

# To hell with complacency!

 By [Janine Lazarus](#)

3 Nov 2015

I am sick of it. Absolutely and utterly done. If one of my compatriots in the media gets charged just one more time with covering only the bad news and doing diddly squat for nation-building, I think I might blow a gasket.



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My fellow reporters may not provide their readers with a smorgasbord of sunshine, lollipops or rainbows, but like it or not - disaster is way more compelling. Sensationalism and fear sells. This unfortunate fact of life won't change anytime soon.

This subject made for a rather interesting debate on seasoned host Ashraf Garda's [media@safm](#) talk show on Sunday when he threw down the gauntlet to his listeners to call in with their views on why a daily parade of suffering seems to fill the news space.

I think we can all agree that our planet is not a kind place. In fact, if you read the news often enough, you'll know that the world is populated by unscrupulous politicians, rapacious bankers, debauched priests, racist college students and hordes of armed zealots. And let's not even begin the conversation on crime and social violence... All admittedly very bleak stuff.

But the point I made which seemed to fall in line with the view of *Sunday World* Editor Abdul Milazi, but perhaps not with Wits Professor of Journalism, Jane Duncan, was that while the media may sell negative world views, it is a business that succeeds by attracting viewers and readers. It is not that reporters, writers and editors are by nature pessimistic people. The fact is that good news doesn't tend to sell.

What may be more important than casting blame at the media for a steady diet of death and deception, let's examine what this depressing slant says about its audience. Is society's fascination with negativity more pervasive than we might, in fact,

realise?

In what turned out to be a rather disheartening social experiment, Russian news site *City Reporter* attempted to report only the good news to its readers for an entire day. Only 'silver linings,' feel-good stories and openly optimistic alternatives were permitted in its coverage. Bad news was altogether verboten.

The result: The *City Reporter* lost two-thirds of its normal readership that day. Psychologists at McGill University in Canada term society's predilection for bad news a "negativity bias." So our attraction to bad news may be way more complex than pure journalistic cynicism.

My sense on this is that people in an information-rich environment may have way more to lose from neglecting to learn about a negative trend or event, than to gain from awareness of a positive one. And perhaps more to the point: People may inadvertently seek out bad news because they don't want those bad situations to happen to them.

As a former crime reporter, my job was to report on the darkness that lies within so much of society - not to catch the rapists, paedophiles and killers. That was the job of the authorities. And when they didn't get it right, I made it my business to report on it.

In the same way, I don't believe that it's the job of the media to nation-build. We have an elected government to do that. And if they get it wrong, then we are duty bound to ask the tough questions and to bring their failures to light.

The role of the media in a democracy is to monitor error, to be the public's vigilant watchdog. There is no choice for the mass media but to expose all instances of injustice found at every level of society.

And let's not forget that bad news can actually be good news because it illustrates a society that still cares when bad people do bad things.

I say to hell with complacency!

## ABOUT JANINE LAZARUS

Janine Lazarus is a South African journalist and interviewer of top names in the news, public figures and celebrities. Follow @JanineLazarus on Twitter.

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