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Positive News Makes Readers Feel Good: A “Silver-Lining” Approach to Negative News Can Attract Audiences

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ABSTRACT

After much criticism that the media publish too much negative news, some media outlets have dedicated themselves to publishing only happy, upbeat stories. The current experiment examined the positive news industry by testing the effects of three types of story valence—positive, negative, and silver lining—on readers’ affect, story enjoyment, perceived well-being, and sharing intentions. Results suggest that valence plays a significant role in readers’ affect, in that positive news makes readers feel good. Additionally, findings suggest that the silver-lining story—one that highlights a positive outcome of a negative event—may present a practical way for media outlets to maintain the time-honored surveillance function of negative news yet also reap the affective benefits of positive news.

At least a few dozen English-language online news outlets have dedicated themselves to publishing only happy, positive news content. These sites offer mottos such as “Daily Dose of News to Enthuse” (Good News Network) and “News that Inspires” (Daily Good). The editors of such “good” news Web sites often claim that their purpose is to counter the overabundance of negative news in traditional news media and to show their readers the world is not all bad. On the “About” page of such sites, it is common to read explanations like this one:

This site was born out of a frustration with mainstream news sites only reporting negative news in the main instead of focusing on the positive side of things. Good News Stories will only report on happy and upbeat news to put a smile on the face of people worldwide. (Good News Stories, n.d.)

Many of these so-called good news outlets report surprisingly large audiences and increasing engagement. Daily Good, for example, is a relatively small media outlet with a simple Web site, yet it claims more than 100,000 subscribers. Positive News, based in the United Kingdom, publishes a print edition with a circulation of 40,000. Good News Network, named on Rolling Stone’s Hot List in 2009, had almost half a million “likes” on its Facebook page (an increase by almost double in 18 months) and nearly 74,000 users actively commenting as of November 2015. Good news is catching on in better-known media as well. Both Fox News and MSNBC offer good news segments. The Huffington Post publishes a section dedicated to good news, and editors presented audience metrics showing a substantial increase in the number of visitors to their good news site (Maymann, 2013).

Geri Weis-Corbley, former broadcast journalist and founder of the Good News Network, says “positive news can improve our lives by bringing emotional well-being, health, and even prosperity” (Good News Network, n. d.). Weis-Corbley’s statement is based on anecdotal evidence, but systematic empirical testing is needed to determine in more detail how audiences react to positive versus negative news in addition to a type of story commonly found on good news sites: the
“silver-lining” story. Such stories may feature individuals who have overcome adversity or address issues that have some negative aspects but where the emphasis is put on possible positive outcomes. To that end, the current study examines the effects of news story valence on readers’ affect, story enjoyment, perceived well-being, and sharing intentions. In addition, the effects of hard news, which addresses topics that are more impactful and timely, versus soft news, which addresses topics that are more entertaining and emotional, are investigated. The results of this study will help media practitioners better understand audience reactions to news content and improve the popularity of that content.

**Literature review**

**News story valence**

American news’ traditional functions include serving as a watchdog on government (Entman, 2005; Eriksson & Ostman, 2013) and alerting the public of threats and opportunities (Lasswell, 1948). Shoemaker (1996) argued that the news media exist because humans are biologically built to look for environmental threats. This hard-wired predisposition toward threatening information is one reason that news is so often negative (Shoemaker, 1996).

The valence—positivity and negativity—of news stories has been shown to impact consumers, but, before discussing valence effects, it is necessary to define positive and negative news. Most definitions in the academic literature come from studies in which scholars tested how much bad news the media were in fact publishing after politicians, celebrities, and laypeople criticized the media for reporting too much negative news (Gieber, 1955; Hartung & Stone, 1980; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Stone & Grusin, 1984). Gieber defined positive news as "those items reflecting social cohesion and cooperation," including stories involving international cooperation, noncontroversial government and societal affairs, and news items about individuals (1995, p. 312). He defined negative news as "those items that report social conflicts and disorganization," including stories involving international tension, civic disruption, crime and vice, and accidents and disasters (pp. 311–312). This definition was "based on traditional rules of thumb employed by many telegraph and news editors” (p. 312). Twenty-five years later, 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). They defined a negative story as simply the opposite. More recent definitions were developed while updating a typology of news values rather than while evaluating the media’s focus on bad news. 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). Harcup and O’Neill (2001) offered examples of positive story topics including “acts of heroism, resourceful children, miracle recoveries, lucky escapes, happy anniversaries, prize winning, and triumphs over adversity” (p. 272). Contrarily, Riffe (1993) said bad news includes topics such as “crime, accidents, disasters, etc.” as well as “internal conflict, between-nation conflict, displaced persons and refugees” (p. 7). For the current study, the authors define a positive news story as one that focuses on the benefits of an event or issue and a negative news story as one that focuses on the harmful outcomes of an event or issue.

Substantially more scholars have focused their attention on the effects of negative rather than positive news. Studies in the 1970s and 1980s examined the impact of negative news and overwhelmingly found that negative news stories had a negative impact. Negative news was found to reduce helping behavior, decrease tolerance, lower perceptions of a community’s benevolence, lower evaluations of anonymous others, and cause depression and helplessness (Galician & Vestre, 1987; Veitch & Griffitt, 1976). Negative news has been shown to lead to distrust in political leaders (Kleinnijenhuis, van Hoof, & Oegema, 2006). Specifically compared to positive news, negative news also made viewers feel less emotionally stable and more apprehensive about potential harm.
to themselves (Aust, 1985). Despite these negative effects, Aust found that bad news was judged as more interesting than good news.

Little research has examined the effects of positive news. However, a recent study found that individuals seemed to be more interested in positive than negative news. New York Times readers shared positive news stories more quickly and with more people on social media than they shared negative news stories (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Another study looking at the effects of news story order in a broadcast found that adding a positive story to the end of a television broadcast caused viewers to rate the preceding news stories as less severe (Zillmann, Gibson, Ordman, & Aust, 1994). Both of these studies, however, pointed to the distinction among different types of positive news stories. For example, humorous stories but not human-interest stories caused viewers to rate preceding news as less severe. And in Berger and Milkman’s (2012) study, positive stories that evoked highly arousing emotions were shared often, but not positive stories that evoked emotions low in arousal.

In regard to story valence, yet another category of positive news abounds on good news sites. Some stories published by positive news outlets are purely positive (e.g., New Billboard Promotes Most Effective Medicine: Hugging), but many stories highlight a positive outcome of an inherently negative event (e.g., Competitors Rescue Farm After Deadly Silo Collapse). The authors of the current study have labeled these types of stories silver-lining stories and include them in the experiment to enhance the ecological validity of the story valence variable.

**Story valence and affect**

A significant amount of research has attempted to identify and classify the cognitive antecedents of emotion instead of simply describing the emotions that emerge from various situations (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003; Gross, 1998; Ortony, Clore, & Collins, 1990). Psychologist Magda Arnold (1960) first used the term appraisal to describe the immediate and intuitive evaluations that occur in individuals and result in action tendencies, which are then experienced as emotions (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). In the years following, cognitive appraisal theory was more fully articulated to account for individual variances in emotional reactions to the same event or stimulus. A number of psychologists in the 1980s (Frijda, 1988; Roseman, 1984; Scherer, 1984; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) developed research streams that identified various dimensions of the appraisal process, including certainty, predictability, agency, coping potential, and novelty. Regardless of their focus, all of these scholars agreed that affective responses to an event or other type of stimulus result—at least in part—from an individual’s cognitive appraisal of that event or stimulus (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003). This initial cognitive appraisal initiates the emotional reaction, often (but not necessarily) leading to physiological changes. Furthermore, an understanding of one’s emotional reaction becomes important for future cognitive appraisals as well (Lazarus, 1991).

Applying this theoretical approach to the effects of news differing in story valence, it stands to reason that “good news”—stories that focus the reader’s cognitive efforts on the positive aspects and outcomes of a given topic—will result in higher levels of positive affect or emotion than will stories focused on negative aspects and outcomes. Stories that take a “silver-lining” approach to a topic by addressing any negative components of an issue but also focusing on whatever positive outcome can be expected would likely fall somewhere in between in terms of resulting affect and emotion. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

\[ H_1: \] Story valence will impact readers’ affect in that participants who read a positive news story will subsequently report feeling more positive affect than will those who read a “silver-lining” story or a negative story.

Likewise, when asked to evaluate how enjoyable a news story is, it would follow that those participants who read a positive news story and experience subsequent positive affect will report the most enjoyment from the story, leading to the following hypothesis:
H₂: Story valence will impact readers’ level of enjoyment of the story in that participants who read a positive news story will evaluate the story as more enjoyable than will those who read a “silver-lining” story or a negative story.

**Story valence and perceptions of well-being**

Appraisal theories focus on an individual’s immediate cognitive reactions to a stimulus and the emotions that result from these appraisals. The theories also suggest these emotions play a role in subsequent appraisal situations; thus, emotions are seen as processes that develop over time (Ellsworth, 1991). However, cognitive appraisal theories do not consider the role of appraisal on larger-picture assessments of an individual’s perceived general well-being. Theories focused on social comparison processes, which suggest that individuals compare their own circumstances to those of others in order to evaluate their own abilities and standing (Festinger, 1954), are perhaps more useful for predicting how exposure to positive or negative news will affect assessments of overall well-being. Aust (1985), in a study of the effects of television news on viewers’ satisfaction with life and outlook regarding good fortune and misfortune, used social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) to suggest that exposure to bad news may actually improve an individual’s disposition. “Using aversive life situations endured by persons portrayed in the news reports as a standard of comparison, the viewer might make a more positive judgment about his/her own life situation, compared to viewers who see neutral or good news” (Aust, 1985, p. 13). However, Aust found no evidence to support his predicted inverse relationship between news valence (good vs. bad) and viewers’ degree of satisfaction with life.

Given the lack of clarity in existing literature regarding the effects of good and bad news on general perceptions of well-being, the following research question is proposed:

RQ₁: What is the effect of story valence on participants’ perceived well-being?

**Story valence and sharing intentions**

The current study will also examine whether story valence might influence sharing intentions regarding news stories. Scholars who focus on information diffusion have suggested that people might be more likely to share positive rather than negative messages in an effort to signal their identity or enhance their self-presentation (Wojnicki & Godes, 2008). Sharing positive information might also improve the sender’s mood (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Berger and Milkman analyzed more than 7,000 New York Times stories using both computer and human coders to see which types of stories were shared most often. They found that, overall, positive stories were shared more than negative stories, but the results were more nuanced than the dichotomous distinction between positive and negative valence; they were also linked to emotion. The authors found that the most shared stories were highly emotionally arousing. These stories evoked either positive or negative emotions, such as awe or anger. However, when controlling for emotionality, positive stories were shared more often than negative stories. In sum, stories most likely to go viral were both positive and emotionally arousing or activating. Stories least likely to be shared evoked deactivating emotions that are low in arousal, such as sadness. These results remained even after controlling for how surprising, interesting, or practically useful the news stories were.

Although the present study is focused on affect rather than arousal, Berger and Milkman’s basic finding suggests there will be a linear relationship between story valence and sharing intentions, such that intent to share will be highest for those participants who read a positive news story and lowest for those who read a negative news story. However, this could be considered inconsistent with Galtung and Ruge’s (1965) classic theory of news story diffusion, which posits that people are more interested in negative news. Individuals might be more likely to share negative news stories because, in keeping with the press’s surveillance function, it is important to alert individuals of societal or environmental threats typically synonymous with negative news (Shoemaker, 1996). Empirical
research has supported this idea. Hansen, Arvidsson, Nielsen, Colleoni, and Etter (2011) looked at the relationship between information valence and sharing behavior on Twitter and found negative news was more likely to be retweeted than positive news. Among non-news Tweets, positive messages were more likely to be shared. The results of this study contradict Berger and Milkman’s (2010) findings, making it appropriate to propose a research question instead of a hypothesis regarding the influence of story valence on sharing intentions:

RQ2: What effect will news story valence have on sharing intentions?

**Hard vs. soft news**

In addition to the independent variable of story valence, the current study examines differences between two other categories of news stories: hard vs. soft. Conceptualizations of hard and soft news in academic literature have been unclear at best and nonexistent at worst (Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2012). Scholars have suggested soft news is less timely than hard news (Patterson, 2000; Reinemann et al., 2012; Shoemaker & Cohen, 2006), has more entertainment appeal (Patterson, 2000), is more sensational (Patterson, 2000), is written in a more personable style (Patterson, 2000) and is less expensive to produce (Baum, 2002). Researchers have further mentioned specific topics when defining these story categories. Soft news has been classified as reports that focus on lifestyle, wardrobe, and celebrities (Prior, 2003). Baum (2002) listed celebrity murder trials and sex scandals as “the usual fare of soft news outlets” (p. 91). He operationalized soft TV news as talk shows and entertainment and tabloid news programs such as Entertainment Tonight, Extra, and Oprah Winfrey. Hard TV news programs included CNN, CBS Evening News, and ABC World News Tonight.

Soft news has also been defined by what it is not—hard news. Patterson (2000) defined hard news as “coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routines of daily life, such as an earthquake or airline disaster” (p. 3). Baum (2002) considered hard news to involve politics and public policy. A common theme in hard news is that it contains information that is necessary for consumers to understand and participate in public affairs (Patterson, 2000). Soft news has been considered a catchall category for all news that is not considered hard (Baum, 2002; Patterson, 2000). Although scholars have pointed to distinctions between hard and soft news, they have not always agreed. For example, Patterson (2000) cited scholars who defined breaking news events such as natural disasters to be hard news, but he then argued that these sensational, incident-based reports are in fact soft news. It is important to note that these categories are not necessarily dichotomous but rather have been thought to rest on a continuum, which has added to their ambiguity (Baum, 2002).

Reinemann et al. (2012) reviewed the inconsistent literature regarding hard and soft news and offered thorough definitions of the two story categories. They distinguished hard and soft news by measuring a story based on its topic, focus, and style. A hard news story is more politically relevant, focuses on the public or social relevance or consequences of an event and is written in a less personal style that does not include the journalist’s personal views. A soft news story is less politically relevant, focuses on personal or private aspects and consequences and is written in a more personal or emotional style.

**Story category and affect**

Based on the many conceptualizations of hard and soft news, soft news stories seem to inherently include more positive than negative information. If hard news is considered to be more impactful and timely and soft news more entertaining and emotional, then many stories on positive news Web sites rest on the softer side of the spectrum (McIntyre, In press), providing evidence that soft news stories are more positive than hard news stories. Additionally, people perceive a hard news story as delivering negative information and a soft news story as delivering positive information. In a survey, hard news viewers were more likely than soft news viewers to say the news is negative rather than positive (Patterson, 2000).
In regard to the relationship between story category (hard vs. soft) and affect, individuals who read soft news might reasonably report more positive affect than those who read hard news, but it is the positive quality of soft stories that would likely result in the positive affective reaction. Because this confound exists in the literature, it is possible that when story category (hard vs. soft) and story valence are separated, there is not much of a difference between individuals’ affective responses to hard and soft news. The current study is designed with separate conditions for story valence and category in an attempt to avoid this confound. News stories were manipulated so that not all soft stories were positive and not all hard stories were negative. Rather, the authors included both a positive and negative version of a soft news story and a positive and negative version of a hard news story. A silver-lining version was also included for both the hard and soft stories. Thus, the following research question is proposed:

RQ3: Irrespective of story valence, how do hard news stories differ from soft news stories in terms of readers’ affective responses?

**Story category and sharing intentions**

The confounding nature of story category (hard vs. soft) and story valence (negative vs. positive) comes into play again in regard to each variable’s effect on sharing intentions. Berger and Milkman (2012) found that news consumers were more likely to share positive stories than negative stories, and positive stories are considered softer than negative stories (Patterson, 2000), which leads to the prediction that individuals who read soft news stories will report higher sharing intentions. However, Berger and Milkman’s (2012) finding was driven by emotional arousal. Because soft news stories are often positive, and positive news stories are often highly emotional (McIntyre, in press), it is likely individuals will be more likely to share soft stories than hard stories, but only because of the positivity of such stories, not the softness of them. Again, because the current study includes hard stories that are both positive and negative and soft stories that are both positive and negative, the authors can determine whether participants report different levels of affect after reading a positive or negative version of a hard story and after reading a positive or negative version of a soft story.

In contrast to Berger and Milkman’s (2012) finding, Hansen et al. (2011) found that negative news messages were shared more than positive news messages on Twitter. Again, however, these authors only examined the valence of the messages and not whether the news was hard or soft. Given the contradictory findings regarding sharing behavior as well as the potential confound of story valence and story category, a research question is proposed:

RQ4: Irrespective of story valence, how do hard news stories differ from soft news stories in terms of readers’ sharing intentions?

**Method**

**Design**

This study employed a 3 × 2 between-subjects factorial design with Story Valence (positive, negative, silver lining) and Story Category (hard, soft) serving as independent variables.

**Participants**

Participants were 307 U.S. individuals recruited from Amazon’s Mechanical Turk, a crowd-sourcing labor market where researchers (and others) pay “workers” minimal wages to complete small tasks. Mechanical Turk is a useful social science tool because it allows researchers to gather data quickly and inexpensively. In the current experiment, data collection was completed in a few hours. Workers were paid $.50 for their participation, and the average time to complete the experiment was about 9 minutes. Participant samples from Mechanical Turk might not be representative of the...
U.S. population, but they are significantly more diverse than typical American college samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The participants in the current study were 65% male and 74% Caucasian (followed by 9% Asian and 8% African American). The average age was 32, although ages ranged from 18 to 72. Workers were spread throughout the United States with about one quarter from each the Northeast, Southeast, and West. They were fairly educated: 38% held a bachelor’s degree, 29% attended some college, 13% graduated high school, 10% held an associate’s degree, and 9% completed graduate school.

Although more research is needed on the effectiveness of this relatively new data-collection method, research has shown that data collected through Mechanical Turk are at least as reliable as those obtained by traditional methods (Buhrmester et al., 2011).

**Stimulus materials**

A fictitious news site, Network News, was designed for the experiment using Adobe Illustrator and was intended to look like a standard professional news Web site. The header included a logo, search bar, social media icons, and horizontal navigation bar with several story categories such as “Business,” “Politics,” “Education,” etc. The footer repeated the logo, included additional social media icons and also included standard (fake) links such as “About Us” and “Contact Us.” The sidebar simulated a simple “Local Weather” widget and included a plain ad for a fictitious paper company. The body of the fake news site included one of the versions of a news story complete with headline, subhead, byline, recent date, photo, and story text.

One “soft” and one “hard” news story were chosen from real news outlets and manipulated for the experiment. The soft news story involved the effectiveness of educational applications for children. The hard news story involved the potential consequences of a minimum wage increase. A hard news story was conceptualized as one with significantly more political relevance than its softer counterpart. This conceptualization followed from Reinemann et al. (2012), who designated the story topic as the most important dimension in distinguishing between hard and soft news. They conceptualized story topic in terms of how politically relevant a story is and argued that “a news item reporting a politically relevant event will always be ‘harder’ than a politically irrelevant item” (p. 232). To ensure that participants perceived the hard story to be more politically relevant than the soft story, participants were asked to rate the extent to which they believed the story to be politically relevant.

Both stories were manipulated to include a positive, negative, and silver-lining version. In the soft news story, the positive version focused on a study that found that children who consumed educational material on apps performed better on verbal and math tests. In the negative version, the study found children who used educational apps were performing worse. In the silver-lining version, the study found that children using the apps were performing worse, except that the results were reversed for older children (ages 8–10). In the hard news story, the positive version focused on the benefits of a proposal to raise the minimum wage, including that it could reduce poverty. The negative version focused on the consequences of the proposal, including that it could raise unemployment. The silver-lining version discussed how the proposal might have some short-term consequences but would ultimately have more benefits in the long run. The manipulation/story focus was stated clearly at the beginning of each article and was followed by supporting information and quotes. The article headlines were also manipulated to reflect the positive, negative, or silver-lining focus of each story. To ensure the valence manipulation was successful, a pretest was conducted in which participants were asked to rate the negativity/positivity of the story.
**Procedure**

Participants self-selected to take a survey posted on the Mechanical Turk Web site. The survey was described as a research study in which each worker would be asked to read a news story and respond to a questionnaire. The description also said the task should not take longer than 10 minutes. Workers who chose to participate were redirected to a Qualtrics survey, where they were thanked for their interest and asked for their consent to participate. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the news story versions and asked to read the story carefully. Finally, participants responded to several questions before submitting the survey.

**Dependent variables**

Affect was measured using five 7-point semantic differential scales: bad/good, sad/happy, hopeless/hopeful, bored/entertained, and negative/positive. The single index of affect used in the analysis was obtained by averaging responses to these five scales, which yielded a reliable Cronbach’s alpha of .89. Story enjoyment was measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale in which participants rated their agreement with the following statement: “The story you just read was enjoyable.”

Perceived well-being was measured by adapting a scale by Côté, Gyurak, and Levenson (2010). The original scale included five true/false items but was converted to a 7-point Likert-type scale in order to create a ratio-level variable. Participants rated their agreement with the following statements: “My daily life is full of things that keep me interested,” “The future seems hopeless to me” (reverse coded), “Most of the time I feel happy,” “I don’t think I’m quite as happy as others seem to be” (reverse coded), and “It often seems that my life has no meaning” (reverse coded). The index yielded a reliable Cronbach’s alpha of .88.

Sharing intention was measured by asking participants to rate the likelihood they would share the story they had just read on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Additional relevant information was collected including questions about participants’ demographics, news habits, and familiarity with the story topic.

**Results**

**Manipulation checks**

Political relevance of story topic was measured to ensure the hard story (about minimum wage) was considered more politically relevant than the soft story (about educational apps for children), in keeping with Reinemann et al.’s (2012) definition of hard news. As expected, a t test revealed that the hard news story was significantly more politically relevant than the soft news story, \( t(268.34) = -20.45, p < .001 \). An adjusted \( T \) value was reported because Levene’s Test for Equality of Variances was significant. News story valence was also measured to ensure the manipulation was effective. A significant \( t \) test with pretest data confirmed that participants regarded the positive story as significantly more positive than the negative story, \( t(55.71) = 10.47, p < .001 \). An adjusted \( T \) value was reported because Levene’s Test was significant.

**Survey results**

**Affect**

Affect was examined using a 3 (Story Valence) \( \times \) 2 (Story Category) analysis of variance (ANOVA). This procedure revealed a main effect for story valence, \( F(2, 301) = 42.05, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21 \), supporting \( H_1 \), which predicted a relationship between story valence and affect. Participants reported greater positive affect after reading a positive news story (\( M = 5.15, SD = 1.1 \)) than a silver-lining story (\( M = 4.52, SD = 1.13 \)) or a negative story (\( M = 3.72, SD = 1.1 \)). Bonferroni post hoc comparisons of mean affect ratings indicated that positive, negative, and silver-lining news stories all significantly differed from one another at the \( p < .001 \) level. Addressing RQ\(_3\), which asked how hard news stories might differ from soft news stories...
stories (irrespective of story valence) in terms of readers’ affective responses, this ANOVA further revealed a main effect for story category, $F(1, 301) = 6.2, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. Participants reported greater positive affect after reading a soft news story ($M = 4.63, SD = 1.2$) than a hard news story ($M = 4.31, SD = 1.29$). This effect remained when controlling for how familiar participants were with the story. Finally, this ANOVA revealed no significant interaction effect.

**Story enjoyment**

A two-way ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of story valence on how enjoyable the story was, $F(2, 301) = 6.69, p < .01, \eta^2 = .04$, supporting $H_2$, which predicted a significant relationship between story valence and enjoyment. Participants who read a positive news story ($M = 4.97, SD = 1.2$) rated the story as more enjoyable than those who read either a silver-lining story ($M = 4.47, SD = 1.3$) or a negative story ($M = 4.33, SD = 1.4$). Bonferroni post hoc comparisons of mean story enjoyment ratings indicated significant differences between positive and negative stories ($p < .01$) and positive and silver-lining stories ($p < .05$), but no significant difference between negative and silver-lining stories. The ANOVA also revealed a significant main effect for story category, $F(1, 301) = 5.22, p < .05, \eta^2 = .02$. Participants who read a soft news story ($M = 4.76, SD = 1.28$) rated the story as more enjoyable than those who read a hard news story ($M = 4.42, SD = 1.36$). No significant interaction effect was revealed.

**Perceived well-being**

$RQ_1$ asked what effect story valence might have on participants’ perceived well-being. A two-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effect of story valence on perceived well-being. Additionally, no significant main effect was found for story category, and there was no significant interaction.

**Sharing intentions**

$RQ_2$ asked what effect news story valence might have on sharing intentions. A two-way ANOVA revealed no significant main effect for story valence. Participants did not differ in their likelihood to share the news story based on whether it was positive, negative, or silver lining. $RQ_4$ asked, irrespective of story valence, how hard news stories might differ from soft news stories in terms of readers’ sharing intentions. Again, the ANOVA revealed no significant main effect for story category. Participants did not differ in their likelihood to share the story based on whether it was hard or soft. Finally, no significant interaction effect was revealed.

**Discussion**

A growing trend in digital news sites—the focus on good news—suggests that media executives are trying to increase audience size by emphasizing the positive aspects of issues and events. The current study took a psychological approach to understanding why people like positive news stories. Our results underscore the ability of good news to create positive affect. In addition, findings suggest that a combination type of news report—the silver-lining story—may present a practical way for media outlets to maintain the traditional surveillance function of negative news yet also benefit from the affective benefits of positive news.

Our first hypothesis, stemming from cognitive appraisal theory (Ellsworth & Scherer, 2003) predicted that respondents who read a positive news story would experience higher levels of positive affect than would those who read a silver-lining story or a negative story. This valence-related effect was present for both a hard news story that involved a politically relevant topic (the effects of increasing the minimum wage) and a soft news story that involved a less politically relevant topic (the effectiveness of mobile apps designed for youngsters). Likewise, study respondents who read a positive news story reported higher levels of enjoyment from the act of reading the story than did those who read a silver-lining or negative story, which supported our second hypothesis. Thus, reading good news is more enjoyable. It is important to note, however, that individuals who read a negative news story might have been less likely to say they enjoyed the story because it might be socially undesirable to report enjoying a negative story.
Also, even though they reported enjoying the story less, they might still be interested in and appreciate the story. Nonetheless, these findings support the assertions by good news proponents that reading news from their sites can make people happier.

However, this study produced no evidence to suggest that, as the founder of the Good News Network claims “positive news can improve lives by bringing emotional well-being, health and even prosperity” (Good News Network, n. d.). Respondents who read a positive news report did not report higher levels of perceived well-being than did those who read silver-lining or negative news. Apparently, the higher levels of positive affect and enjoyment that result from reading good news do not translate into a larger sense of personal well-being. However, the design of this study was likely not the most effective way to examine the larger effects of continued exposure to positive news. Additional research of a more longitudinal nature would be better suited to determine if reading good news can indeed lead to long-term well-being and prosperity.

This study did little to clear up the already muddied findings about what makes digital content go viral, as no sharing effects were found. Perhaps the context or the medium through which sharing would occur, which was not specified in this study, affects whether people share positive or negative content. Berger and Milkman (2012) previously found that individuals were more likely to share an advertisement through e-mail when it evoked amusement—a positive emotion—but more likely to share a customer-service experience through e-mail when it evoked anger—a negative emotion. On the other hand, Hansen et al. (2011) determined that negative news messages were shared more often than were positive news messages on Twitter. Hansen et al. (2011) has speculated that e-mail is a more reciprocal medium; therefore, people might be more likely to share positive news through e-mail because they want their friends (who will likely reply) to associate them with positive information, whereas people might be more open to sharing negative news on Twitter because it is a less reciprocal communication tool. Additional research is needed to more carefully examine the nuances of sharing intentions and to clarify the role of content type, sharer emotions, and medium.

Lastly, our results show an effect of story category on reader affect. Participants who read the soft news story reported higher levels of positive affect than did those who read the hard news story, regardless of story valence. This effect endured when controlling for how familiar participants were with the topic of the story they read. This result could provide guidance for media executives who are looking for increased audiences: News that is “softer” in nature—more focused on human interest and less on political relevance—makes people feel better, even when it focuses on negative information.

**Implications of the “silver-lining approach” for media professionals**

Perhaps the most important practical contribution of this study is its consideration of the effects of what we call the “silver-lining story.” This type of news report, which is commonly found on good news sites, highlights the positive aspects or outcomes of an otherwise negative topic. Examples are news stories about those who overcome adversity to achieve success: For example, a teenager who, despite growing up in poverty, goes on to start his own software company, or a town that bounces back after being devastated by a tornado. These stories combine the traditional surveillance and watchdog functions of negative news with the uplifting human-interest value of positive news. Although there has been a growth in news outlets that focus solely on good news, it is not realistic to think that negative events or issues should or will not be reported on. For those media executives who want to maintain the time-honored surveillance function of news yet also harness the popularity of good news, the silver-lining story may be a useful option. Silver-lining stories do not produce as much positive affect or reading enjoyment as purely good news, but they do produce higher levels of those sought-after results than does strictly negative news. Thus, our advice to reporters and editors is to include positive “silver-lining” information in news stories whenever possible.
**Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations to this study. This study exposed participants to only one news story, which does not allow us to examine the effects of a more extensive diet of positive, negative, or silver-lining news. Likewise, this study examined enjoyment and positive versus negative affect but did not address the concept of media appreciation, which likely involves mixed affect, such as feeling touched or moved (Oliver & Raney, 2011). Future examination of the effects of silver-lining news, which by definition includes a positive angle on a relatively negative situation, should most certainly include assessment of the presence and effects of mixed affect.

**References**


