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The follow-up to Pinker's groundbreaking
The Better Angels of Our Nature

CHAPTER 4 PROGRESSOPHOBIA

Intellectuals hate progress. Intellectuals who call themselves “progressive” *really* hate progress. It’s not that they hate the *fruits* of progress, mind you: most pundits, critics, and their *bien-pensant* readers use computers rather than quills and inkwells, and they prefer to have their surgery with anesthesia rather than without it. It’s the *idea* of progress that rankles the chattering class—the Enlightenment belief that by understanding the world we can improve the human condition.

An entire lexicon of abuse has grown up to express their scorn. If you think knowledge can help solve problems, then you have a “blind faith” and a “quasi-religious belief” in the “outmoded superstition” and “false promise” of the “myth” of the “onward march” of “inevitable progress.” You are a “cheerleader” for “vulgar American can-doism” with the “rah-rah” spirit of “boardroom ideology,” “Silicon Valley,” and the “Chamber of Commerce.” You are a practitioner of “Whig history,” a “naïve optimist,” a “Pollyanna,” and of course a “Pangloss,” a modern-day version of the philosopher in Voltaire’s *Candide* who asserts that “all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds.”

Professor Pangloss, as it happens, is what we would now call a pessimist. A modern optimist believes that the world can be *much, much* better than it is today. Voltaire was satirizing not the Enlightenment hope for progress but its opposite, the religious rationalization for suffering called theodicy, according to which God had no choice but to allow epidemics and massacres because a world without them is metaphysically impossible.

Epithets aside, the idea that the world is better than it was and can get better still fell out of fashion among the clerisy long ago. In *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, Arthur Herman shows that prophets of doom are the all-stars of the liberal arts curriculum, including Nietzsche, Ar-

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thur Schopenhauer, Martin Heidegger, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Jean-Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Cornel West, and a chorus of eco-pessimists.¹ Surveying the intellectual landscape at the end of the 20th century, Herman lamented a “grand recession” of “the luminous exponents” of Enlightenment humanism, the ones who believed that “since people generate conflicts and problems in society, they can also resolve them.” In *History of the Idea of Progress*, the sociologist Robert Nisbet agreed: “The skepticism regarding Western progress that was once confined to a very small number of intellectuals in the nineteenth century has grown and spread to not merely the large majority of intellectuals in this final quarter of the century, but to many millions of other people in the West.”²

Yes, it’s not just those who intellectualize for a living who think the world is going to hell in a handcart. It’s ordinary people when they switch into intellectualizing mode. Psychologists have long known that people tend to see their own lives through rose-colored glasses: they think they’re less likely than the average person to become the victim of a divorce, layoff, accident, illness, or crime. But change the question from the people’s *lives* to their *society*, and they transform from Pollyanna to Eeyore.

Public opinion researchers call it the Optimism Gap.³ For more than two decades, through good times and bad, when Europeans were asked by pollsters whether their *own* economic situation would get better or worse in the coming year, more of them said it would get better, but when they were asked about their *country’s* economic situation, more of them said it would get worse.⁴ A large majority of Britons think that immigration, teen pregnancy, litter, unemployment, crime, vandalism, and drugs are a problem in the United Kingdom as a whole, while few think they are problems in their area.⁵ Environmental quality, too, is judged in most nations to be worse in the nation than in the community, and worse in the world than in the nation.⁶ In almost every year from 1992 through 2015, an era in which the rate of violent crime plummeted, a majority of Americans told pollsters that crime was rising.⁷ In late 2015, large majorities in eleven developed countries said that “the world is getting worse,” and in most of the last forty years a solid majority of Americans have said that the country is “heading in the wrong direction.”⁸

Are they right? Is pessimism correct? Could the state of the world, like the stripes on a barbershop pole, keep sinking lower and lower? It’s easy to see why people feel that way: every day the news is filled with stories about war, terrorism, crime, pollution, inequality, drug abuse, and

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oppression. And it's not just the headlines we're talking about; it's the op-eds and long-form stories as well. Magazine covers warn us of coming anarchies, plagues, epidemics, collapses, and so many "crises" (farm, health, retirement, welfare, energy, deficit) that copywriters have had to escalate to the redundant "serious crisis."

Whether or not the world really is getting worse, the nature of news will interact with the nature of cognition to make us think that it is. News is about things that happen, not things that don't happen. We never see a journalist saying to the camera, "I'm reporting live from a country where a war has not broken out"—or a city that has not been bombed, or a school that has not been shot up. As long as bad things have not vanished from the face of the earth, there will always be enough incidents to fill the news, especially when billions of smartphones turn most of the world's population into crime reporters and war correspondents.

And among the things that do happen, the positive and negative ones unfold on different time lines. The news, far from being a "first draft of history," is closer to play-by-play sports commentary. It focuses on discrete events, generally those that took place since the last edition (in earlier times, the day before; now, seconds before).⁹ Bad things can happen quickly, but good things aren't built in a day, and as they unfold, they will be out of sync with the news cycle. The peace researcher John Galtung pointed out that if a newspaper came out once every fifty years, it would not report half a century of celebrity gossip and political scandals. It would report momentous global changes such as the increase in life expectancy.¹⁰

The nature of news is likely to distort people's view of the world because of a mental bug that the psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman called the Availability heuristic: people estimate the probability of an event or the frequency of a kind of thing by the ease with which instances come to mind.¹¹ In many walks of life this is a serviceable rule of thumb. Frequent events leave stronger memory traces, so stronger memories generally indicate more-frequent events: you really are on solid ground in guessing that pigeons are more common in cities than orioles, even though you're drawing on your memory of encountering them rather than on a bird census. But whenever a memory turns up high in the result list of the mind's search engine for reasons other than frequency—because it is recent, vivid, gory, distinctive, or upsetting—people will overestimate how likely it is in the world. Which are more numerous in the English language, words that begin with *k* or words with *k* in the third position? Most people say the former. In fact, there are three

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times as many words with *k* in the third position (*ankle, ask, awkward, bake, cake, make, take . . .*), but we retrieve words by their initial sounds, so *keep, kind, kill, kid, and king* are likelier to pop into mind on demand.

Availability errors are a common source of folly in human reasoning. First-year medical students interpret every rash as a symptom of an exotic disease, and vacationers stay out of the water after they have read about a shark attack or if they have just seen *Jaws*.¹² Plane crashes always make the news, but car crashes, which kill far more people, almost never do. Not surprisingly, many people have a fear of flying, but almost no one has a fear of driving. People rank tornadoes (which kill about fifty Americans a year) as a more common cause of death than asthma (which kills more than four thousand Americans a year), presumably because tornadoes make for better television.

It's easy to see how the Availability heuristic, stoked by the news policy "If it bleeds, it leads," could induce a sense of gloom about the state of the world. Media scholars who tally news stories of different kinds, or present editors with a menu of possible stories and see which they pick and how they display them, have confirmed that the gatekeepers prefer negative to positive coverage, holding the events constant.¹³ That in turn provides an easy formula for pessimists on the editorial page: make a list of all the worst things that are happening anywhere on the planet that week, and you have an impressive-sounding case that civilization has never faced greater peril.

The consequences of negative news are themselves negative. Far from being better informed, heavy newswatchers can become miscalibrated. They worry more about crime, even when rates are falling, and sometimes they part company with reality altogether: a 2016 poll found that a large majority of Americans follow news about ISIS closely, and 77 percent agreed that "Islamic militants operating in Syria and Iraq pose a serious threat to the existence or survival of the United States," a belief that is nothing short of delusional.¹⁴ Consumers of negative news, not surprisingly, become glum: a recent literature review cited "misperception of risk, anxiety, lower mood levels, learned helplessness, contempt and hostility towards others, desensitization, and in some cases, . . . complete avoidance of the news."¹⁵ And they become fatalistic, saying things like "Why should I vote? It's not gonna help," or "I could donate money, but there's just gonna be another kid who's starving next week."¹⁶

Seeing how journalistic habits and cognitive biases bring out the worst in each other, how can we soundly appraise the state of the world?

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The answer is to *count*. How many people are victims of violence as a proportion of the number of people alive? How many are sick, how many starving, how many poor, how many oppressed, how many illiterate, how many unhappy? And are those numbers going up or down? A quantitative mindset, despite its nerdy aura, is in fact the morally enlightened one, because it treats every human life as having equal value rather than privileging the people who are closest to us or most photogenic. And it holds out the hope that we might identify the causes of suffering and thereby know which measures are most likely to reduce it.

That was the goal of my 2011 book *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, which presented a hundred graphs and maps showing how violence and the conditions that foster it have declined over the course of history. To emphasize that the declines took place at different times and had different causes, I gave them names. The Pacification Process was a fivefold reduction in the rate of death from tribal raiding and feuding, the consequence of effective states exerting control over a territory. The Civilizing Process was a fortyfold reduction in homicide and other violent crimes which followed upon the entrenchment of the rule of law and norms of self-control in early modern Europe. The Humanitarian Revolution is another name for the Enlightenment-era abolition of slavery, religious persecution, and cruel punishments. The Long Peace is the historians' term for the decline of great-power and interstate war after World War II. Following the end of the Cold War, the world has enjoyed a New Peace with fewer civil wars, genocides, and autocracies. And since the 1950s the world has been swept by a cascade of Rights Revolutions: civil rights, women's rights, gay rights, children's rights, and animal rights.

Few of these declines are contested among experts who are familiar with the numbers. Historical criminologists, for example, agree that homicide plummeted after the Middle Ages, and it's a commonplace among international-relations scholars that major wars tapered off after 1945. But they come as a surprise to most people in the wider world.¹⁷

I had thought that a parade of graphs with time on the horizontal axis, body counts or other measures of violence on the vertical, and a line that meandered from the top left to the bottom right would cure audiences of the Availability bias and persuade them that at least in this sphere of well-being the world has made progress. But I learned from their questions and objections that resistance to the idea of progress runs deeper than statistical fallacies. Of course, any dataset is an imperfect reflection of reality, so it is legitimate to question how accurate and rep-

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representative the numbers truly are. But the objections revealed not just a skepticism about the data but also an unpreparedness for the *possibility* that the human condition has improved. Many people lack the conceptual tools to ascertain whether progress has taken place or not; the very idea that things can get better just doesn't compute. Here are stylized versions of dialogues I have often had with questioners.

So violence has declined linearly since the beginning of history! Awesome!

No, not "linearly"—it would be astonishing if any measure of human behavior with all its vicissitudes ticked downward by a constant amount per unit of time, decade after decade and century after century. And not monotonically, either (which is probably what the questioners have in mind)—that would mean that it always decreased or stayed the same, never increased. Real historical curves have wiggles, upticks, spikes, and sometimes sickening lurches. Examples include the two world wars, a boom in crime in Western countries from the mid-1960s to the early 1990s, and a bulge of civil wars in the developing world following decolonization in the 1960s and 1970s. Progress consists of trends in violence on which these fluctuations are superimposed—a downward swoop or drift, a return from a temporary swelling to a low baseline. Progress cannot always be monotonic because solutions to problems create new problems.¹⁸ But progress can resume when the new problems are solved in their turn.

By the way, the nonmonotonicity of social data provides an easy formula for news outlets to accentuate the negative. If you ignore all the years in which an indicator of some problem declines, and report every uptick (since, after all, it's "news"), readers will come away with the impression that life is getting worse and worse even as it gets better and better. In the first six months of 2016 the *New York Times* pulled this trick three times, with figures for suicide, longevity, and automobile fatalities.

Well, if levels of violence don't always go down, that means they're cyclical, so even if they're low right now it's only a matter of time before they go back up.

No, changes over time may be *statistical*, with unpredictable fluctuations, without being *cyclical*, namely oscillating like a pendulum between two extremes. That is, even if a reversal is possible at any time, that does not mean it becomes more likely as time passes. (Many investors have lost their shirts betting on a misnamed "business cycle" that in fact consists of unpredictable swings.) Progress can take place when the reversals in a positive trend become less frequent, become less severe, or, in some cases, cease altogether.

How can you say that violence has decreased? Didn't you read about the

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school shooting (or terrorist bombing, or artillery shelling, or soccer riot, or barroom stabbing) in the news this morning?

A decline is not the same thing as a disappearance. (The statement “ $x > y$ ” is different from the statement “ $y = 0$.”) Something can decrease a lot without vanishing altogether. That means that the level of violence today is *completely irrelevant* to the question of whether violence has declined over the course of history. The only way to answer that question is to compare the level of violence now with the level of violence in the past. And whenever you look at the level of violence in the past, you find a lot of it, even if it isn’t as fresh in memory as the morning’s headlines.

All your fancy statistics about violence going down don’t mean anything if you’re one of the victims.

True, but they do mean that you’re less likely to *be* a victim. For that reason they mean the world to the millions of people who are not victims but would have been if rates of violence had stayed the same.

So you’re saying that we can all sit back and relax, that violence will just take care of itself.

Illogical, Captain. If you see that a pile of laundry has gone down, it does not mean the clothes washed themselves; it means someone washed the clothes. If a type of violence has gone down, then some change in the social, cultural, or material milieu has caused it to go down. If the conditions persist, violence could remain low or decline even further; if they don’t, it won’t. That makes it important to find out what the causes are, so we can try to intensify them and apply them more widely to ensure that the decline of violence continues.

To say that violence has gone down is to be naïve, sentimental, idealistic, romantic, starry-eyed, Whiggish, utopian, a Pollyanna, a Pangloss.

No, to look at data showing that violence has gone down and say “Violence has gone down” is to describe a fact. To look at data showing that violence has gone down and say “Violence has gone up” is to be delusional. To ignore data on violence and say “Violence has gone up” is to be a know-nothing.

As for accusations of romanticism, I can reply with some confidence. I am also the author of the staunchly unromantic, anti-utopian *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, in which I argued that human beings are fitted by evolution with a number of destructive motives such as greed, lust, dominance, vengeance, and self-deception. But I believe that people are also fitted with a sense of sympathy, an ability to reflect on their predicament, and faculties to think up and share new ideas—the better angels of our nature, in the words of Abraham Lincoln. Only by

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looking at the facts can we tell to what extent our better angels have prevailed over our inner demons at a given time and place.

How can you predict that violence will keep going down? Your theory could be refuted by a war breaking out tomorrow.

A statement that some measure of violence has gone down is not a “theory” but an observation of a fact. And yes, the fact that a measure has changed over time is not the same as a prediction that it will continue to change in that way at all times forever. As the investment ads are required to say, past performance is no guarantee of future results.

In that case, what good are all those graphs and analyses? Isn't a scientific theory supposed to make testable predictions?

A scientific theory makes predictions in *experiments* in which the causal influences are controlled. No theory can make a prediction about the world at large, with its seven billion people spreading viral ideas in global networks and interacting with chaotic cycles of weather and resources. To declare what the future holds in an uncontrollable world, and without an explanation of why events unfold as they do, is not prediction but *prophecy*, and as David Deutsch observes, “The most important of all limitations on knowledge-creation is that we cannot prophesy: we cannot predict the content of ideas yet to be created, or their effects. This limitation is not only consistent with the unlimited growth of knowledge, it is entailed by it.”¹⁹

Our inability to prophesy is not, of course, a license to ignore the facts. An improvement in some measure of human well-being suggests that, overall, more things have pushed in the right direction than in the wrong direction. Whether we should expect progress to continue depends on whether we know what those forces are and how long they will remain in place. That will vary from trend to trend. Some may turn out to be like Moore’s Law (the number of transistors per computer chip doubles every two years) and give grounds for confidence (though not certainty) that the fruits of human ingenuity will accumulate and progress will continue. Some may be like the stock market and foretell short-term fluctuations but long-term gains. Some of these may reel in a statistical distribution with a “thick tail,” in which extreme events, even if less likely, cannot be ruled out.²⁰ Still others may be cyclical or chaotic. In chapters 19 and 21 we will examine rational forecasting in an uncertain world. For now we should keep in mind that a positive trend suggests (but does not prove) that we have been doing something right, and that we should seek to identify what it is and do more of it.

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When all these objections are exhausted, I often see people racking their brains to find *some* way in which the news cannot be as good as the data suggest. In desperation, they turn to semantics.

Isn't Internet trolling a form of violence? Isn't strip-mining a form of violence? Isn't inequality a form of violence? Isn't pollution a form of violence? Isn't poverty a form of violence? Isn't consumerism a form of violence? Isn't divorce a form of violence? Isn't advertising a form of violence? Isn't keeping statistics on violence a form of violence?

As wonderful as metaphor is as a rhetorical device, it is a poor way to assess the state of humanity. Moral reasoning requires proportionality. It may be upsetting when someone says mean things on Twitter, but it is not the same as the slave trade or the Holocaust. It also requires distinguishing rhetoric from reality. Marching into a rape crisis center and demanding to know what they have done about the rape of the environment does nothing for rape victims and nothing for the environment. Finally, improving the world requires an understanding of cause and effect. Though primitive moral intuitions tend to lump bad things together and find a villain to blame them on, there is no coherent phenomenon of “bad things” that we can seek to understand and eliminate. (Entropy and evolution will generate them in profusion.) War, crime, pollution, poverty, disease, and incivility are evils that may have little in common, and if we want to reduce them, we can't play word games that make it impossible even to discuss them individually.



I have run through these objections to prepare the way for my presentation of other measures of human progress. The incredulous reaction to *Better Angels* convinced me that it isn't just the Availability heuristic that makes people fatalistic about progress. Nor can the media's fondness for bad news be blamed entirely on a cynical chase for eyeballs and clicks. No, the psychological roots of progressophobia run deeper.

The deepest is a bias that has been summarized in the slogan “Bad is stronger than good.”²¹ The idea can be captured in a set of thought experiments suggested by Tversky.²² How much better can you imagine yourself feeling than you are feeling right now? How much *worse* can you imagine yourself feeling? We can all imagine a bit more of a spring in our step or a twinkle in our eye as an answer to the first hypothetical, but the answer to the second one is: it's bottomless. This asymmetry in mood can be explained by an asymmetry in life (a corollary of the Law of Entropy). How many things could happen to you today that would

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leave you much better off? How many things could happen that would leave you much *worse* off? Once again, we can all come up with the odd windfall or stroke of good luck to answer the first question, but the answer to the second one is: it's endless. But we needn't rely on our imaginations. The psychological literature confirms that people dread losses more than they look forward to gains, that they dwell on setbacks more than they savor good fortune, and that they are more stung by criticism than they are heartened by praise. (As a psycholinguist I am compelled to add that the English language has far more words for negative emotions than for positive ones.)²³

One exception to the negativity bias is found in autobiographical memory. Though we tend to remember bad events as well as we remember good ones, the negative coloring of the misfortunes fades with time, particularly the ones that happened to us.²⁴ We are wired for nostalgia: in human memory, time heals most wounds. Two other illusions mislead us into thinking that things ain't what they used to be: we mistake the growing burdens of maturity and parenthood for a less innocent world, and we mistake a decline in our own faculties for a decline in the times.²⁵ As the columnist Franklin Pierce Adams pointed out, "Nothing is more responsible for the good old days than a bad memory."

Intellectual culture should strive to counteract our cognitive biases, but all too often it reinforces them. The cure for the Availability bias is quantitative thinking, but the literary scholar Steven Connor has noted that "there is in the arts and humanities an exceptionless consensus about the encroaching horror of the domain of number."²⁶ This "ideological rather than accidental innumeracy" leads writers to notice that wars take place today and wars took place in the past and to conclude that "nothing has changed"—failing to acknowledge the difference between an era with a handful of wars that collectively kill in the thousands and an era with dozens of wars that collectively killed in the millions. And it leaves them unappreciative of systemic processes that eke out incremental improvements over the long term.

Nor is intellectual culture equipped to treat the Negativity bias. Indeed, our vigilance for bad things around us opens up a market for professional curmudgeons who call our attention to bad things we may have missed. Experiments have shown that a critic who pans a book is perceived as more competent than a critic who praises it, and the same may be true of critics of society.²⁷ "Always predict the worst, and you'll be hailed as a prophet," the musical humorist Tom Lehrer once advised. At

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least since the time of the Hebrew prophets, who themselves blended their social criticism with forewarnings of disaster, pessimism has been equated with moral seriousness. Journalists believe that by accentuating the negative they are discharging their duty as watchdogs, muckrakers, whistleblowers, and afflictors of the comfortable. And intellectuals know they can attain instant gravitas by pointing to an unsolved problem and theorizing that it is a symptom of a sick society.

The converse is true as well. The financial writer Morgan Housel has observed that while pessimists sound like they're trying to help you, optimists sound like they're trying to sell you something.²⁸ Whenever someone offers a solution to a problem, critics will be quick to point out that it is not a panacea, a silver bullet, a magic bullet, or a one-size-fits-all solution; it's just a Band-Aid or a quick technological fix that fails to get at the root causes and will blow back with side effects and unintended consequences. Of course, since nothing is a panacea and everything has side effects (you can't do just one thing), these common tropes are little more than a refusal to entertain the possibility that anything can ever be improved.²⁹

Pessimism among the intelligentsia can also be a form of one-upmanship. A modern society is a league of political, industrial, financial, technological, military, and intellectual elites, all competing for prestige and influence, and with differing responsibilities for making the society run. Complaining about modern society can be a backhanded way of putting down one's rivals—for academics to feel superior to businesspeople, businesspeople to feel superior to politicians, and so on. As Thomas Hobbes noted in 1651, "Competition of praise inclineth to a reverence of antiquity. For men contend with the living, not with the dead."

Pessimism, to be sure, has a bright side. The expanding circle of sympathy makes us concerned about harms that would have passed unnoticed in more callous times. Today we recognize the Syrian civil war as a humanitarian tragedy. The wars of earlier decades, such as the Chinese Civil War, the partition of India, and the Korean War, are seldom remembered that way, though they killed and displaced more people. When I grew up, bullying was considered a natural part of boyhood. It would have strained belief to think that some day the president of the United States would deliver a speech about its evils, as Barack Obama did in 2011. As we care about more of humanity, we're apt to mistake the harms around us for signs of how low the world has sunk rather than how high our standards have risen.

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But relentless negativity can itself have unintended consequences, and recently a few journalists have begun to point them out. In the wake of the 2016 American election, the *New York Times* writers David Bornstein and Tina Rosenberg reflected on the media's role in its shocking outcome:

Trump was the beneficiary of a belief—near universal in American journalism—that “serious news” can essentially be defined as “what’s going wrong.” . . . For decades, journalism’s steady focus on problems and seemingly incurable pathologies was preparing the soil that allowed Trump’s seeds of discontent and despair to take root. . . . One consequence is that many Americans today have difficulty imagining, valuing or even believing in the promise of incremental system change, which leads to a greater appetite for revolutionary, smash-the-machine change.³⁰

Bornstein and Rosenberg don't blame the usual culprits (cable TV, social media, late-night comedians) but instead trace it to the shift during the Vietnam and Watergate eras from glorifying leaders to checking their power—with an overshoot toward indiscriminate cynicism, in which everything about America's civic actors invites an aggressive takedown.

If the roots of progressophobia lie in human nature, is my suggestion that it is on the rise itself an illusion of the Availability bias? Anticipating the methods I will use in the rest of the book, let's look at an objective measure. The data scientist Kalev Leetaru applied a technique called sentiment mining to every article published in the *New York Times* between 1945 and 2005, and to an archive of translated articles and broadcasts from 130 countries between 1979 and 2010. Sentiment mining assesses the emotional tone of a text by tallying the number and contexts of words with positive and negative connotations, like *good*, *nice*, *terrible*, and *horrific*. Figure 4-1 shows the results. Putting aside the wiggles and waves that reflect the crises of the day, we see that the impression that the news has become more negative over time is real. The *New York Times* got steadily more morose from the early 1960s to the early 1970s, lightened up a bit (but just a bit) in the 1980s and 1990s, and then sank into a progressively worse mood in the first decade of the new century. News outlets in the rest of the world, too, became gloomier and gloomier from the late 1970s to the present day.

So has the world really gone steadily downhill during these decades?

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Keep figure 4-1 in mind as we examine the state of humanity in the chapters to come.

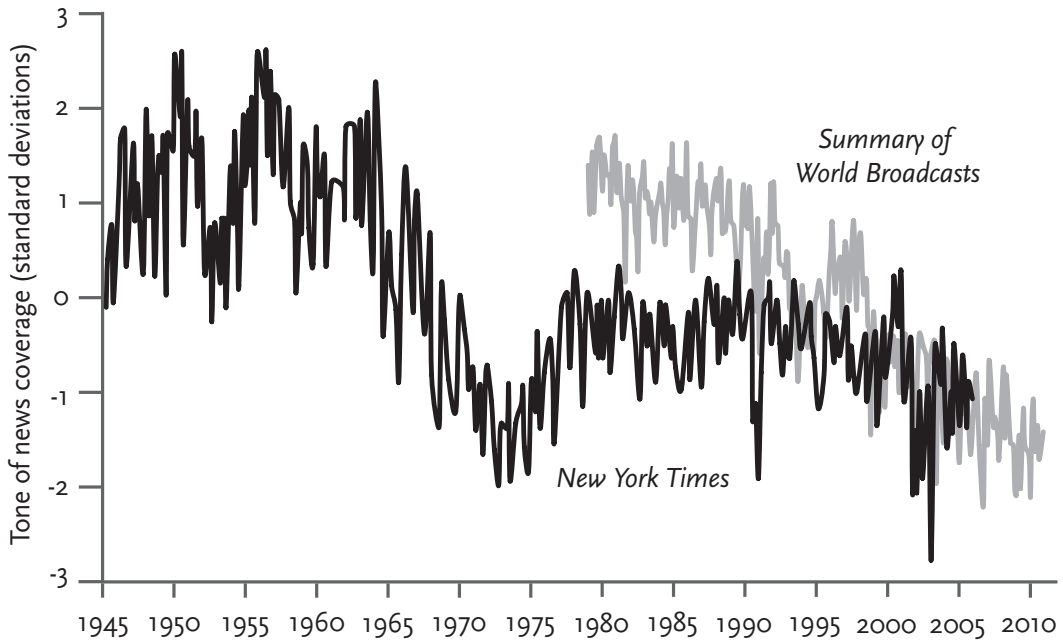


Figure 4-1: Tone of the news, 1945–2010

Source: Leetaru 2011.



What is progress? You might think that the question is so subjective and culturally relative as to be forever unanswerable. In fact, it’s one of the easier questions to answer.

Most people agree that life is better than death. Health is better than sickness. Sustenance is better than hunger. Abundance is better than poverty. Peace is better than war. Safety is better than danger. Freedom is better than tyranny. Equal rights are better than bigotry and discrimination. Literacy is better than illiteracy. Knowledge is better than ignorance. Intelligence is better than dull-wittedness. Happiness is better than misery. Opportunities to enjoy family, friends, culture, and nature are better than drudgery and monotony.

All these things can be measured. If they have increased over time, that is progress.

Granted, not everyone would agree on the exact list. The values are avowedly humanistic, and leave out religious, romantic, and aristocratic virtues like salvation, grace, sacredness, heroism, honor, glory, and authenticity. But most would agree that it’s a necessary start. It’s easy to extoll transcendent values in the abstract, but most people prioritize life,

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health, safety, literacy, sustenance, and stimulation for the obvious reason that these goods are a prerequisite to everything else. If you're reading this, you are not dead, starving, destitute, moribund, terrified, enslaved, or illiterate, which means that you're in no position to turn your nose up at these values—or to deny that other people should share your good fortune.

As it happens, the world does agree on these values. In the year 2000, all 189 members of the United Nations, together with two dozen international organizations, agreed on eight Millennium Development Goals for the year 2015 that blend right into this list.³¹

And here is a shocker: *The world has made spectacular progress in every single measure of human well-being.* Here is a second shocker: *Almost no one knows about it.*

Information about human progress, though absent from major news outlets and intellectual forums, is easy enough to find. The data are not entombed in dry reports but are displayed in gorgeous Web sites, particularly Max Roser's *Our World in Data*, Marian Tupy's *HumanProgress*, and Hans Rosling's *Gapminder*. (Rosling learned that not even swallowing a sword during a 2007 TED talk was enough to get the world's attention.) The case has been made in beautifully written books, some by Nobel laureates, which flaunt the news in their titles—*Progress*, *The Progress Paradox*, *Infinite Progress*, *The Infinite Resource*, *The Rational Optimist*, *The Case for Rational Optimism*, *Utopia for Realists*, *Mass Flourishing*, *Abundance*, *The Improving State of the World*, *Getting Better*, *The End of Doom*, *The Moral Arc*, *The Big Ratchet*, *The Great Escape*, *The Great Surge*, *The Great Convergence*.³² (None was recognized with a major prize, but over the period in which they appeared, Pulitzers in nonfiction were given to four books on genocide, three on terrorism, two on cancer, two on racism, and one on extinction.) And for those whose reading habits tend toward listicles, recent years have offered "Five Amazing Pieces of Good News Nobody Is Reporting," "Five Reasons Why 2013 Was the Best Year in Human History," "Seven Reasons the World Looks Worse Than It Really Is," "29 Charts and Maps That Show the World Is Getting Much, Much Better," "40 Ways the World Is Getting Better," and my favorite, "50 Reasons Why We're Living Through the Greatest Period in World History." Let's look at some of those reasons.

NOTES

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1. Herman 1997, p. 7, also cites Joseph Campbell, Noam Chomsky, Joan Didion, E. L. Doctorow, Paul Goodman, Michael Harrington, Robert Heilbroner, Jonathan Kozol, Christopher Lasch, Norman Mailer, Thomas Pynchon, Kirkpatrick Sale, Jonathan Schell, Richard Sennett, Susan Sontag, Gore Vidal, and Gary Wills.
2. Nisbet 1980/2009, p. 317.
3. The optimism gap: McNaughton-Cassill & Smith 2002; Nagdy & Roser 2016b; Veenhoven 2010; Whitman 1998.
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11. Availability heuristic: Kahneman 2011; Slovic 1987; Slovic, Fischhoff, & Lichtenstein 1982; Tversky & Kahneman 1973.
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13. If it bleeds, it leads (and vice versa): Bohle 1986; Combs & Slovic 1979; Galtung & Ruge 1965; Miller & Albert 2015.
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18. Solutions create new problems: Deutsch 2011, pp. 64, 76, 350; Berlin 1988/2013, p. 15.
19. Deutsch 2011, p. 193.
20. Thick-tailed distributions: See chapter 19, and, for more detail, Pinker 2011, pp. 210–22.
21. Negativity bias: Baumeister, Bratslavsky, et al. 2001; Rozin & Royzman 2001.
22. Personal communication, 1982.
23. More negative words: Baumeister, Bratslavsky, et al. 2001; Schrauf & Sanchez 2004.
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26. Connor 2014; see also Connor 2016.
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31. The UN Millennium Development Goals are: 1. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. 2. To achieve universal primary education. 3. To promote gender equality and empower women. 4. To reduce child mortality. 5. To improve maternal health. 6. To combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases. 7. To ensure environmental sustainability. 8. To develop a global partnership for [economic] development.
32. Books on progress (in order of mention): Norberg 2016, Easterbrook 2003, Reese 2013, Naam 2013, Ridley 2010, Robinson 2009, Bregman 2017, Phelps 2013, Diamandis & Kotler 2012, Kenny 2011, Bailey 2015, Shermer 2015, DeFries 2014, Deaton 2013, Radelet 2015, Mahbubani 2013.