

## Dumbing down the media

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In a world where maintaining the average reader's attention span is akin to training tigers, news media has become shorter, less informative, and less interrogative. Partly fostered by the inverted pyramid format – get the important information out at the start and add less important details as the article progresses – and partly fostered by North American society's fascination with sound bites and photographs, the news' target audience intelligence lowers daily.

In news casts and articles, the media now tells their audience what happened, but not why. The media drops the full details of a story, most often the analytical elements of news, to appeal to their supposedly short attention span audience. The worst part of the situation is that most of the audience has not even noticed that the attention of the media has shifted from the news to the personality presenting the news. As Lewis Lapham stated in a recent interview, news media, and especially television, "is about the personality, about the actor, not the act."

The news media's role in society is to inform, to provide checks, balances, and alternative points of view, not to entertain. Yet, the media's focus shifts further and further into entertainment.

Recently CBC responded to reader complaints that a number of their TV news stories represented women as "silly, boy-crazy little girls." The CBC correspondent's reply? "We're providing stories on trends in our communities and across our country. This is what is going on in Canada. These are valid news stories."

These stories did not provide information on trends or on important information. They discussed the dating patterns of older Canadian women and of one woman's preference for dating "heroes." Exactly how do these stories register as valid news? The fact that CBC gathers many strongly-worded complaints indicates that a significant portion of Canadian society does not want their news disguised or outright eclipsed by entertaining, fluff stories.

It's time for Canadian news media to raise the bar.

Kitchener reporter Louisa D'Amato's comments that *The Record* targets an audience reading level of grade eights with ADD. When raising a child, adults do not assume that the child cannot progress past toddler-hood. Instead, adults encourage the child to ask questions; they give a child as much information as they can to explain the world. Following this pattern, the media can foster an educated, informed society by providing important, timely information.

American intellectual Lewis Lapham believes that D'Amato's target audience assessment is "a little cruel." He says that he might push the target audience to a typical grade nine, but warns that "the chase for ratings pushes [the target audience] into a shorter and shorter attention span."

The public in general has a higher attention span than the media gives them credit for. Let's start treating them that way.