The Effect of News Exposure on Impression Formation

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Abstract

How does exposure to negative news articles affect our impression of strangers? Previous research has shown that news media contains an overwhelming share of negative news, with the potential to alter a person's perception of the world as more negative than it actually is. This study aimed to understand how negative news could alter a person's emotional state, thereby affecting their perception of others. Participants were randomly assigned to read a negative news article or a neutral news article. Subsequently, participants answered a questionnaire containing photos of strangers asking them to rate how strongly they agreed or disagreed with positive statements about them. A participant's total score on the questionnaire was used to measure negative or positive impressions. The results show a statistically significant difference in impressions between both conditions. Neutral news readers consistently showed neutral impressions of strangers. Contrary to this experiment's hypothesis, negative news readers displayed more positive impressions of strangers. These findings demonstrate that negative news had a greater impact on a reader's emotional state, although participants chose to have more positive impressions of strangers.

The way people consume news has evolved from newspapers and television, to the internet and social media. Breaking news spreads quickly on Twitter, blogs, and other social networks. All of these sources are free and easily accessible in comparison to traditional news outlets that charge subscription fees. Due to this, traditional news outlets have struggled to stay relevant and compete with the internet. Headlines are written to grab the reader's attention, and stories are written to evoke strong emotions. Where a person gets their news from can affect how they view the world, how safe they feel in their communities, and how they interpret the actions of others. Negative topics dominate the news cycle, making it increasingly difficult to avoid (Glavac et al, 2022).

There is empirical evidence that negative news impacts a person's emotional state, with cognitive appraisal theory as a pertinent framework to understand this phenomenon (de Hoog & Verboon, 2020). Cognitive appraisal theory posits that a person's emotional response to a stressor is a consequence of a two-step appraisal process leading to the interpretation of the situation. The first step is the primary appraisal wherein a person identifies the importance of the situation based on severity and relevance, and the second step is the secondary appraisal wherein the ability to cope with the situation is assessed (Glavac et al, 2022). According to authors of appraisal theory (Glavac et al, 2022), exposure to visceral news causes an emotional reaction stemming from appraisal, thus leading to reaction of the situation. Secondary appraisal is seen as less relevant due to most news events being perceived as uncontrollable, while personal relevance and perceived salience strongly impacts reaction (Glavac et al, 2022; de Hoog & Verboon, 2020).

Emotional headlines have a greater impact on information processing and social judgment than the perceived credibility of the media source, even when a person deems the source as untrustworthy (Baum & Rahman, 2021). As a result of greater emphasis on sensational news that strives to agitate, emotional content can have a stronger impact on a person's interpretation of the news than facts and credibility. Negative news focused on

dramatic themes instead of neutral facts could have the potential to shape how people understand the world, leading to a negative and grim view of society (Glavac et al, 2022). Exposure to traumatic and emotionally triggering stories could alter social expectations, consequentially shaping a person's experience and behavior, notably the safety and trust they feel around others (Glavac et al, 2022). Studies have shown that negative news decreases positive affects, increases negative affects, and leads to sadness and anxiety (de Hoog & Verboon, 2020).

Perceiver effects is the tendency for individuals to form judgmental bias about other people, accounting for 20% to 30% of the variation in interpersonal impressions (Rau et al, 2021). This research aims to examine how exposure to negative news can impact perceiver effects, specifically initial impressions that occur in absence of direct interaction with the other person. Online social networks, online platforms to meet potential partners or friends, and the ubiquity of mobile phone usage in all aspects of normal life have led to more superficial connections. As such, negative news may have greater significance on initial impressions. It is hypothesized that negative news will lead individuals to form negative impressions of others, adversely altering their perceiver effects. If the news can distort the events of a story, it stands to reason that it can also manipulate a reader's emotions, thereby affecting how they perceive and behave towards others.

Method

Participants

The participants included twelve adults, four men and eight women between the ages of 18 and 45 years old. Half the subjects are CSU East Bay students, and the remaining participants are volunteers recruited by convenience sampling. The consent form was linked in the instructions document, and participants consented but did not receive anything for participation.

Materials and Design

The articles chosen were written in 2020 about the Black Lives Matter protests. One article was written by Fox News "Rioting, looting linked to George Floyd protests leaves trail of destruction across American cities", and the second article was written by the New York Times "Protests Swell in U.S. and Beyond as George Floyd Is Mourned Near His Birthplace". The articles were found from each publication's website. All identifying characteristics were removed, such as the navigation bar with identifying media name and characteristics (colors and styles that represent the media company), header with publication name, author, identifying images, ads, videos identifying the media company, and links with media name. The altered article was then saved as a pdf. The images of people were selected from a collection of images used in experiment *Seeing the Best or Worst in Others* (Rau et al, 2021), and images selected from a google search for stock photos of faces with neutral expressions. The same images were used for both conditions.

The experiment used a between subjects design. The independent variables were a negative news article and a positive/neutral news article. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the independent variables, with an equal number of participants for each variable. The participants' impression of strangers was the dependent variable. Impression was measured by

a participant's total score on the impression questionnaire. A low score indicates an overall

negative impression of strangers, and a high score indicates a positive impression of strangers.

Procedure

　　Subjects were emailed a document with the experiment instructions. The document

instructed subjects to read the linked article, then complete the linked questionnaire. To

complete the questionnaire, participants were directed to look at the photo and indicate how

strongly they agreed or disagreed that the provided statement fit the person in the photo. The

debriefing document was linked in the instructions which provided details about the experiment

and its hypothesis. Participants were instructed to email any questions or feedback about the

experiment. Three participants provided feedback after completing the experiment.

Results

　　An independent sample t-test was run with an alpha level of .05. Participants who read

the negative article ($M = 24.33$, $SD = 1.37$) had a higher impression score than those who read

the neutral article ($M = 21.50$, $SD = 2.25$), $t(10) = -2.63$, $p = .03$.

Discussion

　　Contrary to my hypothesis, participants who read the negative news article showed a

significantly higher positive impression of strangers in the photos. However, participants who

read the neutral news article more often indicated a neutral impression of the strangers in the

photo. Most participants chose neutral for at least one of the photos, while one participant from

the negative article group had more opposing scores. This participant chose strongly disagree

or strongly agree for most photos, and never chose neutral. Participants who read the negative

article gave five out of eight photos higher impression scores than participants who read the

neutral article, indicating they agreed more with the positive statements attributed to the faces.

Participants who read the neutral article gave three out of eight photos higher impression scores

than participants who read the negative article. Although the negative article participants had a

higher mean, these participants had a more significant standard deviation for each photo. Why

were the negative article participants more likely to assign positive attributes to strangers? What

would the results show if the statements were negative characteristics instead of positive?

This research shows that the negative article did have a significant effect on the

participants' emotional states. Whereas the neutral article participants chose the neutral score

more often, the negative article participants showed a larger range in scores. The negative

article participants were more willing to form impressions of the strangers. Previous research

has repeatedly found that women have more positive generalized other-perceptions than

men (Rau et al, 2021). The larger representation of women in the participant group could

explain why this experiment's results show a more neutral or positive impression of strangers.

Feedback from participants indicated that many individuals felt uncomfortable

characterizing attributes to strangers. A mistake in the design of the questionnaire was

assigning declarative statements to each photo. Future research could change the statements

to indicate that a person looks like they possess a characteristic, rather than saying they are

that characteristic. Some participants may still feel hesitant to judge strangers but could feel less

pressure and self judgment.

References

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