

Take Back the News

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Virtually all aboriginal human groups that have been studied over the last 150 years exhibit a condition that in all likelihood has been characteristic of traditional human communities for 99.9% of their history – up to the modern era. The sphere of concern of these small human bands and tribal groups is strictly local both socially and geographically. And while regional trading is common, information beyond the local and immediate regional sphere tends to be periodic, partial and quite limited. In this mostly local setting there is good news and bad news, but in the cyclical nature of living out life through the seasons, a lot of what is expected to occur in fact manifests as anticipated. Life is fairly predictable. There is daily reporting on events around the fire, and much of this is good news. Bad news is the exception and it gets significant play when it arises, but it rarely takes over the situation for lengthy periods. In this context, there is overall balance between the good and the bad news reporting with the good generally outweighing the bad. Humans under these conditions are realistic about the significant natural and social challenges that surrounded them locally and to an extent regionally, and while they must be alert and careful and industrious and resourceful, most of the time they are not excessively concerned, fearful, or stressed out about either their present circumstances or what the future may bring.

In the modern human setting, which has become pervasive over the last 2,000 years, humans are aggregated into much larger groups defined by cities, states, and nations. And these nations are now linked into ever-tighter international relations. In this context, there is a greater sensitivity to what is happening across a vastly expanded social and geographical domain because in the modern setting it is understood that events in distant places can significantly affect the situation “at home.” While it is true that at the local level, social control [rule of law] extends over a much broader area – offering security in this modern situation, the umbrella of this coverage includes mostly strangers whose intentions are unknown – offsetting somewhat the sense of security that the rule of law provides. In addition, in the modern setting, life is understood as a linear progression through time with change occurring at an ever more rapid pace. This is not the comfortable context of the predictable and repeating cycle of life through the seasons and over the years. In this situation of a relatively unknown and more open-ended future, there is greater uncertainty about what may happen. Overall it is fair to say that there is considerably greater experienced uncertainty in the modern living situation than in the aboriginal

human condition, and uncertainty in turn evokes increased fear regarding potential outcomes.

While the actual proportion of good and bad news may in fact be much the same in the modern and traditional human contexts, humans perceive themselves to be at greater risk of potentially negative events in the modern context where uncertainty and fear are enhanced by the prevailing circumstances. As currently practiced, broadcast news both reflects and promotes this modern situation of increased uncertainty and fear. Broadcast news is dominated by bad news – all the places, worldwide, where negative events are occurring due to what is happening in the environment, or in the various spheres of social, economic, political, military, or religious activity.

Modern humans are swamped with bad news, which itself engenders more uncertainty and increased fear about what the future may bring. Even though we know that there is plenty of good news out there, there is little inclination to balance the good and the bad in news reporting, and of course the sensational – especially in a graphic visual version – grabs human attention [exactly because it is atypical] and brings in dollars for those who sponsor news reporting. It is a self-fulfilling condition; bad news feeds on itself as uncertainty feeds fear and fear feeds uncertainty. In addition, the understandable impetus to bad news in the modern setting can easily escalate irresponsibly into rumor mongering, spin and dissembling, the epitome of which are talk show blowhards and internet libel arcades where in the name of free speech information is systematically edited into half truths and outright lies to serve preconceived religious or political views.

Whether from the news or its bastard child – tabloid journalism, the world of negativity and rumor that is portrayed in the modern media is not REAL because it lacks a realistic balance in relation to the way things actually are out there. Every day there is a wealth of good news, news that goes unreported, almost entirely overlooked. The concern is that this imbalance in the direction of constant negativity is detrimental to the condition of the modern human psyche. And an impaired psyche in turn negatively impacts not only the quality of our social, economic and political discussions and decisions but also human physical health – through all the mechanisms related to chronic stress.

What can we do to address this “disease” of the modern human communications system? If we are aware of the changes that are driving us in the modern situation to be overwhelmed and stressed out by all the bad news that is fit to be mass disseminated, we can require adjustments that bring news reporting and information media back into conformity with reality, without

authorizing or promoting Pollyanna or propaganda versions of the news. We can start by requiring that infotainment programs and the celebrities that “enable” them label themselves as entertainment and stop allowing them to masquerade as purveyors of accurate information. In the world of broadcast news reporting, news is currently at least 90% all about problems and threats and conflicts and injury and all sorts of human degradation. The print news media is somewhat better balanced, but it still gives decided priority to the sensational and the negative. In reality, the balance in positive and negative events is probably 60 – 40 in favor of the positive; life is just not as precarious as the news media would represent. So, the minimum requirement for news reporting should be to reverse these proportions allowing for 60% bad and 40% good news. Tell us what is right with the world, not just what has gone wrong, and occasionally the good news can even be fronted and not tagged on to the end of the program! We need to be relieved of the representation in the news that the bad dominates in everything, everywhere, and almost all the time.

If we require infotainers to disclose their actual roles as character actors in their own serial infodramas and demand appropriate balance in news reporting, we can reduce undue stress in modern life, support human mental and physical health, improve the quality of the decisions we make at all levels, and even educate the public about accomplishments humans are making in understanding who they are, in addressing their collective needs, and in learning how the universe in which they live works. These can be substantial gains for modern humans, and they can be achieved by merely insisting that the communication of information be brought into conformity with the reality of the human condition.