

## **What's in the News These Days**

**by Clay Williams**

I've been thinking a lot in the past few weeks about mental health articles in the news. There's quite a lot of news associated with Covid-19 and how it has affected the mental health of people around the world, and a lot of it is bad news. I'm sure you've seen the headlines. As part of a mental health advocacy group, I receive links to news articles in my inbox fairly regularly. It's news that is certainly relevant to what I'm doing, and it is definitely news about things that need action, but unfortunately there has been far more bad news than good. I'm not saying that the reporters are reporting only the doom and gloom; we are definitely in a difficult time right now, but I have to admit that I usually read only the headlines of the ones that are bad news, and read the full articles of those that are good news, or even "a little hopeful" news. It's kind of like the bad news about the mental health of Canadians during the pandemic is creating more bad news about our mental health. I mean, I'm ok with hearing bad news, I'm not a Polly Anna. But ongoing and repeating bad news definitely takes its toll. Especially since I'm kind of an action guy; when I hear about a problem, my mind almost immediately starts moving toward potential solutions. But the bad news I'm hearing about is so frequent and so varied that it just leads to frustration for me, and a feeling of being powerless. But maybe there's good in the bad news. Imagine the world 25 years ago. Imagine getting a call from someone doing a survey, or even talking with your family doctor, and being asked about your emotional state during the current situation. I think around that time that a lot of people would have responded with something like: "I'm fine" or "That's none of your business."

People would only admit they were struggling if they had a severe problem. But now we're seeing regular reports about incremental differences in mental health status. Not just the extremes of "I'm fine" and "I have severe depression disorder" but many shades and variations in between. And I think part of the good news about that is being able to feel, for the most part, that we can now admit to not being OK without having to go as far as standing at the brink of disaster.

So I guess the good part of bad news is that there is news, rather than silence; a problem to work on rather than an elephant in the room.

All this thinking about news also had me thinking about where I get my information. How do you get your news? From the local newspaper? A national newspaper? A printed magazine? Radio? Broadcast television? Do you seek out news online from a major broadcaster like CBC or CTV, or from a web service like Yahoo News or Microsoft? Or is news that is supplied to you by your social media feeds, curated with the help of the clicks of your previous choices.

I have a story about curated news. I'm not a cat person, I have almost always had a dog around the house. When a friend of mine told me that when she was a teenager she used to read a monthly magazine called Cat Fancy, at first I laughed because I thought it was a joke. When she told me that it was a real and serious thing, I couldn't resist doing a google search for Cat Fancy Magazine. The result of doing that search is that I now have far too many cat related posts coming up in my social media feeds.

It's pretty clear to most of us that social media platforms use our previous choices to determine what we see within and outside their apps, at least to some extent, depending on how you set your preferences. And we whine about it a little as we keep using Facebook and Twitter, but still

read the stories that are laid out in our “news feeds”. Social media platforms have a business mandate to keep us engaged so that we will see their advertisers, I’m sure you’ve seen the news about that. To a certain extent we are fed information that confirms the way we already think. And when you think about it, doesn’t our social circle do a similar thing? Our actual friends? We hang around with them because we have some things in common. Certainly not everything, but some things. We look to our friends for affirmation. Maybe that’s a topic to explore another time. Time to stop rambling, sorry. My point is that I think it’s important to recognize the source of your “news” so you can judge whether it’s the facts or the reporter’s opinion about the facts. My Dad told me years ago: “When someone gives you advice, think long and hard about the source of that advice.” This is especially applicable now, with so many sources of “advice.”