

A Deluge of Disaster, Destruction, Death and Deception: Negative News and Empathy Fatigue in the Digital Age

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Abstract : Initially identified as sensationalism in the eras of yellow journalism and tabloidization, the inclusion of news which shocks or provokes strong emotional responses among readers, viewers, and browsers has not only remained a persistent feature of journalism but has also seemingly escalated in the current climate of digital and social media. Whether in the relentless revelation of scandals in high places, profiles on people displaced by sporadic wars or natural disasters, gruesome accounts of trucks plowing into pedestrians in a city centre, or the coverage of mourners paying tributes to victims of a mass shooting, mainstream, and digital media are often awash with tragedy, tears, and trauma. While it may aim at inspiring sympathy, outrage, or even remedial reactions, it would appear that the deluge of grief and misery in the news merely generates in the audience a feeling that borders on hearing or seeing too much to care or act. This feeling also appears to be accentuated by the dizzying diffusion of social media news and views, most of whose authenticity is not easily verifiable. Through a survey of 400 regular consumers of news and an in-depth interview of 10 news managers in selected media organizations across the Middle East, this study therefore investigates public attitude to the profusion of bad news in mainstream and digital media. Among other targets, it examines whether the profusion of bad news generates empathy fatigue among the audience and, if so, whether there is any association between biographic variables (profession, age, and gender) and an inclination to empathy fatigue. It also seeks to identify which categories of bad news and media are most likely to drag the audience into indifference. In conclusion, the study discusses the implications of the findings for mass-mediated advocacies such as campaigns against conflicts, corruption, nuclear threats, terrorism, gun violence, sexual crimes, and human trafficking, among other threats to humanity.

Keywords : digital media, empathy fatigue, media campaigns, news selection

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