Going beyond Westminister, war and wealth: in defence of ‘bad’ news

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Is news too negative and narrowly focused? Would it be healthier for us to simply shut it out and concentrate on our real lives? Should journalists try harder to accentuate the positive? ***Branwen Jeffreys*** *argues that journalism must change and be more constructive but it has to stay critical and that hard news is vital to a healthy society. Jeffreys is the BBC’s Education Editor, but this article was written in a personal capacity for a panel debate as part of the Wellcome/Hubbub project. You can listen to the audio of that event here*

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I am a cheerful optimist – despite a daily diet rich in news.

Each morning my wake up alarm is the Today programme whispering into the dark.

As I turn in I check #tomorrowspaperstoday on Twitter – to see what’s on the front pages of national – and increasingly local papers.

A female friend said to me recently that much news coverage revolves around **Westminster, war and wealth.** It’s not very appealing when you put it like that is it? Political point scoring, shouty debate, death, destruction and suffering, the endless toil to earn your living and a bit of human greed mixed in.

So why not just shut it out of our lives – and focus on the positives?

Because we’d be poorer for it – as a society – and I believe poorer emotionally as individuals.

I know the news at the moment feels particularly **overwhelming**. The war in Syria – the boats full of people desperate to reach a safer, better life in Europe – our own divisions revealed by the referendum that cut across the country, across families even.

But this is the world around us and news captures it. It often does that in a blunt imperfect way – but it means we are not looking away.

And personally I think not looking away is really important.

Bad things don’t simply stop happening because we stop looking. Even when, as in Syria, that doesn’t feel as though it makes much difference.

I also think there’s a fundamental human desire to record and document our lives – in drawing, music and writing. There is a long tradition of dark and frightening storytelling. Just look at fairy stories, myths and legends. My own name, Branwen, comes from a welsh legend full of violence and with a tragic end.

News is just one part of creating a record of our present.

It's also about us all to varying degrees being a witness to events – as journalists, as consumers of news.

I'm often amazed by people's willingness to talk to me as a journalist.

A couple of years ago I interviewed several women who had been sexually assaulted by Jimmy Savile in hospitals. They'd given evidence to a confidential inquiry – but also chosen to speak publicly with anonymity.

One in particular made a strong impression on me – it was evidently stressful – we stopped recording more than once because she was distressed and needed a break. But she wanted people to hear her story. Not just the confidential panel – not just her lawyer. Not just me. She wanted people to know – she wanted a wider public to hear the effect on her life. She wanted to be part of the re telling of the story.

But as well as bearing witness – news is important for **accountability**.

Do you remember the series of exposes on MPs expense claims in the Telegraph?

A pair of crystal bowls for eating grapefruit for 240 pounds – what kind of value for public money did that represent. It's not that they were breaking the rules – MPs had just completely lost sight of how it would look to all of the rest of us.

News can help shift the norm of what is acceptable behaviour – and change things not just in politics.

Many companies are more rigorous now about their supply chains – because of exposes on child labour and poor working conditions. Look at the BBC's Panorama raising questions about whether some companies were buying goods from factories in Turkey using Syrian teenagers. The companies have said they'll look again.

Look at investigations into working conditions in the UK – like the one at Sports Direct by the Guardian. It led to an inquiry by MPs – who called the owner Mike Ashley to account for working conditions they described as "Victorian". One woman gave birth in a toilet because she was afraid to call in sick.

You could argue that scrutiny would happen in all kinds of ways without news. But without the publicity of news there wouldn't be the lever of damage to reputations.

After a spate of stabbings a few years ago – there was a promise that A&E departments would record knife wounds and share anonymous information with the police. There's good evidence that can help with prevention – identifying

hotspots and improving the built environment, driving the pattern of police patrols. Anyway – a bit more than a year after this was meant to happen I got a call. A review had been carried out for the government and embarrassingly it found not much had happened.

The solution – the report was going to be slipped online somewhere inconspicuous so no one would notice. Until I got the phone call telling me when and where it would appear. So we got the story and one of the academics onto the Today programme to ask why the promise wasn't being kept.

Just over a year later I was pleased to see most A&E departments were getting involved in this evidence based approach to crime prevention.

But I'm not going to argue news always has some higher moral purpose.

Should we report more positives – maybe – but don't lose sight of the fact we already do.

I covered health for many years – a very large part of that is about a search for solutions such as the success stories of new medicines or technologies.

Even the debate about the rising cost of healthcare is the result of remarkable changes in life expectancy. It's a good problem to have.

Think about how the story around cancer is changing. Breast cancer for many is now a disease where a woman can expect to be alive ten years later. We really are telling those stories.

It's sometimes said news distorts our perception of the world – particularly about how dangerous or risky it might be. So it matters that we put that information in context. This is somewhere news can improve – but we already have got better at numbers and context.

And there are two big trends in journalism that I think are also shifting the balance.

First of all data – we have extraordinary access to information – more capacity to sift and analyse it. And we're getting better at finding ways of displaying and visualising data. Of course academics are doing the same – but sometimes journalists just ask different questions.

My BBC colleague Chris Cook – when he was at the FT – got access to one of the big education datasets. His analysis revealed that disadvantaged children in London were doing well in the capitals schools. It set off a debate about what exactly had made the difference that's still going on today. If poor kids here can do well – why not elsewhere? Data is really helping us look at variation.

We can use our leverage as journalists to pull together information and give people news they can use.

A couple of examples from the BBC: The Care Calculator in which you can get some idea of your care costs or those of someone in your family. The information for the original calculator was pulled together from a wide variety of sources including freedom of information requests.

Last week we put online information about the admission policies of every grammar school in England. We wanted to ask if they were giving priority to poorer pupils.

For each school we put the information in the context of some data from their local authority – it showed how varied grammar schools are in their approach.

In some areas it may provoke a local political debate – or reflection by school governors – or questions from parents. I hope it does.

This is news that adds value to personal decisions, to policy making, to public debate.

New formats and platforms are changing how we share and make news.

There is a fundamental cultural shift underway too. News is more of a conversation than ever before, involving millions of people in our content on social media.

It's making it more personal – more interactive – more individual.

It's making news journalists think about how we capture something that connects with the everyday texture of people's lives. And because of that it's widening the definition of what we mean by news.

I think that's a good thing – something that should help news get closer to the everyday of people's lives as well as those more traditional pillars of wealth, war and Westminster.

This article by Branwen Jeffreys @BranwenJeffreys was written in a personal capacity