

# News consumers differ widely in their preferences for negative or positive content

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Research regularly finds that Americans respond more strongly to negative news content, but a recent study suggests it's a global occurrence.

According to a University of Michigan study across 17 countries on six

continents, the [average person](#) is more physiologically activated by negative content than by positive content.

"In a period during which news around the world is especially wrought with negativity, this subject is of obvious significance," said Stuart Soroka, the Michael W. Traugott Collegiate Professor of Communication Studies and Political Science, and a faculty associate at the U-M Institute for Social Research.

Soroka and colleagues in Canada and Israel say their research is motivated by a widely recognized feature of modern-day communication—the negative tone is a defining feature of the news; good news, in contrast, is nearly synonymous with the absence of news.

The study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, focused on physiological responses to [news content](#) as observed by roughly 1,100 respondents. They watched seven randomly ordered BBC World News stories on a [laptop computer](#) while wearing noise-canceling headphones and sensors on their fingers to capture skin conductance and blood volume pulse.

On average, participants exhibited higher heart rate variability and higher skin conductance during negative news stories than during positive ones. But not all countries showed a statistically significant negativity bias; and there was a very high degree of variation in the negativity bias across individuals.

The researchers conclude that there is accordingly a large audience for positive [news](#), as well. News agencies, they suggest, might reconsider the adage "if it bleeds, it leads."

**More information:** Stuart Soroka et al. Cross-national evidence of a negativity bias in psychophysiological reactions to news, *Proceedings of*

*the National Academy of Sciences* (2019). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1908369116](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908369116)

Provided by University of Michigan

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