

How Biased Reporting Brings Us Down While the Economy Is Up

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Have you ever unplugged from legacy media for an extended period? This experiment flips our perceptions toward direct, personal experience, and it reveals the disconnect between long-term trends and what gets reported.

The micro-versus-macro contrast is glaringly obvious in the United States under President Donald Trump. Survey data aggregated in January by the [American Enterprise Institute](#) shows people felt optimistic about their own lives, finances, and work prospects. However, even though “half or more rated economic conditions as excellent or good,” they “were more optimistic about their personal situations than they were about the country.”

In other words, they were feeling the benefits of technological advances, [deregulation](#), and a lower [corporate income tax](#). Yet, despite the stronger labor market with this century’s lowest unemployment, Americans perceived negative trends for other people in the United States. The mixed feelings are not helped by the vehemently anti-capitalist media.

An [Investors Business Daily](#) editorial has correctly observed: “The profound leftward ideological bias of the Big Media ... Journalists, besotted with their own ideology, are no longer able to recognize their own bias.” Unfortunately, this ideological drift toward statism—which needs oppressed classes to justify its existence—has polluted financial and economic journalism along with other branches.

A team of academic accountants led by Andrew Call of Arizona State University surveyed 462 financial journalists and released the [findings](#) in December 2018. The take-home [message](#): just 4.4 percent said they were either somewhat or very conservative, versus 58.5 who were somewhat or very progressive. The remaining 37.1 percent described themselves as moderate.

The Unreported Story: Human Flourishing

Just as the moral arc of the universe bends toward justice, so too does economic development lift all boats, even if you do not hear it in news coverage that inflames and divides. Poverty in many developing nations is plunging, and prosperity is rising in the United States.

In Paraguay, for example, a sophisticated, broad measure of poverty in [Social Indicators Research](#) found a stark decline in multidimensional poverty between 2000 and 2015 from 57 percent of the population to 17 percent. Meanwhile, December data showed the U.S. poverty rate [down](#) significantly on the previous five-year period. The Heritage Foundation has found that

even these “poor” households, as defined by the Census Bureau, have on average two TV sets, a car, spacious living, and no hunger.

Such has been the enormous rise in prosperity—thanks to capitalism, not socialism—in recent decades, the Cato Institute has established a website to document the incredible advancements that have proceeded with little fanfare. HumanProgress.org demonstrates the “wide gap between the reality of human experience, which is characterized by incremental improvements, and public perception.”

In 2018, a team of Harvard University psychologists found people, as their lot improves, keep raising their expectations: “When the world gets better, we become harsher critics ... this can cause us to mistakenly conclude that it hasn’t actually gotten better at all. Progress ... tends to mask itself.”

The creators of HumanProgress.org believe “policies and institutions compatible with freedom and openness are important factors in promoting human well-being,” but they “let the evidence speak for itself.”

Preying on Rational Irrationality

Economist Bryan Caplan, in his classic “The Myth of the Rational Voter”, describes in detail the common biases of voters. He contends that they are often rationally ignorant: they remain ill-informed because the cost of informing themselves likely exceeds the personal benefits.

So long as people remain superficially informed, if at all, they are fodder for drive-by negative reporting. We have all heard misleading tropes such as “the rich are getting richer, while the poor are getting poorer,” or states lowering taxes are in a “race to the bottom.” This fear-based reporting garners eyeballs, while few people devote the time to pull back the curtains on the deception. Meanwhile, people vote with their feet and move to fiscally conservative states to raise their standards of living.

Caplan identified four biases of particular importance. Among them are pessimism and “anti-market.” The latter is a “tendency to underestimate the benefits of the market mechanism.”

How much of these biases is instinctive versus propagated is difficult to find out. However, insomuch as innate elements exist, media outlets stoke, foment and make them worse, and they have gone into overdrive of late. Akin to “if it bleeds it leads,” doomsayer assessments garner attention and calls for intervention, killing two birds with one stone for progressive journalists.

Inform Yourself Toward Optimism

The anti-market bias among us and in the legacy media is real, as is its extreme tilt against Trump and U.S. ideals. Fortunately, there is rising awareness and skepticism of media—albeit divided along partisan lines—and a long-term transition to independent outlets that seek to revive classical journalism and inspire readers with human-interest stories.

Even if more people are skeptical, however, that does not mean they know how to respond and better assess what to consume. One must think for himself and take the time to consider what sources and platforms deliver precision rather than confusion, lest he be easy prey for deceptions that spread all too easily.

There is no shortcut here, except perhaps to avoid state broadcasters like the plague (see: CBC and the U.S. Agency for Global Media). Not only do these media arms of government waste taxpayer money and misinform, they crowd out legitimate, independent media.

One important ingredient to keep in mind is the speed of the news cycle. So often stories are here today, gone tomorrow, with little impact but negativity. The Nick Sandmann debacle—about a high-school student who grinned at a protester—is a case in point. Like so many other fabricated dramas, it was a distraction from positive long-term trends, which merit our attention and invoke optimism.

We need not be easily swayed by data either, be it long or short term. British author David Boyle explains in his brilliant work, “The Sum of Our Discontent: Why Numbers Make Us Irrational”, the shortcomings of data so often presented as truth. He quips that “politicians can’t measure poverty, so they measure the number of people on welfare.”

Boyle wants readers to remember the most precious elements of life, such as the quality of our relationships or the joy of new experiences, defy measurement. The more we focus on what can be measured, the less we focus on what cannot. Further, a tendency to compare ourselves with our peers distracts us from our own immense prosperity relative to all past generations.

Reporters only scare us if we give them our attention. A careful consumer of news and student of history sees we have much to be thankful for. A sense for our own proclivities also heightens our awareness of when reporters and commentators are playing to our worst instincts, so the onus is on us to choose whether to take the bait or not.