Abstract

Main Purpose: In modern society, being bombarded with news headlines is nearly inevitable. From constant advertising on the Internet, to breaking news tweets, to jumbotrons in large cities, much of the news can make it sound like the world is going to end. Terror Management Theory (Greenberg et al., 1986) suggests, to the extent that these headlines threaten one's worldview, they can elicit death-related cognition (DTA; Hayes et al., 2010). The purpose of this study was to determine if exposure to catastrophic news headlines affects DTA and just world beliefs (Lerner, 1980).

Procedure: Study 1 ($N = 299$) pilot tested 50 headlines to determine their degree of perceived catastrophe. Headlines rated as most and least catastrophic were identified for manipulations in Study 2. In this study ($N = 852$), participants were presented 10 headlines. The number of catastrophic headlines (e.g. "Alarming Levels of Plastic in Children's Bodies, German Study Shows") varied by condition, with participants randomly assigned to eight, two, or zero catastrophic headlines as a control condition. Following the manipulation, participants completed measures of DTA, personal belief in a just world (PBJW) and general belief in a just world (GBJW).

Results: Study 2 found that participants exposed to 8 catastrophic headlines reported less GBJW, but not PBJW, compared to the other conditions. Additionally, results revealed a condition by PBJW interaction predicting DTA, such that those with high PBJW reported greater DTA in the 8-catastrophic headline condition compared to the control condition, and those with low PBJW reported greater DTA in the control condition compared to the 8-catastrophic headline condition. These results suggest those with low PBJW have their worldview threatened by not hearing about catastrophic events, and that those with high PBJW have their worldview threatened, as

indicated by DTA, by hearing about many catastrophic events. Implications and possible future directions are discussed.