

Why Do We Only Read About Project Management When Projects Fail?¹

Sebastian Wieschowski

INTRODUCTION

Why do projects fail? This question is a perennial favorite whenever project management is discussed. A search engine returns countless guides, studies, and analyses. What mistakes were made? Who was responsible? Why were deadlines missed? Why did costs spiral out of control? And how could professional project management have prevented the disaster?

But the question can also be turned around: Why do we read so often about project management when projects fail – and so rarely when they succeed? Every day, projects are completed without a newspaper reporting on them. Production facilities go into operation as planned, IT systems are migrated successfully, new products are launched on time, and buildings are completed within their intended budgets. Project teams solve problems, respond to risks, and make decisions. That is precisely what professional project management is for.

Yet precisely when it works, it often remains invisible to the public. This is not accidental. Communication science offers an explanation.

WHY DO THE MEDIA REPORT MORE OFTEN ON FAILED PROJECTS?

One of the best-known approaches in communication science is news value theory. It addresses the question of why some events become news while others do not. In the 1960s, Norwegian researchers Johan Galtung and Mari Holmboe Ruge developed a catalog of twelve factors associated with newsworthiness. These included, among others, unexpectedness, meaningfulness, unambiguity, continuity, reference to persons, and reference to something negative (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). Their model has remained highly influential, although later research has revised and expanded the taxonomy of news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

News value theory is a communication-science approach to explaining journalistic news selection. It assumes that certain characteristics of an event – known as news factors or news values – increase the likelihood that the event will be selected by the media and presented prominently. In Galtung and Ruge's original formulation, the more criteria an event satisfies, the greater its likelihood of becoming news, although the authors also

¹ How to cite this paper: Wieschowski, S. (2026). Why Do We Only Read About Project Management When Projects Fail? commentary; *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue IX, September.

proposed complementarity and exclusion effects rather than a simple mechanical scoring rule (Galtung & Ruge, 1965).

This creates a fundamental problem for project management. Consider a major construction project budgeted at \$500 million. After five years of construction, it opens on the scheduled date and ultimately costs \$495 million. For the project organization, that is a major success. For a national news outlet, the story may be worth little more than a brief item.

Now change a few parameters: The opening is delayed by three years, costs rise from \$500 million to \$1 billion, a parliamentary or legislative inquiry examines the project, and those responsible publicly blame one another. Suddenly, there is a news story. Not because the second project is more representative of project management – but because it satisfies more news values.

WHICH NEWS VALUES MAKE FAILED PROJECTS INTERESTING?

This is particularly evident in the case of negativity. Problems, conflicts, damage, and failure have substantial news value. When projects fail or veer badly off course, additional factors often come into play. Negativity continues to feature prominently in contemporary revisions of news-value research, alongside factors such as surprise, conflict, relevance, magnitude, and elite or prominent actors (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017).

A massive cost increase crosses a threshold of attention. An unexpected construction stoppage provides surprise. A dispute between project partners creates conflict. If ministers, CEOs, or other prominent actors are involved, personalization and elite relevance come into play. If public money is being spent, societal relevance increases. And once a project has made the headlines, continuity can make the next delay, cost forecast, or crisis meeting newsworthy again.

A remarkable spiral can emerge. A troubled project continually produces new occasions for coverage and may fit a narrative that is already established – namely, the narrative that projects almost always take longer, become more expensive, or fail altogether. Stories that conform to an existing expectation can be easier to recognize and interpret within an established frame. In Galtung and Ruge's original model, this mechanism is related to "consonance": events that correspond with what journalists expect or predict are more likely to be registered as newsworthy (Galtung & Ruge, 1965). This should not be interpreted as evidence that journalists deliberately seek to confirm a worldview; rather, consonance describes a selection mechanism based on expectations.

A successful project, by contrast, ideally produces only one obvious news occasion – its completion. This helps explain why our media perception of projects does not necessarily correspond to the reality of projects as a whole. The frequency with which failed projects appear in the media tells us little, by itself, about how often projects actually fail. Media visibility and actual frequency are not the same thing.

WHY DOES SUCCESSFUL PROJECT MANAGEMENT OFTEN REMAIN INVISIBLE?

There is a second problem: Successful project management often consists precisely in ensuring that certain events do not happen. A risk is identified early and mitigated. A conflict is resolved before it escalates. A cost deviation is corrected in time. A supply bottleneck is addressed through an alternative. A scheduling problem is detected before it turns into a delay lasting several months.

From the perspective of project management, these are successes. From the perspective of news production, they are often non-events. The headline “Project Team Identifies Risk Early and Prevents Major Problems” has a harder time competing with “Costs Explode: Major Project Delayed Again.” Professional project management therefore contains a communication paradox: The better risks are controlled, the less visible the work required to control them may become.

Project management becomes particularly visible when its mechanisms appear to have failed or actually have failed. This can create a misleading association in public perception: Project management becomes associated with problems even though professional project management is intended precisely to identify, limit, or prevent problems at an early stage.

HOW DOES THE AVAILABILITY HEURISTIC INFLUENCE OUR PERCEPTION OF PROJECTS?

The distortion does not end with media selection. Mechanisms on the audience side can also influence perception.

One important explanatory concept is the availability heuristic, particularly associated with the work of psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. Put simply, people may judge the frequency or probability of an event partly by how easily relevant examples come to mind. Tversky and Kahneman demonstrated that availability can be a useful shortcut but can also produce systematic biases when ease of recall is influenced by factors other than actual frequency (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Particularly memorable events may therefore appear subjectively more common than they really are.

This mechanism is highly relevant to perceptions of project management. Ask someone for examples of troubled megaprojects, and several prominent cases will often come to mind quickly. Ask for projects that were completed on schedule and within budget, and spontaneous examples are likely to be much harder to produce.

It would be too simplistic to conclude that media coverage directly causes a false perception of project risk. Media effects are more complex, and the availability heuristic itself does not establish such a causal chain. The underlying mechanism is nevertheless important: What is especially easy to remember can influence what we regard as typical. And failed megaprojects are exceptionally memorable.

WHAT ROLE DOES NEGATIVITY BIAS PLAY?

A further psychological explanation is negativity bias. The term refers broadly to the tendency for negative information, events, or stimuli to exert stronger effects than comparable positive ones under many conditions. Research has documented negativity effects across several domains of human cognition and behavior, while work specifically on news has found evidence of stronger psychophysiological responses to negative news content across countries (Soroka, Fournier, & Nir, 2019).

There is also empirical evidence from online news consumption. In a large set of randomized headline experiments involving approximately 105,000 headline variants, 5.7 million clicks, and more than 370 million impressions, Robertson and colleagues found that negative words in headlines increased click-through rates; for a headline of average length, each additional negative word increased the click-through rate by 2.3 percent (Robertson et al., 2023).

At the same time, caution is warranted before reducing the issue to a simple “bad news sells” formula. News consumption and social sharing are not identical behaviors. Berger and Milkman, for example, found that positive New York Times content was more likely to be shared than negative content overall, while high-arousal emotions – whether positive, such as awe, or negative, such as anger and anxiety – increased virality (Berger & Milkman, 2012). Negativity is therefore an important factor, but it is not a universal explanation for every form of media use.

For project management, the combination is nevertheless unfavorable: Failures possess news value, attract attention, and can be easier to remember. Successes are more often expected, less conflict-laden, and therefore more difficult to turn into compelling stories. Journalistic selection mechanisms and human perceptual mechanisms can therefore potentially reinforce one another: Media outlets are more likely to select unusual and negative project trajectories as news, and precisely these stories may remain particularly salient to audiences.

IS SUCCESSFUL PROJECT MANAGEMENT THEREFORE BORING?

From the perspective of classic news logic, the uncomfortable answer is sometimes yes. If a project proceeds exactly as planned, it lacks one of the central ingredients of news – deviation from what is expected. News outlets do not normally report that millions of people arrived at work on time in the morning. They report on the strike, power outage, or severe weather that prevented them from doing so.

The perception of projects works in a similar way. The fact that a professional team plans schedules, manages risks, engages stakeholders, prepares decisions, and responds to change is initially what is expected. It is the deviation that turns the process into a story. That does not mean successful projects have to be uninteresting from a communications perspective. They simply require a different way of being told.

SUCCESSFUL PROJECTS NEED STORIES

Anyone communicating project success should therefore avoid presenting only the outcome. “Project Successfully Completed” may be good news, but it says little about why the project is interesting.

The decisions behind the result are more compelling: What unexpected problem did the team have to solve? Which risks were identified early? Where did the original plan have to change? What conflicts emerged? Which innovation made the difference? What would the project team do differently next time?

In this way, communication about successful projects moves closer again to classic news values. A successful project can also offer surprise, conflict, relevance, personalization, and novelty. The decisive difference is that the story does not begin only when the project fails.

Successful project management becomes communicatively interesting when the story focuses not only on the outcome but also on the path that led to it. Organizations seeking to make professional project management visible should therefore communicate about projects earlier – not only at the opening or launch, and certainly not only when a crisis occurs.

PROJECT COMMUNICATION SHOULD NOT BEGIN ONLY IN A CRISIS

The same applies to the project management community itself. If project management is explained publicly primarily when costs explode, deadlines are missed, or responsibilities appear unclear, a distorted image of the profession and its field of activity inevitably emerges. Project managers can then quickly appear to be the people who must explain why something did not work. Less visible is their actual task: helping complex endeavors function under conditions of uncertainty.

This creates a communication task for companies, public-sector clients, professional associations, and the profession as a whole. Successful project management does not need to be sugarcoated. Quite the opposite: The difficulties, decisions, and trade-offs behind a successful outcome are precisely what make it interesting. A project in which nothing ever threatened to go wrong may indeed not make a particularly compelling story. A project in which many things could have gone wrong – but professional project management helped ensure that it succeeded anyway – is an excellent story.

PERHAPS WE ARE SIMPLY ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION

If we have the impression that we are constantly reading about failed projects, we should not automatically conclude that projects are constantly failing. Communication science offers another explanation: Media do not represent all events in proportion to their actual frequency. They select. News values play an important role in that selection. A spectacular failure often satisfies more of them than a milestone achieved exactly as planned.

On the audience side, the effect may continue. Spectacular examples are easier to remember – and events that fit established expectations may be easier to process. Negative information can command particular attention. A small number of prominent cases can therefore contribute to the impression that they are characteristic of project management as a whole. The concepts discussed here provide plausible mechanisms for such a perception, but they should not be treated as direct empirical proof that media coverage systematically misrepresents the overall project failure rate.

The fact that we read more often about why projects fail does not automatically mean that failed projects are the norm. It means, first of all, that their failure is often a better news story than another project's on-time success.

Perhaps, alongside the frequently asked question "Why do projects fail?", we should ask another one more often: Why do so many projects work – and why do we hear so little about them? The answer would be relevant not only to the image of project management. It could also help us better understand what actually makes successful projects successful.

REFERENCES

- Galtung, J., & Ruge, M. H. (1965). The structure of foreign news: The presentation of the Congo, Cuba and Cyprus crises in four Norwegian newspapers. *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1), 64–90. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002234336500200104>
- Tversky, A., & Kahneman, D. (1973). Availability: A heuristic for judging frequency and probability. *Cognitive Psychology*, 5(2), 207–232. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285\(73\)90033-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0010-0285(73)90033-9)
- Berger, J., & Milkman, K. L. (2012). What makes online content viral? *Journal of Marketing Research*, 49(2), 192–205. <https://doi.org/10.1509/jmr.10.0353>
- Harcup, T., & O'Neill, D. (2017). What is news? News values revisited (again). *Journalism Studies*, 18(12), 1470–1488. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2016.1150193>
- Soroka, S., Fournier, P., & Nir, L. (2019). Cross-national evidence of a negativity bias in psychophysiological reactions to news. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(38), 18888–18892. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1908369116>
- Robertson, C. E., Pröllochs, N., Schwarzenegger, K., Pärnamets, P., Van Bavel, J. J., & Feuerriegel, S. (2023). Negativity drives online news consumption. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 7, 812–822. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-023-01538-4>
-

Author's note: This article was originally prepared in the German language, after which AI tools were used to translate the story and assist with structure, grammar and punctuation. All details are in the author's own words.

About the Author



Sebastian Wieschowski

Nuremberg, Germany



Sebastian Wieschowski is an editor at the German Project Management Association (GPM), the national member association of the International Project Management Association (IPMA) in Germany. He is responsible for developing GPM's media relations and serves on the editorial board of PM Aktuell, a quarterly magazine distributed to more than 6,500 GPM members as well as external stakeholders.

Born in 1985 in northern Germany, Wieschowski developed an early fascination with journalism. His formal education began with active contributions to school and local newspapers. He later completed journalistic training at the Cologne Journalism School for Politics and Economics, earned a Master Level Diploma from the School of Journalism at Eichstaett University, and undertook professional training at a regional newspaper publisher. He also holds a postgraduate M.Sc. degree in Public Health from Hannover Medical School.

In addition to his freelance journalism for national and international outlets, including major German media such as DIE ZEIT, Wieschowski has held senior communications roles since 2012. He first worked as press officer for a private university specializing in social work, then for a psychiatric hospital, and later for an industrial company. In September 2024, he joined GPM's Marketing and Public Relations department, where he focuses on strengthening the visibility and public relevance of project management through editorial formats such as storytelling.

Alongside his professional career, Sebastian Wieschowski is also active as a freelance author in his lifelong passion, numismatics. He writes for both German- and English-language specialist publications, and his work has been recognized three times by the Numismatic Literary Guild, a writers' association based in the USA.

Sebastian is a reporter at heart and enjoys discovering inspiring stories and meet people from around the world, a goal that is particularly easy to pursue in the field of project management. He can be contacted at s.wieschowski@gpm-ipma.de.