

Some of the key questions for us as individuals and as a society are: How do we know what's going on around us? Can we trust that information? And most importantly, what is the effect of that information on our lives?

Beyond the immediate reporting of our senses, we rely on “the news” – information about current events – brought to us by a variety of sources, some of which are extremely biased. We tend to use sources that confirm our beliefs about the world, which is another problem. But regardless of the source, most of the news these days seems to be pretty negative.

Here are some recent headlines from a variety of places.

Texas has declared open season on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube with censorship law.

Supreme Court has voted to overturn abortion rights, draft opinion shows.

Finland leaders back NATO bid; Russia vows 'retaliatory' military measures

Fed economists warn of 'brewing US housing bubble' as home values continue to soar

Dow pares losses after 500-point plunge on fears of prolonged inflation

More than \$7 trillion has been wiped out from the stock market this year

California's ban on selling semiautomatic guns to adults under 21 is unconstitutional, court rules

Record-high gas prices are eating into Americans' spending, JPMorgan says

How do each of those make you feel physically? Do some of them make you feel tense, or anxious? Do any of them make you relax?

How each of us react to those headlines will vary – depending on our social location, our politics, our economic status. We may see some of them as good news... or bad news. But overall, most of them are either bad news, or news that creates a sense of uncertainty about the state of things. And much of it concerns things we can't really do much about.

The news is very rarely good. Good news doesn't get attention. Good news is boring. Evil and suffering are fascinating. Conflict sells. Yes, lots of bad stuff happens. Lots of good stuff happens too. But good stuff doesn't grab audience share, or clicks on social media. So bad stuff gets the attention and most of the media time.

And we're the ones who buy it and keep coming back for more. It's addictive and designed to be addictive.

It's like junk food for the soul. Pretty soon you feel bloated and have a terrible case of brain fog.

The cumulative effect of all that bad news is pretty distressing in and of itself. Bad news raises our anxiety levels. It can make us feel hopeless and powerless. We can't fight, and we can't flee, so we freeze.

And it skews our understanding of the world around us. So here's some good news for you:

Colombia has decriminalized abortion procedures up to 24 weeks of gestation. The progress is thanks to the feminist 'green wave' sweeping Latin America with pro-choice advocates sporting green bandanas. Abortion was recently decriminalized in Argentina and Mexico, and Ecuador has decriminalized the procedure in cases of rape.

Over 460 acres of ancestral land has been returned to the Rappahannock Tribe at Furnes Cliffs in Virginia. The land is also home to one of the largest nesting populations of bald eagles on the Atlantic coast and the tribe plan to create a replica 16th-century village to educate visitors about their history, and train tribal youth in traditional river knowledge.

83% of all new power capacity added in the United States in 2021 was renewable, while fossil gas additions were down 50% compared to 2019. The US also set a major renewable energy milestone earlier this month: wind power was the country's second-highest source of electricity, edging out nuclear and coal for the first time since the EIA began gathering the data.

Black business ownership in America is 30% higher than pre-pandemic levels and women are driving most of that growth. In April 2020, the number of Black-owned businesses dropped by 41% but numbers rebounded as Black women took the lead, launching and pivoting businesses and banding together with local communities to keep their doors open.

A rewilding project in Argentina has returned jaguars to the Iberá wetlands for the first time in 70 years and the macaw for the first time since the 1800s. The project, founded in 1998, turns private land into national parks and has successfully reintroduced regionally extinct species like the pampas deer, giant anteaters, collared peccaries and coypus.

How does hearing those make you feel physically? Do some of them make you feel tense, or anxious? Do any of them make you relax?

Personally, I feel a lot calmer. Let's do just a few more....

According to the latest Social Progress Index, despite the culture wars, creeping nationalism and rise of authoritarianism, the world has become more socially progressive. Since 2011, it has charted the progress of 167 nations, assessing them on things like rights, access to education, quality of healthcare, personal safety and quality of environment. The result? Good news, largely: 147 nations recorded a better score in 2021 than they did a decade ago, with just four countries (the US, Brazil, Syria and South Sudan) regressing.

Ecologists reported in 2021 that the Mississippi River is the cleanest it's been in more than a century, with pollution down to 1% of what it was in the 1980s, while the most comprehensive survey of the Thames in 60 years found that the river, once declared biologically dead, is now "home to myriad wildlife as diverse as London itself."

Same-sex relations were decriminalized in Angola, overturning a 134 year old colonial statute, and in September, Switzerland became the 30th country to legalize gay marriage, followed by the 31st, Chile, in December 2021. Across Catholic Latin America, same-sex marriage is now legal in Costa Rica, Ecuador, Colombia, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, and 23 of Mexico's 32 states.

In one of the largest shifts of public opinion ever recorded, Gallup said last year that 94% of American adults now approve of interracial marriage, a huge leap from 4% when the poll began in 1958. People over the age of 50 reported the biggest shift, increasing their approval by 64% in the past 30 years. Nearly one-in-five newlyweds in their 30s (18%) are married to someone of a different race or ethnicity, as are 16% of those in their teens or 20s and those in their 40s.

Incarceration rates in the United States fell to a 24 year low in 2019, plummeted a further 14% in 2020, to 1.81 million people, and then fell again in 2021, to 1.77 million. There are now half a

million fewer people in prison in America compared to 13 years ago, and empty prisons are being repurposed into homeless shelters, educational farms, and even movie studios.

That all sounds like good news to me. It gives me hope for the future, and a sense that humans *are* changing the world and making it better.

Yes, there are serious problems facing us. But a constant diet of bad news and social media actually makes it harder for us to deal with those problems. We're off balance much of time, anxious and fearful. We become emotionally reactive instead of thoughtful and proactive. We become passive instead of active.

And there are forces that want us this way. Who benefits from our helplessness?

But we can do something about this.

We start by being mindful about our information environment so we aren't steeped in negativity. We pay attention to the news, but not all the time. We understand that social media distorts reality and undermines our shared understanding of the world. We become aware of how the news makes us feel and not let those feelings dominate our daily lives and our responses.

We understand that we must actively balance out the bad news with good news, and seek out stories of beauty and creativity and competence. This is not easy. This is not supported by our current media environment. It takes a conscious effort on our part.

And we need to be story makers ourselves. We need to be the people making beauty and being creative and helping others, especially in our local communities.

We can't control the world, but we can control our responses to it – our emotions and thoughts and actions. And it is action that moves us out of negativity and into community, into a better world for all.

There's a lot right with the world. And more can be made right, but not if we allow ourselves to be helpless. We are not helpless. We are competent and creative, and we can make the world a better place.