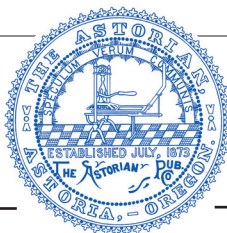


OPINION

editor@dailyastorian.com



THE DAILY ASTORIAN

Founded in 1873

KARI BORGEN
Publisher

JIM VAN NOSTRAND
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

DEBRA BLOOM
Business Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

CARL EARL
Systems Manager

OUR VIEW

Fighting news fatigue in a 24/7 era

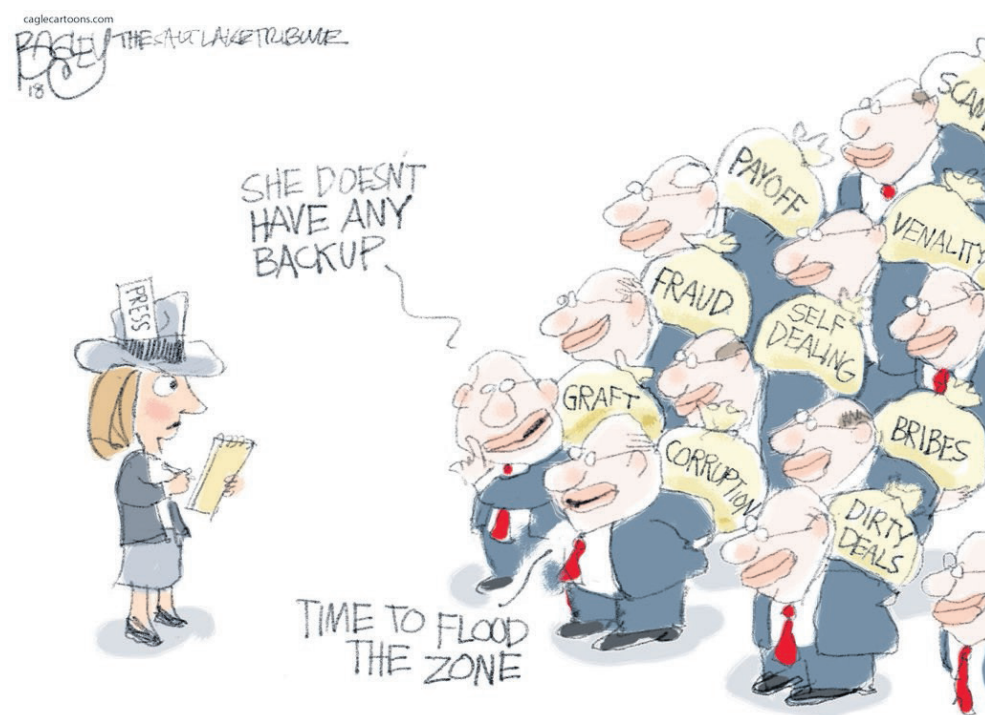
It can be exhausting trying to keep up with the news, especially about our president and his cabinet, as they chart a dramatically different course for the country.

It can make you seasick trying to concentrate on everything speeding by the transom, whether it be updates from overnight meetings with a nuclear-armed dictator, stories of financial malfeasance and corruption at the EPA, President Trump's continuous pokes-in-the-eye via his Twitter feed, or the nasty thing some dumb actor has yelled from his rooftop garden.

It's enough for many people to throw their hands in the air. A new malady has been coined — “news fatigue” — this feeling that you cannot keep up with the steady stream of important information emanating from journalists the world over. The news is depressing and nausea-inducing, and that's no way to start the day. To combat the symptoms, many citizens are finding themselves pushed to make a choice.

First, they can convince themselves that the firehose of news isn't important — you can check out and not care about it and all will be fine.

Or they can take the route of believing there are vitally important updates and critical things happening every day that they must stay apprised of, but their own mental and physical wellbeing requires them to take a step



back and clear their head.

Or, they can just take the tack that everything else is fake, except for what the head of our government says, allowing only one person and their supportive media outlets to dictate the terms of reality. That's the laziest and simplest route, but to many it offers the veneer of peaceful understanding.

Sure, we're in the news business — it benefits us for people to pay attention.

But we're first and foremost citizens. And we know the danger that comes when powerful people and institutions attack the news, purposely try to

confuse and overwhelm their constituents, and try to numb them with scandal after scandal until none are remarkable enough that they incite the public to demand accountability. It's a way to get away with anything, this slow spread of news fatigue disease.

As David Frum, the political commentator and former speechwriter for George W. Bush, said recently in an interview: “If your child is feverishly ill, it can be very fatiguing to take care of her. But it's what you do, because that's your duty ... if your country is ill you have the same responsibility.”

Part of the reason why “news” seems overwhelming, and some are trying to shirk the responsibility of understanding it, is that many people no longer agree on what “news” is. A recent poll conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs and the American Press Institute noted that most readers and journalists agree on what they want from journalism — news stories that are factual and offer context and analysis. Yet most of what people absorb, via social media or partisan talking heads on television, or via 280-character tweets, does not offer clear facts and clear context. Absorb too much of that and the brain decides to close down and give up.

There is a real joy of a few days of vacation, to check out of the news stream. That may be necessary to our mental health, and it's also a point of privilege — a North Korean, a bourbon executive trying to navigate the president's tariffs, an illegal immigrant, or a person with pre-existing medical conditions does not have the ability to check out for a few days. They must fight and lobby, and work hard to understand the context of their action and those of others.

We know time away from the fusillade is important, and useful. But we urge you to jump back in, to remain vigilant and knowledgeable about the problems affecting our nation and the progress made by it.

GUEST COLUMN

Don't continue to deny homeless problem

The experience of homelessness has reached epidemic proportions in our nation and, sadly, the North Coast is not immune. People are experiencing homelessness for a wide variety of reasons, and there does not seem to be a definitive age, gender, background, ethnicity, family makeup or mental capacity as the root cause.

Neither can population density (urban versus rural), regional business sector (forest, farm, fish, manufacture, technology, hospitality, service), or community size be trusted to predict whether a state or municipality will experience uncomfortable numbers of helpless and “scary” street folks who lack any or all of the necessary resources to provide for themselves.

The primary cause is rooted in the rapidly increasing costs of living as compared with the inflation-adjusted decreasing rates of pay, according to sociologists and economists. Living costs have escalated at an alarming pace over the past couple of decades, while workers (over that same period of time) have not enjoyed any appreciable increases in take-home pay — certainly, not sufficient to make ends meet.

While the costs of utilities, groceries, insurance, clothing, rent, fuel and prescriptions have risen due to market momentum or inflation, employee compensation (a worker's ability to pay for such increases) has not kept pace. While employers have, fairly uniformly, regarded operating expense hikes as mandatory increases in their cost of doing business (read “have to”), most have treated payroll and benefits as discretionary (read “want to”).

Because employers cannot or will not choose to share their proceeds and profits with workers, minimum wage laws were enacted on the national and state levels. Due to tremendous corporate resistance, and despite evidence of success in raising pay standards in states like Minnesota and cities like Seattle, those guidelines have not kept up either.

The cover article of the January 2016 issue of Forbes magazine claims 63 percent of Americans today do not possess enough available resources to weather just a \$500 financial surprise. The article goes on to say this phenomenon cannot be explained away as laziness, loose spending habits or lack of savings discipline. And this uncomfortable reality is validated for me by many with whom I have shared this stat — in Astoria — who, sheepishly, raise their hands (those working for public and private employers alike).

Mental illness, substance abuse, and the lack of treatment facilities and funding in the country are — and should be — necessary parts of the nationwide conversation. They are the impetus for a minor percentage of the



Illustration
by Noel
Thomas

unfortunates who cannot find or keep adequate housing. But depression and anxiety, as well as self-medication and resultant addictions, are more often symptoms of the profound despair one can feel when faced with the painful reality that “the cupboards are bare” or “I can't pay the rent.”

Despite the well-documented and frightening rise in opioid prescriptions, it has not been proven Americans are now suffering greater frequency of addiction than ever before. Though there may be greater public awareness about mental illnesses, it has not been proven Americans are experiencing emotional instability more than ever before. However, experts have concluded Americans are becoming more financially vulnerable than ever before. It is not difficult for any who have earned a pension, or are still actively working for a living and looking forward to Social Security, to recognize that.

With the notable exception of professional actors and athletes, corporate executives and many politicians, each of us is becoming increasingly more financially stretched (or strapped) over time. It seems certain we will all become more so as the gap between our own, personal income and expenses broadens. Helping Hands Director Alan Evans recently

reported, in a citywide forum discussing our local crisis, that the fast-growing demographic among those experiencing homelessness is seniors age 65 and above. His organization collects enough statistics to draw such meaningful conclusions, and is already making a tangible and significant difference in town.

We can continue in denial that this dilemma actually exists for us. We can continue to foster attitudes, encourage law enforcement, and pass restrictive ordinances in hopes that — if we are perceived as not-homeless-friendly — then at-risk people will not come to the beach. We can continue to grouch about the unseemly habits and/or unsightly behaviors exhibited by those who have been feared and neglected by society, forced to relinquish all of their dignity, and find themselves in such unfortunate circumstances.

We can continue to reminisce about simpler, happier and more prosperous times in our storied past, codify our memories into zoning and building codes, and preserve what once passed for “character.” We can continue to search for the people or places where blame comfortably resides. We can continue to debate the definition of what is (or makes housing) “affordable.” And we can continue to pretend converting the former Merwyn Hotel — also

known as the Waldorf — into mostly high-end condos and a couple of less-than-market rate studios will address this desperate population or move “undesirables” and their trash out of downtown doorways.

We can continue to become frustrated over the untenable social conditions in which we find ourselves and ask why some government agency (whose resources have also been gutted) is not solving this for us. Or we can set aside such distractions and begin chipping away at our challenge — one studio, shelter, or day center at a time. For then we may achieve two, beneficial, community results: 1) Identify housing for some less fortunate ones who are daily living this nightmare, and 2) reduce much of the perceived nuisance we, who are more fortunate, wish had not happened in our time.

“I wish it need not have happened in my time,” said Frodo. “So do I,” said Gandalf, “and so do all who live to see such times. But that is not for them to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.” — J.R.R. Tolkien, Lord of the Rings

Bill Van Nostrand is pastor of First Presbyterian — “The Big Yellow Church” on the corner of 11th Street and Grand Avenue in Astoria.