

Tips for Serpent-Doves in a Media Age

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1. Be humble.

You don't know everything. You may have missed something.

"Whoever trusts in his own mind is a fool, but he who walks in wisdom will be delivered"
(Proverbs 28:26).

2. Slow down.

If James were around today, he'd probably say, "Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to post." Take time to form an opinion. Resist the pressure to have an opinion about everything.

"If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13).

3. Remember that people want your attention, and they may do dishonest things to get it.

Before the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, British spies conducted a disinformation campaign in the US to convince us to enter the war. They planted false stories, promoted a fake astrologist who "revealed" Hitler's horoscope, and created a fake map supposedly showing how the Nazis would divide up the US if they conquered it.

4. Get to know your mediators. Unless you're an eyewitness, all your information relies on media.

We all rely on media, so we should learn who they are, their record of reliability and what angle they may have on the information they convey. What you learn probably shouldn't lead you to accept or reject everything they say, but it should lead you to read or listen more carefully.

For example, *The Epoch Times* is run by the Falun Gong, "a spiritual discipline which China banned in 1999 calling them an 'evil cult.'" Articles from *The Epoch Times* aren't necessarily false, but they're often colored by a strong bias against the Chinese Communist Party to the point that it can lead to other distortions.

5. Learn to spot a (dis)honest author/speaker.

a. Are they fair to their opponents and their ideas?

Do they take quotations out of context? Do they distort their opponents' ideas or actions? Do they "put a thumb on the scale" to tilt the balance in their favor?

"Unequal weights and unequal measures are both alike an abomination to the Lord"
(Proverbs 20:10).

b. Are they honest about their own claims, acknowledging limits, gaps, or exceptions?

"Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good" (Proverbs 16:20).

c. Do they cite their sources? Are their sources reputable (more than speculation or social media)?

"Whoever speaks the truth gives honest evidence" (Proverbs 12:17).

- d. *Do they often rely on "always" or "never" statements?*
Most things don't fit into these extremes; using appeals like these may be a symptom of dishonesty.
- e. *Do they hide their purpose?*
For example, do they say they want to inform, when they really want to persuade? Or do they conceal an opinion piece as a news story?
"The purpose in a man's heart is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out" (Proverbs 20:5).
- f. *Do they substitute flash or gimmicks for substantive evidence and arguments?*
"All that glitters is not gold;" an argument may look solid on the surface, but may be weak at its core. Get past the flash.
- g. *How much does their bias affect their evidence and arguments?*
Everyone has some degree of bias, but an honest author won't conceal it or make it appear to be different than it is.
- h. *Are they fair to you, the reader/viewer?*
What kind of person do they want you to become? If you accept their position, what does it make you? An honest author/speaker wants good things for his audience and will be upfront about his intent.
- i. *You may have to grade on a curve.*
When you evaluate an author's honesty, you need to recognize that no one is perfectly honest, but some are more honest than others. Politicians, in particular, are prone to distortion. Often, they don't have the time to talk about every angle. But sometimes they distort deliberately to get your vote. Seek out those that tend to do better most of the time.

6. Learn how to read/watch the news.

- a. *Don't draw a conclusion from the headline alone.*
Often editors, not authors, choose the headline for an article to get attention and not necessarily to sum up the article. Headlines may sensationalize or slant the story. Don't rely only on the headline.
- b. *Don't base your opinions on a single source. And make sure the other sources aren't just a copy.*
Many online articles rely on social media as their only source, or on conjecture or hearsay. In some cases, you may Google the story and find it in several other places-- because each source simply copied the story from the original. Look for corroboration, i.e. a multitude of witnesses.
- c. *Cut back on the news you get from social media.*
Social media does some things really well—keeping up with friends and family, sharing important life events. But social media lacks the prudence and restraint required to avoid distorting news. Don't rely on social media for regular news.

- d. *Read honest authors that you disagree with. Avoid confirmation bias.*
If you only read/watch what you already agree with, you'll never grow beyond what you are now. Read honest sources who hold positions different than yours--not those who only want to inflame, but those who seek to inform. Don't waste your time with a dishonest author or speaker, whether they agree with you or not.
- e. *Check sources that don't have a dog in the fight.*
When you're looking for other sources, sometimes it helps to find those with distance between them and our current debates. For example, some conservative foreign news sources avoid the pressure to take a stand on American affairs, while still giving a useful perspective.
- f. *Be an honest news source yourself.*
Social media makes each of us a news source, so be the same kind of honest author we describe above. Don't post what you can't confirm. Don't bear false witness in your feed.
"The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps" (Proverbs 14:15).
- g. *Be willing to change your mind.*
Go back to the beginning of wisdom: the fear of the Lord. He's God and you're not. You could be wrong. If you're not willing to change your mind, you may need to reconsider your theology, not just your news habits.

7. If you're getting too anxious, hit pause and unplug.

Everyone is under extra stress these days. So, to paraphrase Proverbs, better to dwell in a news desert, than to live in a mansion with a quarrelsome news feed. It's OK to take a break; your sovereign Father will keep things in order while you rest.