



Neuroscientist and media psychologist **Professor Dr. Maren Urner** pleads for a journalism that is orientated towards solutions instead of just pessimism – especially during the corona crisis.

“It does not help to just spread fear and terror”

Ms. Urner, you advocate for journalism to become more constructive. Has the coronavirus pandemic taught you otherwise?

On the contrary! In principle, the coronavirus pandemic is the perfect justification for the fact that we need solution-orientated journalism. We media researchers call it constructive journalism. I see a huge opportunity for it. Because everyone is asking the key question of constructive journalism at the same time, all over the world: how can it continue? The urgency to talk about how we want to continue is there every day. It does not help if the media only presents the problems, spreads fear and terror and, in doing so, generates helplessness and fatalism among the public.

Would a more constructive journalism have changed the course of the pandemic response?

I am convinced that more solution-orientated reporting would have helped – and would continue to help us cope

better with the crisis, both on a personal and societal level. This means, for example, that when it comes to the topic of vaccination, we should not have looked at the German federal states that are doing the worst. Instead, we should look at those that are doing well and from which the others can learn something. In this way, I create a different awareness, perception and perspective that provides motivation and does not end in a constant search for scapegoats.

Is the tone of reporting different in other countries, such as the UK or the US – more positive, more optimistic?

That is my impression, but of course it is personally tinted by my media consumption. A lot of what we encounter in Anglo-Saxon papers, such as The New York Times or The Economist, could be labelled “constructive journalism”. When it comes to proposing solutions to the pandemic, the tone is bolder and more encourag-

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ing. Cultural differences also play a role here. I lived in England and the Netherlands for several years, where I generally encountered a more open and reassuring attitude at universities and companies. Positive feedback and communication on an equal footing are completely normal. A German friend who had started his first job in the Netherlands once bewilderedly told me: What did I do wrong? I received praise!

You highlight the fact that fixation on danger and risk is part of our evolutionary heritage. If you want to spread courage and confidence, how do you tackle this?

We cannot get rid of this heritage; that is just how our Stone Age brain works. But this does not mean that we are powerless. We can try to deal with it better. The first step is to become aware of it all. Like an alcoholic who knows he has to change something about his behaviour. We have to realise that there is no separation between “rational” and “emotional” in the mind, just as there is not “objective” information processing. We have to deal with this constructively and ask ourselves the question: what does that entail on a private, professional and societal level?

If this is the case, what does this mean for communicating risks?

The important first step is to always ask: what is the goal? Where do I want to go? Then I can compile the material I need for my message: text, images, graphics. Every sender always has to realise that every piece of information has an impact on the recipients.

Let's take fear as an example.

Okay. Fear is notoriously a bad advisor, which brain research confirms. Fear blocks higher cognitive abilities, which are primarily located in the frontal lobe behind the forehead. It also stops us from drawing on those experiences that have helped us to make good decisions in the past. Stress and fear put us on alert, where we choose between “fight” and “flight”. But we are no longer in a position to think calmly to make solution- and future-orientated decisions.

What does this mean for information regarding the coronavirus pandemic?

The key question is always: how can I convey solution-orientated information? How do I put people in a state of mind where they recognise the urgency of a topic without going into panic mode? This is a fine line for providing information. We have recognised the urgency of the coronavirus – it affects people, people are suffering, it is happening on our doorstep. But we cannot be allowed to dramatise it so much that fear and terror prevail, leaving only the choice between “fight” or “flight”. People must have enough cognitive capabilities to make goal-directed and long-term decisions.

Let's turn to the topic of pesticides. The BfR provided information that, according to the scientific evidence, glyphosate is not carcinogenic when used as intended. The criticism then was to play down the risk.

This brings us to an important point: Are people objective information processors? No! Everything we have previously observed in life influences us, consciously or unconsciously. Of course, the unconscious part plays a huge role in how emotionally we feel about a topic. When factual information then contradicts personal beliefs, the psychological “immune system” wakes up. It does not protect us from viruses and bacteria, but from insights and opinions that do not fit our view of the world. If it wasn't for this, we would be busy all day reinventing our identity.

What helps with this?

While useful in itself, this immune system often makes it difficult to integrate new insights and facts into our world view. This is where what I call “critical thinking” can help. This includes the skills of questioning ourselves, practising intellectual humility and being curious at the same time. This kind of thinking should be taught and encouraged not only in children and young people, but also in adults. ■

More information:

Urner, M. 2021. Raus aus der ewigen Dauerkrise. Mit dem Denken von morgen die Probleme von heute lösen. Droemer, Munich (in German)