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## Is it Just Fluff? Topics, News Values, and Normative Democratic Implications of BBC's *The Happy Pod*

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### ABSTRACT

A growing number of legacy news organizations are experimenting with ways to address the widespread perception that news is too negative. While many of these initiatives claim to apply traditional news values with a solutions-oriented twist, this study explores one that makes no such claims: the BBC's *The Happy Pod*. Using a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of one year of *Happy Pod* episodes, we analyze the topics and news values the podcast applies and discuss normative democratic implications of this happy-news-only initiative. We find that it is almost the inverse of a traditional news program, covering primarily soft news stories and applying few traditional hard news values (suggesting that some traditional news topics and values are more straightforwardly compatible with happy news). Instead, it applies a host of humanistic news values often downplayed in mainstream news. We conclude that, as a sole source of information, *The Happy Pod* falls short of democratic ideals, but in other ways, particularly in taking seriously the affective aspects of the news experience and including common citizens, it surpasses most traditional news sources.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Good news; positive news; happy news; news values; podcasting; content analysis; constructive journalism; solutions journalism

Selective news avoidance is at an all-time high: 39% of news users worldwide say they sometimes or often avoid news, many because they find it too depressing (Newman et al. 2024). Forty-six percent say negativity affects which news outlets they trust—and trust in news continues to decline (Newman et al. 2024).<sup>1</sup> The belief that news is too negative is not new (Gieber 1955; McIntyre 2016), but in an environment of hyper-competition for audiences and advertisers, news organizations are now under more pressure to try to respond to that belief, and many of their strategies raise questions that go to the heart of how we define news itself. Advocates for movements to make news more positive, from peace journalism to, more recently, constructive journalism and what has variously been called eudaimonic, inspiring, or joyful journalism, often emphasize that they are not “just happy,” but instead incorporate positivity while retaining traditional hard news values, like holding power to account and addressing major social problems (Aitamurto and Varma 2018; Galtung 2003; Parks 2021). The underlying assumption is that “just happy” news is just “fluff”: dumbed down, trivial, providing little of public service.

However, legacy news organizations are now experimenting with a range of happy news products, some of which make claims to adhere to traditional hard news values. One example is *The Happy Pod*, a weekly episode of the BBC World Service's *Global News Podcast* focused entirely on short, upbeat stories from around the world. Notably, *The Happy Pod* does *not* appear to resist the "just happy" label, but instead embraces what editor Karen Martin has called "unashamedly happy" news (Leonard 2023).

On the surface, *The Happy Pod* appears to produce exactly the kind of news that advocates of constructive and joyful journalism dismiss as trivial (Constructive Institute 2023; Parks 2021). And yet, we contend that happy news initiatives, and *The Happy Pod* specifically, are worth closer examination for several reasons. First, as experiments in addressing news-is-too-negative perceptions that are produced by respected legacy news organizations but are less resource intensive than many other strategies to make news positive, their approaches may be worth replicating. Second, by making positivity its primary goal *The Happy Pod* may be a more radical departure from established prestige journalism than strategies that prioritize more traditional news values are, and as such it may be more attractive to audiences turned off by news. Third, news podcasts have become an important space for "radical experimentation" (Dowling and Miller 2019, 173) where entrenched norms like objectivity have been questioned and subverted in ways that put podcasting at the vanguard of more widespread changes in reporting norms and practices (Dowling 2024; Lindgren 2023; Nee and Santana 2021). Innovations in news podcasting may therefore herald broader changes in the field.

In this paper we use a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of *The Happy Pod* to explore what news might look like if happiness were prioritized by professional news organizations, and to discuss the potential of happy news initiatives more broadly. The main questions we aim to address are: What topics are covered in *The Happy Pod*? What news values, in addition to happiness, does it apply? We conclude by exploring how *The Happy Pod* fulfills or falls short of the democratic ideals often ascribed to journalism.

We find that *The Happy Pod* avoids most traditional hard news topics but does cover many scientific breakthroughs and solutions to problems, in addition to many topics usually considered soft or human-interest news. It also does not apply many other traditional news values—notably absent are stories focused on the power elite—except for the values of magnitude, weirdness, and emotional impact. Instead, it applies a host of humanistic news values that have long been present but less prioritized by news organizations. We conclude that, as a sole source of information, *The Happy Pod* falls short of democratic ideals, but in other ways, particularly in taking seriously the affective aspects of the news experience and including common citizens, it surpasses most traditional news sources.

## Literature Review

### *Negativity as a (Potentially Problematic) News Value*

That news accentuates the negative is one of the most well-established findings in Journalism Studies. Scholars devising typologies of news values—the unwritten rules that journalists use to decide what counts as news (Harcup and O'Neill 2001)—almost

always conclude that negativity, sometimes labeled bad news or conflict, is a dominant value (e.g., Bednarek and Caple 2017; Harcup and O'Neill 2001, 2017; Schultz 2007). Meanwhile, studies of news content and training materials for journalists confirm that news, especially “hard” news, highlights violence, disaster, scandal, and conflict (Parks 2019a; Rozado, Hughes, and Halberstadt 2022; Soroka 2014; Soroka and Krupnikov 2021).

Some trace news’s negativity bias to an evolutionary advantage that helps people minimize risk, leading producers to prefer it, consumers to respond to it, and producers in turn to prioritize it more (Baumeister et al. 2001; Shoemaker 1996). Indeed, there is strong evidence that consumers, although they may say otherwise on surveys, are consistently drawn to negative news, as measured by sales (Soroka 2014), clicks (Feezell et al. 2024; Robertson et al. 2023), and psychophysiological responses (Soroka, Fournier, and Nir 2019).

However, if we look at broader consumption patterns and consumer attitudes toward news, negative news may be a problem worth addressing. It is not clear whether too much negativity in news depresses political engagement: scholars find evidence in both directions, and some argue there is probably an ideal amount of negativity that catches attention without turning people off completely (Soroka and Krupnikov 2021). But audience research suggests we may have passed that point: both declining trust in news and rising levels of news avoidance are linked to the belief that news is *too* negative (Newman et al. 2024; Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen 2023), and news avoidance in turn is linked to political disengagement (Norris 2000; Toff, Palmer, and Nielsen 2023). Studies show that negative news can have a negative impact on mental health (de Hoogand and Verboon 2019; Woodstock 2014), and that large numbers of news consumers, particularly young people, believe that it is very or extremely important that news help them “feel better about the world” but that news does a poor job of it (Newman et al. 2024). In sum, research suggests that even if metrics show that negative headlines catch attention, the cumulative effects of negative news are a serious concern for news producers and the public.

### ***Positivity in News***

Although less prominent and less studied than negativity, positivity has long played an important role in news, and some scholars (though not all, see Schultz 2007) include it in their typologies of news values (Bednarek and Caple 2017; Harcup and O'Neill 2001, 201). Good news stories have been linked to a range of positive effects, including increased positive affect (McIntyre and Gibson 2016), greater sharing intention (Berger and Milkman 2012; Heimbach and Hinz 2016; but see McIntyre and Gibson 2016), and less depression associated with fear of crime (Yamamoto 2018).

But the role of positive news and the way it is perceived have changed over time. Parks (2019a, 2019b) documents how over the course of the twentieth century an emerging objectivity norm in the US led to a growing divide between more emotional, human-interest stories, which tended to be more positive, and harder, presumably more objective current events news, which tended to be more negative. This has led to an often-unexamined assumption that happiness is incompatible with serious news, triggering fears that efforts to make news products in general, and hard news in particular, more positive will inevitably dumb them down (Baden, McIntyre, and Homberg 2019).

Against this backdrop, various journalism movements over the last several decades have made a case for ways to reduce negativity in hard news reporting, including peace journalism, through an emphasis on alternatives to violence (Galtung 2003) and public journalism, through an emphasis on empowering citizens to search for solutions (Rosen 2001). More recently, constructive journalism calls on journalists to combat the prevalent negativity bias in news by applying the principles of positive psychology, with a focus on solutions, nuance, and dialogue (Constructive Institute 2023; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). Scholars and advocates of constructive journalism invoke positive psychology pioneer Barbara Frederickson's influential broaden-and-build theory, which argues that experiencing positive emotions expands peoples' perceptions in the short run, but also builds their resources (intellectual, emotional, and social) so they are healthier and more productive in the long run (Frederickson 2001; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). Solutions journalism, a form of constructive journalism, focuses primarily on reframing hard news stories to foreground and investigate solutions to social problems (McIntyre and Lough 2021).

The perceived tension between positivity and hard news values—a legacy of the division Parks (2019a, 2019b) identifies—is evident in discourse around these forms of news. The Constructive Institute website, for example, explains that constructive journalism “is not positive, uncritical news, an alternative to watchdog reporting.” That kind of rhetoric is typical: advocates are quick to explain that constructive and solutions journalism are not “good news,” or “happy news,” or “just” positive (Aitamurto and Varma 2018; Constructive Institute 2023; McIntyre and Lough 2021), but instead continue to apply other, more celebrated traditional news values, such as holding power to account and addressing social problems (Aitamurto and Varma 2018; Galtung 2003; Rosen 2001). These approaches emphasize that positivity is incorporated in the way stories are framed and presented (often by highlighting solutions), but positivity is not a core news value in the sense that it is not, taken alone, a good criterion for story selection. Stories of individual acts of bravery or altruism, for example, do not qualify as constructive or solutions journalism because they do not illustrate replicable solutions to structural problems (Aitamurto and Varma 2018; Constructive Institute 2023; McIntyre and Lough 2021).

### ***Eudaimonic, Inspirational, or Joyful News***

Another, in some ways more radical, strategy to address news-is-too-negative perceptions is not to reframe traditional forms of news while prioritizing old news values, but instead to rethink news values themselves. To be clear, this is not a coherent, well-defined set of practices like those described above. It is a collection of overlapping proposals from scholars and industry insiders who argue that news sometimes already does, or potentially could, tap into deep positive emotions and contribute to well-being by prioritizing news stories that are not just cheery or entertaining, but inspiring or joyful. Like advocates for constructive journalism, they often draw on the principles of positive psychology (Frederickson 2001) to argue that these forms of news can help people become more open-minded, resilient, and engaged (e.g., Oliver et al. 2018; Parks 2021).

These approaches advocate for making positivity a core value for story selection, although they usually distinguish between different types of positive news. Here the distinction between hedonic and eudaimonic happiness is helpful. Drawing on Aristotle,

some media scholars distinguish between hedonic media experiences, which elicit immediate pleasure, humor, or contentment and eudaimonic media experiences, which evoke more profound, mixed feelings of reflection, hope, awe, gratitude, transcendence, and overall well-being (Bartsch and Schneider 2014; Oliver et al. 2018). Colloquially, eudaimonic media may be best described as “inspiring” (Dale et al. 2017; Janicke-Bowles et al. 2019). Most research on eudaimonic media focuses on entertainment, but feelings of awe and inspiration may be elicited by at least some forms of positive news (Janicke-Bowles et al. 2019; Ji et al. 2019), such as stories about nature, art, great accomplishments, kindness, and perseverance in the face of obstacles (Dale et al. 2017).

Picking up on this idea, Parks (2021) argues that joy has long been an essential but little prioritized news value. Like advocates of constructive journalism, he emphasizes that joyful news is not merely “good news,” that tends toward sappy, click-bait stories of happy oddities (that is, hedonic), but instead highlights “human potential in the face of all manner of adversity” (827), ultimately leaving people feeling hopeful rather than defeated. He identifies eight “pillars” to look out for in the pursuit of joyful news: perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity (2021).

In practice, the increasingly popular “user needs” model originally developed at the BBC applies some of these ideas (Newman et al. 2024; Woudstra 2020). The model recommends including more stories addressing users’ emotional needs (in addition to their informational needs), breaking these into two types: diversion (presumably more hedonic) and inspiration (eudaimonic). Inspiring stories may include solutions-oriented pieces, but often are longform stories about “people who achieve something significant against all odds: interesting people doing inspiring or surprising things” (Woudstra 2020).

### **Reconsidering “Just Happy” News**

Because they are often longform, complex, and heavily reported, constructive and eudaimonic news stories tend to require a lot of effort and resources from both journalists and audiences (Bartsch and Schneider 2014; Jackson, Glück, and Nguyen 2024; Woudstra 2020)—a crucial consideration for news organizations in the current climate. Partly for that reason, we want to suggest that “just happy” news deserves a closer look. McIntyre (2016) defines this as news “with particularly positive overtones, such as rescues, cures, acts of heroism, economic growth, reunifications, or love.” (224). Usually conflict-free, a “good” or happy news story is “one in which the majority of the site’s readers/viewers would be satisfied or pleased that the event happened, or happened as it did” (McIntyre 2016, 224). Happy news takes happiness itself as its primary news value or criterion for story selection, and as such stories may or may not apply traditional hard news values (unlike constructive journalism) and may or may not tap into the deeper meanings of human experience (unlike eudaimonic media).

Recently, mainstream news outlets have begun to experiment more with happy news products. Newsletters like the *Guardian’s* “The Upside,” the *Washington Post’s* “The Optimist,” or *El País’s* “Correo sí deseado” [“mail you *do* want”] aggregate and distribute only the most positive stories from their respective publications, an approach that requires few dedicated resources. Others, like *USA Today’s* “Humankind” section and the BBC’s *The Happy Pod* (detailed further below) rely heavily on contributions from audiences.

The most obvious criticism of happy news initiatives is that because they do not (necessarily) apply traditional news values, they risk being trivial or treacly—that is, fluff (Parks 2021). Studies that have compared the news values applied in “good news” stories appear to corroborate some of those concerns: good news stories emphasize personalization, entertainment, and emotion, whereas traditional hard news stories focus more on the power elite, conflict/negativity, and timeliness (McIntyre 2016; Yu and Zhu 2024). Advocates of constructive journalism also argue that since happy news focuses on solutions that are not replicable (heroic individual acts, for example), it does not encourage civic engagement (Constructive Institute 2023; Wenzel et al. 2018). Moreover, if happy news does not necessarily apply any of the news values assumed to set news apart from other media forms, it is not clear why audiences would choose it over, say, videos of puppies and kittens or other happy alternatives.

That said, there are some clear advantages to at least experimenting with happy news initiatives to address news-is-too-negative perceptions. Because they tend to be shorter and require less in-depth reporting than constructive and eudaimonic journalism (Bartsch and Schneider 2014; Jackson, Glück, and Nguyen 2024; Woudstra 2020), these stories can be cheaper to produce, and quicker to read and understand. And although the main priority is to be “just” positive, this may be a more worthy ambition than is generally acknowledged. As is clear in almost any context *except* when we are focused on news, making people feel good is not trivial. According to the broaden-and-build theory sometimes invoked by constructive journalism and eudaimonic media advocates, when people feel more positive, they broaden their perspective and build resources that enable them to take a wide range of actions including to engage more in social and political life and potentially with news itself (Frederickson 2001, 2013; Parks 2021; Woodstock 2014). Notably, in the many studies designed to test broaden-and-build theory, the positive emotions in question are induced by, for example, showing people pictures of puppies or giving them a bag of candy (Greater Good Science Center 2011). In other words, the beneficial positive emotions need not be profound. If the goal is for people to perceive news as less negative and to feel more positive when they use it, it is not at all clear that news must be eudaimonic or constructive. Including more “just happy” stories may well do the job.

We need more research to understand these distinctions and whether and when they matter. As we explain in the next section, podcasts are a good place to start.

### ***News Podcasts as Sites of Experimentation***

Some scholars argue that podcasting is the latest in a long line of technological innovations that have brought about new forms of news and influenced journalistic norms and practices more broadly (Dowling 2024; Nee and Santana 2021). News podcasts, those produced by professional news organizations, (Nee and Santana 2021) can be either “native” shows created specifically to be distributed as podcasts, or “catch-up” content repurposed from broadcast programs (Newman and Gallo 2019). Formats vary, including talk/interview, one-off series, and daily news podcasts (Newman and Gallo 2019; 2020). The latter include news roundups like the BBC’s *Global News Podcast* (the parent podcast of *The Happy Pod*), that give brief overviews of the day’s news (Newman and Gallo 2019; 2020).

As of 2024, 35% of global survey respondents had consumed a podcast in the previous month, and 13% had consumed a news podcast (Newman et al. 2024). But that number belies podcasts' growing importance for building loyalty and brand awareness due to high engagement, return rates, and completion rates; for generating ad and sponsorship revenue, since listeners tend to be relatively wealthy; and for reaching hard-to-reach younger audiences (Newman et al. 2024; Newman and Gallo 2019, 2020).

Crucially for this project, podcasts have also been a place of "radical experimentation" in journalistic storytelling (Dowling 2024, 12; Lindgren 2023). Some of the new norms that have come to define the form include a casual, even chatty, tone; personal storytelling in which the reporter may become part of the story; and self-reflexivity, transparency and metacommentary about journalistic practices (Dowling and Miller 2019; Lindgren 2023; Nee and Santana 2021). In an inversion of long-standing assumptions that objective, neutral reporting builds trust, in podcasting transparency and self-reflexivity become crucial for credibility (Dowling 2024). As such, podcasting has been at the forefront of the growing debate over whether objectivity in its traditional form is as essential to credibility as was long assumed.

In immersive, long-form podcast journalism, especially, emotion is no longer "outsourced" to subjects and sources, as has been longstanding practice in other forms of news reporting, but instead is often expressed by journalists themselves (Lindgren 2023). Thus, both the content and the mode—which, like radio, requires imagination, but unlike radio, is usually experienced alone, often directly in listeners' ears—generate a kind of "hyper-intimacy" (Berry 2016). Given that podcasting prioritizes emotions and has been a way news organizations have tried out different approaches to journalism in the past, and that some of these appear to have been at the vanguard of challenging journalism conventions more broadly, it is logical that news organizations would use podcasts to explore the possibilities of and responses to happy news. It is also possible that such innovations will have wider effects on the industry.

### *The Happy Pod*

With downloads in the millions, the *Global News Podcast (The GNP)* is the BBC's most successful podcast, produced twice daily by staff of the BBC World Service (Newman and Gallo 2020). *The GNP* follows the format of a traditional news roundup: presenters introduce a succession of topics and journalists report from around the world, but with what Commissioning Editor Jon Manel calls a more familiar, "podcasty feel" (Newman and Gallo 2020). Although art, culture, and science stories are often included, episodes usually focus on the biggest global hard news stories, with death and disaster often taking center stage. "North Korea tells BBC of neighbors starving to death" (Leonard 2023) is a typical headline.

Starting in spring 2023 *The GNP* began airing *The Happy Pod* once a week on Saturdays. It follows the same news roundup format as *The GNP* but has a more upbeat tone and often incorporates contributions from listeners. The podcast makes no claims to be traditional hard news, but rather prioritizes making people feel happy. "Relief and joy: Pakistan cable car rescue" is a typical headline. *GNP* editor Karen Martin, who also edits *The Happy Pod*, has characterized the latter as a space to rethink what news is and can be:

I think perhaps we need to consider what the definition of news is. And are we sort of still—is it quite a macho concept that it's about war and death and destruction, or is it, in fact, just

new information that people don't know about that they'd be interested in that can be inspiring and uplifting? It can be something that makes you feel good. And that doesn't have to mean light and fluffy (Leonard 2023).

Scholars have called for more research into news podcasting in general (Lindgren 2023; Nee and Santana 2021), and happy news projects have been little studied so far. As a prelude to much needed studies focused on production and consumption of happy news, this paper focuses on happy news content produced by a legacy news organization, specifically the BBC's *The Happy Pod*. We aim to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What themes and topics does *The Happy Pod* cover?

RQ2: What news values does *The Happy Pod* apply?

## Methodology

We conducted a quantitative and qualitative content analysis to identify the topics and news values in *The Happy Pod* from March 2023–July 2024. Each podcast consisted of 6–10 stories, and the unit of analysis was the story. Two researchers refined the coding scheme using 10% of the episodes and used the next 10% to determine intercoder reliability. Since this was a relatively simple coding task, intercoder reliability was predictably high, with simple agreement at 94%, and Gwet's  $AC_1$  at 89%.<sup>2</sup> The 54 remaining episodes ( $N = 473$  stories) from July 2023–July 2024 were then coded for presence or absence of topics and traditional news values (see appendix for codebook). Since a single story can cover multiple topics and apply multiple news values, codes were not mutually exclusive (Harcup and O'Neill 2017).

The list of topics was adapted from Hernández and Madrid-Morales (2020). After an initial review of 10% of the podcasts and discussion between the two researchers, we collapsed their categories of national politics and foreign affairs into just "politics" since this is a global podcast, and broke the "human interest" category into science and technology, health, religion, animals, children, heroic acts and rescues, acts of altruism, and individuals overcoming adversity. We also added two additional topics drawn from the constructive journalism movement: scalable solutions to social problems and mobilizing information (adapted from Maier 2015).

Since *The Happy Pod's* main, explicitly stated news value is happiness, we did not code for that. To identify the podcast's other news values, we applied the same codes that McIntyre (2016) used in her content analysis of good news websites, which were themselves derived from previous studies (see McIntyre 2016, 226), except we eliminated the "emotional impact" category because we found it too subjective to code quantitatively (we instead explore this in our qualitative analysis), and changed the "entertainment/oddity" category to "weirdness" because we could not come up with a consistent way to code "entertainment," and "oddity" seemed less intuitive to us than "weirdness."

To complement the quantitative analysis, we also took qualitative notes as we listened to each story, especially looking out for more emotional values (since we did not code emotional impact quantitatively, as noted above) including those Parks (2021) associates with joyful news. As he argues, these are all but impossible to quantify, making qualitative approaches best for identifying them, and we wanted to leave room for less-traditionally-prioritized news values to emerge inductively. We loosely hand-coded our qualitative notes and discussed them to identify the most common emergent themes.

Below we refer to specific stories by short headlines. To be clear, only the lead story in each podcast has an actual written headline, which is used as the title of the episode online. All other “headlines” are brief descriptors we assigned to stories.

## Findings

### Topics Covered in The Happy Pod

The most frequently covered topics in *The Happy Pod* (Figure 1) were arts and culture (32%), science and technology (29%), animals (24%), and scalable solutions to social problems (23%), followed by environment (18%), individuals overcoming adversity (17%), health (/16%), and acts of altruism (15%). Since categories were not mutually exclusive, there was a fair amount of overlap, particularly between the other categories and scalable solutions, acts of altruism, and individuals overcoming adversity. Stories within the top three categories ranged from singular, fun, and quirky, to stories about remarkable individual acts of bravery or altruism, to those that stood to benefit many. That is, they ranged from hedonic to eudaimonic.

For example, the most common category, arts and culture, included announcements about events such as “Italian town displays the world’s largest Christmas tree,” about a town coming together to create a massive Christmas tree on a hillside, as well as the cute-and-quirky (but decidedly not impactful) “France rolls out scratch-and-sniff baguette stamp.” But many arts and culture stories covered acts of individual or collective altruism and/or explored potentially replicable ways people were addressing social problems, as in “Indian comic book about menstruation educates women around the world.” Still others focused on remarkable feats of people overcoming challenges, such as “Ukrainian fighter is now a dancer after losing his legs in a war.”

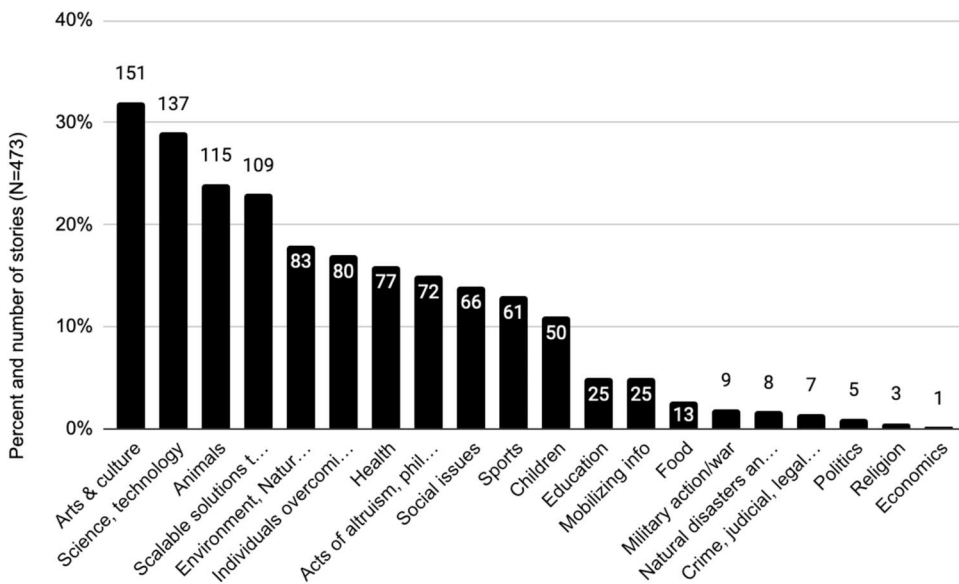


Figure 1. Topics covered in *The Happy Pod*.

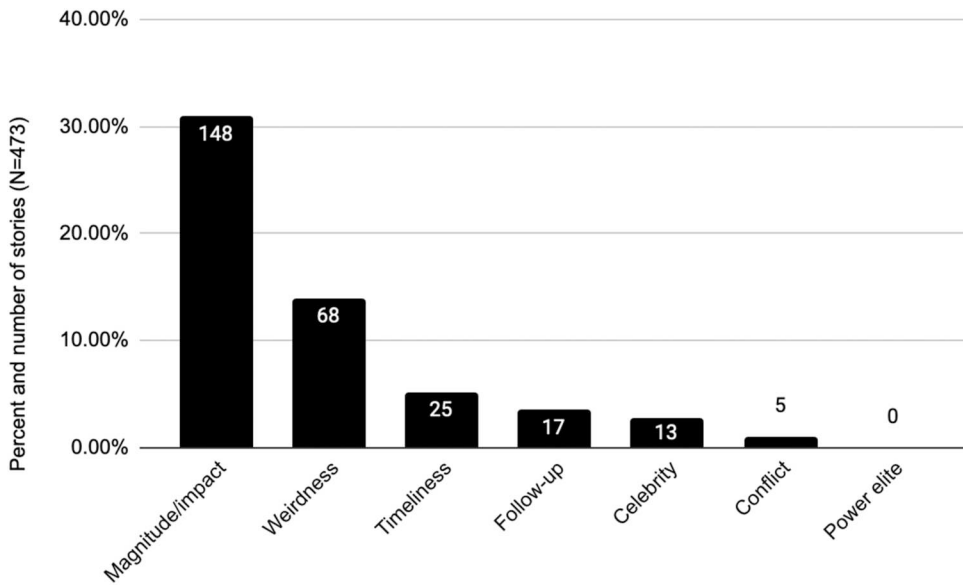
Stories in the second most common category, science and technology, likewise covered some fun or funny oddities (“Male palm cockatoos make drumsticks to woo mates”) but most explored breakthroughs and innovations that could potentially change or even save many lives such as “New drug for Alzheimer’s treatment.” Animal stories were also extremely common, and ran the gamut from whimsical, e.g., “Tiny Welsh mouse helps tidy man’s work shed,” or weird, like “Mayor marries caiman in Mexico,” to a happy reversal of the proverbial man-bites-dog story: “Dog saves Texas family from a fire.” But many animal stories also included those that had a conservation or environmental element, including discoveries of new species (“New species of toad discovered in Kenya”) and endangered animals brought back from the brink of extinction.

The least common topics were those normally considered hard news: economics (1 story or .2%), religion (3 stories/.6%), politics (5 stories/1%), crime (7 stories/1.5%), natural disasters (8/1.7%), and military action/war (9 stories/1.9%). While it may be unsurprising that these types of stories, so often centered on conflict and casualties in traditional news, are not covered more in a podcast focused on happy news, it is still notable that there were so few stories covering these topics. When they were covered, it was in an unconventional way, foregrounding innovation, heroism, and survival in the face of destructive forces, rather than the destructive forces themselves. The single story coded as economics explored the economic benefits that the legacy of the poet Robert Burns brings to Scotland. One of the few stories coded for both politics and military action/war was “Moroccan and Algerian friends create initiatives to promote unity between 2 countries in conflict,” a story that provided background on the political conflict dividing the two nations but focused on how common citizens were trying to overcome it.

In short, *The Happy Pod* prioritized what are usually considered soft news topics and scientific breakthroughs, while sidelining traditional hard news topics like politics, economics, and disasters. Stories ranged from light, hedonic fare to more eudaimonic stories that featured inspiring acts of heroism or solutions that had benefitted or would benefit many people. Notably, the latter (stories coded as discussing “scalable solutions”) come closest to fitting the criteria for constructive journalism. Meanwhile, “individuals overcoming adversity” and “acts of altruism” do not meet those criteria, insofar as they highlight remarkable individual acts that are newsworthy and inspiring precisely because they are rare or impossible to replicate, but they still might be considered eudaimonic or inspiring.

### **News Values in The Happy Pod: Quantitative Findings**

Our second research question was what news values *The Happy Pod* applies. In line with past research on happy news (McIntyre 2016; Yu and Zhu 2024), in our quantitative analysis (Figure 2) we found that *The Happy Pod* applied few conventional news values (except emotional impact, which we explore further in our qualitative analysis below). Most strikingly, zero stories in the sample focused on the power elite, which underscores the degree to which the podcast focused on common citizens, in sharp contrast to more traditional news approaches (more on this, too, below). Less surprisingly, very few stories (5) covered conflict, and those that did, like the aforementioned story about Algerian and Moroccan friends, focused on people rising above conflict, facing it heroically, or standing up to power and winning, such as “Central Indian man takes on coal industry to save a forest and wins.”



**Figure 2.** News values in *The Happy Pod*.

Weirdness (68 stories), was somewhat more common, including many stories about animals and individuals doing unusual things that ranged from funny and adorable (“Cat named Truffles at US eye clinic helps kids try on glasses”), to amazing (“Baby found safe in tree after crib lifted by tornado in Tennessee”), to just plain odd (“US woman creates new Guinness World Record for burp”).

But the most often applied traditional news value was magnitude/impact at 148 stories. Here we included stories that had already or were likely to affect hundreds of people or more, which is perhaps a low bar to define impact. But, nonetheless, many of these stories were undeniably about events or discoveries or accomplishments that stood to influence many people for the better (here, again, there was a lot of overlap with the topics coded as “scalable solutions”). A story like “Surgeon performs first partial heart transplant on a newborn,” for example, described a medical breakthrough to repair valves on hearts the size of strawberries, a procedure that looked likely to save thousands of babies in the future.

In sum, some values that are conventionally prioritized in hard news, like conflict and the power elite were nearly or completely absent in the *The Happy Pod*. Weirdness and, especially, magnitude, were somewhat more common—although, even combined, these did not apply to even half the stories. This raises the question answered in the next section: if conventional hard news values are so underplayed, what values, in addition to happiness itself, are being used to select stories for *The Happy Pod*?

### **News Values in The Happy Pod: Qualitative Findings**

The purpose of our qualitative analysis was to allow less-conventional news values to emerge inductively, but we also kept emotional impact (a conventional news value that we found we could not quantify) in mind along with Parks’s (2021) “pillars” of joy:

perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity. As explained above, these are values that exist in conventional news, but are often downplayed and relegated to “soft” news sections or human-interest stories. We found that *The Happy Pod* did prioritize emotional impact, and in so doing applied a set of more humanistic values that align well with Parks’s (2021), especially gratitude, generosity, and compassion. To these we add two qualities associated with eudaimonic media: hope and awe/inspiration.

While some of the stories that applied these humanistic values also applied more conventional news values, in the sense that they were high on magnitude (e.g., “Potentially groundbreaking treatment could help restore movement to paralyzed limbs”) or weirdness (e.g., “Mexican woman turns home into a clinic for hummingbirds”), many applied no traditional hard news values *except* emotional impact. For example, stories such as “5-year-old’s teacher donates part of her liver to him,” while profoundly life-changing for those involved, had no impact beyond them, covered no powerful people, and were not particularly timely or weird. They explored selfless acts of giving and receiving kindness. Likewise, many stories about remarkable individual accomplishments (e.g., “Man breaks record as oldest person to row across Atlantic”) were not widely impactful, but were awe-inspiring, hopeful, or both.

These humanistic values were not only prioritized in story selection, but also in the ways the stories were told. Presenters often prompted sources to speak explicitly about generosity or gratitude, sometimes implying or suggesting outright that these very qualities may be the root of happiness. For example, another organ donation story, this one about a mother and daughter who both donated kidneys to strangers, began with the mother describing feeling inspired by a story of someone else becoming a donor, recalling “I just remember thinking ‘I can do this. This gives meaning to life,’ you know? Like I’m helping. I’m contributing.” Her daughter was later inspired to do the same. The story ends with the mother recalling feeling moved to tears at a gathering of donors and recipients, concluding, “This is the lesson. Just to really, really, just approach this life with so much joy.”

To these humanistic news values we can add two additional values that are even less common, particularly in a global news program: ordinariness and community.

Regarding ordinariness, this manifested in *The Happy Pod* in two respects. First, as a kind of inverse to the power elite focus in traditional news, the podcast focused almost entirely on relatively less-powerful people. While some protagonists were outstanding in their fields, common citizens (as opposed to political figures or celebrities) were the main sources and subjects of the stories. They were often featured because they had done extraordinary things, such as set a record, or simply experienced something extremely unusual, such as making a rare discovery (e.g., “Man with metal detector finds medieval treasures in Scotland”). The few stories in our sample that centered on conflict were about common citizens standing up to powerful people, like the aforementioned “Central Indian man takes on coal industry to save a forest, and wins.”

The inclusion of ordinary people in news because they have done something extraordinary is not new (Palmer 2017), although *The Happy Pod* centers these people to an uncommon degree. However, in *The Happy Pod* we also found an undercurrent celebrating ordinariness itself, in the sense of the every-day and unremarkable, that seemed even more unconventional. Listeners were frequently invited to call in to talk about sounds that

made them happy in their daily life, and featured calls included sounds like a coffee maker or feet on snow—that is, ordinary things. Experts gave advice about day-to-day well-being that were extremely simple and, well, ordinary, such as getting enough sleep, or socializing (“Research finds that people who reconnect with old friends are happier”). In this way, *The Happy Pod* not only celebrated the thrill of the extraordinary but also contentment with the ordinary.

Relatedly, we identified community as one of *The Happy Pod's* news values because collective action or people helping one another was celebrated in many of the stories, but also because, in comparison to traditional news programs, this podcast was much more collaborative with the audience. Far more so than a traditional news show, this was a kind of global community-centered journalism (Wenzel 2020), insofar as listeners contributed story ideas, responded to calls from presenters to tell stories fitting specific categories, such as “small acts of kindness that have made your day,” and sent in recordings to be included in the podcast.

The show also edited stories to highlight moments when interviewees articulated what made them happy, sometimes prompted by a reporter. The heart surgeon mentioned above, for example, not only explained the significance of his groundbreaking surgery on a newborn, but also how he felt about it: “talk about the joy of your life, to be able to see a child that you’ve done a groundbreaking operation on, and to see how happy the family was.” He went on to enthuse about the baby’s family, explaining that they were motivated to agree to the surgery by “the idea that they could potentially help thousands and thousands of children down the road with this very courageous move.” The overall effect of these stories emphasizing people helping one another, the listener contributions, and the emphasis on articulating joy is that of a community building itself around the very concept of happiness.

In sum, although *The Happy Pod* does not prioritize many conventional hard news values, it does consistently apply a set of emotionally impactful humanistic values, primarily gratitude, generosity, compassion, hope, and awe/inspiration, as well as community and ordinariness itself. Ultimately, *The Happy Pod* is an exercise in collectively defining happiness, actively searching for it in the day-to-day, and helping one another find it.

## Discussion

In terms of topics covered and news values applied, *The Happy Pod* is almost the inverse of what we normally think of as hard news. Our content analysis showed it gave much more emphasis to stories that would normally be classified as soft news or human interest, especially arts and culture, science and technology, and animals. Stories applied more humanistic values such as hope and generosity, as well as community and ordinariness. While some of the stories met some of the criteria for constructive journalism, in that they explored scalable solutions to social problems, and many were inspiring, thereby meeting at least the basic requirements for eudaimonic news, there were also many stories that were simply fun, funny, quirky, and otherwise uplifting in their particularities—what media scholars would classify as “hedonic.” These were not stories that aspired to inspire, but rather aimed to make people feel good, at least for a moment.

It makes sense that this form of experimentation should take place in podcasting, which has proven to be both more experimental and more emotional than many other

forms of news (Dowling and Miller 2019; Lindgren 2023). It is possible that some genres simply lend themselves better to happy news than do others. But it is also possible that, as some scholars argue has happened in the past, experimentation in podcasting may usher in questioning and shifting of established norms and practices in other forms of news (Dowling 2024; Nee and Santana 2021). With that in mind our findings raise interesting questions and may indicate potential challenges and opportunities for news organizations exploring how to make news more positive in other formats as well.

In that regard, our findings suggest that some news topics are more easily framed in happy terms than others. *The Happy Pod* largely avoided traditional hard news topics such as economics, politics, and war. This does not mean it is impossible to find and frame stories about these topics in positive terms (see “Ukrainian fighter is now a dancer after losing his legs in a war”), but it does suggest we have few models for how to do this and it may take more effort and creativity to figure out how.

Similarly, some traditional news values seem to combine more easily with happiness as a news value than others do. We found that some traditional news values were excluded completely (e.g., the power elite) or mostly (e.g., conflict), while others like magnitude and weirdness were much more common. Focusing on the power elite, surely it is possible to frame stories about powerful people in positive terms, and doing so might help counter negative perceptions of politics, but given journalism’s long standing mandate serve as a watchdog for corruption and hold power to account—to *afflict* the powerful, as the saying goes—it is less obvious how to combine a value like the power elite with happiness (and perhaps less obvious that this should be a priority anyway).

Given the way good news projects are so often dismissed as trivial and the fact that *The Happy Pod* is produced by a public service broadcaster, we conclude by reflecting on what our analysis can tell us about the normative democratic implications of a news experiment like *The Happy Pod*. Is this just “fluff,” or is this podcast performing an important public service? There are three ways we can think about this question: *The Happy Pod* as a source of information, as a source of emotions, and as a reflection of the public.

First, one of, if not *the* great normative claim for journalism’s importance in democracy is that it should supply citizens with information they need to make important decisions, especially about politics (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014). Taken alone, *The Happy Pod* provides very little political and economic information. Many stories do cover science, health, and world culture in ways many listeners probably find useful and empowering. But it would be hard to claim that, if it were someone’s sole source of news, *The Happy Pod* would prepare them well to vote or otherwise participate in political processes. That said, it is also clear from its scheduling—it is the Saturday episode of the *Global News Podcast*, an otherwise very serious traditional news roundup—that it is not intended to substitute, but rather to supplement, or even provide an antidote for, the news of the week.

Second, there is little question that traditional news can be emotionally impactful, but insofar as *The Happy Pod* seems intended to balance out other, more traditional news forms, its role is *primarily* emotional. And that, we want to suggest, is more worthwhile than is often recognized by journalism scholars and professionals, who have long disparaged news that is “just happy” as mere fluff, with little importance or impact. As our content analysis shows, many *Happy Pod* stories do cover impactful events, but many do not: they focus on inspiring, comedic, or sweet stories that are not replicable, but

that are uplifting or funny. Drawing on an argument central to constructive journalism and eudaimonic media scholarship, it is entirely possible, even likely, that the way news makes us feel has important implications for democratic participation and efficacy. According to the broaden-and-build theory, simply feeling good can widen people's perceptions immediately and help them build resources for future action, including, presumably, consuming more news and engaging in public life (Frederickson 2001; Janicke-Bowles et al. 2019; McIntyre and Gyldensted 2017). Here, *The Happy Pod* seems poised to succeed, but future research should explore how producers and audiences approach these happy news initiatives, including their beliefs and expectations about the balance of information and emotional benefits they offer.

Third, one way critics argue that traditional news is not very democratic at all is in its focus on the power elite to the exclusion of less powerful voices (Palmer 2017). It may claim to serve the public, but news often does not include or even reflect the public very well. In *The Happy Pod*, nearly all stories are about common citizens. They are the main sources, and they are often called upon to help construct the news in ways that are celebrated by advocates of public, engaged, and community-centered journalism: not just by commenting on existing stories, but by suggesting stories, calling in and providing stories, and volunteering their views about what makes them happy, why, and what happiness is more broadly. In this regard *The Happy Pod* is far more democratic than traditional forms of news: it simply gives more time, latitude, and power to the voices of common citizens.

## Notes

1. As an online survey, the Reuters Digital News Report is not entirely representative, underrepresenting older and less wealthy news users especially in the Global South, but this is still the most exhaustive survey done at a global level.
2. Gwet's AC<sub>1</sub> was used to calculate intercoder reliability since it is a more accurate index than prevalence-dependent indices such as Scott's pi, Krippendorff's alpha, and Cohen's kappa when marginal distributions are skewed (Gwet 2014, Feng 2013, 2015), which was the case for many of our categories.

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## Appendix. Code Book

Story ID	How to code	Description	Example
Story Title or Brief Story Description	Episode #, Story # Quote or paraphrase	Write down the headline/story title. If there is none, use just a few words to capture what the story is about. Put quoted titles or words in quotation marks.	2.4 "Woman saves sister from crocodile"
Topics: Politics	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) national or international politics including elections, protests, political negotiations, activism aiming to influence political actors, negotiation, or policymaking, acts by political bodies such as the UN or NATO.	UN approves measure to address climate change.
Topics: Economics	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) economic matters such as GDP, inflation, employment or unemployment numbers. Do NOT include an individual's personal finances here.	Unemployment numbers at an all-time low.
Topics: Military action/war	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) military action such as deployment of troops, war, defense systems, attacks by or altercations between troops.	Bandages made of fish scales used to treat Ukraine war wounded.
Topics: Crime, judicial, legal affairs	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) crimes such as robberies, murders, rapes, delinquencies, or judicial/legal matters such as trials and lawsuits.	Prisoners perform Shakespeare in prison.
Topic: Natural disasters and catastrophes	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, fires. Do NOT code climate change or other long-term environmental changes here. They should be coded in "science or environment"	Football fans donate to earthquake victims.
Topic: Social issues	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) social issues such as housing, living conditions, poverty conditions, infrastructure, inequality, working conditions, or other patterns of behavior that affect social welfare.	Finland deemed happiest country due to egalitarian social policies.
Topic: Science, technology, environment, weather	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) science or technology, such as scientific discoveries, inventions, or machines. Discoveries about outer space should go here.	Innovators find that data centers can be used to heat pools

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Continued.

	How to code	Description	Example
Topic: Environment, nature, & weather	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) issues related to environment such as climate change, pollution, endangered species, ecosystems. Stories about natural disasters such as earthquakes should NOT be coded here (code them under natural disasters and catastrophes). Stories about animals that do not talk about their habitats/ecosystems, or link them to environmental or science issues should NOT be coded here (they should be coded as "animal").	UN passes measure to address cleanliness of oceans.
Topic: Arts & culture	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) artistic or cultural news, including accomplishments, events, and innovations in fine art, dance, music, and games that are not sports (such as chess). Include fashion stories and stories about different ethnic cultures here, but not stories about religion (those should be coded as "religion").	Knitter-to-the-stars made costumes for Oscar nominated film.
Topic: Education	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) formal education, such as schools & universities, do NOT include here brief mentions that an expert is a professor.	Autistic man becomes first Black Cambridge professor.
Topic: Food	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) food and drinks, including cooking, eating.	Man survives lost at sea by eating ketchup.
Topic: Health	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) health, disease, injuries to the body, illness, disability, treatments for these, and peoples' experiences with them.	New treatment for Tourette's syndrome shows promise.
Topic: Religion	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) religion or organized spiritual practice. Do NOT apply this code for individual feelings of awe or spirituality that are not explicitly religious in nature.	Indian temple uses robotic elephant instead of real one.
Topic: Sports	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) sports events, innovations, or accomplishments. Games (e.g., chess) that are not sports should NOT be coded as sports but instead as arts & culture.	Gymnast Simone Biles returns to competition.
Topic: Animals	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) animals, including animals doing unusual things and new discoveries about animals. Stories about animals in their natural habitats or endangered species should be coded here and ALSO in the environment and nature category.	Retired sled dogs get adopted.

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Continued.

	How to code	Description	Example
Topic: Children	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) people under 18-years-old or main speaking source is a child	New treatment for Tourette's syndrome shows promise (and child talks about it).
Topic: Individuals overcoming adversity, including feats of bravery or heroism, rescues, and other individual accomplishments.	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) extraordinary feats of survival or acts of heroism by individuals or groups, including rescues and other individual acts of bravery. Do NOT include sports and arts accomplishments here (they should be coded as sports and arts & culture respectively). Do NOT include acts of altruism other than rescues here (those should be coded as acts of altruism). Do NOT include scientific and technological innovations or discoveries in nature. DO include here important "firsts" such as first woman or first black person to do something and people receiving rewards or accolades for professions. DO include people doing something extraordinary for their age or condition.	Man survives at sea by drinking ketchup, or NASA names first female director.
Topic: Acts of altruism, philanthropy, volunteerism	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) acts to help others by individuals, activists, and groups, such as donations, fundraising, or volunteering.	Football fans donate to help earthquake victims.
Topic: Scalable solutions to social, health, or environmental problems	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) solutions to social, health, or environmental problems that could potentially be replicated, such as programs to address poverty, cure diseases, or save endangered species. Do NOT include individual, non-replicable acts of heroism or altruism here even if they address social problems. Those should be coded under "heroic acts and rescues" or "acts of altruism."	Bandages made from fish scales work well for battle wounds. Data centers could heat pools.
Topic: Mobilizing info	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) "facts and recommendations specifically advising readers what should be done to address a situation described in the story ... specific guidance beyond a general call for action." (Maier 2015, 710). Mobilizing info should be explicit, not implied (in other words, the story should tell listeners what they can do, not just tell the story of that action helping someone else).	Scientists say learning to play musical instruments has many benefits, recommend listeners take up an instrument even later in life.

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	How to code	Description	Example
News Values NV: Power elite	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) powerful political figures such as presidents, prime ministers, governors, mayors or powerful corporate figures such as CEOs or powerful political or corporate organizations like NATO, UN, or powerful unions. Do NOT include lower level officials and employees who are not representing a powerful organization or figure.	UN passes measure for climate change.
NV: Celebrity	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) famous people such as actors & pop stars. Do NOT include powerful political or corporate figures (who should be coded as "power elite") NOR artists or cultural figures who are not household names	Knitter to the stars makes sweaters for Colin Farrell and other famous people.
NV: Weird news	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a brief mention) a strange event that is really just odd; it is not a major accomplishment, but an outside-the-box, strange act or occurrence, remarkable just because it is so strange.	Man crosses ocean with best friend, a chicken.
NV: Magnitude/impact	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = Hundreds or more living beings (humans, animals, plants, etc.) were, will, or could be affected by the events or innovations described in the story. Include here major natural disasters and environmental shifts like climate change, discoveries and innovations that have or could affect many people, such as cures of diseases or inventions to address climate change.	Ophthalmologist in Africa has cured 10s of thousands of blind people.
NV: Follow-up	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = Story is a continuation of a story that this podcast has reported on previously (this should be clearly stated in the story).	Interview with first black principle dancer of Paris Opera Ballet (a story previously reported in the Happy Pod).
NV: Timeliness	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = Code this as 1 if it is explicitly stated that the story (or a key part of it) happened within the previous week or is about to happen in the next few weeks. This rule should also apply to the headlines the presenter says were in the news this week: they must say that the substance of the story took place in the previous week or will happen in the next few weeks. If they say the event happened "recently" or "very recently" or "has happened" code this as 0. If the timing is not clear in the story this should be coded as 0.	Man crossed oceans with chicken (and chicken just died)

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	How to code	Description	Example
NV: Conflict	0 = absent, 1 = present	Present = story discusses (beyond a very brief mention) a dispute or disagreement (legal, military, or rhetorical) between two or more people or entities (companies, cultures, communities, countries, etc.).	Neighbors who have been feuding for years finally settle their disagreement.
Qualitative notes	Take notes	Write down any additional thoughts not captured by the codes. Especially include thoughts on any positive or alternative news values (such as Parks's joyful news pillars: perspective, humility, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion, and generosity) or ways that emotion, especially happiness, is expressed/tapped into in the stories (such as music, journalists expressing their own emotions, using a chatty tone, or cracking jokes).	