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Overcoming “Development Fatigue” [1]

We’ve got a problem. People in rich countries don’t believe that things have improved in the developing world?—?and this view is really hard to change. Even regular news consumers who in theory are in favor of foreign aid are likely to believe that it is usually misspent and pilfered away by shameless dictators.

Public opinion in developed nations is decidedly against increasing foreign aid. The common belief that “it’s a hopeless and bottomless pit” means there’s very little incentive for news organizations to cover the expensive global development beat.

According to a 2013 Eurobarometer poll, only 22% of Europeans had heard of the Millennium Development Goals, even though the MDGs have been the United Nation’s overarching framework for all global development work since 2000. Because there’s so little reporting on it, it’s not terribly surprising to discover that few people in rich nations know what the goals are and whether the effort was successful.

In reality, the UN’s final report on the MDGs in 2015 showed that there was a lot to celebrate. For example, extreme poverty in developing countries was reduced from 47% to 14%, there was a 45% decrease in HIV infections, and 2.6 billion people have access to better water.

So who’s been covering all this good news?

Among the hardy few, we find the Guardian. In 2010, they entered into a partnership with the Gates Foundation to develop a website that would help focus the world’s attention on global development and the progress of the MDGs.

They asked our team at the Media Impact Project to work with them to figure out if the site was achieving its goals. It can be very tricky to establish correlations between media interventions and broad social change, but, given the right data, it is possible to assess effects on individuals.

We started with a content analysis, which allowed us to understand exactly what topics and countries were covered in two years’ worth of the Guardian’s Global Development coverage. We also gathered web analytics, which helped us determine who visited the Global Development site and who hadn’t. Then we administered a survey that asked questions that would gauge respondents’ awareness, knowledge, and whether they had taken any “offline” actions that our web analytics wouldn’t reveal.

This was a targeted survey that popped up only for people who met specific criteria. In this instance, we wanted to find people who had visited the Global Development section of the Guardian, but we also wanted to find people who had never visited that section of the site but had gone to the World News section, which is its closest cousin.

Our strategy was to find among the World News visitors a group of people who were very similar to the visitors to the Global Development site?—?we had just under 8,000 respondents so it was pretty easy to do. Ultimately, we could use this matched comparison group to find out whether visiting the Global Development site was associated with higher levels of

awareness, knowledge and engagement in global development.

The results were quite clear. Those who had visited the Global Development site were more likely to be more aware of MDGs, to have signed a petition, and to have changed their minds about a global development issue after reading a Guardian story.

These findings suggest that Global Development readers are persuadable and prepared to take political action based upon Guardian reporting.

Encouraged by our findings, we now wanted to know if there was a subgroup who were even more engaged with global development. Who was most likely to both be knowledgeable and to have taken action?

We looked through piles of data, and found a surprise. The best predictor for taking action was the question, “How much of a difference do you think an individual could make to reduce poverty in poor countries?”

The crucial link between awareness and action was self-efficacy, a sense of agency that social psychologists have long associated with positive behavior change, like eating healthier or quitting smoking. People who are more inclined to act are the ones who already think that they can make a difference. Without the feeling that “you can do it,” you probably won’t.

Psychologist Albert Bandura has published studies since the 1970s demonstrating that people’s sense of self-efficacy is affected by the media they encounter. When they see people like themselves succeeding at something, they are more likely to believe that they can do it too.

If this is the case, then the next inevitable question is, how can we increase people’s sense of self-efficacy?

I believe the answer can be found in two recent studies (first and second) conducted by the Engaging News Project at University of Texas Austin. They worked with the Solutions Journalism Network in order to figure out whether news stories that include solutions in them?—?rather than just focusing on the problems?—?affect readers in some way.

In the first study, researchers presented U.S. adults with news articles that were identical in every way, except half of them added reporting on potential responses to mitigate the problem. It turned out that readers of the “solutions journalism” were significantly more likely to say they had increased interest, they felt inspired, and they believed they could contribute to a solution to the issue.

People who read the articles that included solutions reporting also were significantly more likely to say that they would like to get involved in the issue and donate money.

Fortunately, as the solutions journalism framework tells us, these lessons apply to all types of communication and media?—?whether you’re crafting a tweet, a blog post, a press release, a fundraising letter, or a feature film. Consider, for instance, explaining the *causes* of the problem, and not just the problem itself. Describe responses that people have devised, and provide how-to details. And don’t forget to include evidence of results so that people are empowered to evaluate for themselves the scope of the solution. This kind of information makes it easier for people to think constructively about grave social problems, rather than turning a deaf ear and feeling disempowered.

This is hopeful news for all of us involved in efforts to improve global health. Let’s use these guidelines to overcome “development fatigue” and finally build the global momentum necessary to address the utterly solvable health problems that continue to plague us.

Note from the CPD Blog Manager: *This piece originally appeared at The Development Set.*