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# What Makes “Good” News Newsworthy?

Karen McIntyre

*To combat the constant supply of negative news, some online news outlets focus solely on “good” news. But what is the value of “good” news? A content analysis was conducted to determine which traditional news values (timeliness, conflict, impact, etc.) appear in stories on Web sites dedicated to positive news. The researcher compared “good” news sites to the New York Times. Results indicated that the majority of “good” news stories were entertaining and emotional, whereas the majority of New York Times stories involved authority figures and conflict. Good news stories were less committed to journalism’s core functions, such as holding power accountable and providing the public with information necessary for creating an informed electorate.*

*Keywords:* Content Analysis; Good News; News Values; Newsworthiness; New York Times; Positive News

Consumers have criticized the American news media for publishing too much bad news for more than half a century (Gieber, 1955; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). This so-called “bad news blues” has contributed to the launch of at least a few dozen online media outlets dedicated entirely to happy, positive news. But what exactly is good news, and what value does it have? What makes positive stories newsworthy? One way to approach this question is to examine the characteristics present in stories published on good news Web sites. Existing literature largely ignores the landscape of good news. This study hopes to fill that gap by exploring online media outlets devoted to publishing positive news to see which traditional news values editors choose to focus on in their coverage of all things good.

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Despite the criticism that the media publish too much bad news, there are many reasons why negative news is necessary. Shoemaker (1996) argued that humans are biologically built to look for environmental threats. Journalists recognize that “bad” news is inherently newsworthy (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996). News workers believe it is a necessary function of their jobs and a preservation of democracy to serve a surveillance function by exposing corruption and other inherently negative misdeeds in government or business. This watchdog function is deeply ingrained and widely accepted in journalistic culture (Gans, 2004). Further, journalists tell stories, and drama and conflict are common characteristics of storytelling (Epstein, 1973). It is a literary convention for journalists to cover conflict, not consensus (Eliasoph, 1988; Gitlin, 1980). Additionally, market-driven publishers might believe bad news is profitable. Still, individuals complain that the media are consumed with negativity, perhaps suggesting a market for good news.

### **What Is Good News?**

Few scholars have conceptualized good news. Gieber (1955) first defined positive news as “those items reflecting social cohesion and cooperation” and negative news as “Those items that report social conflicts and disorganization” (pp. 311–312). He listed examples of negative news as political and economic tension, crime, accidents and disasters. Gieber’s definitions were “based on traditional rules of thumb employed by many telegraph and news editors” (Gieber, 1955, p. 312). Hartung and Stone (1980) defined a positive news story as “one for which the majority of the local paper’s readers would be satisfied or pleased that the event had happened or happened as it did. The tone of the story will be generally positive or upbeat” (p. 21). A negative story was defined as the opposite. Stone and Grusin (1984) used similar definitions and reported intercoder reliability at 89%. More recently, Harcup and O’Neill (2001) defined good news as “stories with particularly positive overtones such as rescues and cures” and bad news as “stories with particularly negative overtones, such as conflict or tragedy” (p. 279). They said positive stories “included acts of heroism, resourceful children, miracle recoveries, lucky escapes, happy anniversaries, prize winning, and triumphs over adversity” (p. 272).

Taken together, definitions of good news focus on two characteristics of interpreting “good.” One is the type of occurrence the news story is describing, distinguishing between harmony and conflict. The other is tone, or the predominant valence of the language used in the story. By combining the two characteristics seen in the existing definitions of good news, the following definition was used in this study: Stories with particularly positive overtones, such as rescues, cures, acts of heroism, economic growth, reunifications, or love. These stories often do not have conflict. Think of a good news story as one in which the majority of the site’s readers/viewers would be satisfied or pleased that the event happened, or happened as it did.

### *Does Good News Possess Traditional News Values?*

When deciding what to publish, journalists act as gatekeepers, looking consciously and unconsciously for characteristics that define news (White, 1950). This task can be subjective, but editors and other gatekeepers rely on a flexible set of standard news values, such as conflict, timeliness and impact (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Yopp & McAdams, 2013). To evaluate the news values present in positive stories, this study adapted news values largely from Harcup and O'Neill (2001). This study also borrowed news values common in journalism textbooks to form a more complete typology (Harrower, 2010; Yopp & McAdams, 2013; Yopp, McAdams, & Thornburg, 2010). The following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: Which traditional news values are present in stories published in “good” news outlets?

RQ2: How might these values differ from values present in mainstream news?

### **Method**

A content analysis was conducted of news stories from five “good news” online media outlets. Each outlet’s stories were coded for traditional news values. Stories were sampled in March 2013, a time when no exceptionally newsworthy stories influenced the typical news cycle.

#### *Good News Outlets*

A good news outlet was conceptualized as a regularly updated online U.S.-based media outlet whose main purpose is to publish good news stories. Twenty-five good news sites that were featured in Google searches<sup>1</sup> were originally compiled. Media outlets were then eliminated if they, (a) presented content in a style more common to blogs than news sites; (b) focused on a specific geographic area within the United States or focused on another country; or (c) did not update an average of at least five stories every 2 days, in order to have enough new content to code. Five outlets fit the criteria and comprised the following purposive sample: *Good News Network*, *Happy News*, *Daryn Kagan*, *OdeWire*,<sup>2</sup> and *Huff Post Good News*. The five outlets generally had Web sites that emulated mainstream news Web sites but on a smaller scale, publishing a handful of stories each day, at most. Stories were mostly aggregated, aside from editorials and columns, which were not coded in this study. In addition to the five good news outlets, news stories were coded from the *New York Times* Web site to offer one indication of the news values represented in mainstream online news. The *New York Times* was chosen as a baseline comparison because it has been known to set the agenda for other mainstream news organizations, and research has referred to it as the paper of record (Wang & Riffe, 2010).

Two researchers coded the stories nearest the top of the homepage<sup>3</sup> on each of the six Web sites. The top stories were chosen as sampling units because editors consider

them to be most important (Wang & Riffe, 2010). Researchers coded the top 10 stories on the nytimes.com homepage and the top five stories on the good news sites' homepages. More stories were coded on nytimes.com to account for a more complete representation of the site's daily news; The *New York Times* publishes substantially more news than the good news sites, and the first five stories on nytimes.com are typically considered hard news, whereas softer news stories appear lower on the page but still within the top 10 stories. Stories presented in any medium (print, photo, video) were included, but blog posts and editorials were not.

### *News Values*

The coders analyzed story content by noting the presence or absence of the following traditional news values: power elite, celebrity, entertainment/oddity, magnitude/impact, follow-up, timeliness, conflict, and emotional impact. This typology was adapted from news values suggested by existing scholars (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001; Harrower, 2010; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Yopp & McAdams, 2013; Yopp et al., 2010). The author combined the value of "surprise" with the value of "oddity," which was ultimately collapsed with "entertainment" after coders found that virtually all odd/surprising stories were entertaining. The author also ultimately collapsed the "magnitude" value with the value of "impact" after coding revealed the similarity of the two variables.

### *Coding Parameters and Reliability*

All Web sites were captured daily, before noon, EST. Four of the sites<sup>4</sup> were captured using SiteSucker, an application that downloads Web sites from the Internet onto a local drive. The remaining two sites<sup>5</sup> were captured manually due to complications with the application. Research has shown that "one snapshot per day of nytimes.com's front page could sufficiently represent each day's Web content" (Wang & Riffe, 2010, p. 11). A systematic sample of every second day, where March 1 was randomly selected as the starting day, resulted in 16 days of coded content.<sup>6</sup> After repeat articles<sup>7</sup> were discarded, the sample included 516 stories.

Two coders tested a 10% sample of the news stories for intercoder reliability using Scott's pi. Results for each news value variable were as follows: power elite (.88), celebrity (.92), entertainment/oddity (.84), magnitude/impact (.80), follow-up (.82), timeliness (.60), conflict (.86), and emotional impact (.80).

## **Results**

RQ1 asked which traditional news values were present in stories on good news Web sites. RQ2 asked how these values might differ from those emphasized in mainstream news stories. The findings revealed that stories from good news outlets were overwhelmingly entertaining and emotional. Two-thirds of the stories from the

good news sites were considered entertainment news, whereas only one-quarter of *New York Times* stories were classified as entertainment. This was a significant difference ( $z = 9, p < .01$ ). Stories from the good news sites were also significantly more emotional ( $z = 6.6, p < .01$ ) than those on the mainstream site. Examples of emotional stories included headlines such as, “A High School Basketball Story That Will Make You Cry” or “7-Yr-Old Boy Raises \$30,000 to Help Find Cure for Classmate.”

Good news stories also lacked conflict and rarely involved politicians or other power figures. Of the good news stories, 7% contained conflict, which was significantly less than the 60% of *New York Times* stories with conflict ( $z = 5.3, p < .01$ ). The power elite news value was present in less than one-quarter of good news stories and in two-thirds of *New York Times* stories ( $z = 11.9, p < .01$ ). Stories from good news sites were also less timely. The timeliness variable did not achieve high reliability; however, this finding has face value as stories about government and conflict reasonably have a news peg more often than entertainment stories. The percentage of each news value in the good news sites collectively compared to the *New York Times* can be seen in Table 1. A *t*-test revealed that good news stories collectively possessed an average of 2.2 news values each, which was significantly fewer than the 3.2 average number of news values in each *New York Times* story ( $t = -10.2, p < .01$ ).

Good news sites, both collectively and individually, were significantly different from the *New York Times*, but they also showed some differences among each other.<sup>8</sup>

The site with the fewest news values was *Happy News*, which possessed an average of 1.9 news values per story. In addition to being significantly different from the *New York Times*, *Happy News* was significantly different from both the *Good News Network* ( $p < .05$ ) and *Ode Wire* ( $p < .01$ ). *Ode Wire* had the most news values among the good news sites (an average of 2.4 per story), which was not surprising because *Ode Wire*, according to its motto, focuses on providing a more balanced media diet and is not as strict as the other good news sites that all of its stories be positive. This finding showed that although the good news sites collectively were significantly different from the mainstream news site, they also differed from one another and therefore cannot be treated equally.

**Table 1** Percentage of Stories Containing Each News Value

	All good news sites ( $n = 356$ )	<i>New York Times</i> ( $n = 160$ )
Entertainment/oddity	67%	28%
Emotional impact	46%	19%
Timeliness	43%	66%
Magnitude/impact	20%	39%
Power elite	18%	68%
Celebrity	10%	17%
Conflict	7%	60%
Follow-up	7%	26%

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study examined the unexplored landscape of media outlets that focus on publishing good news, particularly by looking at the news value of such stories using established criteria for defining newsworthiness. The results indicated that stories on good news Web sites overwhelmingly emphasized the news values of entertainment and emotional impact. The stories coded often involved touching features about kind deeds or acts of heroism, and many videos featured entertaining children or pets. Good news Web sites valued different criteria in their content than a traditional media outlet—the *New York Times*. Stories from the *New York Times* often involved government activity and conflict. The stories coded were more serious in nature and often involved political conflict as well as economic turmoil and corruption.

Good news stories collectively possessed significantly fewer news values than *New York Times* stories. The purpose of this study, however, was not to claim that good news is less newsworthy than mainstream news. The *New York Times* was included to offer a baseline comparison, but it is not representative of all mainstream news, nor should it be expected to be similar to good news outlets. This study examined stories on the homepage of the *New York Times*. It is possible that a specific section of the *New York Times*, like the entertainment section, might have stories with news values more similar to those in stories on good news outlets. Additionally, other types of news, such as local news, might be more likely to publish positive news stories with values more closely related to those of good news outlets. Future research should compare good news outlets to additional types of mainstream news organizations.

Different types of media outlets value different news traits, and values relevant to good news may be underrepresented in traditional news typologies. These findings support the idea that news values should not be applied universally to all news outlets. Positive news editors likely have a different purpose in mind than traditional news editors when choosing content. Specifically, these data suggest that good news outlets may be aiming to amuse consumers, whereas the *New York Times* may be aiming to inform consumers. These results suggest a need for multiple news typologies that apply to different types of news. Perhaps researchers and practitioners alike should consider a good news typology meant for media outlets that aim to spread positive news. Additional typologies may be necessary for other types of media organizations, like national versus local news, for example, as local news site editors likely place importance on different news values than national news organizations.

Specific news values that are emphasized in good news deserve further examination. Research has shown that journalists don't define news values clearly, and they rely heavily on intuition (Herscovitz, 1993). More can be learned about the characteristics that make up good news by breaking down common, broad news values such as "human interest" or "entertainment" to provide more nuanced definitions.

This study also sparked questions about the potential benefits and consequences of consuming good news. The findings suggest that good news consumers may be entertained but should not rely solely on good news if they aim to be well informed. Consumers may not receive stories with widespread political or

economic significance from the good news Web sites in this study, but they may reap other benefits. Researchers who have studied the effects of good news have found that consuming a positive news story before or after consuming negative news can mitigate the effects of the bad news (Zillmann & Gibson, 1994). More research should test whether implementing good news stories into mainstream news could, over time, lessen symptoms of the mean-world syndrome associated with cultivation theory (Gerbner, 1976). In his landmark study, Gerbner (1976) found that heavy TV viewers overestimated crime statistics and were more fearful of other individuals than light TV viewers. A more recent cultivation study showed that heavy TV news viewers were more likely than light news viewers to mention crime as an important problem (Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). Perhaps regularly consuming good news in addition to traditional news may leave individuals with a more accurate perception of the world. Contrarily, maybe reading good news will overmitigate the effects of the mean-world syndrome. Future research should evaluate whether heavy good news readers underestimate crime statistics or are perhaps so trusting as to increase their risk of danger. More can be learned about good news readers' perceptions of the world by surveying those who seek good news.

This investigation was designed to explore the good news industry. The results provide an understanding of the different types of stories valued by good news site editors—namely entertaining and emotional stories. This study contributed to the literature on news values and evoked future research questions. But it is not without limitations. A small sample of good news Web sites was examined. Additional good news outlets may differ and should be included in future research. Also, one mainstream news outlet was used in this study to provide a snapshot point of comparison. It would be worthwhile to look at the differences between good news outlets and other mainstream news sources. A final limitation is that this study treated each of the news values equally, when some values might be more important than others. For example, individuals might consider a story that has impact to be more valuable than a story about a celebrity. Future researchers might consider weighting their news values in addition to using different typologies according to the type of news organization they are examining.

## Notes

- [1] Search terms included various combinations of terms, including *good news*, *positive news stories*, and *happy news*.
- [2] *Odewire* has since changed its name to *The Intelligent Optimist*. The following quotes no longer exist on the new site, but the mission has not changed.
- [3] Coders identified the top stories by reading each site's homepage like a book—from top to bottom, left to right.
- [4] *Odewire*, <http://www.odewire.com>; *Daryn Kagan*, <http://www.darynkagan.com>; *Happy News*, <http://www.happynews.com>; *New York Times Online*, <http://www.nytimes.com>
- [5] *Good News Network*, <http://www.goodnewsnetwork.org>; *Huffington Post Good News*, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/good-news/>

- [6] Five articles from five good news sites for 16 days (400 articles) plus 10 articles from nytimes.com for 16 days (160) equals 560 articles.
- [7] This refers to articles that repeat themselves on the same site due to the fact that the site did not update frequently enough to have five new stories after 2 days. Stories that were repeated on separate sites were included.
- [8] Results for the average number of news values in each site were as follows: *New York Times*, 3.2; *Odewire*, 2.4; *Good News Network*, 2.3; *Daryn Kagan*, 2.2; *Huffington Post Good News*, 2.1; *Happy News*, 1.9.

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