

**Title: Oliver Burkeman, How the News Took Over Reality**  
**Episode: 60**  
**Podcast: Half Hour of Heterodoxy**

### Transcript

[From Heterodox Academy, this is *Half Hour of Heterodoxy*, conversations with scholars and authors, ideas from diverse viewpoints and perspectives. Here's your host Chris Martin.]

**Chris Martin:** My guest today is Oliver Burkeman. He's a British journalist based in Brooklyn, New York and he writes for The Guardian. He's also author of *The Antidote: Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking*.

We will be talking about his recent essay *How the News Took over Reality* in which he argues that excessive engagement within news has diminished our happiness and has also harmed our democracy.

So we're here to talk about your essay. Has the news taken over reality? And your argument in that essay is that political news specifically is taking up too much of our mental space and is having some not-so-great consequences. Tell me about the history behind this essay.

**Oliver Burkeman:** The idea for this piece came from a sense that I had mainly from 2016 onwards. You know, both the presidential election here in the US and the Brexit referendum in the UK. But a lot of people, people I knew personally, people I was witnessing in social media, and also myself to some extent were relating to the news in a completely new way such that it was kind of the center of gravity of their realities.

It was the – the news was primarily where the psychological space that they occupied and that's – you know, their circle realized, their families at home, the neighborhoods were somehow secondary. We're sort of marinating in these sort of endless stories of political conflict and all kinds of awful and aggravating tales of suffering and protest and catastrophe in a way that felt new and that going alongside this was a real intensification of an idea. But there was actually a moral duty to be doing this that you weren't really playing your role as an outstanding citizen if you were not completely immersed in the news like this pretty much around the clock.

What I wanted to explore in this piece, some ideas that I've become pretty convinced by actually, that that – it's kind of the opposite that in many ways we may have a moral obligation both to ourselves and also to help the democracy to not be so completely immersed in the news all the time.

**Chris Martin:** So you're a journalist and it's unusual to see a journalist arguing that we should be a bit less engaged with the news. What would you say is the optimal amount of engagement with the news right now?

**Oliver Burkeman:** I don't know that I have an answer to that question in a sort of quantitative sense. I am conscious of the ironies of a journalist saying this and I'm also aware that I think the

sort of mythology that identify here is probably by far worst among journalists than other media people. You know, the sense of identifying so completely with the news.

I really don't actually think it's ultimately a question of quantity. I don't think I'm going to say like this many hours is OK and this many hours is too much. It's more a sort of basic sense of the relationship I think between you and this world of the news.

I think all sorts of factors that we can discuss if you like about how the attention economy operates give the news and related forms of information a really unfair advantage in sort of burrowing their way into our consciousness and I think it's incredibly important to stay abreast of a lot of this stuff so that you can take actions that are actually useful, decisions about voting, political activism, charitable contributions, whatever your actions might be.

But we have to really try to distinguish that from the idea that simply marinating in more information and the sort of relatively false feeling. I think it's relatively false that you're doing something nearly by posting about it or by scrolling down your infinite Twitter feed about it.

We have to separate that idea off from the sense that this is actually kind of acting but this is taking a start or doing anything. So I am very much in favor of the news as a source of information. But I think when it becomes sort of the place where you live, I'm not sure it's terrifically useful.

**Chris Martin:** One of the things you say in the essay is the way that journalists and television producers have always experienced the news as how millions of other people experience it too now and that occurred to me that might be true. But maybe it's worse because journalists to some degree also realize that journalism might be a bit of a game and maybe have some detachment from it whereas maybe regular people do not or at least some regular people do not. So how similar do you think things are now between people who are just watching the news and actual journalists?

**Oliver Burkeman:** I think that's a fair point to make, especially historically. You know, because recently – I mean even in the 1980s when CNN was providing round-the-clock news already, there was a pretty rare person who spent much more than about an hour actually consuming news on a given day. If you go back a few more decades, it's astonishing how short say the special news broadcast. When Pearl Harbor happened, there was a completely unprecedented amount of news coverage on the TV stations and it lasted I think 90 minutes, the entire special coverage.

If I remember correctly, it was on a Sunday and the engineers would not standardly had been in in the first place at all. So they had to sort of scramble the whole TV station to even be on air.

I'm sure you're right that as that kind of news coverage grew and grew and grew, journalists did have some kind of distance, a certain jadedness or cynicism or historically in the UK, I think half of them were drunk half the time,

**Chris Martin:** Fortunately not in the US maybe.

**Oliver Burkeman:** I think that the different – the distinction is less now because I think that actually the sort of addictive qualities of social media, the way that it has become really a science to maximize in a very customized way whatever is going to grab you and push your buttons and enrage you, that works for everybody. That works on journalists.

I see it all the time as much as it works on anybody else. So I do think that at this point, we're all kind of stewing in this – what used to be the public sphere is now, as other people have pointed out, a kind of globalized private sphere where we're all kind of hardwired into each other's deepest bits of our consciousness. Probably usually better kept private.

**Chris Martin:** Well, one interesting connection is that you talk about this phrase or axiom. If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention and it reminded me that a couple of years ago, I was doing some research on why college students might be more anxious and I came across this scale, called Why Worry Scale. It was created by Canadian psychologists and there's actually a Why Worry 2 now.

It measures the degree which people believe that worrying has positive characteristics. So it measures five characteristics including the belief that worry protects against negative emotions. It prevents negative things from actually happening if you worry enough and that worrying itself reflects a positive personality trait.

So if you worry, you are inherently virtuous because that is what virtuous people do and it occurred to me that maybe we've now just created a very large set of people who believe that worrying is a manifestation of a virtue even though it might not be.

**Oliver Burkeman:** I think that's a really excellent way of putting it. I haven't made that connection before but there is something very clearly similar I would say between that sense that worry is constructive and that sense that – the sort of actions and words that you take engaging with news and social media are constructive, whether that is liking and posting and retweeting or whether it's literally just pursuing through clicks and scrolls your particular interest. There's a sense that you are constructively exploring a world and yeah, I think I'm – by nature, I'm probably one of the people who think that – subconsciously anyway that fretting about something is likely to prevent catastrophe and if I stop fretting, terrible things might happen.

Yeah, I think obviously it's not just a parallel between worry and social media activity. I think you're also right that a lot of social media activity is worrying. You know, it is people worrying about stuff that's going on in the world but it is after all deeply concerning.

I think one thing that I would – I think is worth emphasizing about that idea of if you're not outraged, you're not paying attention. There's this whole notion that the duty is to attend to things. I think that what I try to argue in the piece is that that's kind of anachronistic. That's kind of out of date now because that maybe belongs to a time when it was less the case that information was in such a surplus and attention was so scarce.

That relationship between scarce attention and surplus information obviously is how the social media platforms and anyone else who makes money in media these days makes their money through monetizing attention.

In that situation, it's a little bit strange to say that you sort of have a duty to pay attention because the whole system is designed to extract as much of your attention as it possibly can.

I think what actually arises then is that you have something of a duty to steward your attention and that might actually mean not giving it to many, many things that in some kind of abstract sense totally deserve it.

**Chris Martin:** I think that's a good way to sum up the point. Another parallel between what you were writing about and some of my older research is that I had a couple of people mention that college students used to live in a bubble and we used to complain that college students were living in a bubble.

But part of that bubble was just a matter of structure. There was just one telephone on the hall. You didn't have a television in your dorm room and to some degree, that was actually healthy because that was a period where you were just coping with several life changes and just being cut away from the world and now that's just gone for everyone who has a cell phone. So that's another cause of anxiety now.

**Oliver Burkeman:** Right. It's funny the way we talk about bubbles. You know, you're really talking about something that feels more worthy I would say of the label "bubble," a real kind of barrier to hearing about things. Bubble strikes me as really not the right word for what we experience in social media today, right? Because there are certainly echo chamber effects. There are certainly the effects of being exposed to – and exposing your views to people who already agree with you. But there's also this effect where because outrage is as good a – it's as good a way of getting people's attention as anything, you also see like the absolute worst views of people who you have absolutely nothing in common with.

So people far off the other side of the political spectrum saying absolutely terrible things. I'm not in a bubble that screens me from them. People show them to me on Twitter all the time in the course of mocking or condemning them and I think possibly there is a – there is some research that I recall I think that suggests that it's the middle that gets excluded from that. You know, people are not – are neither particularly excited by nor particularly scornful of kind of boringly middle of the line opinions. It's the ones at the edges that really spread far.

So yeah, I mean I think there's something to be said for certain kinds of bubbles. But I don't think that's what we're doing now in the digital realm anyway.

**Chris Martin:** Another part of your essay is about polarization and depolarization and we talk about this idea that we need to have more civil conversations about politics with our neighbors and how that might actually not be something we need to do but rather have more involvement and activities where we don't have to talk about politics. How did you come to that realization?

**Oliver Burkeman:** Well, I'm influenced here a lot by a political scientist called Robert Talisse who I should give full credit to for these ideas. He has a book coming out in a few months called "Overdoing Democracy" which pretty much gets to the point.

This is the argument that we tend to assume as people who value and end up committed to democracy, that it is a kind of universal solution and response to anything. So if there are big problems and goodness knows there are big problems these days, in a democracy, but the solution must always be more democracy, right? So more protests and more voter mobilization and more fundraising and whatever.

That definitely has a role. But as Talisse points out, democracy at its best is something that we do on a sort of wider terrain of civic life that is not all political. So democratic arguments should be something that we sort of come together to a particular place to have and then we go back to this sort of broader life that makes it impossible.

So when people say the thing that democrats really need to be doing is reaching out to people who supported Trump and having conversations, trying to bridge the divide, one of the major rifts of that – I mean, A, I don't know whether it works but also it just has the general effect of making more and more of your life about politics.

Meanwhile if you spend all your spare time in your neighborhood meeting with like-minded people to organize politically and canvass or whatever, then you're subject to this kind of group polarization effects where you gradually sort of sort yourself into ever more narrow and to some extent more extreme political groupings.

Talisse suggests and it sounds like a good idea to me that what we should actually be doing is pursuing as you say more sort of social – more aspects to social life where politics is just off the agenda. Politics just doesn't come into it where you relate to people not just as the voter choice, which the best people in the world, you're still doing when you try to bridge the divide with someone.

You're still sort of – you're still defining both parties in that exchange as nothing but political actors. So it's a question less of seeking out the person you usually disagree with and trying to reach an agreement and more about that he would – I don't know, go to a sport game, go to a gig where you just have no idea whether the people alongside you, front of you are on your political side or not.

It's hard to do because of all the geographical sorting that has gone up, right? I mean if I do that here in Brooklyn, New York, I can – I'm still going to be able to predict to a very close certainty that everyone there has the same – basically the same politics as me. But to the extent that it's possible and it may be more possible in other parts of the country. It's just this idea like we need to relate to people just apolitically. Not trying to compromise in the middle of the politics but just not only doing politics.

**Chris Martin:** Right. Well, I think the geographical sorting might be a little overstated or maybe it's just because I live in Atlanta. But I think there are definitely metropolitan areas around the

country that are about 60, maybe 65 percent democratic. So not close to 50-50 but definitely when you go to a baseball game or a football game. It's not like you're in Brooklyn where you can safely assume that everyone has the same political opinions you do.

**Oliver Burkeman:** And actually, you know what? I think I'm talking about a five-mile radius of my house. I think that with a little bit of effort, that's doable here and I've been in context where it's – where I think I was doing it and it's never – it never involves quite as much travel as you might imagine especially in the UK where I come from where the place is so small anyway.

**Chris Martin:** Right, right. So in terms of creating harmony by having these segments of our lives that are apolitical, I think one way someone might push back against that idea as a counterargument is what if there's a time when you say there is a truly fascist political party during that period of a country's history. Did you want to create harmony or do you want to have these unifying things like watching baseball games?

**Oliver Burkeman:** It's an interesting form of the criticism because I – there is obviously a really powerful criticism, potential criticism running against all of this, which is just that these things are too serious and too acute and too urgent right now to be worrying about whether we're too immersed in the news or something.

You know, you have to step up to the moment and I think most of what I'm saying here actually meets that criticism. I think that the point is that actually immersion in social media is to a large extent simply not helpful for achieving those goals and that even when very strong political activism is required as it is now I would say, I think it works better. It certainly has worked better for me in my experience in those times when I'm not completely hypnotized by every new outrage but that I've chosen one or two things that are going to be my focus where they're local as so far as possible although that's not always the top priority and you sort of – and you're able to steer your attention in that way.

The criticism as applied to the idea of socializing outside of politics, I mean all I can really say is I do think that ultimately you want societies to cohere such that after these emergencies have been vigorously dealt with, the society can persist I think and this idea is certainly better I think than the one where we try to find compromise and middle ground and try to say it's the very good people on both sides version of the argument.

That we need to somehow get some to the 50-50 midpoint between a decent politics and a completely indecent politics. I don't know to be honest what the – whether this is an argument for – whether that's also an argument of sort of never going to the baseball game because you might be sitting alongside people who actually support the politics that extreme.

My guess is from what I understand – I think you will know more about this research than me. Ultimately the effect of that can – if it has any effect can only be to keep people from spinning off into those extreme positions. But I mean yeah, maybe there are times when that part of it does not work.

**Chris Martin:** Right. I asked that just because it's something I think about based on what I read in applied social psychology. Most applied social psychologists I think try to work on creating intergroup harmony. But occasionally, you will see a psychologist arguing that harmony is actually not good when there's a power asymmetry because it just maintains that power asymmetry and then keeps the disadvantaged group from actually doing things like protesting, doing things that disrupt the harmony so that they get their rights they deserve.

There was an issue of psychological inquiry some time ago, maybe eight or nine years ago where there was an interesting debate about this issue. It's not one where I have a clear side. I just know it's happening in that world. I find it interesting.

**Oliver Burkeman:** The question there is whether the – I mean I totally agree with that, yeah, actually. I can certainly see that – the case for it. That there are times when harmony between groups should not be the goal. I do wonder though if this idea of stepping away from politics applies to that in the same way because you will – well, I mean I guess I'm repeating myself. But it's this notion that harmony between different political groups may not always be appropriate. But the idea of stepping outside of politics and understanding that literally everybody you're dealing with is in some sense a human being, I find it very hard to imagine the context in which that isn't ultimately going to be something that is positive for the health of a society.

**Chris Martin:** Right, that becoming humanity idea.

**Oliver Burkeman:** Right. But not becoming – you can't reach – I don't think you can reach that by trying to see the reasonableness of everybody's political opinions. I think that you probably got to accept that some people are not going to be – you're not going to be able to define them as reasonable by any standards.

**Chris Martin:** Right, right. So on a somewhat different topic, I just wanted to talk about your work on happiness because I know you've written a book about that and I teach a course on happiness. Are you – well, tell me a bit about that book and where you're taking that work.

**Oliver Burkeman:** So the book is called "The Antidote". The subtitle is "Happiness for People Who Can't Stand Positive Thinking" and I really just started from my own installation to the culture of being constantly told to think positive or to – and a broader kind of positive thinking. Often it's not explicit. Most people are a bit cynical about that kind of really clichéd version of it. But just this general idea that the way to have a happy life is to use your conscious will to fill your mind with good feelings or to – I think striving, making very, very clear goals and relentlessly striving towards them is another example of it and I had found writing this weekly column in *The Guardian* about this kind of stuff, I had found again and again the ideas that resonated with me, the techniques that worked. The philosophies that really stayed with me. None of them were about that. All of them were about trying to become friendlier with negative emotions, trying to become more sort of capacious when it comes to being able to hang out with failure or uncertainty or sadness.

I think meditation and that whole trend at its best is about that and some of the renewed interests in stoicism is about that. So that isn't less keen on that. But, you know, so there's a general kind

of – and I think it actually does in a way. It connects to our earlier part of the conversation because I think we should be hoping to have fulfilling lives and we don't live at a point in history where we're just trying to make everything go really, really, really well. It – necessarily seem like a very practical means for that. We're going to have to sort of be living in a world with severe environmental threats and huge amounts of political aggravation and all the rest of it and somehow tried to understand what it means to be happy or at least have meaningful lives in that context and you won't get that by just screening out all of that stuff.

**Chris Martin:** Yeah. One interesting thing I've noted is the critics of the happiness industry tend to not be American. They tend to be British or Australian and I feel like the culture has something to do with that. I myself am pretty skeptical of big parts of the happiness industry and one of the books I recommend to my students is the *Happiness Trap* and the first chapter in that book is a description of the trap which is this idea that there's something wrong with you if you're not happy or you can't think positively all the time. So are you planning to do anything more in that area?

**Oliver Burkeman:** Well, that broad – I mean I will tell you what has always – I'm working on a – because at the moment it's not about happiness in any direct sense. But the thing that seems to really always draw me and crop up in one way or another in everything I do really is the idea of this sort of ironic effect. So the heart of that book and the *Happiness Trap* idea I think.

That there are all sorts of things in life where the more effort you put into trying to do them, the harder it gets to attain them and I think that really is true of happiness. But I think it's true of lots of other things as well and I'm there – I'm right now very interested in how much of our sort of culture around productivity and sort of high proficient time management seems to just make people busier and more burned out, which suggests that it's not really doing what it says on the label.

**Chris Martin:** All right. All right. There are definitely a lot of professors who feel burned out. So maybe when that book comes out, I should interview you again.

**Oliver Burkeman:** I will happily talk about it, yeah.

**Chris Martin:** All right, all right. Well, it has been great having you on the show. Thanks for joining us.

**Oliver Burkeman:** Thanks very much for asking me.

[Music]

**Chris Martin:** Thanks for tuning in and for those of you who came to the Heterodox Academy Conference, thank you for attending the conference. Several of you came up and said hello to me and we really appreciate that. There's a link to Oliver Burkeman's essay in the show notes as well as links to a couple of other pieces by him that you might like and a link to his book.

The next guests on the show are Cailin O'Connor who's a philosopher of biology and has a new book about misinformation and how it spreads. After that, we will have Joanna Schug. She's a cross-cultural psychologist and she will be talking about how we can understand cultures that are different from ours. I will also have an episode featuring short interviews with people who were at the conference, both people who spoke and just people who attended.

There will also be an episode in early September with Lara Schwartz who is at the conference. She's the director of the American University Project on Civil Discourse. As always, if you enjoyed the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. It helps other people find out about the show and you can also follow me on Twitter, @Chrismartin76. Thanks for listening.

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