**Shock! Horror! Behind the ethics and evolution of the bad news business**

March 27, 2015 1.17pm GMT

here are hidden, and serious, ethical issues in the news media. It has become an industry in which editors and journalists routinely select the most disturbing and shocking news for our daily, or even hourly, consumption.

Editors may make such decisions on the assumption that “bad news sells”, but the discourse of journalism suggests that it is taken for granted that good news is frivolous and distracts from the serious events such as wars, famine or child abductions.

There are three arguments that tend to justify this approach. We are told that consumers are free to select different types of news and that it is the media’s job to hold those in power to account – hence the interest in wrongdoing rather than “right-doing”. We are also told that bad news is in some sense good for us and for society, in terms of increasing awareness of what is wrong so we are able to take appropriate action.

Our research, however, provides strong evidence to show that these arguments are false – indeed the opposite is true – and that there are curious parallels with the businesses trying to sell us [peanut butter donuts](http://www.krispykreme.co.uk/doughnuts/doughnuts-new/?id=67) or [stuffed crust pizza](http://www.pizzahut.co.uk/restaurants/food/pizza/Philly-Cheese-Steak/).

## Mood music

For a start, it is clear that negative news is not good for us. Our study of more than 2,000 respondents indicated that exposure to a typical news story resulted in a drop in mood in most people, and the extent of the drop was substantial – mood dropped by 38% in female and 20% in male respondents.

Secondly, our research found that exposure to negatively framed news items (such as war, or [bumble bees disappearing](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/pa/article-3002685/Warning-bees-extinction-threat.html)) makes people significantly less likely to take positive action than those who saw more positively framed news items (peace talks, [bumble bees making a comeback](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-11472104)).

The more anxious, sad, depressed and worried the news items made people feel, the less likely they were to be motivated to donate to charity, be more environmentally friendly or make their views known.



There is also evidence that the adversarial role played by news journalists in holding those in authority to account, can in some cases be counter-productive. Focusing simply on what goes wrong – for example reporting the small percentage of [schools or hospitals that are failing](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-28329312)rather than the majority that are doing well – can put issues on the political agenda and create pressure for change based on the view that more is wrong than actually is.

## Positive discrimination

We also found a strongly reported preference for more positive stories, although the negative ones were more likely to grab attention. Consistent with previous research [we found a discrepancy](https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G1-177361648/engaging-the-female-audience-an-evolutionary-psychology) between what the public say they would like (positive news) and what they actually end up watching and reading.

There is much in the argument that this is explained by a [hard-wired evolutionary instinct](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/1996-06209-002) to pay attention to alarming information – that responding to scary headlines is often an involuntary response. It is an instinct, not a judgement then, which the news sector takes advantage of by foregrounding the most alarming and shocking news items.

But if the public gets what the public wants, can this ever be seen as an ethical issue? To address this question, an analogy with the food industry is helpful. There are concerns that the high level of sugar and fat in processed food is bad for health and is directly related to an increasing prevalence of diet-related diseases such as diabetes and obesity. An additional problem is that the hard-wired evolutionary drive to consume this kind of food is no longer adaptive in a world where such food is constantly available.



Although there may be debate over what the response to such tensions should be, we can accept that it is unlikely that a food manufacturer would believe they are being actively ethical by increasing the amount of fat and/or sugar in their product. This is in stark contrast to the news industry.

## Food for thought

Evidence strongly indicates that consumption of news with a high negativity content is associated with mental health problems and apathy. Again consumption of such negative news is associated with an evolutionary response that is no longer so adaptive. Yet those producing such news believe they are doing the right thing. Indeed the highest journalist awards and accolades go to those journalists who report the most shocking and distressing stories.

An additional issue is that, unlike food which is consumed voluntarily, it is almost impossible not to be exposed to the most shocking and distressing happenings in the world, as these are the aspects of the stories that are most prominently foregrounded, with the conscious aim of capturing attention.

Our brains are not adapted to process the whole of the world’s horrors, selected and framed to present the most shocking and horrifying picture of the world. It is no wonder then that many try to turn off and those that do engage with it experience anxiety, worry and depression.

It is time that we brought to light the ethical issues associated with the way in which news is selected and presented and prompt further reflection and discussion on how these issues can be addressed. New movements such as the [Constructive Journalism Project](http://constructivejournalism.org/) and [Positive News](http://positivenews.org.uk/) are exploring ways in which news can stay true to its purpose to inform, without engendering feelings of helpless, anxiety or depression.