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My thanks go to ...

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FOREWORD: MANIA, GODDESS OF DELUSIONS

In Greek mythology, Mania is the goddess of delusions and madness. Together with her partner Mantus, she rules over the underworld. It would appear that this goddess has returned to today's society and has put a curse on it: in the form of a collective obsession with negativity. According to all the objective criteria, we are actually living in the safest and most prosperous period in human history, and yet dissatisfaction and fear is rife. This apparent contradiction has preoccupied me intensely in recent years. In this book I am going to look for an explanation for this paradox. But first I would like to elaborate on the contradictions I have wrestled with myself.

It began with the search for a book title. Initially I found it pretty difficult to find a fitting title. My publisher, Ina Boer, advised me to begin by defining the problem. But I fell into my own pitfall straight away. How could I take a problem as the starting point if what I actually wanted to do was challenge the idea of thinking in terms of problems? Besides, the last thing I wanted to do was to write a negative book. In fact, I had already thought of all sorts of positive titles: *Upwards*, *The Positive Society*, *A constructive society*. However, these titles had a very high 'hallelujah' content. Ina's reaction was understandably dismissive. "I thought you wanted to address *negativity*?", she said. She had a point there.

I came round. In spite of the fact that it means a serious break with the trend of my previous work, this time my book has a negative title. Because *Negativity Mania* contains a kind of double negative, hopefully it is clear that it is not a celebration, but an accusation against the obsession with negativity. A call to build a more constructive society, where positivity and negativity are in balance. Because the excessive attention paid to problems, mistakes and accidents creates a distorted world view, a collective illusion that damages both our own health and society as a whole. Insights gained from science and positive examples from journalism, government, education and the business world demonstrate that it can be different. That is the story I want to tell.

The enthusiastic reactions to the title surprised me actually. Not just from my publisher, but from book shops and people I know as well. To some extent, the obsession with negativity is being fought using its own weapons. Negativity attracts attention and that is an important cause of the obsession with negativity. At the same time, the reactions are perhaps also a confirmation that the time has come to deal with this madness. Many people have had enough of the excess of negativity in the media, in education and at work. It's time to send the goddess back to the underworld, where she belongs.

REALITY DOESN'T

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ANTHONY J. D'ANGELO

1. INTRODUCTION

AN OBSESSION WITH NEGATIVITY

1.1 DISENCHANTMENT

A few days before I started writing this book, I was driving back with two friends from Lowlands, the annual music and cultural festival in Biddinghuizen in the Netherlands. We had enjoyed a few wonderful days: we had heard great music, discovered new artists, shared life stories and celebrated our friendship. On the way back, I put on the radio to hear the news. People had been killed in an attack in Syria, a boy had drowned, shares in China had plummeted, two planes had crashed and some students were not able to pay back their student loans. The stream of negative news items was in stark contrast to the bliss of the previous days. Had the rest of the world sunk into the ground while we were partying? That is the immediate impression you get if you rely on the reports in the media.

In reality, most people in the rest of the world had had three fine days as well: people had fallen in love, new discoveries had been made and there had been exceptional achievements. And yet you hear next to nothing about all this good news. The world is steeped in negativism.

Newspaper headlines emphasise the problems in the world and we are confronted with it in other places on a daily basis as well. The education system focuses on avoiding failure and so a low grade gets all the attention. Organisations are mainly driven by the prevention of complaints and employees have their faults corrected. We hear from the authorities if we need to pay tax or we have committed a traffic offence. The messages we receive from formal bodies rarely have a positive tone.

Fortunately for most of us, our private lives are a different story. That's where we look for positive experiences that we also like to discuss or share via social media. We fill our time as much as possible with things that give us pleasure, in places we find attractive, with people we like. What's more, we have psychological mechanisms that make sure we feel good. We overestimate our own qualities, for instance, while we underestimate other people's accomplishments. So it's no wonder that people are pretty satisfied with their private lives. The obsession with negativity mainly concerns the formal part of society: the media, the government, education and the business world.

The excessive attention paid to negativity does, however, have a significant impact. Some people withdraw into their own circle and no longer feel involved with politics or their employer. Others get frustrated or depressed. It bothers some people more than others, but it affects us all to a greater or lesser extent. It has consequences for public health and a sense of togetherness and it also leads to political instability, because it creates an image of society that is inconsistent with reality.

1.2 FAIRY TALE OR REALITY?

‘And they lived happily ever after ...’ Evil has been defeated, peace has returned and people are living in harmony with each other. The last sentence of many fairy tales is literally a fairy-tale description of the ideal society. This world seems far away from our current society. The horrors of war and violence come into our living rooms every day. And yet we are closer to this ideal world than we might think. We live increasingly long and most people tell us they are quite happy when you ask them in a survey.¹ The period since the Second World War is the safest and most prosperous in human history. Nonetheless, at the same time there is dissatisfaction. One of the symptoms is the lack of faith in politics. Let’s take the Dutch population. In 2017, less than a quarter of Dutch people had faith in politics and for people with a lower income it was only 9%.² In the same period, no less than 88% of Dutch people said they were happy.³ There is a paradoxical situation that almost all Dutch people are happy with their own lives, while they are dissatisfied with the state of affairs in society. It’s a trend that can be seen in other prosperous countries as well.

If we look at images of the favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the slums in Calcutta or the townships in Cape Town, it’s hard to imagine that only a few centuries ago almost everyone lived in these sorts of conditions. Around 1900, a quarter of the population of Amsterdam was still living in slums. In the space of a few centuries, health, educational levels and prosperity in the Western world have improved to such an extent that almost everyone can lead a happy life. By now we have the means and knowledge to be able to build a paradise on earth for everyone. But the balance is fragile. Technological progress can help mankind to build a wonderful world for everyone, but it can also hinder the human race or even destroy it. During the Cold War, we came dangerously close to that at times and now we have to be careful that the environment doesn’t finish us off.

More than ever, the future of life on earth depends on human choices. So it is immensely important that we understand what makes people tick. Why do we have such a fixation on problems and negative news? Why is it so difficult to give priority to huge problems, like the climate, while the papers are full of relatively insignificant issues? How is it that groups within society are becoming more distant from each other while we are increasingly connected online? This book is going to look for answers to these kinds of issues. The search begins with an organ weighing more than a kilo that we all carry with us: the human brain.

1.3 AN AMAZING ORGAN

Our brain is a fascinating organ with amazing capabilities. On the one hand, we can discuss this organ in our cranium merely in terms of awe, beauty and amazement. It is responsible for the unbelievable achievements the human race has made. Heart transplants, space travel, peace agreements – the list of human achievements is impressive. But the organ also has a number of limitations. It sometimes reacts too impulsively and its antenna for danger is oversensitive. The brain has an inbuilt alarm function that is too sharply tuned, as it were. That is why dramatic headlines attract attention. It also explains why a bad evaluation or an argument can bother us for a long time – negative signals have a greater impact than positive ones.

In psychology this phenomenon is described as the ‘negativity bias’. We⁴ are programmed to be alert to danger and sometimes we have difficulty seeing threats in proportion. Chapter 2 will cover the origins of the brain and the violent history of the human race. It provides an explanation for the source of the negativity bias and its historical value.

In today's society, the sensitivity to negative signals often gets in our way. If there is a threat of danger, we have difficulty seeing this in the correct proportion. The alarm goes off for the slightest negative signal, we experience stress and withdraw. In our society there are no dangerous animals or murderous attackers forcing us into fight-or-flight mode. But there are more subtle factors that our brain reacts to. During the course of this book we will see how this leads unnoticed to an increase in obesity, narcissism, depression and a decrease in empathy.

The excessive attention paid to negativity does not apply to every sort of danger. It applies mostly to matters that concern the short term. The brain particularly values new and striking information. In fact, besides an oversensitive alarm function, our brains also have a short-term fixation. This means that we have a relatively large amount of attention for acute problems with a limited scope (a murder, attack, plane crash) and that relatively little attention is paid to major problems that occur gradually (depression, obesity, climate change). The brain ensures that positive events and long-term developments both stay out of the picture. There is another aspect of negativity mania that can be traced back to the way the brain works. The brain is actually more inclined to be negative about people who are far removed from us. About ourselves, or people who belong to our own group, we are generally positive. This aberration of our brain leads to self-overestimation, an unrealistic fear of strangers, discrimination and sometimes even hostility and war.

Negativity mania is caused by a combination of the above characteristics of our thinking – something we will investigate more fully in the following chapters. The inclination towards negativity thinking, the short-term fixation, self-overestimation and groupthink will be covered in Chapter 3. Together they lead to a distorted world view, which is difficult to correct because all humans have a similar brain.

What's more, certain developments ensure that our faulty reasoning is boosted more and more strongly. There is a serious competition for attention these days, partly through the rise of internet and the expansion of the number of channels. That leads to the reporting in Western society becoming ever more dramatic and negative, because the brain registers that more easily. The messages posted on social media are more positive, but they are mainly shared within people's own network. Online, people mostly follow others who have the same opinions as themselves. In the United States, Trump supporters follow like-minded people, and the same is true for the opponents. Both groups are constantly reinforced in their opinion, which gives them a more negative picture of each other. The regular and social media each drive the obsession with negativity in their own way. In Chapter 4 the influence of technology and the new media are discussed and Chapter 5 covers traditional journalism.

The last chapters of the book deal with the social repercussions. The consequences of our overactive alarm function are discussed in relation to various aspects of society, such as education, government and business. These are the pillars of society and are largely responsible for our prosperity and stability. Within these areas, all sorts of systems are built in that give off negative signals. Whenever a problem arises, however small and irrelevant, a red flag is raised somewhere. Just like with a bull, the alarm then goes off in the brain of the person involved and attention is distracted from the things that are going well and relevant social problems that really do need attention.

At the same time, we are also seeing promising developments in the fields of journalism, education and business. Constructive journalism is looking for a new balance in reporting. Educational institutions are experimenting with talent development and the application of insights from positive psychology. Successful businesses are showing that it is possible to design organisations differently. These solution approaches represent the positive message of this book and are intended to bring the negative diagnosis of 'negativity mania' into balance. All these

initiatives are showing impressive results. So it is strange that they are not yet being followed up on a larger scale. But perhaps it's not so strange after all, in a world where the prehistoric brain still has so much power ...

1.4 A CONSTRUCTIVE SOCIETY

The world is friendlier, more prosperous and safer than ever before. What's more, the human race has the knowledge and technological means to make the world an even better place. A constructive society, where people are happy and tolerant of each other, is within reach. But the inclination towards negativity thinking is getting in our way. Fortunately we are getting better and better at knowing how to deal with the limitations of our primeval brain. Neuroscience and psychology research shows that, at an individual level, we can train our brains to be less sensitive to the pitfalls of negative thinking. Over the centuries, we have already made significant strides in this direction. In order to continue the positive development towards greater peace and safety, it is important to curb the brain. We have to find a way to subdue the undesirable aspects without ignoring the useful elements of the alarm function.

The solution does not lie in denying negative events. There are enough problems that justify critical examination. But a new balance is needed. The current imbalance towards the negative leads to political turmoil and a decline in solidarity, creativity and well-being. Paying attention to the things that are going well is important, not least because one-sided attention for negativity has particularly undesirable psychological effects. It leads to us having less energy, being ill more often and being less happy. What's more, it's dangerous to create a culture where negativity is the norm. It has an impact on the way we interact with each other and has major political consequences. It leads to irritation, intolerance and isolation.

But something can be done. If we are aware of our pitfalls and make an effort to avoid them, we can control our impulsiveness, our inclination towards groupthink and negativity. Every person is equipped with a similar set of brains and we make more or less the same errors of reasoning. When we recognise and anticipate this, the first step towards a more constructive society has been taken. But it only works if we understand the source and the effects of negativity thinking. Hopefully this book can contribute to this understanding.