Why does so much news seem negative? Human attention may be to blame

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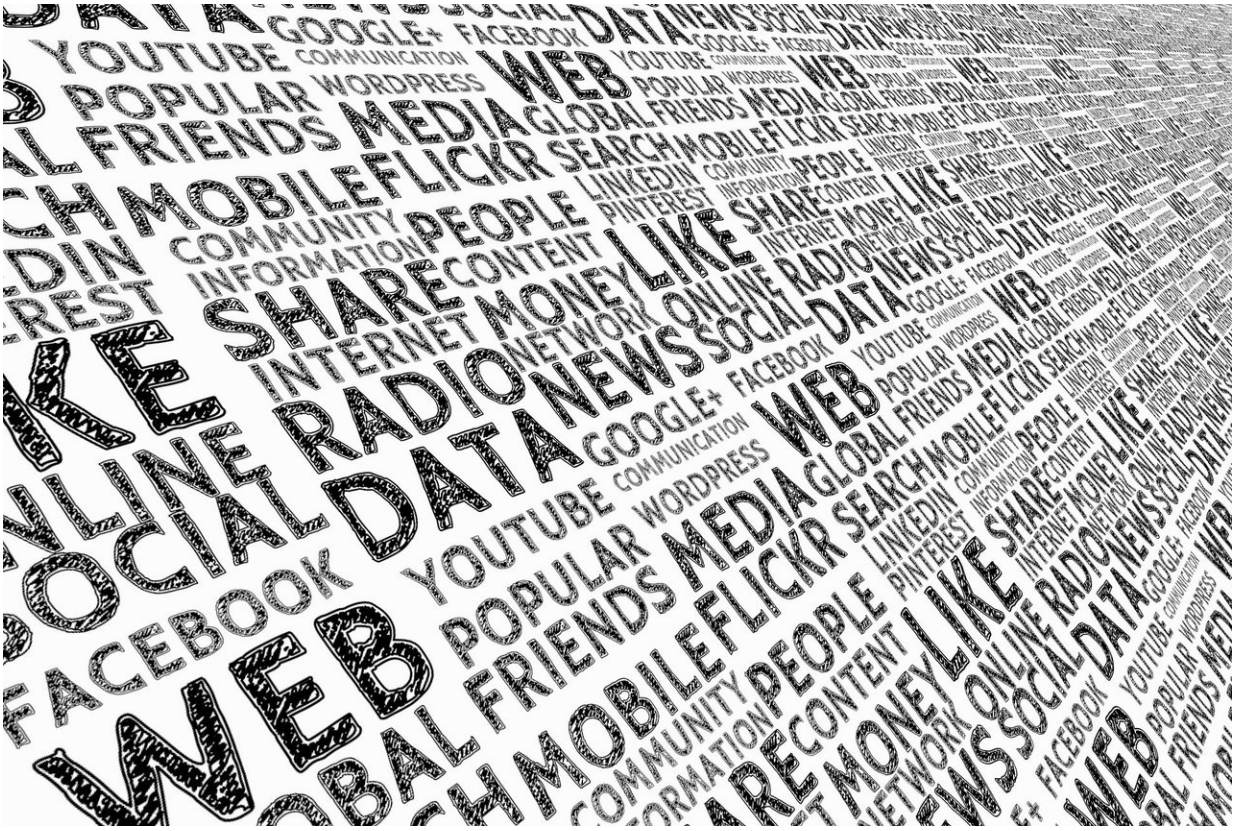

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Ever wonder why there's so much bad news out there? Maybe it's because people find bad news more interesting than good news.

A new study involving more than 1,000 people across 17 countries spanning every continent but Antarctica concludes that, on average, people pay more attention to negative news than to positive news.

The findings, published this week in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, hint that this human bias toward negative news might be a large part of what drives negative news coverage. But the results also revealed that this negative bias was not shared by everyone, and some even had a positive bias—a sign that there may be a market for positive news.

"In a period during which news around the world is especially wrought with negativity, this subject is of obvious significance," the study authors wrote.

Lead author Stuart Soroka, a political scientist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, said he and his colleagues were interested in the psychology of negativity biases—the tendency for people to pay more attention to negative information than positive information—and the role it might play in shaping the news.

Among academics, one explanation for this bias was that "journalists were angry people and skeptics and they produced a bunch of negative content, and that was bad—as in bad for democracy and bad for people reading news," Soroka said. "Our suspicion was that the way news looked wasn't purely a function of what journalists felt but more about what audiences responded to."

There are some evolutionary reasons as to why negativity bias exists, the scientists pointed out. For one thing, it can be much riskier to ignore negative information (a storm is coming) than good news (a dog rescued a boy from a tree). Paying attention to negative news, the researchers said, is generally an effective survival strategy.

While previous studies have examined the negativity bias, they've largely focused on subjects who were white, American, college-aged young adults. Soroka said he wanted to see whether the results of those studies could be generalized to the rest of the world.

To get a more global view, the scientists recruited 1,156 people in 17 countries: Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Denmark, France, Ghana, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, New Zealand, Russia, Senegal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The researchers went out of their way to find a wider range of study participants whenever they could. They recruited from marketplaces in Ghana, for example, and took their lab gear to a shed in a construction compound in India.

"It really depended on where we could get a good sample," Soroka said.

Each participant was shown seven randomly ordered BBC World News television reports, some of which had a negative tone and some of which were more positive. As the participants watched, the researchers monitored their heart rates and their skin conductance levels (essentially, tiny fluctuations in their sweat levels, which could indicate a person's fight-or-flight response levels).

The researchers found that, on average, a slight majority of viewers demonstrated a bias toward more negative news. This largely held across countries and cultures, Soroka said.

However, the scientists also found that on an individual level, there seems to be a high level of variability in responses. Roughly 2 out of 5 participants showed either no bias toward negative news or a bias toward positive news.

This means that the old adage "If it bleeds, it leads" may no longer always apply, said Richard Lau, a political psychologist at Rutgers University who was not involved in the study.

"One of the things that the study is flagging is that there's a great deal of variability within people," Lau said. "This is true across all cultures."

Soroka suggested that it might mean that news outlets could shift the proportion of bad news to good news and still maintain an audience.

"It's not the case that most people want mostly negative news all the time," Soroka said. "And knowing that, I think, opens up other possibilities where news is concerned."