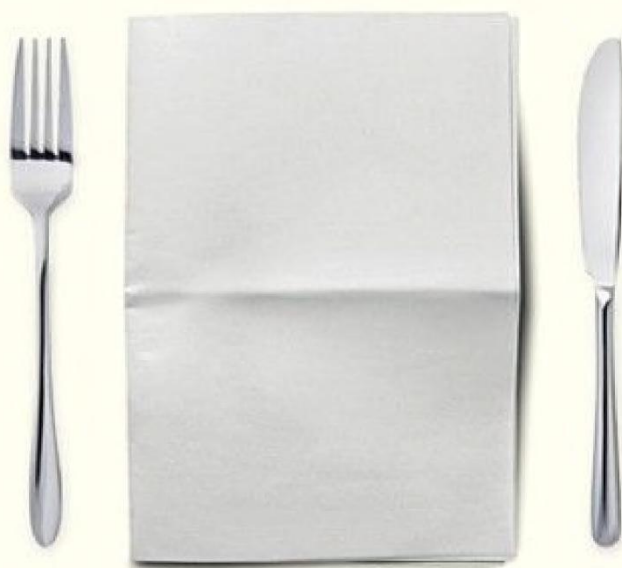


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YOU ARE WHAT YOU READ

**WHY CHANGING YOUR MEDIA DIET
CAN CHANGE THE WORLD**



JODIE JACKSON

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FOREWORD

There is no more important time than now to rethink news coverage and consumption. As a former journalist, I know better than to start this foreword with such an obvious statement. But what sounds obvious to you and me may not be so for many people. If you've picked up this book you know that there is a better way to stay informed about what's happening in the world or in your community without getting depressed. Perhaps you're looking for strategies or answers, or maybe you're in search of validation for some of the approaches you've adopted to protect your heart and mind amidst rampant negativity on the news. Whatever the reason, this brilliant book by Jodie Jackson is filled with insights and tools that will help you navigate the uncharted territory we've all found ourselves in.

Modern life calls for new operating instructions. These days our brains are being inundated with negative messages that have a direct effect on our well-being. A barrage of negative news increases our anxiety, makes us more fearful, and decreases our performance at work and in school. Depression rates have skyrocketed over the past few decades, and new research finds that eight-year-olds attempting suicide has *doubled* in recent years. These are just some of the heartbreaking indicators that something is very wrong. At the centre of this broken picture is the media – perpetuating a damaging and misguided view of our world and ourselves.

During the Great Recession in America, I saw first-hand how powerful it can be to shift the focus of news coverage and witnessed the impact this has on improving the trajectory of people's lives. I was anchoring two national news programmes in the United States at CBS News, and like other news organisations, we packed our show with heart-

wrenching stories of all that was broken in this world. It was no surprise that this came at the same time we saw an overall decline in viewership as people turned away from these depressing newscasts.

At the height of the recession, my producers and I decided to try something novel – an experiment of sorts. Instead of merely showcasing people losing their homes, jobs and retirement savings, we decided to dedicate one week of programming to focus on what people in those situations could do about it. Experts shared actionable strategies to help people avoid financial pitfalls and rebuild their lives. ‘Happy Week’ got the greatest viewer response of the year, as people shared beautiful stories of how they had used the tools. Focusing on solutions inspired people to take meaningful action.

The lens through which we view the world changes how we operate in it. If we believe the world is dangerous and failing, we hide in our homes and think happiness and success are zero-sum. If we can have a clear understanding of the challenges we face and at the same time maintain a belief that our behaviour matters, we know that the problem is just the start of the story.

Jodie Jackson is the ideal expert to guide us to a better reality. I have learned so much from her, and I know you will too. Jodie and I met during our early years as researchers – both investigating the impact of our news diet on well-being and performance. As a quantitative researcher crunching numbers and looking for trends in the data, I was inspired by Jodie’s qualitative approach, which hit straight to the emotional core. Through her work, she showed me the psychological implications of solutions journalism and taught me so much about how the news affects real people. We’ve since collaborated on studies together, along with the Solutions Journalism Network, and additionally we’ve become friends.

And it was as friends that this work became even more

meaningful. We witnessed each other becoming mothers, and we talked not just about the world we wish to create for our children, but the world we wish our children could see exists right now. We want them to always have a resilient mindset that is solutions-focused when challenges strike, and see the potential for positive change in every moment.

And it's because of this wish, not just for our children but for us all, that I am so grateful to you for reading this book. As you'll quickly see when you dive into *You Are What You Read*, this is not merely a book, it is a manifesto for a movement. It is only together, with you, that we can create a great shift in this world away from negativity and stress, to a planet full of people that believe our behaviour matters when it comes to fixing the problems in this world. Every positive step you take to transform your relationship with the news, and every conversation you have about that with others, sparks a positive ripple effect that will transform your family, community and the world for the better.

Michelle Gielan, researcher and bestselling author of
Broadcasting Happiness

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

In 2011, I got to the point where I could not bear to hear another news story. I would switch radio stations as soon as I heard the beeps introducing the news bulletin. They sounded to me like alarm bells, warning me that something awful was coming. Some people labelled my decision not to listen to the news as naïve, weak, ignorant or simply extreme. This reaction that others had towards me made me feel that I must be damaged in some way, that there was something in me that was not strong enough or brave enough to see the world in all of its ugly existence.

But in fact I did not – and do not – see the world as ugly. My experience of the world is that it is a remarkable and complex place, filled with adventure, imagination and kindness as well as cruelty, suffering and injustice. I could understand that the world had its flaws but I did not and could not agree with the picture that I was being given by reading the news. I came to realise it was not me but the news industry that was damaged.

I didn't always feel so strongly; it was a gradual progression that moved me from being someone who watched the news daily, almost obsessively, to someone who could no longer stand it.

I wrote this book because I have grown tired of reading so many inflammatory headlines charged with opinion rather than fact, emotion rather than reason, and designed to bolster conflict rather than aid resolution. I began to get passionate when other people did not understand my frustration with the news's unrelenting focus on the negative. Instead, they would jump to its defence with the unfulfilling argument that 'the news is the way it is' and no real insight into *why* these are the only stories we are told about.

The fact that people were not questioning the news made me want to dig deeper. I started asking questions like, why is there a massive preference for negative news? For what purpose do journalists report corruption and scandal? Is it just to hold those people to account, or does it become a deterrent for others? Why do journalists report on war crimes? Is it to put pressure on those violating human rights to seek more legitimate means of conduct? Or are they just reporting what they see without intentional consequence? Does the media create or reflect opinion? Is the media a commercial enterprise that is led by profitability, or a noble one led by integrity? Does it report news that is in the interest of the public, or in the interest of its own success? What are the consequences of reporting such a negative picture of the world?

What I have found is that many news organisations are aggressively protective of their product. If you question the integrity of the news stories that are produced, you are often beaten back by the noble principles that underpin them. These principles are built on the idea that problems grow in the dark but shrink in the light – that it is the responsibility of the journalists to shine a light on the world's ills; expose them in order to put them on the public agenda and help them disappear.

The depressing thing is that those that report from a place of nobility are scarce in the current media environment and poor-quality journalism has overtaken good-quality journalism. Instead, many journalists are forced to report whatever will generate profit, governed by audience-engagement targets, advertising revenue and reach. Because of its cheap production costs and entertaining nature, poor-quality journalism is thriving in news organisations – something that benefits their bottom line but hurts us both psychologically and socially. We are told a manufactured and manipulated version of the truth. Sometimes it is not the truth at all.

I found this deeply worrying; the information we consume through the news becomes our basis for understanding the world. This then creates a filter through which we see things and influences how we feel, talk about and respond to global, local and even personal challenges. The overwhelmingly negative and sensationalised information I was getting from the news appeared excessively confrontational in its tone and it made me feel like the world was going down the drain and there was nothing I could do about it, except for switch off from it all together. This worried me further. Despite being motivated to stay informed about world affairs, I was becoming increasingly attracted to the idea of ignorance being bliss. It made me wonder: how many others felt the same?

But I also asked: what would it take to keep me informed in a way that engaged me? It was by asking this additional question that led me to find what is now known as solutions journalism. Solutions journalism typically includes news reports on innovation, initiative, peace-building progress and responses to social problems. One of the biggest misconceptions of this kind of news is that solutions-focused stories are inconsequential, light-hearted, uplifting fluff that bring about little, if any, impact on the world. People often misunderstand the term entirely and greet the advocacy of the greater inclusion of solutions-focused news reporting with comments like, 'No one cares if kittens are saved from trees.' I hope this raises a mild smile in those of you who would have once said, or maybe still say, the same thing.

The truth is, solutions stories do have a significant impact and help create a more complete and accurate narrative about the world in which we live. We will challenge some of the common misconceptions as well as look at the powerful potential of solutions-focused news in more depth later. We will be delving into the decades of research and evidence available to demonstrate the importance and power of solutions. We should remind ourselves that the research

often reflects the collective and common experience of individual people. I have found it enormously encouraging to learn that my experience of the news is not just an individual one, but a collective one too.

Before I became aware of all of this, I discovered solutions-focused news almost accidentally by rejecting my most immediate desire to switch off. Instead of choosing ignorance, I decided to learn *more* about the world beyond the media's representation of it. I started searching for stories of people, groups and organisations who were attempting to solve some of the biggest problems and challenges that we face; I was inspired by the initiatives, advancements and solutions being implemented to creatively tackle these problems that we are so well informed on. I was introduced to courageous examples of resilience and progress in the face of adversity with stories such as investigating the approaches to the eradication of child labour; advances in treatment for the common cause of blindness; methods of deradicalisation for those in extremist groups; and initiatives to clean up the ocean.

This helped me feel more connected to the news and, more importantly, more connected to society and my potential within it. I stopped feeling so helpless and hopeless about the state of the world. I was able to fully recognise that the world had enormous challenges and problems, which worried and somewhat angered me, but I no longer felt paralysed or overwhelmed by these feelings. By having a more rounded narrative in my media diet that included a healthy balance of problems and solutions, I instead felt energised – I felt able to do something to help improve things, as well as a strong desire to want to. I transformed from being a passive observer of the world to becoming an active participant in it. Having experienced such a noticeable change in myself from changing my media diet, I wanted to investigate this on a bigger scale. I dived head first into as much media research as I could find over the last century. I got a master's degree in

positive psychology to better understand concepts like hope and optimism, I became a partner in the Constructive Journalism Project and have spoken globally about the impact of the news on our mental health and social functioning.

What began as anxiety born of hearing so many stories of violence, terror, disaster and corruption had transformed into something else. On the one hand, I felt inspired, energised and empowered by learning about solutions that people were coming up with to address these problems. On the other hand, I felt anger at the news organisations that had given me a false impression of the world. It's not that the problems they report do not exist – they do. But these are not the only stories of humanity that are available. Furthermore, by reporting on problems without reporting progress alongside it, it creates a lack of context, an imbalance and an excess where negative news reporting has moved from being helpful to becoming harmful. The hypocrisy seemed absurd to me: news organisations that pride themselves on shining a light on the world's ills have actually been contributing to those ills as no one is shining a light on them.

So who holds the media to account? Simple: we do! The media is a profit-seeking industry, which means that we hold them to account by the choices we make as consumers. It is time that we start making choices that can change the media and potentially the world.

This book brings the psychological impact of the news out of the shadows and shines a bright light on the consequences of reading endlessly negative news. This knowledge can be used to adjust your relationship with the news. If you are someone who no longer reads the mainstream news because you find it too depressing, this book should help you establish a better relationship with it. If you are someone that enjoys reading the mainstream news and think it's important to know what is going on in the world, then this book will not take that away from you. Instead, you may well find you gain a deeper understanding of the effect the news has on you,

why you enjoy it and why there is still so much more to be gained.

Jodie Jackson, December 2018

INTRODUCTION

We are all familiar with the saying ‘you are what you eat’: a simple but effective summary that has made us increasingly aware of the impact that food has on our physical health. We have learned that the consequences of excessive consumption of junk food include obesity, diabetes and heart disease. As a result of this acquired knowledge, we are equipped to move from being consumers to becoming *conscious* consumers. We are able to reason past our immediate desire to satisfy cravings in the short term and reduce junk food from our diet, while at the same time include foods such as fruit, vegetables and wholegrain in our diet, which will lead to long-term benefits.

Well, food is to the body what information is to the mind. The information that we imbibe will turn into emotions, thoughts, actions and behaviours. The consequences are less visible but just as potent. The news is one of the most powerful and most negative streams of information we inescapably consume. Watching the news affects our mood, our beliefs, our understanding of the world, our relationship to other people and our politics, but its impact remains largely unquestioned by the consumers who are affected by its content.

It is time we turn the investigative lens on the news industry to expose the effects of the negativity bias in the news on our mental health and on the health of our democracy and our society. This book investigates what steps you can take to help you navigate your way through the news to be able to take greater control of your mind, world view and psychological well-being. But the real power lies not in asking *how* we can change, but by asking *why* we should change. This is at the heart of behavioural change: those who

know the why of anything will always find the how.

So let us begin by briefly looking at why we should be more critical of the way we consume the news and why we should perhaps be more proactive in our use of it. We all imagine that we create our own beliefs and opinions about what we read in the news. In reality, many of these beliefs and opinions are created for us, depending on where we have learned about the issue being reported. We all have a paper we enjoy reading, a programme we enjoy watching – but more to the point, who has the time to cross-reference each news story to gain different perspectives and analyse all the information to be able to draw our own conclusion? In our fast-paced daily lives, this kind of news consumption fits in well: we like to ‘know’ what is going on in the world so we are not caught off guard for being ignorant, and one source is more than enough at any given time for most people to feel they have a sense of what is going on.

With this in mind, I would like to ask you when was the last time you went on a personal journey to find out more about a story you were introduced to in the news? Have you spared any additional effort to understand the behind-the-scenes mechanics of a story? Have you ever been curious about a story you heard five months ago and followed up on its progress (or demise)? These questions are not designed to shame you into racking up hours on Google. Instead, I want to highlight how much of the information we retain has been *fed* to us rather than researched and concluded ourselves.

I use the word *fed* because of the somewhat inescapable nature of the news. Its presence is so well established that it has become a natural part of our democratic lives. It is a sizeable force that, in theory, helps society work together by informing citizens on national and international affairs, thus enabling people to act on this information. Its most prestigious purpose is holding power to account to ensure that corruption, exploitation and abuses of power are kept at bay. It is so well stitched into the fabric of our society that we

can find ourselves (to varying degrees) forming opinions without really knowing *why* we think what we think. This is because the news is an invisible but powerful influence on our thoughts, telling us not only *what* to think about (by deciding what is reported) but also *how* to think about it (through news frames and organisational bias). Because we habitually mimic the views of the news we watch or read, these stories shape our knowledge, beliefs and opinions.

To better understand the effects of the news, let us first look at how the media decides what news to share with us. This decision is down to the editor as there are thousands of events happening daily, of which only a select few are considered 'newsworthy'. It may not surprise you to know that most stories considered newsworthy focus on war, corruption, scandal, murder, famine and natural disasters.¹ As they say in the industry, 'If it bleeds, it leads.'² As this limited (albeit important) selection of stories fills our papers, televisions and social media, it also fills our vision of the world and its state of affairs. We are served a narrow view of the world that is enlarged to appear as if it's the whole picture.

This gloomy and commercially driven image gives us a significantly skewed perception of the world we live in. To test your own beliefs, answer the question: in the last twenty years, has global poverty:

- doubled remained the same fallen by half

The answer is that it has fallen by half. If you got this answer correct, you would be amongst only 7 per cent of the thousands of people who took this survey, who optimistically said the same. The remaining 93 per cent believed it had either remained the same or doubled.³ This statistic highlights a kind of ignorance that comes not from being *uninformed* but from being *ill-informed*. This is because if people were uninformed, they would have no knowledge

about global poverty, and their answers would have simply been guesswork. In this case, you could expect that a significantly higher percentage would have selected the correct answer. However, it is through being educated incorrectly on this issue that has led so many people to dismiss the idea that things may have improved. We are exposed to so much bad news in our modern media diet, we would not be fools to believe the world is in a state of decline.

Now would be a good time to highlight that the world has actually been moving in the opposite direction to that which the headlines would have you believe. Not only are people (globally speaking) more prosperous than in generations past, we have better health, better technology, better sanitation, less child mortality, higher IQs, fewer homicides and fewer wars than in any other period in history. The only type of violence that appears to be growing is terrorism – and even this threat, while tragic, aggressive and real, is still enormously overestimated. The average European is seven times more likely to die from falling down the stairs than be killed from a terrorist attack.⁴

Stories of progress, however, do not list highly on the news agenda, so we hear about them much less often than stories of failure. This imbalanced reporting gives us an imbalanced understanding of the world, leading us to pessimistically perceive it to be worse than it actually is. And this pessimism has consequences that extend into the political arena, where leaders may prey on our fear of decline and promise a restoration of the ‘good old days’. This was demonstrated recently with the election of President Trump – an enormous 81 per cent of his supporters believe that life has grown worse in the last fifty years, whereas if we look at the evidence, rather than the news, we can see that Americans today have a comparative advantage with higher incomes, lower infant mortality, higher life expectancy and more college degrees than their predecessors.⁵

I have spoken to many people over the years about the

consequences of the news and the distorted and potentially damaging thought process the negativity bias creates in us. I am always amazed by how many people verge on offence when I suggest that the media is too negative and that we would benefit from having more solutions-focused stories in the news. The resistance is in relation to what they perceive news to be – and it isn't good. This is because the negativity bias is so well established as the norm.

Negativity was not always at the heart of what the news is supposed to be. There is no precise definition of the news; however, there seems to be a common offering among the available descriptions: news is considered to be the publishing of new and notable information through public broadcasts with the purpose of engaging and informing citizens⁶ in a way that empowers them to be able to act on the information presented.⁷ The American Press Institute embraces this by defining the ultimate role of the news is to 'empower the informed'.⁸ There is nothing in either definition that requires negativity to prevail. But the reality is that these news ideals are not always met. With sensationalised stories, misleading headlines and inflammatory content, much of today's news actually *disempowers* the *uninformed*. To understand this better, we must burrow into the field of psychology to learn how the news alters our perception of the world and our subsequent beliefs about it.

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PERCEPTION IS EVERYTHING

What the eyes see and the ears hear, the mind believes.

— Harry Houdini

The news acts as our eyes and our ears, with its reporters scouring the land to bring back stories – stories we rely on to help us make sense of the world we live in. But the stories they most often bring back focus on war, corruption, scandal, murder, famine and natural disasters. This creates a perception of the world that does not necessarily reflect reality.

When we open our eyes, we assume that what is in front of us is reality. In fact, it is not that simple. The reality I see through my eyes may be different to the reality you see through yours – even though we may be experiencing the same event. This is what we know as perception.

The simplest distinction between perception and reality is that reality is something that exists *objectively* and is untouched by human experience, whereas perception is an individual's *interpretation* of that reality, or how we *think* about a situation. From this distinction, we can see that reality's trademark feature is that it has an objective truth. Journalists will tell you this is their trademark feature too, and that they report objectively as an invisible middle man, to portray reality, untouched, to their audience. However, objectivity in the newsroom is an illusion. It exists to the extent that journalists will (hopefully) ground their stories in verifiable facts; however, the presentation of these facts is open to interpretation. This is because as soon as anyone tries to retell reality it becomes coloured in some way by their perception and moves from being objective to subjective.

It is not just *how* stories are reported that undermines a journalist's objectivity but also *what* is being reported. The very selection of what to report interferes with a journalist's chance to be truly objective, as they, and/or their editors, make an editorial *decision* to magnify stories they deem to be important and ignore or minimise stories they consider to be unimportant. How can you be neutral when you have made a decision about what is newsworthy and what is not? A journalist reading this might interject to say that this is not about personal preference but instead about the fact that the exposure a story receives will be weighted on perceived importance. That word *importance* is a grey area – what is it that is considered to be important? Are the stories prioritised for the pursuit of social enlightenment? Global impact? Audience engagement? Profitability? This may not be entirely clear. Because of the commercial environment of the news, the incentive of journalists can be misaligned with the more idealistic aims of journalism. In these cases, how can it be possible for them to make truly objective decisions about what stories to cover?

This critical observation is not made for the sake of being difficult or disrespectful. I recognise and understand that the news is an incredibly valuable institution, with objectivity being a founding cornerstone. It is possible to acknowledge and support the ideals of the news industry – impartiality, verification of facts, the presentation of a variety of perspectives, emotional detachment and objectivity – while also recognising its limitations. And in some cases these ideals are not what is driving a news story and they are more than compromised: they are disregarded altogether. As a result, some of the journalism we see today contradicts many of these; it does express editorial bias, the facts may not have been verified, it may use emotive and judgemental language, and can

sometimes have a narrow-minded and even bigoted narrative. Under this review, it is clear that objectivity is perhaps just an ideal rather than a reality. However, because objectivity is considered to be such a large part of the foundation upon which journalism was built, it is difficult to see things as they are, not as they ought to be.

Ironically, seeing things as they are, not how they should be, underpins the principles of objectivity. Our inability or unwillingness to acknowledge that objectivity may not exist echoes the sentiment of the emperor's new clothes.

For those of you not familiar with the tale, this emperor loved the finest clothes; his very identity was defined by his innate sense of fashion and style. He was governed by his desire to be admired by all those that laid eyes upon him. One day, two con men introduced themselves to him, claiming to be the best weavers imaginable. They boasted about their ability to make the finest clothes; clothes fit only for an emperor. They told him that these clothes would be so intricate and so fine that they would seem almost invisible. Only the cleverest of people could see them as they were too magnificent to be seen by stupid or ignorant people. Dazzled by their impression, the emperor paid these men an enormous amount of money to make him an outfit for a great procession, to showcase his wonderful garments to the world. The weavers set to work sewing pretend thread through invisible needles to give the impression they were making what they had promised. When the emperor's men went to check on the progress of this glorious outfit just days before it was due to be worn, they were shocked to find no such outfit. Instead, they saw nothing. The cunning weavers warned the men that if they saw nothing, it was because they were stupid and unworthy. So the men gasped in awe, lying to the weavers about the exquisiteness of their work and communicating their incredible progress back to the emperor.

On the day of the procession, the emperor found himself in a similar position; not wanting to appear foolish or stupid, he too clapped his hands together in admiration for the stunning outfit he would get to wear in front of his people. The emperor paraded around wearing nothing at all but his pride, and everyone in the kingdom, following the same desire to appear intellectual enough to see beyond the nakedness of the truth, pretended to see the magnificent outfit in all its imaginary glory. Finally, a child, free from the social pressure to be considered intellectual, pointed out the obvious: 'He doesn't have anything on!' It didn't take long before others were able to admit that they too saw nothing, and finally the emperor was exposed as having been so full of pride that he had looked beyond the most obvious conclusion and was dressed in nothing but denial.

This story mirrors the sentiment of objectivity in every newsroom. People have said 'the news is objective' so often that they believe it to be true. Those of us who see objectivity to not exist are considered too stupid to understand its application or quite simply wrong by many people in the industry. However, those who blindly defend objectivity based on the conventional wisdom of journalistic principles are perhaps ignoring the most obvious conclusion that it does not exist.

This lack of objectivity is not a failing of journalists; it is a feature of our species rather than a feature of their profession. It is not 'the media' that objectively reports the facts of the news but people who present these facts in a structured way to tell a *story* using the five important Ws: what, when, where, who and why. In fact, the news media is one of the biggest storytelling industries outside of Hollywood.

These stories have a powerful capability to connect us to the rest of the world by bringing the distant near and making what is unknown and different understandable and familiar. The news helps us to become aware of events happening globally that we are not able to experience first-hand. These stories also help us make sense of events that we *do* experience, providing information and analysis about the wider context in which they have occurred.

This is of huge benefit to us; before mass communication, we only knew of a world that we experienced with our own senses. To learn of the world beyond this, our tribal ancestors

would rely on watchmen who would stand on the hills ahead and report back to the tribe. In our more modern environment, the news has allowed us to have an abundance of watchmen on an unprecedented number of hills with the power to speak to a multitude of tribes about the world beyond our borders.

These stories about reality beyond our borders form the basis of our perception of the wider world and its state of affairs. We are sometimes so convinced by them that we retell them as if we had seen them with our own eyes. This is because the way information is processed in our minds makes us unable to distinguish between media and non-media inputs.¹ This means that a media narrative can become the functional equivalent to personal experience, creating memories, shaping knowledge and founding beliefs in the same way as other genuine experiences in our lives.²

In his book *Public Opinion*, Walter Lippmann eloquently captures how the media influences our perception of the world when he says, 'The only feeling that anyone can have about an event he does not experience is the feeling aroused by his mental image of that event.'³ Because most of the stories we hear about in the news are not ones that we experience first-hand, we depend on the media to inform us on them and essentially construct this 'reality' for us. In theory, members of the news media are supposed to suppress their human tendency for personal bias in order to report reality accurately and objectively. As mentioned previously, this is deemed to be the most important guiding principle in the profession. The well-known US broadcaster Edward R. Murrow was in support of this when he famously said that the news 'must hold a mirror behind the nation and the world' and that, more importantly, 'the mirror must have no curves and must be held with a steady hand'.⁴ In practice, however, the mirror that is being held has all sorts of subtle curves and a fair few not-so-subtle dents.

There are two reasons for this: the first is our individual bias and the second is the industry preference.

On an individual level, as I've already mentioned, we must remember that *people* report the news. No matter what professional guidelines are put in place, news reporters are not exempt from the rapid and involuntary psychological processes of perception. This subtle and sometimes unconscious influence can lead stories to become 'curved' with opinion, selective attention and emotional language that colours the reality and the facts. This manipulation does not just happen once – it can happen many times over, because a story is not just told by one person. Although it may be reported by one person initially, it then travels through a network of people, known as gatekeepers, before we receive it.

One of the first to identify the existence of gates and gatekeepers along information channels was psychologist Kurt Lewin. He identified that there are points along the communication channel where decisions are made about what stays in and what gets left out. The people who have the power to operate these gates become crucial in the flow of information.

The gatekeepers within mass media news channels can easily be identified:

1. The person or people who see the news happen – they see this event selectively; some things are noticed and some are not.
2. The reporter who talks to the initial source(s). They decide which facts to pass along, how to shape the story and which parts to emphasise.
3. The editor, who receives the story and decides to cut, add, change or leave as is.
4. The aggregated broadcast channels. Some news stories make it to the big screen; completed and submitted by editors, these news stories are now at the mercy of the broadcaster, who decides which ones to show on the national news channel.
5. If the story goes overseas, further gatekeepers will decide if it is worthy of their time, regardless of whether it is broadcast or print.

The more gatekeepers a story passes through, the more we will hear about it, magnifying its perceived importance.⁵ These ‘important’ issues, fed to us through the news, determine what we think about and lay the foundations for what we discuss socially, whether that’s on social media or at a dinner party, as well as influencing the focal point for our national narrative,⁶ further amplifying their reach. It works the opposite way too, with stories considered to be unimportant left off the news agenda, leaving us unaware of their existence. This magnification and minimisation creates curves in the theoretical mirror which distorts our perception of reality. Once the story is selected, the way that it is reported will often influence how we then feel about the issue. The idea that the news tells us not only *what* to think about but *how* to think about it will set in motion the national narrative and a shared feeling on an issue. In sociology, this phenomenon is known as agenda-setting theory.

In some ways, this selection is necessary, as we do not need to know every little detail of the thousands of daily events that take place globally. However, by selectively reporting on mostly negative events, we come to perceive the world through a troubled lens and have a distorted understanding of reality. This distorted understanding, rather than reality itself, can then determine public opinion. And widespread public opinion can then put pressure on governments to address a local, national or global concern and can become the basis for legislative action.

For example, in the US, crime news tripled between 1992 and 1993, and by 1994 it was actually more dominant than news about the economy, healthcare reform and midterm elections combined.⁷ This created a perception that crime was increasing and had an enormous impact on public opinion. Before 1992, only 8 per cent of people considered crime to be the nation’s most important issue, but the increase in crime reporting saw this figure jump to 39 per cent in 1994.⁸ This is because the mind tricks us into thinking that the more we hear about something, the more prevalent it is. In psychology, this is known as the availability theory. The rise in concern about crime was built on people’s perception of reality, not the reality itself. In fact, statistics from the justice department showed that crime had either remained the same in some crime categories and had been dropping in others over this period.⁹ Despite these hard facts, the perceived increase in crime became a hot topic of discussion and put pressure on the government, leading them to create more prisons at a faster rate than ever in their history. Just six years later, the US had more people behind bars than any other country.¹⁰ Prison sentencing had become so rife that in 2001, the US had between five and eight times more people behind bars than Canada and most Western European countries.¹¹

As highlighted by ‘agenda-setting theory’, the news does more than simply tell us what to think about – it also tells us *how* to think about an issue by the way in which information is presented, using framing techniques and news angles. Framing can direct readers’ attention towards certain aspects of a story, while drawing it away from other parts of it. Different frames are suggested to stimulate different emotional responses¹² and it can create a confusing narrative when two organisations present the same facts differently. Although framing techniques may not alter the facts of reality, they can allow journalists to be flexible with how they interpret these facts, where to place the focus and how to explain it for the sake of creating a ‘good’ story.

I was subject to framing myself as I began my venture into the world of solutions-focused news. I had created a website called What a Good Week, which was an aggregation of what I considered to be ‘good news’ news stories. My efforts were picked up by a morning news programme in 2012, who wanted to invite me to do an interview on their morning show. I was so excited! I thought this would be a brilliant platform to talk about the negativity bias in the media.

When they asked me how my website came to be, I told them quite simply that there appeared to be a negativity bias in the media and that I was trying to do something to create better balance – not as a replacement for the mainstream news narrative, but to add to it. My contact at the news programme asked if we could create a bit more of a backstory; they asked me if I could say that my friends and I had all become depressed by the news, so I would send them good news articles to cheer them up and they then sent them on and thus created an underground network of good news that had just surfaced publicly. This, of course, was not the truth of how the site started. The story was given to me and was framed in a way that would appear as if the website launch was the tip of the iceberg that had only just surfaced but that there was a weighty network beneath it pushing it to the surface. I was not comfortable embellishing so much live on air and wanted to stick with the truth. The trouble is, my truthful story was not as sexy as the jazzed-up version, and so it never made it to air.

To a greater or lesser extent, all news stories are constructed. To communicate to an audience in a way that is engaging to them, the industry has to turn the raw data of reality into a narrative. Erving Goffman, arguably one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, called this the ‘schemata of interpretation’, which is a framework used to transform meaningless information into something meaningful.¹³ This is done through the choice of words and images used to tell the story, the phrases used to describe significant aspects and the presentation style that cascades through the entire tale.¹⁴ We may accept that this packaging up of the truth into something palatable and entertaining is just part and parcel of the profession. However, if ‘truth’ is the product we are being sold, we must be aware that there is a certain craftsmanship to the construction of a story that perhaps filters and frames reality before it reaches us.

Truth is a delicate and precious asset to news organisations; how close they stick to it will determine how much we come to trust the media. Unfortunately, at the moment trust in the media is at an all-time low, with only 43 per cent of people in the UK trusting the news in 2017.¹⁵ One of the main reasons for this distrust is the embellished nature of the news, the way the truth is altered or disregarded altogether for the sake of telling a good story (we will look at this in more detail in the next chapter). Another reason for our distrust is that their quest for drama forces news organisations to focus on the failings of the world. This kind of problem-driven focus gives the reader only one half of the story and creates an incomplete and often dire picture. In order to create a more truthful account that is better bound to objective reality, we should be presented with the whole picture. The media industry should widen its focus to include stories of strength as it does weakness, on successes as it does failures, on human excellence as it does human corruption and scandal, on solutions as it does problems, and on progress as it does recession.

So at this stage, perhaps take a moment for reflection and ask yourself: when you think about the way in which you see the world, how much of that vision has been media-led? We can then follow up with the questions: How are we being led to perceive the world? What stories are being reported on? What stories are we *not* hearing about? It is this last question that I am most concerned about.

As Houdini famously said, ‘What the eyes see and the ears hear, the mind believes.’ In contrast to this, what the eyes don’t see and the ears don’t hear, our mind will never know; you cannot see what you have not been shown. You cannot hear what you have not been told. You cannot understand what has not been explained, and you cannot know what is happening in parts of the world that have been left off the news agenda. While I am not reducing the news to merely an informational illusion, it is important to note that we are presented with a *version* of reality that is created to sell newspapers. It is up to us to remain vigilant in our own personal search for the truth, including both problems and solutions, actively seeking our news rather than passively accepting only what is put in front of us. It is

important that we pick our sources of news carefully and deliberately to remain informed about the world.

Notes

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MISREAD OR MISLED

If you don't read the newspaper, you're uninformed. If you read the newspaper, you're misinformed.

— Mark Twain

News is often tweaked by the media in order to appeal to its audience base, attract new readers or make its stories more palatable and more exciting than the versions told by other news organisations. The problem with manipulating the truth for commercial reasons is that it stops us being truly informed on the issues.

Early in 2017 I experienced the wonderful joy of having my first child, a smiley little girl we called Ariana. Not long after she was born, I was sitting with my mother-in-law, Eva, who told me she worried for Ariana and the world that she is going to have to grow up in. 'It is so much more dangerous than when I was young,' she said.

Let's just take a moment to reflect on that. Eva was a little girl in 1945 – she was born into a world war. Not only that, but since then, globally speaking, we have become more prosperous, have better health, better technology, better sanitation, higher IQs, less child mortality, fewer deaths from conflict, fewer homicides and have seen a reduction in overall crime figures. With all of this progress, how could it be that Eva would think that the world is more dangerous now than it was seventy years ago?

Eva's belief that the world is more dangerous than it used to be does not lie in statistics and facts but in stories she hears about the world; it is a belief created from her perception of the world. Eva watches the news regularly and stays abreast of current affairs so this distorted belief that the world is in a state of decline is not an uninformed belief, it is an *ill*-informed one – and an incredibly common one at that. This is because the stories Eva hears about the world tend to focus on things like terrorism, school shootings, stabbings, government corruption, kidnapping, economic decline and international war. Not only are these news cycles repetitive, but they can also be somewhat exaggerated.

'1 in 5 Brit Muslims' Sympathy for Jihadis'. That was the headline run by the *Sun* in November 2015. The article, written after the Paris ISIS attack, claimed that 'nearly one in five British Muslims has some sympathy with those who had fled the UK to fight for ISIS in Syria.' The story was accompanied by an intimidating and chilling picture of the infamous British militant 'Jihadi John' holding a knife. After receiving over 3,000 complaints, the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO) judged that the newspaper was in breach of the accuracy clause in the Editors' Code of Practice and the *Sun* was forced to admit that this story was 'significantly misleading'. The reason it was deemed 'significantly misleading' was because of the way in which the results were interpreted and because when they were conducting the survey about sympathy, they never actually mentioned ISIS. Notably, the news organisation published the IPSO adjudication on page two, rather than giving it the same centre spot of the original story.

This kind of tampering with the truth is by no means exceptional. News stories are often 'tweaked' by the media for one of three reasons:

1. To appeal to their audience base
2. To attract new readers
3. To make their stories more palatable and more exciting than the versions told by others.

The problem with manipulating the truth for this kind of commercial reckoning is that it interferes with us being accurately informed on an issue. A good, albeit controversial, example of the impact this spinning of the truth can have is the recent referendum concerning whether or not the UK should leave the EU. 'Brexit' caused considerable controversy in 2016 and forced us to look at the news and the influence that it has on the way that people participate in a democracy. The news media was effective in its appeal to engage us, but it did little to help inform us about the choice we were being asked to make. It was much more about the people than the policy, full of 'he said, she said' stories that were fast-paced, emotionally charged and filled with preferential bias and distorted facts for the sake of a quick and enticing story.

The top four UK news organisations in terms of readership – the *Daily Mail*, the *Sun*, the *Mirror* and the *Telegraph*, with a combined

readership of 110.6 million readers a month – had an obvious pro-Leave bias.¹ Their persuasive position was not based on objectively reporting facts but on manipulating them for their own political agenda. They supported the unsubstantiated claims of the Leave campaign regarding exit negotiations, trade opportunities, border control and funding of public services. This campaign arguably abandoned the facts, deeming them unnecessary. Michael Gove, politician and former Secretary of State for the Conservative Party, infamously justified this sentiment by saying that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’. Instead, they created a feeling of patriotic grandeur, an exciting sense of possibility and change, and urged us to value what we *felt* more than what we knew. They made this feeling as tangible, if not more so, than the facts. It almost seemed as if the facts were open to interpretation and so were less stable than this feeling of excitement, possibility and entitlement created by the pro-Leave campaign.

Research conducted shortly after the referendum was held suggested that over a million Leave voters regret their decision because they feel they were deceived by the Leave campaign.²

It is possible to make the case that it was the politicians who made unsupported claims about the benefits that leaving the EU would bring about. However, it was the news organisations that did not properly hold them to account. Although I may be showing my bias (as mentioned before, it is quite difficult not to), the purpose of this example is not to debate whether or not this was the right decision; time will be the best educator on this. It is simply to demonstrate a point that the quality of robust reporting on this issue from the most-read newspapers in the UK was biased and misleading. It is unfair to blanket all journalists under this criticism, as there was some excellent journalism that was produced with the aim of helping us understand the implications of Brexit, but as a consumer it was difficult to separate the soap opera from the substance. As a result, we had an ill-informed electorate making one of the biggest decisions in our recent history.

Here are a few examples of the most fabricated tales at the time:

REPORT SHOWS THE NHS IS NEARLY AT BREAKING POINT AS MASSIVE INFLUX OF EU
MIGRANTS FORCES DOCTORS TO TAKE ON 1.5 MILLION EXTRA PATIENTS IN JUST THREE

YEARS

— MAIL ONLINE, 3 APRIL 2016

This headline is misleading because there is no reference in the report to this increase being the result of EU migrants. In fact, the increase of 1.5 million patients over the last three years is because of our increased life expectancy, as well as migration from inside *and* outside of the EU. There is no way that the *Mail* could have reliably attributed this increase to migrants inside the EU in any case as the data was sourced from the Health and Social Care Information Centre (now NHS digital), which does not record the nationality of patients. InFacts (a journalistic enterprise dedicated to fact-checking news stories relating to Brexit) questioned the *Mail* on this and they changed their headline to read: ‘Figures show strain on NHS as doctors take on 1.5 million extra patients in just three years – with Vote Leave campaigners blaming rise in EU migrants’.

SOARING COST OF TEACHING MIGRANT CHILDREN – £3 BILLION BILL ANOTHER REASON TO
QUIT EU
— *THE EXPRESS*, 16 MAY 2016

This story cited government figures showing that 700,000 children of school age had at least one parent who was a citizen of another European Economic Area country. Regardless of whether you are pro-Leave or pro-Remain, there is no denying that this headline is biased towards Leave. Even worse, it has inflated the government statistics by inaccurately classifying all of these 700,000 children as migrants by using the definition of migrant to be ‘dependent children aged five to eighteen with at least one parent who held EEA nationality’. InFacts pointed out that by this definition, Nigel Farage’s own children would be considered migrants due to the German nationality of his wife. The *Express* corrected this story after receiving a number of complaints about this misclassification.

This is not to suggest that the Leavers were the only ones playing fast and loose with the truth. The Remain news organisations and campaigners had their fair share of Pinocchio moments along the campaign trail too. The point to take away, regardless of whether you voted to Remain or to Leave, is that the news – a huge influential player in helping us make informed decisions – has significantly misled us along the way.

For now, let’s move away from the political hot potato of Brexit and look at some less controversial examples of misleading headlines.

My personal favourite was published by the *Daily Mail* on 21 September 2016, as well as the *Telegraph*, the *Metro* and the *Independent*:

CUDDLING YOUR KITTEN COULD KILL YOU

The headline created a media hype, with many news organisations publishing similar articles with equally fear-filled headlines. These headlines, however, offer a misleading summary of the articles... and the articles offer a misleading summary of the research. It is the equivalent of newsroom Chinese whispers. It is fair to say that the research did show that cats carry a very rare bacteria in their mouth and claws that can be harmful to humans. However, it also showed that just 500 people a year are submitted to hospital as a result. And it is only those with an immunodeficiency disorder like HIV that are at any substantial risk.

I was once told that both academic research and news stories are like broccoli for the brain – important and beneficial but a little boring and hard to swallow. The news, however, has in these cases turned this analogy into deep-fried broccoli served with sweet and sour sauce. It may be palatable, easy to consume and exciting, but it is no longer of much value, and in fact doesn't even really offer the benefits of broccoli anymore.

This kind of misleading news is not exclusive to negative reporting; solutions-focused news stories can also be inflated. On 16 January 2014, the *Daily Express* printed on their front page:

A CURE FOR ALL CANCERS IS ON THE WAY

This story was based on a study where a mole rat had been discovered not to be susceptible to cancer and was even shown to resist chemically induced cancer growth as a result of their fibroblast (connective tissue cells that contribute to wound healing) demonstrating cancer-killing properties. While this was a scientific breakthrough, it was still in its early stages and there were not yet any human implications. This kind of overzealous celebration of research findings overstates their importance and can create the same kind of sensationalised informational hazards that create confusion rather than clarity.

The more obvious misleading headlines often generate a sufficient

First published in 2019

Unbound

6th Floor Mutual House, 70 Conduit Street, London W1S 2GF

www.unbound.com

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Text design by PDQ

A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-78352-722-9 (trade pbk)

ISBN 978-1-78352-727-4 (ebook)

ISBN 978-1-78352-723-6 (limited edition)

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK)