

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #015
Why Is All The News So Negative? And What If It Wasn't?
January 7, 2020

[00:00:02] Hello and welcome to the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge.

[00:00:11] It's a new year and a new decade, which is exciting news, good news. But unfortunately, I have some bad news for you.

[00:00:20] It's that no doubt today and this week and this year's newspapers will be filled with all sorts of bad news, floods, [famines](#)¹, murders, terrible things, just generally stuff going wrong.

¹ extreme lack of food

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Why Is All The News So Negative? And What If It Wasn't?

[00:00:38] Today though, we're going to talk about why that might be, talk about what this constant [influx²](#) of negative news is doing to us and imagine a world where the news wasn't always quite so negative.

[00:00:55] I normally start these podcasts with a reminder about how you can get the transcripts and key vocabulary for the podcast on the website, but I'm not going to do that today, or at least not in any more length than I've just done.

[00:01:07] What I will say though is that I want your feedback.

[00:01:11] I want to know what you like about the podcast, what you don't like, and what we could be doing better. And as a little reward for this feedback, I will personally correct every single one that I receive and send it right back to you.

[00:01:25] So you can think of this as a free bit of English writing practice from a teacher and native speaker.

[00:01:31] So what you need to do is email [hi hi@leonardoenglish.com](mailto:hi@leonardoenglish.com) with your feedback.

[00:01:37] Just put feedback in the subject line.

[00:01:39] I'll then correct it and send it straight back to you.

[00:01:44] Okay then today, let's talk about the news.

² an arrival or entry of large numbers of people or things

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[00:01:47] Not a particular item of news, but the news in general.

[00:01:52] Specifically, why is the news always so negative?

[00:01:57] Whether you're **tuning in**³ to the news on TV, sitting on a bench, reading a newspaper, or reading news on your phone, or even listening to a podcast, a lot of the news is negative.

[00:02:10] In fact, it's almost always negative.

[00:02:13] So famines, explosions, murders, **genocide**⁴.

[00:02:18] If you took the news to be a representation of what goes on in the world today, well, it will be quite a **bleak**⁵ picture.

[00:02:28] Of course, journalists would argue that the entire point of the news is to be **newsworthy**⁶, right, to be worthy of the news, worthy of being talked about.

[00:02:40] And it's for exactly this reason that they'd say that the reason the news is negative is because it's not that frequent and that's why it's worth being talked about.

³ turning on, start listening to or watching

⁴ the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular nation or ethnic group

⁵ cold and miserable

⁶ worth reporting as news

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[00:02:49] They'd say that actually these terrible acts aren't so [commonplace](#)⁷, and that's why they make up the news.

[00:02:56] While of course there is an [element of truth](#)⁸ to this, what I want to do is look at some of the other reasons why our news might be so negative and take a look at how this affects us as human beings.

[00:03:10] Let's start by asking ourselves, what is the role of journalism and who decides what is news?

[00:03:17] Well, when you ask a journalist about why they became a journalist and what role journalism plays in the world, many would answer that it is to tell the stories that would otherwise go [untold](#)⁹.

[00:03:32] To hold people, organisations, and countries to justice, to tell the world about what goes wrong in the hope that people will hold others [accountable](#)¹⁰.

[00:03:44] While this is of course true and a [noble pursuit](#)¹¹, you still have to ask yourself why these stories are all so bloody and negative.

⁷ frequent, usual

⁸ a certain amount of truth

⁹ not told

¹⁰ required or expected to justify actions or decisions

¹¹ an admirable activity, something worth being proud of

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Why Is All The News So Negative? And What If It Wasn't?

[00:03:55] Why, when you open a newspaper or turn on the news in the evening, why does it always **lead with**¹² negative stories?

[00:04:04] Well, the reality is that it's not really the journalists who decide what makes the news.

[00:04:10] Yes, they do the research and produce the stories, but if the **editorial**¹³ team decides it's not going to be a good story, then it won't get shown, or at least won't get the **prominence**¹⁴ that others do.

[00:04:25] Why?

[00:04:26] Well, like many things in life, it comes down to money.

[00:04:29] There's a famous phrase in journalism and that's if it bleeds, it leads.

[00:04:35] Leads here means is the first story to be covered, right?

[00:04:40] The first story in the newspaper or the first story to come on the news on TV.

¹² the top headline of the news

¹³ to be in charge of deciding what goes in the news

¹⁴ importance

Why Is All The News So Negative? And What If It Wasn't?

[00:04:45] Although we might not like to think it, humans seem to naturally [gravitate](#)¹⁵ towards stories of [mortality](#)¹⁶, stories of things going wrong, and stories of people dying.

[00:04:57] From the Romans at the Colosseum to public executions, to the fact that cars slow down when there's a road accident as the drivers try and catch a look, to news stories about murderers, humans seem naturally attracted to stories of death and blood and [gore](#)¹⁷.

[00:05:19] And there are all sorts of theories about why this is.

[00:05:23] Is it because it reminds us that we're alive?

[00:05:26] Is it a sort of [gloating](#)¹⁸ about the fact that you, the listener or the reader or the viewer is more fortunate than the subject of the news item?

[00:05:39] Or is it because there is some kind of innate human instinct to not look away from others' misfortune?

[00:05:46] I don't want to go too much into the psychological reasons for this, mainly because I don't know a huge amount about it.

¹⁵ move towards

¹⁶ death

¹⁷ blood that has been shed, especially as a result of violence

¹⁸ thinking about one's own success or another's misfortune with smugness or malignant pleasure

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[00:05:54] But the reality is it's taken for granted¹⁹ by news editors that stories full of blood and human misery captivate²⁰ the viewer or the reader's attention.

[00:06:09] And there have been numerous²¹ studies that have shown just this, right? People love stories about misfortune, and news companies, which let's remember, are first and foremost²² commercial entities, depend on as many people as possible consuming their content for as long as possible, especially the ones that are supported by advertising business models. Because what happens is the more people are looking at a screen with the stories on or watching TV or opening up the pages of a newspaper, the more eyeballs²³ there are and the more value the media company can get by selling those to commercial advertisers.

[00:06:54] And while editorial and commercial teams in newsrooms are theoretically separated, in many cases, this Chinese wall is actually quite thin, especially with ad-supported media, it's the advertisers who ultimately pay the journalist's salaries, and so they need to make sure that the stories are generating enough interest to keep the advertisers happy.

¹⁹ assume that something is true without questioning it

²⁰ attract and hold the interest and attention of

²¹ large in number, many

²² most importantly; more than anything else

²³ used here to describe the number of people who are reading or watching a piece of news

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[00:07:19] Yeah. If this is [bursting your bubble](#)²⁴, I'm sorry, but media companies can really tell exactly how much each article has earned them, and thus a journalist is to a commercial department, just another income and expense item.

[00:07:35] So you can see the cost of producing a story and then the amount of [revenue](#)²⁵ it has brought in in terms of that, either that advertising revenue or the number of people who have read the story and evidently need to stay profitable a media company needs to have stories that bring in more money than it costs to make them.

[00:07:56] And that's business 101 really.

[00:07:59] And so if as humans we are naturally [gravitating](#)²⁶ towards stories of blood and misfortune, and the news is very [skewed](#)²⁷ towards the negative because that's what sells, how does this actually affect us as human beings?

[00:08:17] Unfortunately, like the subject of this podcast, it's not very good news.

[00:08:23] There's a lot of evidence to suggest that there are some pretty negative mental health effects associated with consuming large amounts of news.

²⁴ change someone's opinion by revealing a piece of information

²⁵ income, money

²⁶ see gravitate

²⁷ make biased or distorted in a way that is regarded as inaccurate, unfair, or misleading

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[00:08:32] If you're just consuming negative content, it's very easy to get into the [mindset](#)²⁸ that the world is a terrible place full of terrible people doing terrible things.

[00:08:43] Indeed, when you're only [exposed to](#)²⁹ negative stories, it's increasingly hard to imagine positive things. Studies show that people develop a sense of anxiety and a feeling of helplessness, and if you're [bombarded](#)³⁰ with negative stories and you're just one person out of, you know, 7 billion in the world today, it's completely natural to feel a sense of helplessness.

[00:09:12] I guess perhaps this might be something that you can [empathise](#)³¹ with. So on a personal level, it's disturbing, but on a wider level, the constant [bombardment](#)³² of negative news can also lead to people having a [skewed perception](#)³³ of what truth is.

[00:09:31] So when people are asked about the [perceived](#)³⁴ risk of something happening, something that is frequently mentioned in the news is almost always considered to be more likely than it is.

²⁸ the established set of attitudes held by someone

²⁹ see, watch, read

³⁰ subject (someone) to a continuous flow of questions, criticisms, or information

³¹ understand and share the feelings of another

³² see bombarded

³³ misunderstanding

³⁴ thought to be

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[00:09:43] So, for example, despite the fact that crime in the UK had actually been falling since 1995 a recent survey showed that 60% of people in England and Wales think it's been rising. So what's the cause of that? Mainly constant news stories about crime.

[00:10:03] Understandably, if you're **bombarded** with news about a particular thing, you're more likely to think that it's happening frequently.

[00:10:12] This, I imagine, is all quite familiar to you.

[00:10:15] And as humans we are really bad at actually understanding risk.

[00:10:19] If we hear a story of something happening, we automatically think it might happen to us, even if the risks statistically are **minuscule**³⁵.

[00:10:29] But even worse than this, after someone is told the truth, humans are very bad at **recalibrating**³⁶ their original idea.

[00:10:40] One very interesting thing that is actually quite scary is that even after we are told the truth, right, even after we have, statistics that are believable and true shown to us, we are very bad at **recalibrating** ourselves and we're not very good at forgetting that original point of reference.

³⁵ very small

³⁶ reset

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[00:11:04] So if you have a point of reference about something, that is your reference point, and people really struggle to move too far away from their original idea.

[00:11:15] So this is something called judgemental [anchoring](#)³⁷.

[00:11:18] A fascinating example of this was something called the Gandhi thought experiment.

[00:11:24] Back in 1997 a group of behavioural psychologists took a group of participants and they split them into two groups.

[00:11:35] One group was asked whether Gandhi was older than 140 when he died, and the other group was asked whether he was younger than nine.

[00:11:46] Right, so two groups. One asked whether Gandhi was older than 140, the other asked if he was younger than nine.

[00:11:54] Of course, both of these options are pretty [implausible](#)³⁸.

[00:11:58] Even if you don't know much about the life of Gandhi, you probably know his name and you assume that he must have done enough with his life to have died when he was older than nine. And you probably also think, well, nobody lives to 140 so he must've been younger than that.

³⁷ provide with a firm basis or foundation

³⁸ not believable

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[00:12:15] But each group only had this one point of reference in their head about the age when Gandhi died.

[00:12:24] They were then asked to state how old they thought he was when he died.

[00:12:29] The group that had been given that over 140 [anchor](#) gave an average of 67 whereas the group that had been given the less than nine option gave an average of 50.

[00:12:44] So despite the [implausibility](#)³⁹ of the original question, people are [anchored](#), they're [glued](#) to the first piece of information that they are made aware of, and that just [anchors](#) everything in their mind.

[00:12:59] So bringing this back to the negativity of the news, if people are constantly [bombarded](#) with negative pieces of information, then this is their [anchor](#). And no matter how much positive information they see, even if it's [contradictory](#)⁴⁰ to the first piece, it's difficult to [unwed](#)⁴¹, difficult to move yourself away from the first piece of information that you received.

[00:13:23] It's mad, right?

[00:13:25] So again, bringing it back to the news, it means that even if we know that all these tragic events aren't really likely to happen to us, the fact that we've heard about

³⁹ fixed to, unmovable from

⁴⁰ different to, incompatible with

⁴¹ unfix from, remove from

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them means they're still in the [back of our minds](#)⁴². We're still thinking about them and we can't ignore them as a reference point.

[00:13:41] But what if the world wasn't like this?

[00:13:44] What if news wasn't always so negative?

[00:13:48] Should it really be that as humans, we only like to hear negative stories of industrial accidents, [famines](#), [bushfires](#)⁴³, and we just accept that we all feel [helpless](#)⁴⁴ in the face of the world's problems?

[00:14:03] And we feel that the role of news is just to frighten us and make us overestimate the probability of terrible things happening.

[00:14:12] Well, I recently finished a book called, You Are What You Read by a lady called Jodie Jackson, and she certainly thinks it doesn't need to be like this.

[00:14:22] She has been arguing for a solutions-based approach to journalism, which means an approach where the news doesn't just talk about the terrible things that have happened in the world, but that highlights the positive things that have happened.

⁴² still thought about

⁴³ a fire in scrub or a forest, especially one that spreads rapidly.

⁴⁴ unable to defend oneself or to act without help

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[00:14:39] And no, she is not **advocating**⁴⁵ for a world where the news reports that no planes have crashed, or actually you don't have to be worried about being eaten by a shark.

[00:14:50] Of course, this wouldn't really be interesting.

[00:14:53] Solutions based journalism highlights stories of things that people have done in the world that inspire people.

[00:15:01] They are stories of people, of organisations and countries doing things that are making the world a better place. Instead of highlighting disasters, it would be highlighting how disasters can be avoided.

[00:15:17] It could be highlighting great things that people have done, inventions, great acts and things that **inspire**⁴⁶ and **uplift**⁴⁷ as opposed to **strike fear into**⁴⁸ the minds of the viewer, of the reader.

[00:15:32] It's really early days for this kind of journalism, but if you're interested, you should definitely check her out.

[00:15:37] You can check out her website at jodiejackson.com

⁴⁵ publicly recommend or support

⁴⁶ create (a feeling, especially a positive one) in a person

⁴⁷ elevate (someone) morally or spiritually

⁴⁸ make someone afraid, scare

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[00:15:41] I certainly think that there is a lot to be said for this kind of [optimistic](#)⁴⁹ journalism, and certainly on this podcast, we're trying to tell inspiring stories about fascinating things, not frighten you with terrible news stories.

[00:15:56] In any case, if you are [fed up](#)⁵⁰ of the constant negativity of the [news cycle](#)⁵¹, then you shouldn't just throw up your hands and say 'pah', nothing we can do about it.

[00:16:07] There are things you can do about it, and this doesn't mean that you have to [retreat](#)⁵² to a cottage in the middle of the woods with no electricity.

[00:16:15] Firstly, one thing that you can immediately do is to limit your [intake](#)⁵³ of news.

[00:16:22] Yes, it's good to be informed, but there are many, many more productive uses of the hours in your day than being [glued](#) to a TV or website waiting to be updated on the latest famine, bushfire or plane crash.

⁴⁹ hopeful and confident about the future

⁵⁰ bored, unable to cope with

⁵¹ the flow of news

⁵² go away

⁵³ consumption, the amount that you read, listen, or watch

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[00:16:36] It's just simply not healthy. You can search out positive news stories, read [longer form](#)⁵⁴ articles that inform and educate, not just [fearmonger](#)⁵⁵ and scare.

[00:16:49] And of course, listen to podcasts, not just this one, although of course, I hope that you will continue to do so, but there are thousands out there, both in English and I'm sure in your mother tongue that will teach and inform, not scare and frighten. I guess if you're listening to this podcast, then you are also learning English, and while [flicking through](#)⁵⁶ the news or [flicking through](#) social media might feel like a immediately good thing to do, long term it's probably not very good for you and you know that you would be much better spending that time doing some kind of English learning activity.

[00:17:29] Which brings me on to the final point.

[00:17:31] So just read and listen to fiction. The human brain is the most amazing tool, and whether you're trying to read in English or in your own language fiction really is [nutrition](#)⁵⁷ for the imagination.

[00:17:46] So picking up a fiction book and reading that for 30 minutes before you go to sleep will definitely leave you feeling more energised and less anxious than, you know,

⁵⁴ content that is longer

⁵⁵ deliberately making someone afraid

⁵⁶ look quickly through

⁵⁷ food or nourishment

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scrolling through the latest headlines or [flicking through](#) whatever your favourite social media app might be.

[00:18:03] So just try it right, try it for a week.

[00:18:06] Stop reading the news, [cut yourself off](#)⁵⁸. I'm sure that your fears of being [out of the loop](#)⁵⁹ won't really be true and there will certainly be [outweighed](#)⁶⁰ by feelings of [freshness](#)⁶¹ and positivity and hopefully also improved English. What a fantastic way to start the year.

[00:18:25] Okay then, as always, thank you very much for listening to the show. I hope it has not been too negative, and I think there is some good news at the end.

[00:18:36] As I said at the start of the podcast, I would love to know what you think of the show.

[00:18:41] You can send in your feedback too hi at leonardoenglish.com with feedback in the subject line. I will correct it and send it straight back to you. I can't wait to hear what you have to say.

⁵⁸ remove your access to

⁵⁹ unaware of information

⁶⁰ be heavier, greater, or more significant than

⁶¹ energy and vigour

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[00:18:52] You've been listening to the English Learning for Curious Minds podcast by Leonardo English. I'm Alastair Budge and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

<u>Word</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Famine	extreme lack of food
Influx	an arrival or entry of large numbers of people or things
Tuning in	turning on
Genocide	the deliberate killing of a large group of people, especially those of a particular nation or ethnic group
Bleak	cold and miserable
Newsworthy	worth reporting as news
Commonplace	frequent, usual
Element of truth	a certain amount of truth
Untold	not told
Accountable	required or expected to justify actions or decisions
Noble pursuit	an admirable activity, something worth being proud of
Lead with	the top headline of the news
Editorial	to be in charge of deciding what goes in the news
Prominence	importance

Gravitate	move towards
Mortality	death
Gore	blood that has been shed, especially as a result of violence
Gloating	thinking about one's own success or another's misfortune with smugness or malignant pleasure
Taken for granted	assume that something is true without questioning it
Captivate	attract and hold the interest and attention of
Numerous	large in number, many
First and foremost	most importantly; more than anything else
Eyeballs	used here to describe the number of people who are reading or watching a piece of news
Bursting your bubble	change someone's opinion by revealing a piece of information
Revenue	income, money
Gravitating	see gravitate
Skewed	make biased or distorted in a way that is regarded as inaccurate, unfair, or misleading
Mindset	the established set of attitudes held by someone
Exposed to	see, watch, read
Bombarded	subject (someone) to a continuous flow of questions, criticisms, or information

Empathise	understand and share the feelings of another
Bombardment	see bombarded
Perception	understanding
Perceived	thought to be
Minuscule	very small
Recalibrating	reset
Anchoring	provide with a firm basis or foundation
Implausible	not believable
Glued	fixed to, unmovable from
Contradictory	different to, incompatible with
Unwed	unfix from, remove from
Back of our minds	still thought about
Bushfires	a fire in scrub or a forest, especially one that spreads rapidly.
Helpless	unable to defend oneself or to act without help
Advocating	publicly recommend or support
Inspire	create (a feeling, especially a positive one) in a person
Uplift	elevate (someone) morally or spiritually
Strike fear into	make someone afraid, scare

Optimistic	hopeful and confident about the future
Fed up	bored, unable to cope with
News cycle	the flow of news
Retreat	go away
Intake	consumption, the amount that you read, listen, or watch
Longer form	content that is longer
Fearmonger	deliberately making someone afraid
Flicking through	look quickly through
Nutrition	food or nourishment
Cut yourself off	remove your access to
Out of the loop	unaware of information
Outweighed	be heavier, greater, or more significant than
Freshness	energy and vigour

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.