

# FEARMONGERING AS A BUSINESS MODEL

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Reporting on the link between palm oil and cancer is just one example of how the mainstream media avoids fair and balanced reporting, and squelches moderate voices. Some media, besides pushing an ideological

agenda, try to make money by stirring up fear.

**Category:** [COMMENTARY](#)

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According to [Francois Balloux](#), a prominent epidemiologist who [led](#) the first large-scale sequencing project of the Sars-CoV2 genome, "the pandemic has [created](#) a market for 'gloom and doom.'" Balloux, director of the Genetics Institute at University College London, calls himself a "COVID 'hope-monger'" because of his rather emotionally detached perspective towards the virus, despite the fact that he describes himself as someone with a generally "deeply pessimistic and cynical outlook on life."

"I don't filter out my most negative views for personal or financial gain," he says. "I believe a more pessimistic take on COVID would have been far more beneficial to my career, scientific standing, and public reach." Balloux went on to say that "[s]preading terror, doom, and gloom from a position of authority, however well intended the underlying objectives may be, is not something I can condone. There needs to be hope and clear endpoints for any public health measure to be justifiable."

Balloux's perspective is refreshing. It also challenges known dogmas. He recently, for example, provided information on the Omicron variant of COVID, showing that it accounts for [only](#) 1.7% of hospitalisations in South Africa—a minute number, even when we consider that South Africa has a much younger population than Europe and that this variant may have larger ripples among Europe's aging populations. [According](#) to Balloux, "Omicron's ability to (in part) bypass its host's immune recognition likely came at a cost in terms of replication ability and pathogenicity." He thus considers that the most optimistic scenario is coming true, whereby we [are](#) "very lucky" because the new variant is turning out to be *less* harmful than would have been possible.

This, of course, raises the question whether all kinds of extreme new COVID measures such as lockdowns are necessary. Proponents of lockdowns will of course insist that even

with a very mild variant, hospital capacity will be stretched. Once again, as we have seen in the past, more moderate voices have been drowned out by alarmists of all stripes since, as in all matters (COVID and non-COVID alike), the media enjoy focusing on fear—either to make money or to promote a particular ideological preference.

Here's an example. The centre-left British newspaper *The Guardian* recently [reported](#) on a new scientific [article](#) in *Nature*, with a headline reading: "Fatty acid found in palm oil linked to spread of cancer." But the reader must persevere through half the article before he reaches the clarification that the fatty acid in question—palmitic acid—is not only found in palm oil but "also in a wide variety of foods such as butter and olive oil." It [represents](#) 50-60% of total fats in meat and dairy products, compared to only 44% of total fats in palm oil.

Yet *The Guardian* did not run with the headline "Fatty acid found in meat and dairy products linked to spread of cancer" because such a headline would not have served the newspaper's agenda. Highlighting palm oil, rather than dairy, in a negative way was meant to contribute to the campaign against deforestation by associating palm oil with cancer. (The campaign, incidentally, wholly disregards the fact that [deforestation is](#) only a problem for a limited part of global palm oil production.)

Moreover, conveniently ignored is the fact that the deforestation problem is fundamentally linked to poverty, inadequate property rights, and inadequate enforcement of rules to protect valuable natural resources. Soybean, timber, and livestock farming also pose environmental hazards—but the palm oil industry continues to take the brunt of the blame for deforestation. A policy response such as restrictions on the import of palm oil products, like those [proposed](#) by the EU Commission, could result in companies in the countries concerned simply switching to other crops, with no benefit to the environment, because palm oil itself is *not* the problem; the real problem is the plethora of ill-advised policies seemingly inspired by simplistic headlines like *The Guardian's*.

In the example of palm oil, NGOs would do much better to focus on [better enforcement](#) of existing property rights and legislation in the countries where palm oil production takes

place, rather than bringing arbitrary restrictions against one industry. After all, economic development and care for the environment go [hand in hand](#). But none of this is raised by the fearmongering media.

The case of palm oil is just one example of how the mainstream media avoids fair and balanced reporting, and squelches moderate voices. There are other ways, too. Some media, besides pushing an ideological agenda, actually try to make money by stirring up fear. It is part of the human condition, of course, that we are more interested in messages when something is going badly than when the message is that everything is actually fine. [On the](#) website called "[Kill or Cure](#)," a certain Paul Battley has meticulously [documented](#) all the times the *Daily Mail*—one of the [most-read](#) English-language news sites—has reported that various items, from antacids to yogurt, either cause cancer, prevent cancer, or sometimes do both (as in the case of the aspirin).

Similarly, *Psychology Today* has [investigated](#) a *Los Angeles Times* [article](#) which claimed that, according to one study, red wine would help kill cancer cells and make radiation therapy more effective for those battling cancer. Unfortunately, the article got it wrong, at least according to *Psychology Today*, which reported that the study “wasn’t performed on humans or even mice—it was carried out on melanoma cells in a petri dish. It is a far leap to extrapolate results from a petri dish to the human body.”

Another [research paper](#), [published](#) by the *British Medical Journal*, puts some of the blame on the way academic research tends to be communicated. The study notes that press releases, often written by specialist agencies, often hype the findings of scientists; eager journalists then simply copy the words of scientists but do not always preserve context. The study suggests that a lot could be improved if journalists would simply add a link to the original study or mention the name of the researchers in their articles.

According to psychologist Tom Stafford, one of many who have come to this conclusion, the preference to focus on negative news is probably part of the human condition, too. Humans, he writes, have evolved into creatures that tend to react quickly to potential threats. Bad news could thereby be a signal that we need to change what we are doing to

avoid danger.

That may well be the case. But as a civilizational matter, countering certain negative inner urges may be a good idea. There is, after all, more to life than merely avoiding danger.