The Psychological Effects of TV News

Negative news on TV is increasing, but what are its psychological effects?

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We’ve known for a very long time that the emotional content of films and television programs can affect your psychological [health](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/health). It can do this by directly affecting your mood, and your mood can then affect many aspects of your thinking and behaviour. If the TV program generates negative mood experiences (e.g. anxiety, sadness, [anger](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/anger), disgust), then these experiences will affect how you interpret events in your own life, what types of [memories](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/memory) you recall, and how much you will worry about events in your own life.

Why have I singled out negative news bulletins for attention here? Well, there is good reason to believe that the negative sensationalism in news has been gradually increasing over the past 20-30 years. So first, we’ll have a look at what negative news is, we’ll then examine the reasons why the broadcasting of negative news has become so prevalent. Then finally, we’ll look at some of the ways in which viewing perpetual negative news might affect your mood, and particularly your tendency to worry about your own specific problems.

There are a lot of bad things that happen in the world, and it is probably right that people should know about these things through their reporting in news bulletins. These ‘bad things’ include crime, famine, war, violence, political unrest, and injustice, to name but a few. But there is also an increasing tendency for news broadcasters to ‘emotionalize’ their news and to do so by emphasizing any potential negative outcomes of a story no matter how low the risks of those negative outcomes might be. This is basically ‘scaremongering’ at every available opportunity in order to sensationalize and emotionalize the impact of a news story. Because we now have 24-hour news coverage, gone are the days when a correspondent or journalist’s role was simply to impartially describe what was happening in the world – because of satellite TV we have an almost immediate visual record of what is happening throughout the world. So the journalist’s job then becomes one of ‘evaluating’ the news story and it is only a small step from ‘evaluating’ a story to ‘sensationalizing’ it.

News bulletins also have to compete with entertainment programs for their audience and for their prime-time TV slot, and seem to do this by emphasizing emotionally relevant material such as crime, war, famine, etc. at the expense of more positive material.

In the knowledge that the proportion of negatively-valenced emotional material in news bulletins was increasing, in 1997 we conducted a study looking at [the psychological effects of viewing negative news items](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2044-8295.1997.tb02622.x/abstract). We constructed three different 14-min news bulletins. One was made entirely of negative news items, one was made of entirely positive news items (e.g. people winning the lottery, recovering from illness, etc.), and one was made up of items that were emotionally neutral. We then showed these bulletins to three different groups of people. As we predicted, those who watched the negative news bulletin all reported being significantly more anxious and sadder after watching this bulletin than those people who watched either the positive or neutral news bulletin.

But what was more interesting was the effect that watching negative news had on peoples’ worries. We asked each participant to tell us what their main worry was at the time, and we then asked them to think about this worry during a structured interview. We found that those people who had watched the negative news bulletin spent more time thinking and talking about their worry and were more likely to catastrophise their worry than people in the other two groups. Catastrophizing is when you think about a worry so persistently that you begin to make it seem much worse than it was at the outset and much worse than it is in reality – a tendency to make ‘mountains out of molehills’!