

The value of personal agency and collective action in dealing with bad environmental news

An issue arising from discussion in a recent HOPE meeting

During the last HOPE meeting on Saturday, 12 November 2022, some discussion was given over to how 'bad' news on climate change and other environmental problems might be best communicated to the public.

There was a diversity of views on this topic. By way of follow-up, I should like to make a few points regarding our social media monitoring process, and a suggestion for possible future actions in that area. In making these comments I admit to a degree of ignorance about the nature of current social media member engagement by HOPE. So, advance apologies if my comments are in fact irrelevant to the existing situation on the social media front!

Background insights from psychology

But coming back to an idea put forward at the HOPE meeting; that public audiences need to be, perhaps, shielded from demoralising levels of 'bad' news on environmental decline. In arguing against that proposition, we can draw on a body of psychological research pointing to the various mechanisms individuals use to deflect the risk of mental distress experienced as a result of encountering unpleasant, inconvenient, or discomfiting information sources.

Such research confirms that the total volume of bad or negative news can have a cumulative effect on mental stress levels. It is, however, also a long-established psychological principal that people's response to bad news and potentially threatening scenarios can be mediated in terms of how much control or influence they believe they have over those negative, challenging or threatening situations.

To put this another way, the perceived degree of personal influence or 'agency' which people have, or believe they may have over events, is a crucial variable in terms of dealing with distressing news in a pro-active way – rather than the volume of bad news, per se.

Another important, intuitive, support factor, borne out by research, is the benefit of joining forces with a group of like-minded individuals, for the purposes of progressing a 'greater good.' Finding such common cause with others is also known to be able to mediate stress generated, for example, by engaging in environmentally supportive behaviour – perhaps up to the level of political advocacy and activism. And without wanting to sound dramatic, one interpretation of the greater good on the environmental front is the future viability of the human race on planet Earth!

Possible problems arising from bad news filtering

And on the other side of the coin, shielding people from bad news can have its own negative consequences; for example, in fostering false hope that the environmental crises we face might just go away or are less serious than the science predicts, or that current, inadequate, government or institutional response is actually up to the task of dealing with such crises. Both of the latter premises being patently untrue at the present moment.

If you follow the logic of such psychological insights – then in a culture of growing disinformation, false news, greenwashing and propagandizing about various environmental and interrelated social crises, we need, surely, to be ensuring that the membership of HOPE, and where possible the wider public, hear the unfiltered/unvarnished truth about those crises, and that, additionally, and most importantly, they are provided with advice on how they can best maximise their agency, for example, through their collective advocacy influence onto governments and institutions - to help bring about the urgent, reformative actions needed to match the current scale of our environmental and social justice linked crises.

And, if amongst the cacophony of disinformation, we may encounter, there is genuine and verifiable 'good' news about real world innovations, strategies and new approaches which can or are making a difference to the problems we face – by all means let us promote those and hear more about them. So long as they do not serve as a cover to generate false optimism or provide a false narrative, to cover the tracks of corporate or governmental environmental vandalism masquerading as effective action. Perhaps we need to look quite a few times in order to determine whether the '[Emperor's Clothes](#)' are real or not.

Implications for the work of HOPE

As already discussed, finding ways to promote a sense of member agency in the face of distressing environmental news, such as climate disruption impacts or the growing loss of nature - could be a useful approach to help maintain their mental wellbeing as they go about environmentally supportive behaviour – probably more useful than simply filtering out such news in the first place. So, how to promote such an approach?

If we lived in a truly democratic society, one answer to that question might be to encourage HOPE members to engage in regular public protest against the myriad failed, unfit for purpose, business as usual, so-called, environmental strategies and plans foisted upon us by the, frankly, undemocratic systems of governance under which we currently live. The same systems, incidentally, which seem adept at finding ever new ways to [restrict or criminalise](#) public street protest.

Given this increasing Orwellian state of affairs, seeking to encourage digital online advocacy or 'cyber activism' might be a preferable choice. By which I mean finding ways to increase the level of digital support HOPE members give to a variety of online campaigns, petitions or other forms of digital advocacy, aimed at influencing government and other institutions toward adopting more genuine environmentally supportive policies, legislation and action on the ground.

A Suggestion based on HOPE social media monitoring

HOPE already encourages some forms of activism amongst members indirectly when it publishes details of forthcoming pro-environmental events, initiatives and specific issue advocacy by a range of organisations. I wonder whether this existing work could be further extended toward a more assertive encouragement of membership cyber activism?

My suggestion here, in the form of a question, is to ask whether those HOPE members responsible for monitoring and summarising environment related news feeds on social media and Twitter could perhaps extend their reportage work. That is, in order to do a bit of background research on reputable online advocacy support groups and online advocacy campaigns relevant to the topics being reported. The wider HOPE membership could then be directed toward those online initiatives and encouraged to lend their support to what extent they prefer.

An example to illustrate

To clarify how this would work, let's take the example of reportage on the recent COP27 meeting in Egypt. There has been a fair amount of contrasting debate recently about the future utility of COP meetings generally - and their capacity to achieve real change on climate disruption, as opposed to simply being part of the problem of maintaining fossil fuel, business as usual; or equally, to find effective solutions to the tragic loss of nature. And here I note that [COP 15 in Montreal](#) about to commence.

As I was looking at a Guardian online newspaper Twitter feed recently, discussing the wrap up to the climate COP 27, I came upon the tweets of [Professor Michael Mann](#), a renowned and respected international authority on climate change policy and strategy. This research scientist has long been an advocate for stronger and more effective action on climate disruption, and his views on the continued utility of the COP meetings process, to help tackle climate disruption, is worthy of fuller consideration. And Mann's work can be followed through his [online advocacy blogs](#) and US academic institution research. And it struck me that the Twitter links to that work could be promoted to HOPE members.

Such background research work by the HOPE social media monitors would require some knowledge of 'who is who' in the reputable global climate change and pro-sustainability scientific research space. I am not sure where our social media specialists might be up to on that required level of knowledge – and I was thinking that they could seek help in sharing any background research work load, on auditing reputable social media advocacy links, by farming research requests out to the wider membership. I for one would certainly put my hand up for such a task.

Should this suggestion/proposal be considered for possible implementation by the HOPE committee, it could also be put out to other members - to obtain their response to the idea and monitored via survey during any implementation phase.

Summary

- Psychological research points to the mental wellbeing value of developing a sense of personal 'agency' an ability or perceived ability to take effective action in the face of a threat or challenge. This agency factor may be of particular importance to people concerned with remedying environmental crises through agitating for change. As will the ability to find common advocacy cause with other, like-minded individuals and communities of interest.

- Simply switching off a bad news feed – in the light of direct and reported experience of increasing environmental impacts and decline is probably counterproductive.
- HOPE could extend its existing good and 'bad' environmental information distribution process in ways which tap into possible latent membership desire to achieve greater agency in the face of growing, largely unaddressed environmental threats. This anticipated member need could be tested for via survey.
- An extension of existing HOPE social media monitoring could be directed to identify reputable sources of online environmental advocacy directly linked to issues being reported on – with members then being encouraged to support those initiatives up to whatever level may be available and in terms of their personal preference.
- The increased background research work required to audit and build a listing of respected, reputable, online advocacy experts and resources could be shared out amongst existing volunteer members.
- Assuming implementation of this idea, a 'before and after' self-report survey of members could test for whether greater collective involvement in online advocacy had, in fact, been achieved, and whether there may have been a beneficial effect on mental wellbeing acting through possibly increased advocacy/activism amongst members.

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