COVID: Media Literally Makes Us Sick with Non-Stop Bad News

By Alex Berezow, PhD — January 22, 2021

Fear sells, which is why news outlets provide so much of it. But constant bad news is bad for our health. Turn off the TV and social media.

In the mediocre but strangely prescient James Bond movie *Tomorrow Never Dies*, the villain is a media mogul named Elliot Carver who tries to instigate a war between the UK and China to grow his empire. Wars attract eyeballs, and as Carver liked to say, "There's no news like bad news."

Carver is correct, of course. Bad news, which often involves something that is not aligned with our expectations, is inherently more interesting than good news. That's why national and local news programs are about homicides, plane crashes, and adulterous politicians instead of puppies, cupcakes, and rainbows.

But all this bad news appears to come at a cost. A recent commentary [8] published in the journal *Health Psychology* argues that non-stop media coverage about COVID might actually cause worse public health outcomes through "increased anxiety, heightened stress responses that can lead to downstream effects on health, and misplaced health-protective and help-seeking behaviors that can overburden health care facilities."

The authors cited previous research [3] on the public's psychological response to the 2014 Ebola outbreak. At the time, one poll showed that 64% of Americans were seriously concerned about an
outbreak and 45% thought someone in their family would get sick. In reality, a grand total of 11 patients were treated for Ebola in the United States, meaning that the risk to the average person was essentially zero. Such is the effect of the media's relentless pursuit of bad news.

Unfortunately, it gets worse. Other research showed that people who consumed copious amounts of news about the Boston Marathon Bombing had more stress than the people who attended the event. Think about that for a minute. The people who actually might have died in the bombing fared better than those who spent countless hours doomscrolling on Twitter. Still, other research found that people who consumed lots of 9/11 and Iraq War news coverage suffered symptoms like posttraumatic stress, and some went on to develop other health problems.

**COVID Media Coverage**

The authors, therefore, make a very compelling case that the media's coverage of the COVID pandemic likely harmed public health. However, it would be difficult to tease apart the health effects of non-stop media coverage from the health effects of the extended lockdowns. My hunch is that the latter far outweighed the former.

The problem for media outlets is knowing what constitutes an appropriate amount of news coverage. Some coverage is necessary in order to tell people how they can protect themselves. But cable news channels chose wall-to-wall COVID coverage, complete with an up-to-date death toll. The *New York Times* published a list of the names of the deceased on its front page. Surely, this sort of "pandemic porn" actually causes more health problems than it solves.

The authors offer the following recommendation:

"It is imperative that information be conveyed without sensationalism or disturbing images. The public, in turn, should be advised to avoid speculative stories and limit repetitious exposure to media stories that provide little new information, while staying abreast of critical updates."

The authors are correct that the job of the media is to inform, not terrify. But fear sells, which is why the authors’ first proposal will never work. The news media isn't about to change its behavior anytime soon.

That means the solution to the problem is in our hands: Turn off the TV and social media and only pay attention to critical, new information. Non-stop bad news is bad for your health.


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