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COLUMN ONE

Headlines and High Anxiety

■ We're safer and healthier than ever—and also more afraid of what we eat, drink and breathe. Why the reality gap? Too often, critics say, the media's coverage fuels our fears.

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"How extraordinary!" wrote political scientist Aaron Wildavsky in 1979. "The richest, longest-lived, best protected, most resourceful civilization, with the highest degree of insight into its own technology, is on its way to becoming the most frightened."

Extraordinary, indeed.

Life expectancy in the United States is 75.5 years, up almost 13 years since 1940 and more than double what it was at the turn of the century. Since 1970, the infant mortality rate has been cut in half, the death rate from heart disease (our No. 1 killer) has dropped 27% and the death rate from stroke (our No. 3 killer) is down 44%. Death rates for emphysema, tuberculosis and other once-dreaded diseases have also declined. Polio and smallpox, long the scourge of childhood, have all but disappeared.

Deaths from cancer (our No. 2 killer) have increased, but that increase is largely attributable to smoking—which has led to a doubling of the lung cancer death rate in the last 30 years—and to two simple facts: (1) People are living longer. (2) The sharp decline in fatalities linked to heart disease and stroke means that other causes of death are rising proportionally.

Despite these enormous improvements—and despite recent improvements in the health of our much brooded-over environment as well—psychologists, sociologists and epidemiologists say we may well be the most anxious, frightened society in history.

No reasonable person can deny that very real dangers lurk in all our lives—in our air, in our food and water supply and in other natural and artificial substances. Guns kill. Cigarettes kill. Toxic chemicals, high-fat diets and abuse of alcohol can kill.

"But the risks that kill people and the risks that scare people are different," says Peter Sandman, a risk communications consultant based in Massachusetts.

Why are we so scared—and so often scared by the wrong things?

Many people say the news media are largely to blame. The media, after all, pay the most attention to those substances, issues and situations that most frighten their readers and viewers. Thus, almost every day, we read and see and hear about a new purported threat to our health and safety.

We are warned about benzene in our Perrier, Alar on our appies, and asbestos in our school buildings. We are told that popcorn, margarine and red meat—as well as Chinese, Italian, French and Mexican food—all contribute to heart disease. Aluminum and zinc are reported to contribute to Alzheimer's disease. Alcohol is blamed for virtually every malady but the national debt. And everything, it's said, causes cancer: Caffeine. Cellular phones. Dioxin. High-power lines. The hole in the ozone layer. Hot dogs. Secondhand smoke. Silicone breast implants.

While we are fretting about the fat in our fettuccine alfredo ("a heart attack on a plate," according to the Center for Science in the Public Interest), we are also being bombarded by terrifying tales of violent crime, crashing airplanes, an AIDS epidemic among heterosexuals and a global warming trend.

The media are supposed to serve as an early warning system for the public, and they have long fulfilled this function in alerting people to a range of risks, from high-fat diets to cars (the Ford Pinto) to medical devices (the Dalkon Shield IUD).

In fact, says Al Meyerhoff, senior attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental group, the media "almost do too good a job" in sounding alarms.

"One of the political problems the environmental movement has had to deal with, particularly over the last few years, is simply getting through the clutter of all the different messages of gloom and doom that the public receives," Meyerhoff says.

LIVING SCARED. *Why Do the Media Make Life Seem So Risky?* First in a three-part series

But for the media to "not say anything at all is the worst crime," says Marlene Cimons, who covers federal regulatory agencies for the Los Angeles Times. "If there's a debate going on, people need to know about it. My responsibility is to report it in a balanced way. I can't help the way people react."

Many people—a number of them journalists—say that media coverage of risk issues is often *un*balanced, and that *does* make reporters responsible for the way people react. Too often, critics say, the media provide not just essential information and legitimate warnings but unwarranted alarms for an increasingly susceptible audience, one willing to see risk in almost everything.

In an effort to educate the public and attract readers and viewers, the media often overplay risks of dubious legitimacy. Scientific studies show that many of the alleged hazards the media trumpet are either misstated, overstated, nonexistent or that there just is not enough scientific evidence yet to yield reliable guidance on the true risk for the average American.

David Ropiek, a longtime environmental reporter for WCB-TV in Boston, says risk coverage "gets to the most fundamental failing of the media today." In their zeal to have an impact, Ropiek says, journalists are "seduced . . . into playing up