

Matt Ridley On Why Only Bad News Gets Reported

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SUMMARY

The discussion centers on the pervasive culture of fear and doom that has historically influenced society, suggesting that while current fears are valid, they overshadow significant positive developments. The speaker argues that fear-mongering has been a consistent theme throughout history, often overshadowing improvements in living standards and environmental conditions.

- The culture of fear is not new; it has been a recurring theme throughout history.*
- Pessimistic narratives often sell better than optimistic ones, leading to a cycle of doom and gloom.*
- Historical examples show that fears about societal decline have often been unfounded, with improvements occurring despite predictions of disaster.*
- The media and political landscape contribute to a "fear industrial complex" that prioritizes negative news.*
- Good news, such as environmental recovery and increased wildlife populations, is often ignored or underreported.*
- Public perception of global poverty is skewed; many believe it has worsened when it has actually halved.*
- Misinformation and myths create barriers to understanding the true state of the world.*
- It's essential to balance awareness of real threats with recognition of positive trends to foster a more accurate worldview.*

- What's your perspective on this sort of culture of fear that's taken hold. - I don't think it's as new as we think. I think it's really bad at the moment but I think it's always happened. I think there have been periods in history when we have sold doom and gloom to the young on an industrial scale, doom mongering, fear mongering the word mongering means selling doesn't it? And this is what's been happening and if you think about, the millennial prophecies a thousand years ago about how the world was going to come to an end and you read the kind of stuff that people were saying then, there's been a lot of it about and in fact, one of the things I found when I wrote "The Rational Optimist" that if you go back in history, pessimistic books were bestsellers at almost every episode of history, at almost every period and I found a wonderful quote from Thomas Babington Macaulay the historian writing in 1830 and he was reviewing a pessimistic book by Robert Southey who was the Poet laureate who was saying this industrial revolution, it's going to end badly, it's all horrible, it's nothing but smoke and dirt and misery and people are

getting poorer not richer and McCauley disagreed,
he thought that actually some of these mechanizations
and technologies that were coming in were going to improve
people's living standards and maybe stop them dying at
the age of 15 or something and so he said, why is it that with nothing
but improvement behind us we to expect nothing but
deterioration before us, what is it about us that we assume that just because things
have gone well in the past they're about to go horribly wrong and I then began looking for
what I call turning point it is which is the tendency to believe that your generation
is at a turning point.

Yes, things have gone fine up to now, but they're about to go horribly wrong and I found that it
was a common phenomenon in every generation and when I look back to when I was young, I was born in 1958
so I was a teenager in the 1970s. In 1970s were full of doom and gloom particularly on the environmental front.
I was told by the grownups very solemnly and with great certainty, by the way that the future was incredibly
bleak, that the population
explosion was unstoppable, famine was inevitable, pollution was going to shorten lifespan because it was going
to
cause a cancer epidemic, the rainforest was disappearing,
Ice age was coming back, the oil was running out.

The future was bleak in all sorts of ways. - [John] Right. - Diseases were going to ravage humankind, honestly, I
do not remember any reading, anything by an adult about a
bright future for humanity. - With perhaps the exception
of Julian Simon, right? He's maybe the only one. - And unfortunately he wasn't
enough of a best seller to reach my years, Paul Ehrlich
who was writing the opposite was a much bigger, best seller. So the doom and gloom has
sold well for a long time and there's no doubt that
there's a certain cynicism here.

People say, Ooh, if I wrote a gloomy book I could sell more copies, if
I made a doomy projection, there's a competitive auction between people to sound more
catastrophic, more apocalyptic because they're more
likely to get attention in the media that way. - It's funny, I've been
increasingly calling sort of the whole, sort of
super structure, if you will the fear industrial complex,
the political class, the news media in particular, if it bleeds it leads is this phrase but it really is the business
model.

You mentioned sort of doom
scrolling on our phones and that's obviously plays a part of it. But I suppose one way to

think about it is that fear and anxiety, well,
we do need them, right? I mean, they're part of how we survive. Like how do you think about fear in terms of
kind of
evolutionary psychology? - Well, I'm not here to say that there's nothing wrong with the world. Nuclear war was
something we should fear, the Ebola epidemic was
something to worry about.

There are plenty of things
that are scary in the world and that things that could
go wrong and can go wrong and we have to find a
way to tell young people, yes there are scary things, but not to leave out the good new. At the moment good
news is no news I mean, it's literally
impossible to get any airtime for the fact that the
world has got greener in the last 30 years by about 14%, partly because of the extra
carbon dioxide in the air, partly because reforestation,
you try and say that or you tell people that when I was young, there were 5,000 humpback
whales left in the world and they were thought to be on the brink, they were heading for extinction and now
there are 80,000 or 16 times as many humpback whales.

- Humpback whales - In the world as the were
when I was in the 19th century. - See, I didn't know
that I thought the oceans were sort one of the
areas where doom and gloom was a little more warranted. - The whale population boom is the reason you don't
hear
about whales these days. In other words, the
better things are doing the more they drop off the news agenda. I mean, think of countries, you hear about
countries, Syria, right?

Was in the news a lot in the last decade. It's not in the news today that suggests to me that the war in Syria must
have come to an end (both laughing) at least to some degree,
not in a good way, I'm sure but at least it's not as bad
as it was five or 10 years ago. Our news agenda is dominated by that. - I guess that is the phrase, right? No news
is good news.

I mean, we say that in our
daily lives all the time - No news is good news, but
also good news is no news. (both laughing) I tell you the godfather
of us all, all us optimists the godfather is Hans Rosling,
alas no longer with us and Hans Rosling did
something very clever. He went out and asked 1000
people the same question he said, "Do you think that the percentage of

the world population that is in extreme poverty has doubled, halved or stayed the same in 20 years?"

And 65% of Americans,
similar number in Britain most other Western countries
said that it has doubled the percentage living in
extreme poverty has doubled. Only 5% thought it had halved, the true number is that it halved, okay? So only
5% of people are right about that but Rosling then said, if
I wrote those three answers on three bananas and I threw them into a
cage with a monkey in it the monkey would pick up the right answer one third of the time, 33% of the time it
would do six times
as well as human beings in answering a question
about human society.

It knows more about us than
we know about ourselves and what this suggests, the
way I put, it is that it's not actually there's a other good quote from a guy called Josh Billings who is a
19th-century wit I think, he said, it's not what you don't know that gets you into trouble, it's what for sure that
ain't so. - Right. - And so we've got a huge problem here. We simply cannot get the facts across to the younger
generation because there's this
great big wall of myth surrounding the truth
on a lot of these things and I'm not here to say
everything's getting better but I am here to say a lot
of things are getting better and why don't why tell the
young people about that.

(logo whooshing)