



The disaster news just won't let up. We should do something for our mental health right now!

Thanks to my job as a professional people-decoder, I keep up to date with the news. However, I have found that in recent months I have deliberately limited the depth with which I engage with the news.

Perhaps that's why a recent opinion piece by journalist Amanda Ripley in the Washington Post caught my eye. In it, she recommends consuming less news. I beg your pardon, a journalist recommends that people use journalistic products less?

In one of the leading American newspapers?

She has an exciting explanation for this and at the same time offers suggestions for a journalism that values people as news processors. In the following, I give her most important insights enriched with personal observations, you can find the link to the article here.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2022/07/08/how-to-fix-news-media/>

Ripley reveals herself to us. She has actively avoided news for years. At first, she had considered it unprofessional and shameful. She had read the Washington Post, the New York Times and often the Wall Street Journal every morning. Afterwards, CNN ran in the background without sound.

One day, the news started to get under her skin. After reading it in the morning, she felt so drained that she could no longer write. She began to dose the amount of news, omitting TV news altogether.

But news continued to invade every corner of her life. In emails, on social media. She tried to toughen up, admonishing herself, "This is real life, and real life is depressing! There's a pandemic going on, for God's sake. And also: racism! And climate change! And inflation! Things are depressing. You should be depressed!"

As soon as she was done reading the news, any action of her own seemed pointless. At some point, she learned that other journalists also behaved in this way. And this brings us to the core of the problem: if so many journalists feel poisoned by their products, could there be something wrong with them?

Reuters data shows that about 4 in 10 Americans sometimes or often avoid contact with the news. And women are more likely than men to avoid news. Why do people avoid news? Because they are repetitive and discouraging, they make people feel powerless.

Many say the problem is journalists' bias. Journalists say the problem is the business model: negativity is a click magnet.

Ripley has come to believe that the most important piece of the puzzle is missing from both theories: the human factor.



Example image: <https://wallup.net/earth-on-fire/>

Today's news, even high-quality print news, is not made for humans. As Krista Tippett, journalist and presenter, puts it, "I don't think we are physiologically or mentally prepared to be fed catastrophic and confusing news and images 24/7. We are analogue creatures in a digital world."

Ripley wanted to find out what news should look like for people - she interviewed doctors who specialise in delivering bad news to patients, behavioural scientists who know what people need to lead fulfilling, informed lives. She learned that there are three ingredients missing from the news as we know it.

First, "We need hope to get up in the morning. Hope is associated with lower incidence of depression, chronic pain, insomnia and cancer, among others. Hopelessness, on the other hand, is associated with anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and ... Death."

It is strange that journalists find it so difficult to understand the meaning of hope. People need a sense of possibility. Otherwise it becomes dark.

Last December, the New York Times published an ambitious multimedia project called "Postcards from a World on Fire," chronicling how climate change has altered life in 193 countries. It led with a graphic of the Earth in flames, spinning in space, and the words, "Cities swallowed by dust. Human history drowned by the sea."

I kid you not. This was a well-intentioned effort, but it was simply not designed for humans. Fear without a shred of hope.

Secondly, people need a sense of their own agency. The feeling that we and our fellow human beings can do something - even if it is only something small - helps us to transform our anger into action and our frustration into invention. This self-efficacy is an essential prerequisite for a functioning democracy.

As market researchers, we see time and again how motivating self-efficacy is for people and that brands can play an important role. Self-efficacy motivates doctors in therapy decisions and DIY fans in their projects.



Nowhere is the crying need for agency and hope more evident than in climate reporting. Of all the climate stories that aired on US news in 2021, only a third discussed possible solutions. Similarly, current news coverage of the gas crisis is turning people into victims rather than bringing them into action. After all, many are buying fan heaters. Evidence of self-efficacy, but not the socially desirable one. Politics and journalism are wasting valuable time.

Third, we need dignity. Again, in Ripley's experience, most reporters don't think about this. This is strange, because it is important to understand why people do what they do.

Dignity is the feeling that I matter, that my life has some value. In journalism, it means treating people as if they matter, especially really listening to them.

There is a way to deliver news - even very bad news - in a way that makes us look better as a result. A way to trigger anger and action. Empathy alongside dignity. Hope alongside fear. But right now, these examples are still far too rare.

Ripley says that if news websites were people, most of them would currently be diagnosed as clinically depressed.

To change this, journalists may have to accept that some of their own core beliefs are outdated. The journalistic theory of change is that the best way to avert a disaster is to make people aware of its potential 24/7.

A better theory of change, suggests journalist David Bornstein, might go something like this: "The world will get better when people understand problems, threats and challenges, and what their best options are to make progress."



Finally, and this is closely related: The people who produce the news are having a hard time themselves. News junkies tend to take a deep gulp of darkness in the mistaken belief that it will make them see more clearly. All these fears have nowhere to go - and they seep into their articles.

I know what you're thinking: what about the money? The news business model requires clicks. And the easiest way to get attention is a firestorm of outrage, fear and doom.

The editorial offices' love of disaster is not likely to abate in the foreseeable future. And we will probably have to wait for a new journalism that gives people hope, shows them the ability to act, and values the dignity of the individual.

Until then, we are well advised to cultivate our mental processing capacity on our own responsibility. More experiences instead of consuming news on whatever platform. More meetings with friends, more concerts, cinema and nature instead of the daily news and Twitter. Ignoring the stock portfolio and hitting the pause button on stock news and stock market podcasts.

One of my favourite podcasters has been running his stocks podcast for the last few months very consistently, but admitted not to have looked at his own portfolio for weeks. He had decided to weather the storm and to keep his portfolio as is. (Disclaimer: This does not constitute investment advice).



And one final note: I assume that BrainCandy readers belong to the middle class. Hopefully, this means that all of you have the above options for action. Of course, most of you will also have to accept losses due to inflation and energy prices. But one can deal with this in a self-effective way. The lower income classes do not have this factual and mental leeway. Here, politics is called upon to take away the fear of unaffordable energy costs and cascading effects such as the threat of losing one's home.

However, the state would be overburdened if it tried to take away the pain of energy prices from all its fellow citizens. And as economically educated people we know about the effectiveness of prices.

When it comes to energy, we want to change our behaviour, at least until sufficient energy is available again. That is our contribution to a defensible democracy.

Back to mental health again. I am now reading the book 'Sapiens' a brief history of humankind by Yuval Harari. A book that Daniel Kahneman has even read twice. Harari can write. Evolution reads like an entertaining thriller. By the way, he takes a digital break for at least three weeks a year. For him, this is the mandatory prerequisite for mental vitality.

Maybe 'Sapiens' will become a BrainCandy, who knows. And what healthy things are you doing today?

Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour To [order](#)



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