

‘Where has all the good news gone?’

Fadlo R. Khuri

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In periods of great historical upheaval or change, it is received wisdom that bad news frequently dominates the news cycle. The eras of the COVID-19 pandemic globally and the deep economic, political, and social collapse in Lebanon are no different. Even the use of striking scientific technology combined with ambitious agency and resources leading to warp speed development of new vaccines against this deadly virus and the increasing availability of multiple highly effective, genetically modified vaccines has been met with far too much sound and fury. “The privileged are getting too much of the vaccines!” goes the hue and cry, in the United States, Europe, the developed world, the Global South, and yes, of course in Lebanon.

It is true that a disproportionate number of vaccine doses have been administered in richer countries(1), but one could also suggest that these privileged “few” are the first cohort beyond the clinical trials to be tested for the short, intermediate, and long-term effects of the mRNA vaccines. And yes, some of the vaccines, particularly those based on adenovirus technology, do appear to be associated with the development of selective and symptomatic thromboses in the central nervous system. However, if the odds of developing serious clotting in or around the brain are weighed against the risk of developing life-threatening clots from the virus itself, the risk-benefit analysis argues strongly in favor of taking whichever vaccine is first available to an individual.(2) And there are a significant number of novel, highly effective vaccines, something that has been celebrated far less frequently, or loudly, than it should have been.

Quite the contrary, sadly. Recent analysis of news cycles(3) related to the vaccines shows they are overwhelmingly slanted towards their lack of availability, their potential side effects, and the disparities between the highly industrialized nations that were able to obtain large quantities of these vaccines, and the nations of the global south, where vaccination remains far more challenging, and resources are far more strained. This was brought home in force when India, the world’s largest producer of vaccines, recently descended into arguably the most devastating viral surge seen since the beginning of the pandemic.

Other than covering the heroic actions by healthcare providers during the various surges, what else has been in the news of late? Destructive confrontations triggered by overwhelming imbalances of might, and yes, a glaring lack of equality in basic human, civil, and citizenship rights. A glaring absence of social justice and an even more glaring lack of empathy. Atrocious, unfathomable leadership exacerbating violence and the insecurity of large swaths of humanity. In this caustic, cynical, and hostile atmosphere, is it any wonder that trust in leadership has collapsed to its lowest level in several decades? Add to that the weaning off of the durable inoculum created during and after World War II(4), and we see a world on the edge of a precipice of confrontation, immersed in fear and willing to believe any news that it is bad, that all motives are dark, whether the news is properly sourced and reported, or invented and disseminated widely on social media!

Perhaps the lessons of history have not been as well learned as one might have hoped. It may well be, and this is increasingly my opinion, that we expect too much of our all-too-human leaders. I recognize this will seem misguided to many, and you have the right to expect your elected and appointed leaders to fulfill their obligation not only to set higher moral standards, but also their obligations to the very people they have sworn to shepherd and protect, and the very institutions and constitutions that they have pledged to preserve. The world likes its leaders wholesome, humble, wise, and yes, pure. Unfortunately, if one looks beyond the major prophets of monotheism, and a few other striking examples of great men and women who lead effectively, humanely, humbly, and wisely, and who pass the character test with flying colors, we find these examples are rare. Reprehensible moral behavior, overweening ambition, crushing insecurity, none of these character flaws exclude their owners from having enormous historical impact, and indeed they may have enabled their actions.

Take Otto von Bismarck, the 19th-century statesman and first German Chancellor and subject of the eminent historian Jonathan Steinberg's scholarly, impassioned, and best-selling biography, *Bismarck: A Life*.⁽⁵⁾ Much has been written about Bismarck's wars, the unification of Germany, the development of *Realpolitik*, and the startling empowerment of an absolute monarchy. Rather less is heard about the construction under Bismarck's aegis of the very first social safety net, an undertaking fully joined by the great grandfather of our own trustee, Alexander Ercklentz. Or the granting of universal suffrage well before other European nations, a battle still not yet fully secure in the United States, where voters' rights are once more imperiled. Or the development of a Reichstag inclusive of the representatives of the various kingdoms, principalities, and dukedoms of Germany. All monumental steps that were not the focus of Steinberg's angular portrayal of a man most historians consider 19th century Europe's most influential and arguably greatest statesman, despite his manifest flaws. But the protagonists of Steinberg's account are not just the Iron Chancellor himself, but the many rich, complex and yes all too human characters that inhabit and enable Bismarck's story. And his, and ultimately our world.

And therein lie several of the lessons we grasp all too infrequently. Life can conform to Macbeth's dark, despairing epitaph, on learning of the suicide of his wife, co-conspirator and life partner, "a tale, full of sound and fury, told by an idiot, signifying nothing."⁽⁶⁾ But it is more frequently a rich tapestry of flawed colors, of human beings who rise and fall, and sometimes rise again, to make a difference even as they struggle with, but somehow, overcome their own flaws. Biographies of great women and men tell us their stories, but there in the background lie heroes and villains, contributors and detractors, largely hidden from view until one adjusts one's sights. The great healers, scholars, scientists, writers, artists, epistemologists, philosophers, engineers, and musicians who are just off-center in the stories of legends, but whose real words and deeds make an everyday difference, more often than not for the better.

People like the Turkish German husband and wife co-inventors, Uğur Şahin and Özlem Türeci, of the mRNA technology that helped us vaccinate and save so many lives.⁽⁷⁾ And indeed people in our own AUB community, who are far too numerous to do justice to here, but who include our graduate, the savvy and dedicated Bechara Choucair,⁽⁸⁾ who led President Biden's remarkable US national vaccination campaign, which will allow the United States to open up by July 4, 2021 and which is planning to ship vaccines to

immunize millions in the Global South. Or closer to home, Nuhad Doumit, Gladys Honein, Iman Nuwayhid, Najat Saliba, Lina Daouk-Öyry, Alain Aoun, Rima Karami, Charlotte Karam, Carmen Geha, and others, heroes who helped bring *Khaddit Beirut* and its inspiring and life-affirming services to the patients and population of the devastated Karantina district of Beirut. (9) Or Carine Sakr, Nada Melhem, Marco Bardos, and Souha Kanj Sharara of our COVID-19 expert committee, who have tirelessly prioritized the safety of our community before all else. Or Ali Abou-Alfa, a modern-day role model who directs the Human Research Protection Program (HRPP), (10) enabling legions of AUB faculty members to conduct practice-changing investigations, all while publishing clinical research, mentoring young physicians and nurses, and saving the lives of patients in acute kidney failure, one person, one patient at a time.

So the next time you despair while reading the news, weighed down by sensationalism rather than lifted by rationalism, reflect carefully on what you can do to bring good news to the world. To make certain that, in the immortal words of Robert Kennedy, you to count yourself among the precious few who can genuinely state: “Some see things as they are and ask why. I see things that never were and ask why not.” By insisting on shaping and serving a better, fairer, more inclusive and more hopeful world, you can answer the question of where the good news has gone because you, my AUB class of 2021, you are our good news. And the good news of a better world.

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