

THE *NEW YORK TIMES*' READERS WANT TO RE-WRITE THE PAPER'S GLOOMY NARRATIVE ON POPULATION DECLINE

An NPG Forum Paper

by Alan Saly

The New York Times can make a claim to be the nation's most influential newspaper. With over 5 million subscribers, it has wide influence not only on the decisions of policymakers, but in setting cultural trends and serving as a weathervane for its readership, which skews younger than other print media. 91% of *Times* readers are Democrats, vs. 7% who are Republican.¹

Although the paper's famous slogan is "All the News That's Fit to Print," there are some perspectives which are not generally discussed — or are put into a narrative frame that seems at odds with the facts. In his landmark book, *Manufacturing Consent*, linguist and activist Noam Chomsky defines what he sees as the role of the media in our society, especially referencing, in many places, *The New York Times*. In a speech about the book, at the University of Wisconsin in March of 1989, he had this to say:²

"According to this alternative view, the media do fulfill a societal purpose, but it's quite a different one.... [it] defends the economic and social and political agenda of particular sectors — privileged groups that dominate the domestic society, those that own the society and therefore ought to govern it — and they do this in all kind of ways. They do it by selection of topics, by distribution of concerns, by the way they frame issues, by the way they filter information, by the way they tell lies, like about revolutions without borders, by emphasis and tone, all sorts of ways, the most crucial of which is just the bounding of debate. What they do is say, here's the spectrum of permissible debate, and within that you can have, you know, great controversy, but you can't go outside it."

Such appears to be the case with the issue of overpopulation, and how to confront it. Facts are presented, but the debate about what those facts imply is bounded and limited by design.

A REVIEW OF TWO ARTICLES

Any regular reader of *The Times* knows that there are plenty of things to be apprehensive about. The bad news just won't stop — in economics, foreign policy, and man's inhumanity to man. A primary concern of *The Times* is, in fact, the alarming situation of the environment, with species loss and habitat loss exacerbated by climate change. Unsustainable fossil fuel extraction, overfishing, pollution, and the ever-increasing inroads by man into pristine nature are thoroughly documented. But a major solution to these problems is hardly ever mentioned.

A June 1, 2021 article, "Study Ties a Third of Heat Deaths to Climate Change," by John Schwartz, is a good example. It's a sobering read, summarizing a recent paper by 70 scientists using data from major projects in the fields of epidemiology and climate modeling in 43 countries.³

The lead author of the paper, Ana Maria Vicedo-Cabrera, says that "the future looks even more grim" than the present. The author forecasts that a climate-generated apocalypse is coming to "societies like India, where many people already live in crowded conditions and poverty, and where health services are already strained." The last sentence in the article is, "It's going to crack at some point." The reader is left shaken, if not demoralized.

But a major corrective to climate change — finding ways to lower the human footprint with policies that, non-coercively, find ways to encourage population decline — isn't mentioned as a solution, although "reducing our greenhouse gas emissions" is. The idea that a lower population would lead to lower greenhouse gas emissions is obvious — but this appears to be out of bounds at *The Times*.

On May 22 of this year, a major front page article

appeared, entitled “Long Slide Looms for World Population, With Sweeping Ramifications,” by Damien Cave, Emma Bubola and Choe Sang-Hun.⁴

The subhead goes further: “Fewer babies’ cries. More abandoned homes. Toward the middle of this century, as deaths start to exceed births, changes will come that are hard to fathom.”

If the article by John Schwartz on heat deaths and climate change stoked one set of anxieties — global heating leading to mass deaths or health crises — then this article confirms a different worry: fewer people will mean not enough young people working to support the old.

“All over the world,” the authors write, “countries are confronting population stagnation and a fertility bust, a dizzying reversal unmatched in recorded history that will make first-birthday parties a rarer sight than funerals, and empty homes a common eyesore.

“Maternity wards are already shutting down in Italy. Ghost cities are appearing in northeastern China. Universities in South Korea can’t find enough students, and in Germany, hundreds of thousands of properties have been razed, with the land turned into parks.

“Like an avalanche, the demographic forces — pushing toward more deaths than births — seem to be expanding and accelerating.”

The article paints a picture of governments desperate to reverse demographic trends which point to a smaller workforce supporting a growing number of the aged. It focuses on a town in Italy where nurseries are “silent and empty.” A small growth in Germany’s fertility rate is praised as a “green shoot” of revitalization. A few paragraphs on the economic difficulties of having children in the modern world conclude the article.

If there is good news, it’s buried deep in the article — almost as an afterthought: “Smaller populations could lead to higher wages, more equal societies, lower carbon emissions and a higher quality of life for the smaller numbers of children who are born.” This, however, was clearly not the thrust of the article.

The Times allows readers to comment on many stories, and this was no exception. A comment is a reaction to a published story — and you are free to write what you like, subject to editorial guidelines to restrict abusive or defamatory language. Then, readers

can also “recommend” comments, to show they are in agreement with that comment. Recommendations are “thumbs-up” on comments.

2,112 readers commented on the May 22 story, and thousands of people recommended hundreds of the comments. Of 2,112 comments, 594 got more than ten recommendations each, in a review of comments and recommendations done on May 26th. The total number of all of those recommendations was 39,157. The comments section for the article was closed a few days after that, although recommendations continue to be logged. This analysis looks at those 594 comments and recommendations, and what they reveal about the opinions of *The Times’s* readership.

A reading of the article will confirm that the main narrative is that population decline will leave a dearth of workers and will result in the sad spectacle of fewer children. Secondly, the article points to the difficult situation of women who can’t afford to have families. That’s the note the article concludes on, which means that it sticks in the mind of the reader.

Comments are often made in the heat of the moment, responding viscerally to what the reader feels about the article just read. In the case of *The Times’s* readership, many comments are obviously informed by close attention to the issues over a long period of time.

LET’S LOOK AT THE NUMBERS

A solid majority says population decline is positive, not negative.

437 commenters — 73% of the 594 total — strongly dispute the tone of the article, with many directly assailing the paper for presenting a positive trend (population decline) as negative. These comments were recommended 31,211 times, representing 80% of all recommendations made.

A large group of commenters chide the paper for not presenting population decline as a cause for celebration, many calling it “the best news ever.” Dozens add that *The Times* should stop with the “gloom and doom” portrayal of population decline. Cheryl King from Massachusetts says the paper should “welcome and embrace” a slowly decreasing population and write “a sequel article about hope, possibility, and what a sustainable population would, could, or should be.”

In a comment recommended by 831 people, “Binturong,” writing from British Columbia, says:

“Where to begin? The tone of this article and its selective data are slanted to make population decline sound like a disaster when in fact it is necessary to the future of a habitable planet. . . .I’m amazed that anyone considers a small population a bad thing.”

In a comment recommended by 339 people, Kelsey Arthur of Seattle writes: “I am baffled by the recent profusion of hand-wringing columns about a slowing population growth like this one. This trend is enormously good news for humans — and all the other forms of life on the planet — and our collective ability to not just survive but thrive.”

And a comment from Nadine in California, recommended by 1,412 people: “I deeply object to the topic of people having fewer children always framed as a bad thing. How about. . .more birds? more trees? less climate change? more independent women leading rich child-free lives?”

And from David O. Hill in Memphis in a comment recommended by 2,516 others: “These scary stories about the world collapsing due to a decrease in births come from demographers who seem to know little about global ecology. The 7.4 billion people alive today have put unsustainable pressures on the atmosphere (climate change), the oceans (where fisheries are collapsing and coral reefs are dying), species extinctions everywhere, forests (just look at current lumber prices), garbage disposal (think of the masses of plastic in the oceans), etc., etc. The truth is a greatly reduced human population is our last best hope for the survival of civilization as we know it.”

ECONOMIC INSECURITY AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

As mentioned above, the article ends on a note of concern about the economic insecurity of women who are contemplating having children. 48 commenters, or 8% of the total, agree that the current systems of support for families are inadequate, and these comments have 2,516 recommendations, or 6% of the total.

A representative comment, from Charlotte, which received 195 recommendations:

“Truth is that society has failed to solve the question of how to raise children in a world where women work outside of the home and make their own reproductive decisions. The magnitude of this shift can’t be overstated. . . .it should come as no surprise that empowered, autonomous, educated, and free women

want fewer babies. Because it’s awful to be locked at home, shouldering the burden, giving up your career, unsupported, tired, and scared for the future.”

Many commenters in the first category — those who say unequivocally that population decline is a good thing and that the paper got it wrong — also discuss the positive consequences of the empowerment of women and the spread of literacy and higher education as positive forces in the world.

SOLUTIONS TO DECLINE — AND DESPAIR ABOUT GROWTH

Echoing the main thrust of the article, 45 commenters (7% of the total) say that society must adapt to declining populations, and these comments were recommended 3,195 times (8% of the total). A representative comment from Oregon, echoed by 24 readers: “We must build retirement savings plans for every baby born so that when they are older they are not dependent on the government or working young people to survive. Social security indeed needs a lockbox and the wealthy need to pay a higher share. Looks like real estate is no longer a long-term investment.”

35 commenters (6% of the total) say — not diverging much from the general consensus — that we must adapt to runaway population growth, but have no solutions to suggest. They are recommended 1,351 times. One commenter writes: “The human species is forced to reckon with the future on nature’s terms because it refuses to be responsible for itself. We’re on the edge of no return and still not responding seriously enough to the looming catastrophe. . . .the pandemic is only a taste of what’s ahead. I watch as we ignore the clues and fill up our lives with more toxic stuff we gleefully churn out all the while drowning in it.”

30 commenters like Jim from Bethesda stress the significant benefits that accrue from population decline, and their comments are recommended by 858 readers:

“Yet another article that doesn’t really recognize the benefit of population decline or that gets into the details of economic systems focused on equity and well-being, rather than resource consumption. Granted, the article is primarily addressing some of the initial questions of how do we adapt to the decline. . . .what a missed opportunity for going deeper.”

CHANGING OPINIONS ECHO NPG FORUM PAPERS

Throughout the comments, readers echo concerns and solutions put forward in NPG forum papers over the last decades.

From Matt in Florida, in a comment recommended 750 times:

“The planet’s climate and resource challenges boil down to one common driver: population growth.”

From Andrew Kennedy, in Redmond, Washington (recommended 187 times): “Although it is seldom discussed, the root cause of almost every major environmental problem — and many other problems — is simply ‘too many people.’ Among the list: urban sprawl, habitat destruction, air and water pollution, scarcity of natural resources, deforestation, traffic, overcrowding of recreation attractions, climate change.”

And from Charley Darwin (which may be an assumed name) in Lancaster, PA (recommended by 40 people): “The way to save the planet is to educate women, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, where growth continues to outstrip resources because women are subject to the demands of their men.”

CONCLUSIONS

Why does a globally influential newspaper, that has built a strong constituency for environmental action, draw the line at encouraging the exploration of strategies for population decline? It’s a hard question to answer. To this writer, internal considerations for the paper could come from both ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand, a tradition of liberal humanitarianism that doesn’t want

to be seen as forestalling any “human right” to be fruitful and multiply — regardless of the environmental consequences. On the other hand, a concern that should the paper support any wide-ranging discussion of population decline that could be seen as promoting a “globalist” agenda of population reduction for the ruling elite which it serves. (In this conspiratorial frame, environmentalism is not real, but a justification for measures of social control.)

The final word may lie with the changing readership of *The New York Times* which, as has been noted, skews younger than other major print publications. Young adults are urgently aware of the times they are living in, and many of the older commenters mention that prominently: “A big thank-you to all the childless adults out there.” (MJ from Chicago). “We have been poor stewards of the planet.” (Bonnie from MA). “Female boomer here. My kids are great, but if I had it to do over again I surely wouldn’t.” (N from Austin.)

The future is staring at the face of today’s young adults, and large percentages are delaying marriage, postponing or even declining to have children. *The Times*, to maintain their loyal readership, may have to shift its emphasis and consistently make the specific case for how a lower population can be a win-win for humans and the wider natural world.

NOTES

1. <https://letter.ly/new-york-times-readership-statistics/>
2. <https://chomsky.info/19890315/>
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/31/climate/heat-deaths-climate-change.html>
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/22/world/global-population-shrinking.html>



Alan Saly is a communications professional based in New York. He has worked for CBS News, the BBC, and has done reporting for National Public Radio.

NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



Negative Population Growth, Inc.
2861 Duke Street, Suite 36
Alexandria, VA 22314

Phone: (703) 370-9510
Fax: (703) 370-9514
Email: npg@npg.org

Board of Directors

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