

Why do we pay more attention to negative news than to positive news?

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A growing body of evidence illustrates the human tendency to prioritise negative over positive news content. But why is this? [Stuart Soroka](#) suggests that humans may neurologically or physiologically predisposed towards focusing on negative information because the potential costs of negative information far outweigh the potential benefits of positive information.

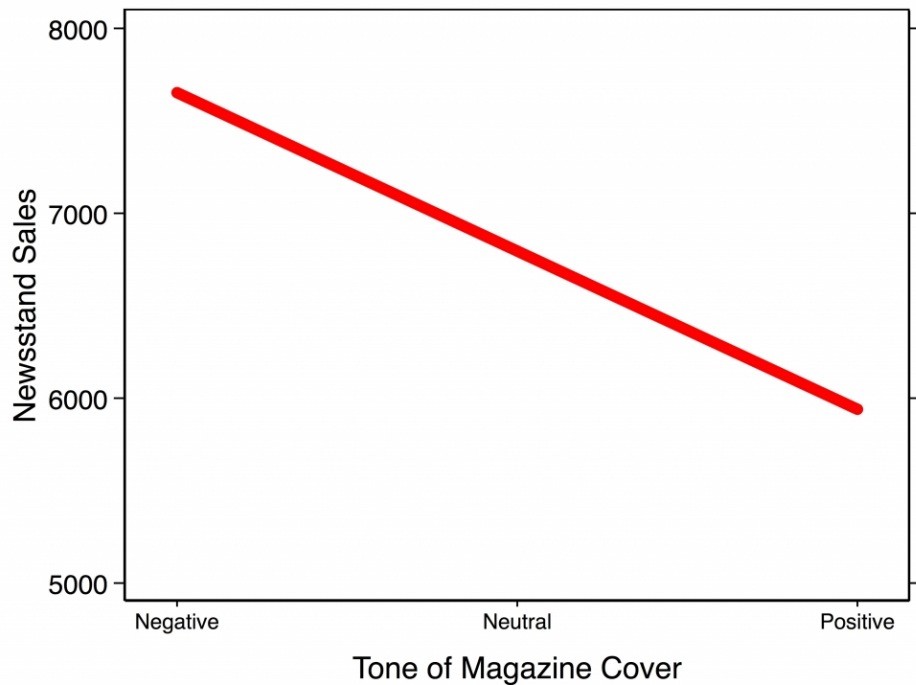


A recent [article](#) by Arianna Huffington argues for the importance – and popularity – of positive news. Huffington draws in part on [recent work](#) suggesting that positive stories are more likely to be shared on social networks. This trend in sharing, she suggests, provides evidence that the “if it bleeds, it leads” approach to gaining audiences is misguided. News readers, she argues, want more positive news content.

Sharing news content on social media is a fundamentally different thing from selecting and reading articles, however. (Indeed, the study on which Huffington relies recognises this.) Even as we may tend to forward positive material via social media, our news-reading habits may still prioritise negative information. There is after all a growing body of evidence illustrating the human tendency to prioritise negative over positive news content.

The behaviour of newspapers and programmes offers one obvious clue – news agencies seek audiences, after all, and experience (and sales) points towards the value of negative information. For instance, and as the figure below illustrates, newsstand magazine sales increase by roughly 30 per cent when the cover is negative rather than positive. It is no surprise, then, that a “good news day” resulted in a [66 per cent decrease](#) in readership in an online Russian newspaper. Indeed, other [research](#) suggests that even when participants say that they would like more positive news, they still select online news stories that are predominantly negative. Even as emails and Facebook feeds highlight good, our news consumption habits still prioritise information that is negative.

Figure 1: The relationship between the tone of magazine covers and sales



From *Negativity in Democratic Politics* (Cambridge University Press) and based on a multivariate regression model of Maclean's weekly newsstand sales figures, 2000-2009.

But *why* do we pay more attention to negative news than to positive news? Answering this question (at least in part) is the focus of “[News, Politics, and Negativity](#),” a paper that [Stephen McAdams](#) and I recently published in *Political Communication*. The paper draws on work in psychology, economics, and political communications to suggest that humans may neurologically or physiologically predisposed towards focusing on negative information. The argument has its roots in an evolutionary-biological account of how humans decide what to pay attention to. It is evolutionarily advantageous to prioritise negative information, the argument goes, because the potential costs of negative information far outweigh the potential benefits of positive information. The human brain is as a consequence predisposed towards focusing on negative information.

We cannot easily prove an evolutionary story, of course. But we can examine news viewers’ psychophysiological reactions to positive and negative news content. The aim of our recent paper was to do exactly this. The paper reports results from a lab experiment in which participants view a selection of real television news stories while we monitor a number of physiological indicators, including heart rate and skin conductance. Skin conductance captures the degree to which we are sweating, which changes constantly in very small ways, and which is often used as a measure of activation or arousal. Decreased heart rate is used as a measure of attentiveness.

Our findings suggest that negative network news content, in comparison with positive news content, tends to increase both arousal and attentiveness. In contrast, positive news content has an imperceptible impact on the physiological measures we focus on. Indeed, physiologically speaking, a positive news story is not very different from the gray screen we show participants between news stories.

Our study is one of the first to demonstrate this tendency using real television news content. It thus makes very clear the implications that a negativity bias in humans’ brains has for the nature of news content. (Not to mention the nature of political and economic behaviour more generally, discussed in more detail [here](#).) News content is predominantly negative because humans tend to be more attentive to negative information.

Whether this is a bad thing is, I believe, unclear. Focusing on negative information may be a perfectly reasonable way of managing a complex news environment. We typically need to change our behaviour, or our assessment of politicians, when something goes wrong, not when something goes right. So unless we have an unlimited amount of

time to pay attention to everything, we may be well-served by focusing on the information that requires a change on our part – provided that all that negativity does not also lead to overwhelming scepticism or disengagement, of course.

The difficulty is that we do not really know the ‘appropriate’ amount of negativity. Nor do we know if there are ways to adjust our negativity biases. This may be a good avenue for comparative research, and my ongoing work with [Patrick Fournier](#) and [Lilach Nir](#) is one of a growing of studies exploring the possibility that negativity biases vary systematically across cultures, and media systems. If negativity biases shift from one country to the next, we may be able to learn something about how communications and political contexts can increase or decrease our interest in negative over positive information.

Future work might also consider the implications that social media have on the tone of the news content that we receive. If we [increasingly receive news content through social media](#), and if social media users [tend to forward positive rather than negative information](#), then we might expect the tone of our ‘news stream’ (all the news we receive by traditional or non-traditional means) to become more positive overall. Whether this leads to a more informed or attentive electorate is another matter, however. We may be better informed about successful policy initiatives. We may alternatively lose (even more) interest in politics.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting. Featured image credit: [Jon S](#) CC BY 2.0

About the Author

Stuart Soroka is the Michael W. Traugott Collegiate Professor of Communication Studies and Political Science, and Faculty Associate in the Center for Political Studies at the Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. His work focuses on political communication, the sources and/or structure of public preferences for policy, and the relationships between public policy, public opinion, and mass media. His most recent book is [Negativity in Democratic Politics](#) (2014, Cambridge University Press).

