

Good news is no news

DH deccanherald.com/content/481944/good-news-no-news.html

June 6, 2015



Good news is no news

The elders' reprimand to keep quiet if I spoke during the news on radio is an abiding childhood memory. News was timed — morning and evening on the radio; the local morning newspaper; and the national newspaper that came in the afternoon by train in the city I grew up. News was not as easily accessible as it is now. If one missed it, there was no way of checking it immediately. If ignorance wasn't bliss, it was at least less overwhelming. Now it seems there's no getting away. We are drowning in information.

Twelve-year old Sana was looking forward to visiting her grandparents in the summer vacations. When the family decided to do the long journey from Bangalore to Delhi by train, her first reaction was a worried, 'What if the train meets with an accident?' Train accidents were all she has seen and known of train journeys from watching news. That was her immediate recall. All around us there is news of corruption, scams, killings, abductions, rape, poverty, negligence, injustice. It does not help that news doesn't 'come to us' like it did about two decades ago, but we 'go' to it. In our Internet-enabled, connected world, we are constantly being bombarded with news and very often rumour, scandal or expose in the garb of news.

Breaking news — and all of it is breaking — comes streaming to us as it is unfolding. If it does not update in two seconds on our phones and computers, we refresh and reboot, panicking about what we may be missing out — a catastrophe worse than any tragedy we may be following on news. The FOMO or fear of missing out makes us compulsive news seekers.

In the past few years, I have seen many friends trying to shut out news completely by not subscribing to newspapers or watching it on television. Though how one can insulate oneself thus in times when news has a way of getting to us and not the other way around, is a wonder. How are the readers and viewers coping? What keeps their hopes for a better world alive?

Choose & filter

Girish Ananth, a software professional, says he would gladly rid himself of the habit of reading news online and offline that lead to a nagging sense of despair and depression, but he is addicted. That his job keeps him in front of an Internet-connected computer at all times makes the escape impossible. But he has gradually learned to read between the lines and recognise at a glance whether a news item is sensationalist or agenda-driven or deserving of more attention.

Tisha Srivastav moderates a closed group called 'Lifeistan' on Facebook. In the group description she states, 'I will delete pointlessly negative comments'. A former journalist, Tisha rejects opinionated accounts in favour of field reportage. She believes that people are cynical because they are passive receivers of news. People must exercise what she calls the 'powerful choice of rejection' of news. So does Varun Pai, interaction designer, who disregards stories that do not present the 'other side' that allow him to put things into perspective and form an independent opinion for himself.

Reading news is part of her job as publication and advocacy officer with the World Health Organization, and Vismita Gupta Smith who was recently in Kathmandu to report the relief operations says depressing as it is, she cannot switch off from news because of her need to stay informed. Marzia Ibrahim, young student and staunch nationalist at heart, wonders how much news is too much. She supports the freedom of the media to report stories, but feels strongly about the ethics that they must follow so as to not infringe on the rights of the people who are part of their stories. Sensationalism and public shaming needs to stop, something that has spiralled out of control with the rise of social media, she rues.

Remedy & recourse

We are moved by make-believe; we cry and laugh while watching films. How is it possible that real life events that give rise to fear, anger, frustration or anxiety will not affect our moods and consequently our psychological health? Writer and life coach, Eshwar Sundaresan, says that negative news impacts those already depressed and he has sometimes advised depressed clients to avoid watching news or reading newspapers till they feel better about their own lives.

I asked Sapna G K, a senior counsellor, how despairing news affects people's overall perception of life. Her response was matter-of-fact, "If one cannot control the events that happen in the world, and if there are more bad things than good, then that is the reality of the situation, which we need to come to terms with." She says, "If it bothers you to the extent that it's affecting your personal life, you can choose how much news you want to take in or not at all. Otherwise, do something to make the world a better place in the ways you can — like volunteering and helping others."

Girish too believes that all sorts of unpleasant things happen over which we have no control, "The world is not a fair place, so why get involved emotionally? Why not just work on our own 'circle of concern'?" He takes recourse in classical music.

Sandeep Bekal, entrepreneur, is a regular newspaper reader who tries not to get too perturbed over bad news because he believes there is a lot good happening too which does not get reported. Spiritualism helps him keep his hope that things will change for the better. Kahkashan Ahmad, mother of teenagers who works with an NGO that helps with the education of underprivileged children, comes across very inspiring stories of the potential and talents of these children, but regrets that such uplifting news has no takers. Volunteering keeps her hope alive.

Editor and translator, Keerti Ramachandra, often shares on Facebook stories of human kindness that she encounters — a passport officer or a cop who goes out of their way and sometimes beyond their call of duty to be helpful. She says that generally news makes her angry and frustrated by its content, but when some act of kindness, some generosity from an unexpected quarter comes by, she is moved enough to believe in the innate goodness of human beings and is immediately hopeful.

Immediacy of sharing

The same items pop up on our newsfeeds again and again. We share easily on social media. Many-a-times it is not the need to inform, but a need to show our stand which drives this. In hindsight, a lot of what we share and say may seem unfair or reactionary. A lot of the sensational news on social media remains unauthenticated. Displaying poor taste and discretion, tragedies are laid threadbare for the sake of TRPs because we have become voyeurs of mourning. This adds to a sense of collective gloom and hopelessness. Tisha is very clear in her approach to news consumption — to witness and not react. She says she's always careful while sharing — never sharing while witnessing, always later. But such a sagacious mindset is not easy to sustain on social media which comes with readers' reactions. Everyone has a say and it is not always pleasant or thought out. Most responses are not just lacking in sensitivity, propriety and grace, but are often caustic and unfair.

Over the last two decades, the line between news and news features has blurred with news becoming not just emotionalised, but 'tabloidised'. Our reaction to it is consequently, emotional. Lapses of judgement are not on the part of the media alone, it is a reflection of the reactionary mood of society today — our hurry, our frailty of speaking too soon. These are our failings. We have fed the monster.

Close to the immediacy of sharing comes what I call the ‘immediacy of caring’, an irrepressible phenomenon that has burgeoned out of the quick, cheap and easy means of communication — Internet and mobile phones. My daughter was at school during the serial bomb blasts of July 2008 in Bangalore. My phone began to ring within minutes of the news breaking on television and well-wishers from all parts of the country began to ask if I wasn’t going to fetch her. It wasn’t closing time yet, so I was sure she would be safe in school. I trusted the school authorities to ensure the students’ safety and had no reason to worry as long as she was inside the school with the rest. But pushed thus, I began to panic. The television news was showing the same clips over and over, there was fear of the phone lines getting jammed. Many in my situation would have felt compelled to venture out themselves and create more panic and confusion when there was absolutely no need.

Exploitive and yellow journalism creates scaremongering in the most harmless situations. Film Editor Amitabh Shukla says his father calls him every time it rains in Mumbai. The TV shows everything in the city submerged, without clarifying that it is in pockets. His family’s entire perception of Mumbai floods is based not on what he tells them, but what the TV shows.

A paradigm shift

Sometime around the 2010s, some people began to feel strongly about showcasing positive, inspiring stories. These soup for soul stories quickly caught up the imagination of the readers who were desperate for stories of courage and motivation as a foil for all the depressing news they were surrounded with. The reach of digital media provided these new news websites a comfortable foothold, and gradually, mass following. These social media-supported news websites like Better India and Love Hindustan were able to start an alternative news medium and stick their heads out of the media clutter by carrying positive stories alone.

‘We feature positive news across India, celebrate the successes of unsung heroes and change makers, showcase the little known good things about our country...’ Better India declares. “We believed despairing news could not make people contribute and change,” says Dhimant Parekh, founder, Better India, that started as a two-member team. They began by linking positive articles from various publications on a blog, but it was difficult because there were so few positive stories. Then they started covering feel-good and motivational news themselves and as more people joined and volunteered, the articles became more varied. Today, Better India has more than 1,00,000 followers on Facebook and about 20,000 followers on Twitter.

Love Hindustan too is a news portal exclusively dedicated to giving readers ‘the other side of India that everyday newspapers and websites don’t’. They link positive news articles from other sources and do some stories themselves. The Logical Indian is another much-followed news website that focuses on bringing to its readers social issues that according to them ‘often miss the limelight in the traditional media’. They have a following of over two million. They have not limited their content to positive news stories alone and prefer to call their work, ‘efforts for good’.

Striking a balance

“We need the media to highlight failings of government bodies, injustices, wrong doings and social problems to create awareness and get people moving towards positive action and hold the government agencies accountable,” says Keerti.

This is exactly what Satyen Bordoloi feels. And there are many like him who are okay with despairing news because it tells them how and where they can channelise their efforts. An activist and documentary filmmaker, Satyen does not want to receive only feel-good, uplifting news. If there is despairing news, it only means he needs to ‘pull up my sleeves to try and do something about it’. He considers all news positive because once reported, all misdeeds and malpractices, corruption and scams can only lead to corrective and positive changes in the society.

Also, news may be upsetting because distressful news sticks to us more easily and surely than feel-good news, says game developer Anando Banerjee. If there were two headlines, ‘India jumps up five places on the Global Happiness Index’ and ‘People die in wall collapse’, we are likely to read and remember the latter better. There is no doubt there is a kind of voyeuristic pleasure in others’ misfortunes, but there is also a sense of relief that ‘it didn’t happen to me’, he adds.

As with everything else in life, we need a balanced dose of news — with the not-so-good must come the good. News media should make a consistent effort to report uplifting news along with the disturbing headlines that cannot be ignored. Political analyst Prashanth Potluri is of the view that newspapers should ensure that at least the front page always has positive news so that people have a good start to their day.

News media gives us what we sanction, it runs on our choices. We have to stop feeding the monster we have created by rejecting sensationalism. Mountain-out-of-molehill news would have to stop if we didn’t consume it. It will seem unthinkable today, but on April 18, 1930, the BBC had no news for the evening and it announced, “There is no news today.” The announcement was followed by piano music.