

The Attention Filter and the Fear Instinct

None of us has enough mental capacity to consume all the information out there. The question is, what part are we processing and how did it get selected? And what part are we ignoring? The kind of information we seem most likely to process is stories: information that sounds dramatic.

Imagine that we have a shield, or attention filter, between the world and our brain. This attention filter protects us against the noise of the world: without it, we would constantly be bombarded with so much information we would be overloaded and paralyzed. Then imagine that the attention filter has ten instinct-shaped holes in it – gap, negative straight line, and so on. Most information doesn't get through, but the holes do allow through information that appeals to our dramatic instincts. So we end up paying attention to information that fits our dramatic instincts, and ignoring information that does not.

The media can't waste time on stories that won't pass our attention filters.

Here are a couple of headlines that won't get past a newspaper editor, because they are unlikely to get past our own filters: "Malaria continues to gradually decline." "Meteorologists correctly predicted yesterday that there would be mild weather in London today." Here are some topics that easily get through our filters: earthquakes, war, refugees, disease, fire, floods, shark attacks, terror attacks. These unusual events are more newsworthy than everyday ones. And the unusual stories we are constantly shown by the media paint picture sin our heads. If we are not extremely careful, we come to belief that the unusual is usual: that this is what the world looks like.

Here is the paradox: the image of a dangerous world has never been broadcast more effectively than it is now, while the word has never been less violent and more safe.

Fears that once helped keep our ancestors alive, today keep journalists employed.

Reading adapted from *Ten Reasons We're Wrong About the World--and Why Things Are Better Than You Think* by Hans and Anna Rosling, pp 103-107