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Our World Is Not Getting Worse:

The Overflow of Negative News and Human Biases

Media have become inseparable from people's lives. Their role is essential to the public, who depend on them as a source of information for understanding what happens in the world. However, over the last decades, while we have seen tremendous progress on a global scale (declining rate in homicides, extreme poverty and increasing life expectancy), reading today's headlines, one could not fall under the impression that the world is becoming more frightening, depressing and hopeless (Roser). Indeed, even if good news is more preferred, humans might be hard-wired for negative information. Nevertheless, this tendency is actually the result of media corporations' unsustainable business model and severe competitive landscape nowadays for public attention. What's more, with technological advancement and digital revolution, the transition of gatekeeping power from newsmaking institutions to social media companies, as well as the ability of citizens to create breaking news might all together escalate the impression of a worsening world.

In his worldwide renowned book *Factfulness*, Swedish professor Hans Rosling mentioned negativity instinct, or "our tendency to notice the bad more than the good" (Rosling, 47). Indeed, the negativity bias occurring in humans has been long researched and observed in the psychological field. According to its theory, people often have a tendency to respond quicker, and remember more about a unit of negative information than a unit of positive information (Lamberson and Soroka, 3). Especially when navigating this era of information abundance,

humans can not register and process everything, and therefore develop a need to select what will strike them the most (Lamberson and Soroka, 2).

Moreover, the negativity instinct is reflected across a wide range of social and political behaviors. For example, in their assessments of elected officials, citizens' overall attitudes are "more strongly affected by characteristics in which the leader is rated negatively than by characteristics in which that leader is rated positively", and thus "US presidents are more powerfully penalized for poor economic performance than they are rewarded for good economic performance" (Lamberson and Soroka, 3). The emphasis on negative information, however, is nowhere else more apparent than in the current news flow and the role of mass media in representing global trends. Understanding the consumers' special attention and inclination towards unpleasant thoughts and events, newsmaking institutions often push even further for negative coverage, thus creating a public discourse of cynicism and incivility.

The motive behind this phenomenon can be quite straightforward since a great deal of media content today is produced by for-profit media companies to begin with. Like all businesses, their decisions are influenced by issues such as "profitability, cost containment, and evolving ownership patterns" (Croteau 32). While in the past, some news media had traditionally been sheltered from the full pressure of profit making, the takeover from major corporate conglomerates during the 1980s has broken their original aim to represent a necessary public service commitment (Croteau 44). Increasing competition from today's move into digital media also affects significantly on the types of news being produced. Facing pressure from an endlessly multiplying array of competitors on the same stories, news outlets now all have greater incentive than ever before to ramp up their coverage of emotionally wrenching stories (Singal).

As summarized by John Tierney in a New York Times article, "Bad news sells. If it bleeds it leads. No news is good news, and good news is no news" (Tierney). Consequently fundamental and world-changing improvements are often deliberately ignored as they are too slow, too fragmented or just too small to ever be attractive to a large audience and be qualified as news. Take media attention for aviation incidents or airplane crashes for instance. As aeronautical technology and weather forecasting have become highly advanced, transportation via airplane is proven to be the safest among all transport modes (van der Meer, 2019, p.784). Yet, this fact is rarely on the front page nor recognized by the public. Instead, the focus is often geared towards catastrophic incidents - which are inherently unavoidable for any mode of transportation. Hence, despite their relative infrequency, commercial airplane crashes "often result in strong public reactions and concerns, like social panic and (irrational) risk-avoiding behavior" (van der Meer, 2019, p.785).

Interestingly, the process of selective reporting might reflect news media's gatekeeping function, where journalists and editorial boards determine which events to cover and make it to the news due to limited resources as well as its aim to reduce the complexity for average consumers (van der Meer 2019, 785). Accordingly, journalists, when writing reports, often rely on selection heuristics, or commonly conceptualized as news values, such as negativity, proximity, and unexpectedness (van der Meer, 2019, p.785). Not to mention the fact that journalists, like many human beings, possess their own cognitive biases and fallacies as well. As a result, their media would then portray infrequent and isolated incidents instead of reflecting the underlying complex realities of day-to-day life as well as long-term socioeconomic trends. To complicate the problem further, we have now moved from a world where media organizations

were gatekeepers to a world where media still create the news agenda, but platform channels like search engines, social media and news aggregators control access to audiences (Nielson 5). Such shifts add even deeper layers to the already complex system that creates and consumes news. Indeed, for the companies' self-interests, social media would feed users emotionally compelling stories to keep them on the platform as long as possible. Besides, digital media has now become utterly open and accessible that everyone worldwide could broadcast about accidents happening at even the most personal and local level, hence in turn amplifying the amount of bad news we encounter on a daily basis.

As mentioned above, relying on platforms for distributing and discovering news has firstly granted the algorithm behind these services considerable gatekeeping power. And when social media platforms operate through gathering data on its users and then "selling customer data to third-party marketers keen to target potential consumers using social media or other websites", it is within their interests to keep users on the platform as long as possible (Kawashima 78). A recent study looking at Twitter found that while people produce much more positive content on social media generally, negative tweets from news organizations are much more likely to spread (Ivanova). Seemingly, negative content often motivates more actions and engagements (such as likes, comments or shares) than positive one on social media to keep users stay longer on the platforms. What's more important, social media corporations are well aware of this human tendency. Therefore, it is unsurprising when their designated algorithm would pick up users' patterns and repeat the news selection that attracts them into the platform in the first place - i.e. negative news. In a way, social media is now controlling how we view the world. Yet, we have little awareness of how these private companies and complex algorithms manage to do

that as the systems behind these platforms are often designed without any transparency to deliberately keep the population ignorant (Stern). Hence, it is perhaps not surprising at all when the majority of people still have not realized how skewed their worldview of the world has become.

A second plausible explanation for larger coverage of negative incidents might be simply because increasing press freedom and advanced technology has created a better surveillance system where every citizen could generate their own news stories and shape the worldview of their networks (Rosling 63). Thus, for example in the past, when Europeans slaughtered indigenous people across America, or central planning resulted in a mass famine in rural China, or when the whole species or ecosystems were destroyed, no one knew and even cared, and there was zero news on these topics (Rosling 63). But nowadays, every minor demeanor could be easily reported through a single social media post, and every socioeconomic or political mishandling could all be disclosed by a public blog post. Consequently, the world might come across as overwhelmingly worse when all these little details add up.

This overflow of negative news and a filtered media environment as happening at the moment can have far-reaching consequences as it creates a distorted reality for everyone. Regarding the mass audience, repeated presentation of negative news and exaggerated severity can create cognitive biases and overestimate the prevalence of newsworthy problems such as aviation incidents, natural disasters or violent crimes. After all, with the media's invasiveness into shaping our reality, it becomes harder all the time to "tell the real world from the media world" (Grossberg 4). It is even more alarming when individuals base their assessment and decide their real-life behaviors according to exemplars in the news, especially when these

exemplars are atypical and chosen for their sensational qualities. Besides, the cycle of news consumption is vicious. The more negative news you read, the more attuned you become to negative events - which is often known as the filtering process when "citizens can decide on the platforms they use, whilst being empowered to scroll, pause, skip, and multiscreen at any time and location they desire" (Van der Meer, 2020, p.939). In another word, our existing beliefs of what the world looks like actually play a guiding role in selecting which types of news to get read, and which get ignored. As a result, it is argued that current news reporting practices often "overshadow discussions of the broader social, psychological, and political context or trends that give rise to complex issues" (van der Meer 2019, 786). At a more subtle level, this dominant trend of negative news could have a profound effect on political and social movements as well. For instance, media emphasizing or hyping violence committed by social movement groups or minorities could foster negative attitudes towards those groups and make violent crimes a more salient issue in the minds of audiences than the cause they are fighting for (van der Meer 2019, 788). Thus, instead of giving those most marginalized the tools and platforms to speak up and take on systematic injustices in an era of unprecedented abundance and ease of access, mass media is now potentially preventing minority groups from rallying public support and gaining their deserved equality in real life.

Furthermore, news consumed online or via social media has been found to be correlated to increased depression, anxiety and stress, especially during the COVID-19 outbreak (March). Thus, negative news, instead of garnering public attention, now actually shuns the audience away and creates a widespread problem of "news avoidance". As reported by Toff and Nielsen, people now actively refrain from reading news as "it feels irrelevant and depressing and does not

help them live their lives", and so they "turn to entertainment or social media instead" (Nielsen 12). This phenomenon also aligns with the current trend of growing public skepticism and distrust of the media across the globe (Nielsen 4). As people start to recognize the pattern of media coverage to exaggerate and its motive to evoke certain emotions and responses of readers, they start to distance themselves from news outlets, and in a worse case scenario, stop believing in journalistic reports altogether.

With these effects in mind, many have called for the disposal of newsmaking institutions all together, or a complete detachment from it. Yet, it is debatable whether such acts lead to any better outcomes. Afterall, news is still powerful, and plays a crucial role in connecting and informing the public. But to resolve this deep-rooted problem, we might consider challenging the current news business models - which is weakening professional journalism and leaving news media more vulnerable to commercial pressures (Nielsen 4). Indeed, over the last decade, there have been multiple attempts to resist the special selection of negative information production for newsmaking institutions to learn from. One of these is the rise of constructive journalism, or "a form of journalism that is public-oriented, solution-oriented, future-oriented and action-oriented, trying to avoid a bias towards negativity in the news" (Hermans & Drok, 679). The constructive journalism is not meant to eliminate drama from news, but aim to develop a more constructive element in journalistic coverage instead of feeding on the prevailing negativity bias. A few examples include more emphasis on possible solutions in the news, diversifying more perspectives, or simply providing more nuanced context to explain the news (Serrano-Puche 156-160).

It is no wonder why we often feel drawn to news. It is a valuable tool to help us make sense of the world around us, and connect us together. However, in a world where we have become 24/7 surrounded by it and when our worldview is constantly shaped, dismantled and molded by the media, we might need to take a step back and become aware of our own biases and the distortions that they create. In another word, consume news, rather than be consumed by news.

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