

Good News Is No News?

I have made a [BBC Radio 4 documentary](#) about the idea of 'positive news' or 'constructive' journalism – it is on the [BBC radio iPlayer](#) – [click here to listen](#) I have this written [short Guardian article](#) based on the documentary that you can access here. See below for my longer article.

I was talking about Good News Bad News with [@theJeremyVine](#) today – here it again here (in at about 1.40) [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b051qvmf ...](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b051qvmf...)

Beyoncé, cute kittens or relentless tragedy? Is good news really news at all?

As the industry ponders the number of gloomy stories, our relationship with news seems to be changing



📷 Mainstream news media is fighting for your attention, not just with rivals, but with the more comfortable alternatives, such as kittens.

Back in the early 1990s, the then [BBC](#) newsreader Martyn Lewis suggested in a speech that we should have more good news stories on TV and in our newspapers to counter the depressing diet of traditional news. Lewis - who now claims he was

No news is good news, but is good news any kind of news at all? When seen on a journalistic screen our world

looks blasted by disease, disaster, terror, and economic turmoil. It's all there in close up on your smartphone, tablet, TV and newspaper, live and direct, all the time and wherever you go. What is this diet of fear and gloom doing to our journalism and the people who consume it?

Back in the early 1990s, even before this digital storm broke, the then BBC newsreader Martin Lewis suggested in a speech that we should have more good news stories on the TV and in our newspapers to counter the depressing diet of traditional news. He was lambasted by his journalistic peers who saw it as platitudinous, populist pap. Indeed, he now claims that the BBC even threatened him with the sack for speaking out against traditional journalism norms:

"My job was on the line. I thought – 'Here is an organization respected around the world, the bastion of democratic debate and argument and assumes the right – quite properly – to analyse and criticise every other sector in society, but they won't tolerate a public discussion about they operate their own news business and indeed the news business itself."

Recently there have been signs that 'digital native' news media are looking again for a more positive approach. They want to improve news journalism by reducing its pace and rediscovering its public purpose.

Sean Dagan Wood, editor of Positive News, a publication focused on 'solutions' accepts his is a niche publication but he hopes more news media would take the same direction:

"We are reaching peak negativity in the news...the overall story the media creates about how we are and how the world is no longer serving us and its increasingly at odds with our evolving sense of who we are, what works and what's possible. Positive news can be credible journalism, it complements the news ecology system as a whole."

And it's not just at the journalistic fringes that people are worried about gloomy news. The Daily Mail is one of the UK's most successful news operations in print and online. It is famous for its doom-laden headlines and fear-inducing narratives. But the Mail's highly-respected Deputy Editor Tony Gallagher, who also used to edit the Telegraph, accepts that scare stories don't always reflect reality:

"Crime is going down, But you wouldn't know that from looking at national media because we still cover the same number of crimes, the same number of murderous trials, so there is a danger that we are not reflecting the world."

Mainstream news media is fighting for your attention, not just with other news outlets, but with the more comfortable alternatives of kittens, listicles and Scandi crime boxsets. The citizen's relationship to news is changing and that is changing news. For example, research suggests that when online people prefer to share positive stories via social networks such as Facebook. So the Mail's Gallagher says it pays to vary the diet:

"We struggle very hard to find positive and uplifting stories because we're keenly aware that its a miserable and gloomy world out there and so we jump on things that are jolly, aspirational, partly because we're keen to ensure that people aren't terrified by the time they finish reading the paper."

The Mail is not alone. The BBC is also looking for ways to tell tough stories without people reaching for the off switch. Today Programme Editor Jamie Angus says it is a particular hard balance to strike with foreign news:

“There’s an element about the repetition of violence – covering extreme violence – in these foreign stories...desensitization and fatigue on a story you feel you’ve heard so many terrible things – as with Syria. And the story never changes, and the audience feel they have no sense of agency, no ability to change events in the region. Over time audiences start to tune out from the coverage”

However, the news-consuming public still seem to prefer their news bad. It could be because we are neurologically hard-wired to attend to threats and to pay attention to conflict. ‘Good news’ is dull and so at a time of economic crisis for journalism, you have to give the punter what they want. Don’t you? Tony Gallagher from the Mail thinks so:

“If we were to provide the readers with a diet of [positive news] then they would soon discover that’s a rather boring place to live...our news desk will see anything up to 2000 stories a day and fewer than 100 will get into the Mail and by their nature they will extraordinary...the news is gritty, it’s gloomy, it’s exciting, [the readers] want to be surprised by what they are reading..”

The online news site Huffington Post has gone further and set up a separate section of ‘good news’. It is full of sentimental animal stories such as “Woman Gives Her Dying Dog A bucket List Of A Lifetime” But Huffpost founder Arianna Huffington accepts that this is a crude way to rebalance news.

“The stories about dogs and kittens are the low hanging fruit. It’s really about the truth. If we don’t cover positive stories with the same relentlessness and resources that we cover the negative stories then we are giving readers a very jaundiced view of human nature. It’s changing. New technologies have changed the way people share stories and the stories they gravitate to. But journalists? They are the ones brought up to think that positive stories are ‘soft’ stories. We need to change the way we look at journalism.”

This debate goes to the heart of what news is and what it does in an age when technology is transforming the way we understand our world. It might just be possible that we can have our news cake and eat it. The same digital technology that allows news to be faster, universal, accessible instantly and very graphic also allows it to be deeper, diverse and more intelligent. The choice for the consumer if not the journalist, is not between good and bad news or even positive and negative. News can be informed and informing or crass, shallow and swift, but now it is all networked together. The last thing I want is less critical, less independent journalism. The choice is there for the journalists but it’s also there for consumers. Which do you want?

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[Here is a review of the programme](#) by Daily Telegraph radio critic Gillian Reynolds

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