

# Beware of good news

There isn't much good news out there, is there? Our national debt has surpassed \$8,000,000,000,000 dollars ([www.brillig.com/debt\\_clock/](http://www.brillig.com/debt_clock/)), the U.S. invasion of Iraq appears to have generated a civil war, community schools throughout our country are being forced to close down due to a lack of funds, more and more good paying jobs are being outsourced to people overseas (who will work for less money, no benefits, and in unsanitary/unsafe conditions), politicians (both Republican and Democrat) are being exposed for corruption, and an avian flu is just one mutation away from killing millions of our species worldwide. Yet, despite all of this bad news, the media often puts a positive spin on things or focuses on "good" news instead. Unfortunately, even much of this "good" news isn't so good when one inspects it closely. Under inspection, much of what stands for "good" news is just "feel good" news full of fluff and devoid of critical examination. It leaves the viewer/reader with a sense that things are going well when in fact they may not be. Let's look at a few recurring examples that should prompt us to be more skeptical recipients of good news in the future.

Disclaimer: My goal in exposing the shortcomings of "good" news claims is not to force us to wallow in despair. Quite the contrary. We must look beyond the superficial positive attributes of many claims in order to make sense of the real world (not just the one that we are told to believe or the one we fantasize about). With a truer sense of what really is going on, we can make better informed decisions. (And, don't worry, I will sprinkle in some good news along the way.)

One thing we've been hearing lately is how life expectancy continues to increase. We take comfort in the fact that, on average, we are living longer. Supposedly this is happening because medicines and medical procedures as well as the augmentation of nutrients and vitamins in our diets reduce the likelihood of premature death. Looking at the data, in 1900, male life expectancy (LE) in the U.S. (at birth) was 48 years, and female LE was 51 years. By 1950, the male LE had risen to 65.5 years (a 36% increase) while the female LE was 71 years (a 39% increase). By 2002, male LE was 74.5 years (a further 14% increase) and female LE was 80 years (a further 13% increase) (Shrestha). This is great news, isn't it? Don't people want to live longer and isn't it remarkable that men in the U.S. are now living nearly 27 years (and women 29 years) longer than they were just a century ago? I think this is good news, but there is more to the story—the parts that often don't get reported.

On a global basis, people born in developing countries today are expected to live 14 years less than people from industrialized countries; women in developing countries fall short by 16 years (when compared to their industrialized counterparts). Much of this shortfall is attributable to unmet prenatal and childhood health care (including immunizations). Because these two services are very inexpensive, they could be easily provided by the wealthier nations of the world if there exists a sincere desire to reduce death and despair; I am absolutely sick of the rhetoric on this issue. Back in the United States, blacks are expected to live 4-8 years fewer than their white counterparts. Significantly higher

rates of poverty within black communities (24.4% versus 8.2% in non-Hispanic white communities) as well as racial discrimination in medical care programs are both thought to contribute to these significant differences in life expectancy (Shrestha). And lastly, skyrocketing obesity rates in the United States are also expected to cause life expectancy in our country to actually decrease during this century (Olshansky et al.). For all of these reasons, 20<sup>th</sup> Century gains in LE cannot be seen as unquestionably good but must be understood in a larger context.

A five-minute radio news update (or streaming news on the bottom of a television screen) undoubtedly contains reports from the New York Stock Exchange and NASDAQ. These reports most often include updates on the gains (or losses) of the Dow, NASDAQ, or the S&P 500 (composite measures of selective stock values) and perhaps a few big multinational companies. Typically, the listener is happy to hear that stocks are going "up" and not so happy to hear them going "down." To the investor, "up" means financial gain (assuming that he/she owns stock in the companies included in these exchanges) and "down" means financial loss. It may make sense that we should be happy to know that we have made money and unhappy to know that we have lost some. (Actually, money isn't really made until the investor cashes in (i.e., sells) their stock at a higher price than he/she purchased it for—neglecting any dividends or inflation that may be applicable.) And, while I have nothing against making money, there is more to the story than whether or not stocks are "up" or "down." (And to those who think this doesn't pertain to them, because they don't own stock, if you have a bank account or any money put away for retirement, you are an investor.)

In my mind, for it to be "good" news when a stock (or a groups of stocks) goes "up," it matters more what stock(s) we are talking about than whether they are growing. It matters because money is power and growth in a company (often a by-product of increasing stock prices) means greater influence and power commanded by said company. And since many investors (my colleagues, for example) don't actually know what corporations/companies they are supporting when they make their monthly retirement allotments (IRAs), growth might be "good" for them personally (i.e., expanding assets) but detrimental in terms of the expanding influence of specific companies. To understand what I am saying here, consider a controversial company like Wal-Mart. Many of my friends boycott Wal-Mart (i.e., we don't shop there) because we believe that it is a company that treats its workers very unfavorably (via low wages, insufficient or no health care, unpaid overtime, etc.) and destroys communities by driving out small businesses (not to mention its very questionable environmental record). Yet, I am sure that all of these friends (and, sadly, even me) have some of our retirement monies invested in Wal-Mart. Thus, when Wal-Mart's stock goes "up," we profit, and we don't seem to mind. (Here, our actions speak louder than words.) Yet, since there are many more companies that an informed populace would likely not support (if they knew their business practices and/or their environmental record), it stands to reason that many of us would change our investment patterns if we were better educated and our news media focused more critically on stock growth and corporate power. Unfortunately, most of us don't have time (or the inclination) to look carefully at our investments and our media seems

fixed on giving us pro-business sound bites rather than substance. Thus, as long as these tendencies continue, we all will continue to support corporations that behave in ways that aren't consistent with our worldviews; a short list of such companies might include those involved in tobacco, alcohol, prisons privatization, weaponry, etc. In summation, the news of a growing stock market must be inspected more carefully in order for a proper assessment of it can be made and "feel good" interpretations will likely lead our world down unfavorable paths.

A few days this winter the temperature seemed unreasonably warm. Very few people complain when it is "hot" in the winter, especially in the heart of the Midwest, where winter temperatures routinely dip below freezing. Warmer than usual temperatures allow us to get outside and enjoy the environments around us. Additionally, when it is warm in the winter, our home furnaces, radiators, and other heating devices need not work as hard and this means lower heating bills, something very much appreciated when natural gas (a very important source of energy for heat) prices are so high. For these reasons, among others, people consider warmer temperatures a blessing and definitely good news. How could a warm winter day be anything but?

One warm day in itself isn't bad and it may in fact have the benefits noted above. However, a warming trend could be disastrous when looking at our environment in a holistic way. For instance, if a winter has mild temperatures and spring comes early, dangerous insects (including, disease-carrying mosquitoes, fleas, or ticks) many flourish in the following summer; a mild winter in 1998-99 appears to have been an important factor in why West Nile Virus carrying mosquitoes were able to take a foothold in the summer of 1999. There exists an analogy here that we relate to from our daily experience. Few people like a rainy day, yet, we would suffer greatly if there were no rainy days—our aquifers would dry up, the vegetation would desiccate, etc. Thus, this winter, when Chicago had 26 consecutive days with above normal temperatures, we should have given pause to its larger implications. Chicagoans certainly saved *mucho dinero* on their heating bills and probably more of them got outside and enjoyed their environments than would normally. (In the end, this winter was Chicago's only the 37<sup>th</sup> warmest of the past 135 years—noteworthy, but not eyebrow raising.) But, will the long stretch of warmer than normal days in January tip the balance in favor of insects this summer?

On a larger spatial scale, excessively warm/cold or wet/dry conditions might spell disaster in the long term. Since humans (all of us) appear to be contributing to climate change, we all need to recognize that our consumption of fossil fuels is responsible for altering the weather and the climate. We need to keep this in mind even during "normal" days, because our behaviors may be implicated in outbreaks of West Nile Virus and hurricanes gone "wild." To forget or ignore this connection make us more vulnerable to future climatic changes.

Having been engrossed with environmental topics for some time now, I am sensitive to the lack of serious attention given to environmental issues in the mainstream. This lack of exposure translates to: "No news is good news." This position can be very dangerous and isn't one that should govern the way we function. There are so many areas that deserve our collective attention, and to "turn a blind eye" or "bury our heads in the sand" is irresponsible

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and foolish. Similarly, to ignore relevant environmental news now, just because it seems depressing and insurmountable, is to dismiss the role that we all play in the outcomes. All positive change for human society has come from struggling people who have stepped up to the challenge and forced change. Environmentally speaking, those that worked assiduously to get the Endangered Species Act or the Clean Air Act passed in the 1970s did just that. Unfortunately, no law is permanent and these two environmental policies have recently endured considerable attack and undermining at the hands of the Bush Administration. It is now time for those of us to stand up and be heard. If environmental news isn't making its way to you, it is time that you made your way to it. The future minds, brains, and lungs of our children and their children depend on us to demand protected habitats and clean air.

Now for some good news. By eliminating lead from gasoline in the United States in the 1980s, lead levels in our nation's children dropped precipitously. Currently, lead paint, though banned from production in the 1970s, is the primary source of lead poisoning in our children which still causes them significant mental decline. The ivory-billed woodpecker, one of the most spectacular of the world's woodpeckers and thought to be extinct for many years, has recently been observed in eastern Arkansas. At the same time, habitat destruction worldwide is putting many birds on the brink of extinction, including, Indian vultures and the albatross. The Stockholm Convention, an international agreement that focuses on eliminating (or reducing and finding safe alternatives for) twelve of the more dangerous chemicals from human production and use—including, DDT, mirex, PCBs, and aldrin—went into force on May 17, 2004 after it was ratified by a fiftieth nation. The United States has still refused to ratify it (although, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, India, China, and even Iran has done so). This failure to acknowledge the problems with these chemicals and join other countries in their effort to ban them makes our nation look arrogant and dismissive of scientific research in the eyes of the world.

Obviously, from these "good" news flashes, one sees that **all** news must be understood in a larger context because no news is unequivocally "good." Sure we should celebrate our accomplishments (and enjoy our warm winter days) but we also have to be more honest and realistic about what is going on in the world. Our future (and our progeny's future) depends on it.

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