

# LET'S GET EMOTIONAL



**Sophie Lecheler** explains the power of a positive emotional message for changing behaviour.

The majority of British newspapers are notorious for their relentlessly negative coverage of the European Union, immigration, the welfare system and other emotive issues. New research by Dr Sophie Lecheler of LSE's Department of Government shows that readers may have become so immune to the pessimistic terms used in these stories that, in many people, they no longer elicit an emotional response.

Conversely, Dr Lecheler has discovered that positive news articles are very effective in prompting positive emotions, which she believes could affect future behaviour, such as voting, and is something that policymakers and politicians need to be more aware of when designing effective public information or political campaigns.

She explains: "My project focuses on how the use of emotional language by political journalists in the news influences our opinions and behaviour. Journalists want to find an emotional angle to a story because they know this makes the story more interesting and relatable to their audience. But the use of different emotions in news reporting is likely to have specific effects on how we think and act about politics. We do not yet fully understand these effects.

"One reason why political communication has long neglected to look at the role of emotions was the belief among scholars that 'good' political decisions are made based on information or facts rather than emotions. Along these lines, emotions were seen as maybe harmful to being an informed citizen and emotions in the news were studied in the context of propaganda or the attempt to 'manipulate' someone. Yet, journalists use emotional language not primarily to persuade of a specific standpoint – although many newspapers have obvious political agendas – but to render stories more interesting or readable."

In a unique experiment, Dr Lecheler, together with Dr Michael Bruter of LSE's Department of Government, examined how specific types of emotions change the effects that news reporting has on someone's political opinions. In a random sample of 790 UK citizens, each person was sent a web link that led to a survey questionnaire. Before filling in the questionnaire, each person was asked to read three constructed newspaper articles written in a UK mid-market tabloid style. All three articles were about elderly care in the UK in times of economic crisis. To test how different emotions influence people's response to the news, one group of people was sent

articles that featured a number of positive emotional language cues such as enthusiasm. Another group received articles designed to arouse negative feelings of anger, and a third group was asked to read three articles that included language connected to feelings of fear. After having read these newspaper articles, respondents were asked a number of questions to test their emotional responses to the articles, as well as their opinions regarding the topic featured in them.

Dr Lecheler, who is also an Assistant Professor of Political Communication at the Amsterdam School of Communication Research (ASCoR) at the University of Amsterdam, explains: "We tested the effects of a range of positive and negative emotions by inserting emotional language into a news article on elderly care, and by then varying this language, for example, 'pensioners are angry', 'pensioners are sad', 'pensioners are enthusiastic'.

"Our results show that the use of emotional language by journalists will definitely cause emotional responses within a reader, sometimes surprisingly strong ones. However, our results also show that the presence of negative emotional language in a news article does not always make people more angry or sad. Our experiment does show, though, that the presence of positive emotional language suppresses negative emotional responses. These same positive news articles also cause a variety of positive emotions such as feelings of enthusiasm and pride.

“The positive feelings people get from positive news articles do not translate into positive effects on political opinions, but it could affect decision-making later on”

“These results can be explained by how newspapers function in the UK and many other countries: journalists most often use negative emotions in their writing because they know that negative news should be more interesting to their audience, for example anything negative about the EU. This means that people are used to these kinds of emotional cues, and that these kinds of news articles may simply not cause much emotional response any more. On the contrary, articles that have positive emotional language have the ability to decrease negative feelings, and make people feel happier at the same time.

“There is a catch: our study also shows that the positive feelings people get from positive news articles do not translate into positive effects on political opinions, in this case support for spending more money on elderly care. But we think that it could affect decision-making later on.

“In short: our results suggest that sometimes, we just cannot feel more negatively about politics than we already do, even if the media try to make us feel worse. However, we can feel much happier after reading a positive news article.”

Dr Lecheler adds: “The research is of direct use to journalists, policymakers and politicians. It is important for young journalists to know that the way they write or produce a story could impact audiences in a certain way. The findings are also relevant to policymakers, politicians and other observers of political life because they give insights into what role the media and news messages play in shaping people’s political attitudes. This is important for designing effective public information campaigns and for political election campaigns.

“Emotions in political communication and news reporting are vital and influence decision-making, so policymakers need to be more aware of this. The commercial advertising industry have known how important emotions are for a long time.”

A second study will focus on how negative emotions in an EU context change how people think about the EU. The findings will test how emotions in the media can be used to mobilise people to learn more about the EU, and to go and vote in EU elections.

Dr Lecheler concludes: “Political communication researchers have sometimes ignored emotions and

there has been more focus on studying the effects of different types of information and facts. In terms of the EU, policymakers also seem to have thought for a long time that if you give people enough balanced facts about the EU, they then will become active EU citizens – but this just is not the case. People need to know more about the EU, but they also need to be emotionally connected to it and they need to care.

“Negativity can change people’s opinions – but that we know already – but positivity also plays an important role in politics through positive emotional responses. And these responses could be influential for all kinds of things, including voting. It’s clear that providing information and facts is a key role of political journalism, but so are emotions.” ■

*Sophie Lecheler was talking to Jo Bale, senior press officer at LSE.*

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