Effects of Bad News Reports on Media Audience: What Implications for Journalism Practice in Cameroon?

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Abstract

The dissemination of bad news in journalism practice seems to be a norm. Oddity is a key determinant of what journalists define as news. This conception has led to an intensification of bad news reports in society. This study measures the effects of bad news reports on media audiences. Agenda Setting, Framing and Gatekeeping theories are used. A total of 376 inhabitants in Buea municipality were surveyed. Findings suggest that the effects of bad news reports are significantly negative (0.000). It evokes anger (41.1%), makes the audience scared (73.4%), affects the audience's mood (46.7%), promotes extremism and violence (41.4%), reinforces distrust and hatred for public officials (57.5%), increases the audience blood pressure (20.1%), significantly (0.000) reduces media exposure and gives joy to some (9%). As a result of the negative effects, 211 (56.1%) respondents preferred good news reports to bad news reports. To mitigate the negative effects of bad news reports on media audiences, this study recommends that journalists should adopt the silver lining approach to news reporting. The approach warrants journalists to focus more on positive features in bad occurrences.

Keywords

Effects, Bad News Reports, Media Audience

1. Introduction

Journalists are more concerned about marketing their products by consistently reporting on the unusual such as fighting, theft, famine, war, conflict, crisis, scandals, murder, rape, and corruption. For instance, most banner headlines, especially from private newspapers, constitute accidents, murder, fighting, floods,

theft, ritual killings and arson. In line with this, Ngange and Elempia (Ngange & Elempia, 2019, p. 1) assert that "newspapers in Cameroon are increasingly attempting to lure audiences and increase readership amidst stiff competition. This competition for audience and the attempt to set the agenda for the public have made many media houses implore controversial techniques of presentation of news such as sensitive and captivating headlines, shocking images, emotional headlines, rumours, obscenity and a reduced emphasis on verification." Although these stories lure readers, they usually affect the audience's attitude and behaviour.

Since the outburst of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis in 2016, bad news reports have dominated the Cameroonian media landscape (Ngange et al., 2020). They further state that "video recordings of violence are glaring over social media platforms, local television stations as well as in newspaper reports. Media such as The Post, The Guardian Post, Equinox Radio and Television, Bareta Online News and Southern Cameroons Broadcasting Corporation (SCBC) report issues on houses razed, torture and inhuman treatment, arbitrary arrest, sexual abuse, kidnap as well as mutilation of civilians, separatists and military body parts" (p23). The reports reflect the state of activities in the North West and South West Regions of Cameroon, where more than 6000 people have lost their lives and over 6000 displaced internally (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2023). Exposure to this negative information about the state of the world is likely to have an impact on people's state of mind, moods, and general happiness (Galician, 1986). Surprisingly, not much research has been conducted on this issue (Hoog & Verboon, 2019).

Beckett (2015) argues that journalism and society are constantly evolving. In other words, scholars agree that mass media and society share a symbiotic relationship (Egharevba et al., 2023; Ijeh, 2023). Unlike traditional journalism practice, modern-day journalism is "interactive, interconnected, participatory, more open, more global, multiplatform, multilinear, producing a constant stream of data, analysis, and comment" (Beckett & Deuze, 2016, p. 1). As journalism evolves, Beckett (2015) asserts that emotions become an important dynamic in how news is produced by media organizations and consumed by their audience. Thus, what constitutes news must be carefully handled and presented in a way that does not negatively affect audience psychology, attitude and behaviour.

Most often, audience attitudes, behaviours and thoughts emanate from media content. Cohen (1963) states that the "press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about… The world will look different to different people, depending...on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the papers they read", (p.13). Thus, media professionals have the power to empower the audience and evoke positive emotions. Misuse of media power results in harmful effects on media consumers. Rossbach (2017) advises that journalists should avoid misusing such power. Edmund Burke affirmed that the media is the Fourth Estate of the Realm. Taking the responsibilities attached to this

status, the media is to ensure transparency and accountability in society by checking the excesses of those in power. This does not mean that the media should consistently focus on negativity such as crime, corruption and accidents in their reports. Isike and Omotoso (Isike & Omotoso, 2017) regretted that the overbearing influence of negative and subjective news by African journalists about African governments to national and international publics largely water the seeds of internal discord and Afro-pessimism. They argue that negative news about Africa should be reported with caution.

Arango-Kure, Garz, and Rott (Arango-Kure et al., 2014) equally observe that negative news items such as conflict, accidents, flooding, and famine tend to be more influential than comparably positive news items. Many have questioned if negativism has automatically become one of the pillars of news selection. Because of this influx of negative stories in newscasts and publications, the phenomenon has been termed negative bias in news production (Edwards, 2017). Looking at the motivation for this, Soroka (2006) states that people are generally more responsive to negative information than positive ones. Media audiences are more interested in knowing the bad than the good. Good news seems to be no news while bad news is considered news.

To Shoemaker (1996), the fundamental reason for the focus on negative news is attributed to the watchdog role that the media plays in society. This role serves as the important function of holding power to account and shining a light on many of the world's ills that need to be addressed, forcing them onto the public agenda (McCombs, 2004). They serve to fulfill our evolutionary human survival instinct to monitor our environment for potential threats or dangers, which require immediate attention (Baumeister et al., 2001). Similarly, Shoemaker (1996) argued that the news media exist because humans are biologically built to look for environmental threats. This hard-wired predisposition toward threatening information is one reason that news is so often negative (Shoemaker, 1996). Grabe and Kamhawi (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006) equally indicated that humans are "hard-wired" to pay more attention (voluntarily or involuntarily) to bad news than good news.

Positive psychology scholars Peterson and Steen (Peterson & Steen, 2009) uphold that the negative narrative and framing chosen by journalists have a major impact on the end user's emotional state. When violence erupts, pictures of victims are displayed repetitively, and various commentators analyze the cause/effects (in some instances lasting for weeks). Because of this, there is a communal rumination and catastrophic imprinting in the consumer, which strengthens and cements into place a pessimistic explanatory style. This raises an important question: how might this predominantly negative tone of the news media affect media consumers? The studies available on the relationship between news exposure and effect do generally support the notion that exposure to news reports affects our moods and state of mind. More specifically, a direct relationship between negative news exposure and negative emotional states was found in several experimental studies (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016). After being

exposed to negative news reports, the positive effect decreases, whereas the negative effect, sadness, worries, and anxiety increase. Other studies have found indirect effects on psychological distress and negative affect through an increase in stress levels and irrational beliefs (McNaughton-Cassill, 2001) or depression (Potts & Sanchez, 1994). Also, a study on the Boston Marathon terrorist attack (Holman et al., 2014) showed people's stress levels were higher after exposure to news about the attack for four weeks compared to stress levels right after the attack. Similarly, post-traumatic stress disorder was found to increase after continuous news exposure about the 9/11 attacks (Piotrkowski & Brannen, 2002).

Gyldensted (2015) argues that news reporting in its current form is not portraying the world accurately and could do a significantly better job in complying with ethical values. McIntyre (2015) adds that taking a constructive approach to news coverage based on evidence from positive psychology can help to fix this. Abraham Maslow was among the first scholars to use the term positive psychology (Febrianingsih & Chaer, 2018). He notes that the science of psychology has been far more successful on the negative than on the positive side as it has revealed to us much about man's shortcomings, his illness, and sins, but little about his potential, virtues, achievable aspirations, or full psychological height. It is as if psychology has restricted itself to only half its rightful jurisdiction: the bad, the darker, meaner half (Maslow, 1954, p. 354).

Much has not been experimented on the effects of bad news in Cameroon. With the influx of negative news due to the civil unrest caused by the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis that has been plaguing the English-speaking regions for over seven years, it is essential to probe into the likely consequences of consuming frequent bad content from the media. This leads to the following research questions and hypotheses.

1.1. Research Questions

RQ1: What effect does bad news have on the media audience?
RQ2: Do media audiences prefer more of good news than bad news?

1.2. Hypotheses

H1: Bad news reports have a significant negative effect on media audiences than good news.

H2: Bad news reports have significantly reduced audience exposure to the news media.

H3: Media audiences significantly prefer more of good news reports than bad news reports.

This study is significant because it will help journalists understand the effects of bad news reports on media audiences. This can lead to a reduction in bad news dissemination. The study will enable the media audience to adopt a better approach to news consumption. Often, media audiences are negligent of the negative effects bad news has on their emotions, attitudes and behaviours. So,

they go about consuming all sorts of negativities from the media. This research will unveil the effects so that media audiences can adopt a better approach to news consumption. Results will help caution media audiences on their sources of news.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Bad News Reports

Bad news report is used to describe tragic, undesirable or unpleasant information (Proctor, 2021). They also refer to stories with negative overtones. This includes stories of war, famine, violence, corruption, recession, tragedy and scandal (Harcup, 2004). McIntyre and Gyldensted (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017) state that negativity is a news ideology and the press is "negative-centric". They suggest that bad news reports dominate the news media. Studies also reveal that journalists are drawn towards conflict and drama (Niven, 2005). They see conflict as routine, expected, and essential. Conflict and oddity are regarded as news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001).

Media audiences are interested in negative news. Soroka (2006) asserts that people are generally more responsive to negative information than the positive one. Trussler and Soroka (Trussler & Soroka, 2014) also reveal that politically interested news consumers prefer bad news reports over good news reports. In an era of intrusive media presence motivated by quick adoption and use of technology, bad news is rampant. Consider, for instance, the Internet space which constructs interactions between politics and social media (Noorikhsan et al., 2023). These authors suggest that actors in contemporary political goings-on need to adopt a new media approach with all its characteristics, to facilitate interactions between new/social media and society; more specifically, with potential electorates. In between these interactions and frictions, bad news occurs; and at times, journalists—especially those writing online—are at the centre of such bad news and controversy.

Despite audience preference for bad news reports, they suffer from its consequences. The process of giving or getting bad news is difficult for most people (Sweeny & Shepperd, 2007 in Legg & Sweeny, 2013). This is because bad news reports are unpleasant to the ears. Thus, training is required and precaution needs to be taken when disseminating bad news reports. Legg and Sweeny (2013) uphold that news-givers face several concerns when giving bad news, including how best to give the news without hurting the news recipient, how to decrease their anxiety, and what exactly they should say during the interaction. The difficulty of delivering bad news has inspired extensive popular media articles that prescribe "best" practices for giving bad news (Bies, 2012), but these prescriptions remain largely anecdotal rather than empirically based.

2.2. Negative Biases in News Consumption

Negative bias in attention: Negative events are more powerful than positive

ones in getting people's attention. Bad news reports or information, "at least in the form of undesirable trait terms, have more power than good information for attracting attention in an automatic, non-intentional fashion," (Baumeister et al., 2001, p. 341).

Negativity potency: This is when negative experiences, thoughts, and emotions are more potent than positive ones of equal power. A study using electroencephalography, a method of monitoring electrical currents in the brain, found higher amplitudes and shorter latencies in response to negative stimuli than in response to positive stimuli. Negative information showed more activation than neutral or positive information (Carretiéa et al., 2001).

Negative dominance: When positive and negative events, objects, individuals, traits, are mixed, and an individual makes holistic appraisals, the negative elements are weighted more heavily (Rozin & Royzman, 2001). Negative dominance has been found to exist in impressions of people (Hodges, 1974), personality trait adjectives (Levin & Schmidt, 1969), and personality descriptions (Miller & Rowe, 1967).

Negative bias in memory: People also show negative biases in memory. Individuals can easily recall or retrieve negative contents from their memories as compared to positive ones. Many Cameroonians can easily recall negative reports affiliated with the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis, especially during the demonstrations, but can hardly remember the moves put in place, then, by the government to address the crisis.

2.3. Positive (or Good) News Reports

Jackson (2016) states that positive news lacks an academic conceptual definition, but it is broadly linked to desirability. This includes stories of innovation, initiative, peace-building, progress, solutions, achievements and positive aspects of society. Harcup and O'Neill (Harcup & O'Neill, 2001) aver that good news reports are "stories with particularly positive overtones such as rescues and cures" (p. 279). This constitutes "acts of heroism, resourceful children, miracle recoveries, lucky escapes, happy anniversaries, prize-winning, and triumphs over adversity" (p. 272). From these scholarly perspectives, positive news is desirable and necessary in any fragile democratic nation such as Cameroon. This stimulates and galvanises the media audience towards productive ventures. McIntyre and Gibson (McIntyre & Gibson, 2016), claim that their purpose for publishing only positive news content is to counter the overabundance of negative news in traditional news media and to show their readers the world is not all bad. Dhiman (2023) supports that positive news fosters social progress, improves well-being, and engages audiences in constructive dialogue. The author adds that emphasis on positive news makes society healthier and happier.

2.4. Mass Media Effects

Media effects describe the social, psychological and cultural effects of media content on audiences (Bryant & Zillmann, 1989). Perse (2001) enunciates that

one of the first and most important assumptions of the study of mass communication has been the presumption that media and their content have significant and substantial effects. Lippmann (1922) asserted that news media serve as a veritable source of pictures in our heads, through the supply of imitations of the external world that is normally "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (p. 29). Cohen (1963) built upon Lippmann's foundation by emphasising that the press is significantly more than a purveyor of information and opinion. "It may not be successful much of the time in telling people about what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about… The world will look different to people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by the media" (p. 13).

Ferreira (2014) posits that the influence of the media was understood as omnipotent, such that the audiences were believed not only to consume media and their contents under any circumstance but also suffer their consequences uniformly. This was termed the all-powerful effect of the media. According to this effect, the audience, taken over by the media, was seen as atoms of individuals clustered in a uniform mass and, when exposed to cultural goods, reacted the same way, as in a causal relation between exposition and action (Santos, 1992, p. 18). Thus, the behavioural reactions of the mass audience were also a reflection of its exposition to the media. For these theories, the media had clear intentions of mobilising attitudes and behaviours and, the audience, passive and unprotected, responded as an organism responds to the inoculation of a potion that is directly injected into the vein, an "emblematic formulation of the hypodermic theory (Santos, 1992). Nowadays, it is highly acknowledged that the media are not always all-powerful, considering voluntary media use and increased interactions between the media and the audience.

2.5. Types of Media Effects

Cognitive effects: A cognitive media effect occurs when media exposure influences a person's mental processes or the product of those mental processes. Potter (2012) postulates that the cognitive effect is the acquisition of factual information from media messages, particularly from books, newspapers, television news stories, and informational websites. The author avers that the human mind can absorb this information through the process of memorization. However, the human mind can do far more than memorize; it can transform information into knowledge. This transformation of information can take the form of inferring patterns across media messages. The human mind can also group media messages in different ways to create new meanings. It can generalize beyond media messages to generate principles about real life. All of these mental activities have cognitive effects on individuals.

Behavioural effects: Behaviour is typically defined as the overt actions of an individual (Albarracín et al., 2005). Audience reactions are interpreted as evidence of media effects (Ruótolo, 1998). These reactions are obtainable through

engagement with media texts for varied reasons like personal, educational, and being academically critical (Thomason & Connolly, 2021). In turn, boosting media relevance and audience engagement leads to media sustainability (Castells-Fos et al., 2022), which can be achieved using three considerations: the careful management of staff and resources to meet the demands of digitalization, the strength of the ties between reputation and loyalty, and the powerful relationship between visibility and organizational size (Castells-Fos et al., 2023).

Enikolopov and Petrova (Enikolopov & Petrova, 2017) advanced that there are two main theoretical explanations for why media can influence people's behaviour. First of all, it can change their beliefs by providing relevant information; secondly, it can have a direct effect on behaviour, independently of people's information, through persuasion, revealing the effect of media on audience behaviour. A 2002 report by the US Secret Service and the US Department of Education, which examined 37 incidents of targeted school shootings and school attacks from 1974 to 2000 in the US, found that over half of the attackers demonstrated some interest in violence through movies, video games, books, and other media (Vossekuil et al., 2002). Similarly, Anderson, Gentile & Buckley (Anderson et al., 2007) reported on a longitudinal study of violent video games. They queried children and their peers as well as teachers on aggressive behaviours and violent media consumption. The study found that boys and girls who played a lot of violent video games changed over the school year, becoming more aggressive.

Affective: Affect refers to the feelings that people experience. These include emotions and moods (Potter, 2012, p. 42). Schachter and Singer (Schachter & Singer, 1962) define emotion as a state of physiological arousal and of cognition appropriate to this state of arousal. Feelings are subjective experiences of emotions and are driven by conscious thoughts and reflections. This means that we can have emotions without having feelings; however, we simply cannot have feelings without having emotions. Emotions are short-lived feelings that come from a known cause, while moods are feelings that are longer lasting than emotions. Emotions can range from happy, ecstatic, sad and prideful, while moods are either positive or negative. The media can trigger emotions such as smiles, happiness, fear, lust, anger, and laughter. Media could play significant roles in helping audiences manage their moods, such that "when we are feeling stressed with all the problems in our real lives, we can chill by listening to music, forget our problems by watching television, or lose ourselves in the experience of playing games on the internet" (Potter, 2012, p. 42).

2.6. Operation Model

The operational model describes the news production process: news gathering, treatment, and dissemination. Journalists gather news from society, treat and disseminate. During treatment, journalists filter the information they have ga-

thered from the field based on their editorial policies. Given media pluralism in Cameroon, focus has been to make profit and become self-reliant. One way they do this to satisfy their audience with the kind of news/information that they want is to produce bad and negative news. Thus, they frame their messages in a manner that meets the expectations of their audiences. This is rather unfortunate. Given that media are a reflection of society and society a reflection of the media, we are of the view that good media breed good society, poor media breed poor society, good society breeds good media, and poor society breeds poor media. Since media audiences are hardwired towards bad than good news, media organs tend to disseminate more of bad news than good news in society within which they operate. This is geared towards "satisfying audience wants", which must be distinguished from "audience needs"

Figure 1 shows that the dissemination of bad news is likely to evoke anger, make media audiences scared of their surroundings, and promote extremism and violence in society. Bad news can also make media audiences cautious of their activities, direct audience and policymakers to societal problems, set the pace for a change in society, help express the plight of the oppressed, expose corruption and sells the image of a medium. On the contrary, good news reports stimulate excitement and boost confidence, give hope and foster the development spirit, mould positive attitude and behaviour, guarantee a healthy society, make audience feel protected than endangered, encourage hard work, consolidate national unity, and increase audience life span.
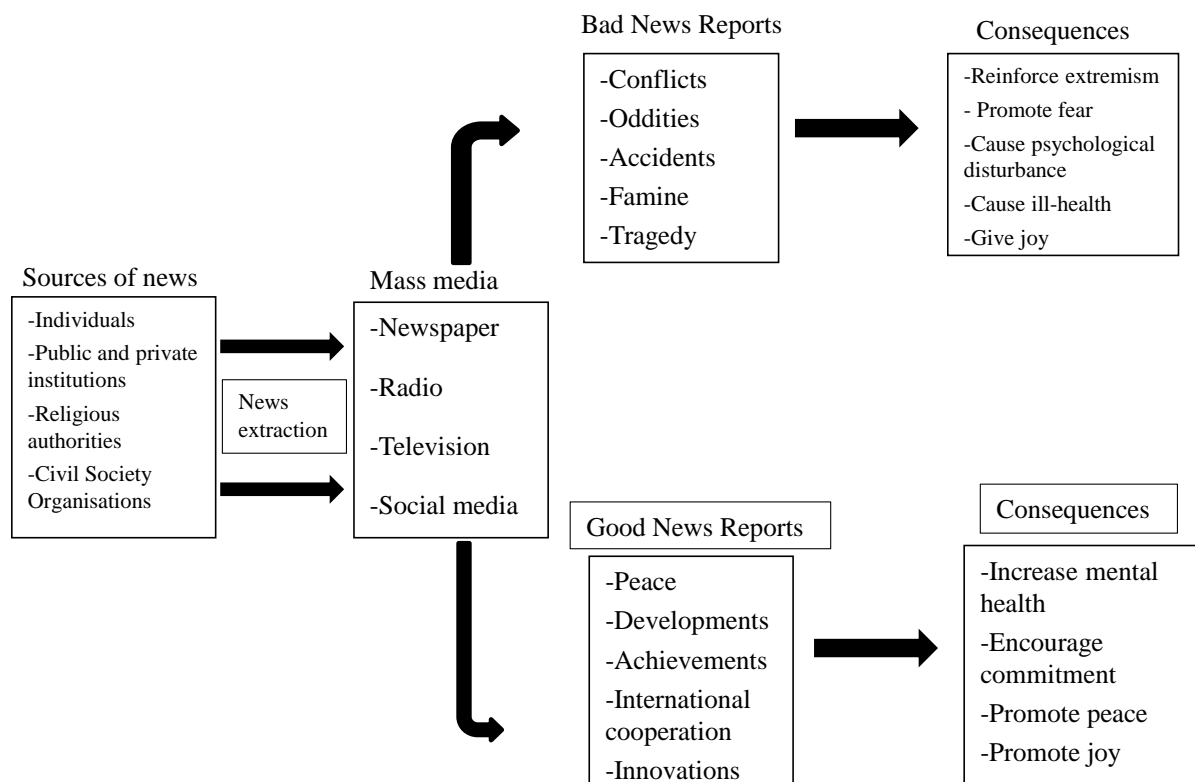

Figure 1. Effects of bad news reports on media audience.

2.7. Theoretical Framework

Agenda setting theory: It explains the priority which media accord to certain information. Ngange and Mokondo (Ngange & Mokondo, 2019) explain that in choosing and displaying news, editors, newsroom staff, and broadcasters play an important part in shaping political reality. This is because the media have an agenda to accomplish. This could be to make profits, and become popular, amongst others. To do so, the media focuses on reporting bad news (Arango-Kure, Garz & Rott, 2014; Edwards, 2017). This explains why this study focuses on the repercussions of negative news, regarded here as media agenda, on media audience. Liaising this with news production, Shoemaker (2006) argues that news does not just happen. It is created by journalists and editors. In other words, the news is constructed, not just reported. News is constructed based on what journalists decide is news (Shoemaker, 2006). This construction sets the agenda for new consumption. The researcher holds that such an agenda may have a devastating effect on the audience's perception of reality as well as the audience's ability to appreciate reality and contribute to national and global development.

Framing theory: Directly related to agenda setting is framing. Frames depict the words, images, phrases, and presentation styles that media outlets use when relaying information about an issue or event to an audience (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989). Arowolo (2017) holds that the concept of framing was first posited by Gregory Bateson in 1972. The author notes further that framing describes the practice of thinking about news items and story content within familiar contexts. It is this context that determines reporters' and editors' choice of words when writing or editing an article. Frames are a characteristic of the discourse itself (Pan & Kosicki, 1993) that provide a central organizing idea (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989); they form a structure on which other elements are built (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997), calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring other elements (Entman, 1993).

As a key assumption, framing postulates that the way something is presented to the audience (called "the frame") determines audience interpretation and understanding of the message. It is for this reason that reporters and editors are cautious of their words when writing their articles or coining headlines. Contextually, from the origin of journalism, journalists have focused on negative frames, though other studies suggest a dominance of positive frames. For instance, Melnyk et al. (2023) studied news frames on *Google News*, the world's largest news aggregator, and found that 70.54% of headlines and news were positive. From the findings, they thus questioned what they referred to as the "stereotype of the dominance of negative agendas in the global news stream" (p.244). Nevertheless, negative framing has dominated the Cameroonian media landscape, especially since the outburst of the Cameroon Anglophone Crisis in 2026. Media reports are framed to achieve various agendas such as economic and political purposes.

Gatekeeping theory: Gatekeeping can be broadly understood as the control of information passing through a gate or filter (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Erzikova (2018) upholds that gatekeeping is a judgment or decision-making about what information should be gathered, evaluated, and ultimately shared. To be a gate-keeper means to exercise control over what information reaches society and how social reality is framed. Gatekeepers "facilitate or constrain the diffusion of information as they decide which messages to allow past the gates" (Shoemaker & Vos 2009, p. 21). Erzikova (2018) adds that the concept of gatekeeping originated from social psychologist Kurt Lewin's study of the selection and distribution of food items in a social system in the 1940s in the United States. Kurt Lewin described the selection process in terms of metaphors: channels (the grocery store, garden), gates (the entrance to a channel), gatekeepers (shoppers, cooks), and positive (attractiveness of a food item) and negative (a high price) forces that influence the selection and processing of items.

Lewin realised that housewives are key gatekeepers who control what food enters the "channels" that ultimately bring it from the garden or supermarket into the household and ultimately onto the dining-room table. Lewin's student, David Manning White, introduced gatekeeping within journalism studies while analysing the gatekeeping decisions of a small-town daily newspaper editor, called Mr. Gates. White (1950) found that the editor was "highly subjective" and largely based the selection of wire news on his personal preferences. Contextually, good and bad things do happen in society. However, most editors gate-keep positive news and allow negative news to reach society. This is because media consumers are more interested in negative stories than positive ones. They are willing to read, listen, and watch more negative news than positive ones. This increases the demand for negative news in society. As a result, journalists are consistently gatekeeping positive stories in favour of negative ones.

3. Methodology

This research adopts a quantitative approach. The approach is used to address the research problem. It enables the researchers to get a wider sample. This is relevant because many individuals in Molyko are exposed to bad news reports. So, it was important to sample the views of many persons in Molyko to know the extent to which they are affected by bad news reports. Alternatively, this research could have used in-depth interviews (qualitative approach) by conducting interviews with Molyko inhabitants. However, the interviews could not have permitted the gathering of huge data as in the case here.

Survey constituted the research method. This method is appropriate for measuring attitude and behaviour of a wider population. Molyko inhabitants measured the extent to which bad news reports affect their attitude and behaviour. The survey targeted Molyko inhabitants who were exposed to bad news reports and were above the age of sixteen. Those above sixteen can identify the nature of bad news reports on their attitude and behaviour. The sample of the study is 376

Molyko inhabitants. They were selected using simple random sampling technique. Molyko inhabitants who were above sixteen years were available and willing to voluntarily participate in the study were surveyed.

A questionnaire was the research instrument. It consisted of four sections: factor influencing audience choice of mass media; audience understanding of bad and good news; effects of bad news reports on media audience; demographics. In the first section, the respondents were asked to indicate their favourite news media and provide justification for choosing either newspaper, radio, television, and social media. The section also measured the frequency at which the respondents were exposed to their favourite news media and the number of hours spent on their favourite news media daily. Frequency was measured using the five-point scale measurement: Always (7 days), Often (5 - 6 days), Sometimes (3 - 4 days), Rarely (1 - 2 days) and Never (0 day). The response option for the time spent on the favourite media daily included: less than 1 hour, 1 hour to less than 2 hours, 2 hours to less than 3 hours, 3 hours to less than 4 hours, 4 hours to less than 5 hours and 5 hours and above. The second section used the five-point agreement scale: Strongly agree (100%), Agree (75%), Neutral (50%), Disagree (25%) and Strongly disagree (0%), to measure respondents' opinions on whether bad news reports have overshadowed positive news reports in the news media; to determine whether the news media should focus more on positive or bad news reports. The respondents were asked to provide justifications for their choices. In the third section, the five-point agreement scale was used to measure the extent to which bad news reports such as COVID-19 death tolls, kidnappings, arson, accidents, killings, corruption and embezzlement affect respondents' attitude and behaviour. The measurement scale was also utilised to ascertain whether bad news reports have reduced respondents' exposure to the news media.

A pretest was done using 30 respondents in Molyko. During the pretest data collection, it was realised that bad news reports was mistaken for fake news. To correct this, the definition and example of bad news reports was clearly spelt out on the front page of the five-page questionnaire before final data collection. Data collection lasted for two weeks. The researchers worked with a team of research assistants from the Communication Research Centre (CRC), Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Buea. The data were coded, entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21, and cleaned analysed. Descriptive and inferential tests were conducted. Validity was ensured through face validity, content validity and construct validity. The questionnaire was developed after the researchers studied available literature related to this study. Ethical considerations like voluntary participation, confidentiality, and informed consent were employed.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Demographic Characteristics of Sample

Out of 376 respondents, 155 (41.2%) are male and 215 (57.2%) are female. 6

(1.6%) respondents did not respond to the question. In terms of age, 185 (49.2%) are between 21 and 25 years, 138 (36.7%) are between 15 and 20 years, 30 (8.0%) fall within 26 and 30, 7 (1.9%) are aged 31-35 years, 3 (0.8%) fall in the range 36 to 40 years, 6 (1.6%) are between 41 and 45 years, 1 (0.3%) respondent is between 46 and 50 years, while 6 respondents (1.6%) did not disclose their age brackets. Singles dominated in this study: 347 (92.3%) are single, 19 (5.1%) are married, 3(0.8%) are cohabiting, 1 (0.3%) is a window(er) and 6 (1.6%) did not respond. Findings reveal that 314 (83.5%) are students, 26 (6.9%) are business operators, 8 (2.1%) are journalists, 7 (1.9%) are administrators, 5 (1.3%) are housewives, 6 (1.6%) are farmers, 2 (0.3%) are actors and 1 (0.3%) is a web operator. Also, 7(1.9%) respondents did not disclose their occupations. 267 (71.0%) respondents are undergraduate students of different higher learning institutions. 71 (18.9%) are Master's students, 3 (3.5%) are holders of the Higher National Diploma (HND), 9 (2.4%) are holders of the first degree, 5 (1.3%) are Advanced Level students and 2 (0.5%) are ordinary level holders. The "others" category had 1 respondent (0.3%).

4.2. Effects of Bad News Reports on Media Audiences in Molyko

Table 1 reveals that bad news reports make media audience scared of their surroundings and annoyed. It also affects their mood, triggers societal extremism,

Table 1. Effects of bad news reports on media audience.

Effects of bad news	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
Evokes anger	54 (14.3%)	101 (26.8%)	105 (27.9%)	65 (17.2%)	52 (13.8%)	155 (41.1%)	105 (27.9%)	117 (31%)
Makes me scared of the society	130 (34.6%)	146 (38.8%)	64 (17%)	24 (6.4%)	12 (3.2%)	276 (73.4%)	64 (17%)	36 (9.6%)
Negatively influences mood	63 (16.7%)	113 (30%)	134 (35%)	33 (11.7%)	23 (6.1%)	176 (46.7%)	134 (35%)	56 (17.8%)
Negatively influences behaviour	51 (13.5%)	94 (24.9%)	140 (37.1%)	47 (12.5%)	45 (11.9%)	145 (38.4%)	140 (37.1%)	92 (24.4%)
Promotes extremism/ violence	77 (20.4%)	79 (21%)	84 (22.3%)	63 (16.7%)	74 (19.6%)	156 (41.4%)	84 (22.3%)	137 (36.3%)
Reinforces hatred/distrust for public officials	103 (27.3%)	114 (30.2%)	84 (22.3%)	49 (13%)	27 (7.2%)	217 (57.5%)	84 (22.3%)	76 (20.2%)
Heightens my blood pressure	31 (8.2%)	45 (11.9%)	102 (27.1%)	96 (25.5%)	103 (27.3%)	76 (20.1%)	102 (27.1%)	199 (52.8%)
Gives me joy	13 (3.4%)	21 (5.6%)	64 (17%)	76 (20.2%)	203 (53.8)	34 (9%)	64 (17%)	279 (74%)
Multiple Response Set (MRS)						1204 (45.8%)	713 (27.1%)	711 (27.1%)

N$_{cases}$ = 376; N$_{response}$ = 2632.

hatred and distrust for public officials. Few respondents indicated that bad news gives them joy.

4.3. Hypothesis One: Bad News Reports Have a Significant Negative Effect on Media Audience than Good News

Table 2 illustrates the result of a One-Sample T-test performed to determine whether or not bad news reports have a significant negative effect on media audiences. The result, t (df = 375) = 25.66, $p < 0.05$, reveals that bad news reports have a significant negative effect on media audiences. The result of the test was statistically significant at the 0.05 level with 95% confidence interval. The mean of the sample (26.88) was significantly higher than the probable test mean of 20 (average agreement response).

This finding confirms previous studies (Dhiman, 2023; Ijeh, 2023; Galician, 1986; McIntyre & Gibson, 2016; Ngange, et al., 2020) which show a direct relationship between negative news exposure and negative emotional states. The studies reveal that negative news exposure negatively affects viewer's mood, state of mind, attitude and behaviour. These findings also support Hoog and Verboon (Hoog & Verboon, 2019), who reveal that daily exposure to negative news makes people feel sad, especially when they consider the news to be personally relevant. Dhiman (Dhiman, 2023, p. 1) also remarked that bad news reports "contribute to a cycle of negativity, leading to feelings of helplessness, disengagement, and a distorted perception of reality among audiences". These negative consequences can be averted through exposure to positive news. Dhiman explains that positive news empowers and inspires media audiences due to its emphasis on innovative ideas, positive outcomes and successful strategies. It also encourages audiences to serve as catalysts of positive change in society and to actively participate in collective problem-solving. Thus, positive news reports build resilience, promote optimism and enhance overall societal well-being. Nevertheless, an experimental work by McIntyre and Gyldensted (McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2017) revealed that there is no evidence to support claims that positive news reports can improve lives by bringing emotional well-being, health and even prosperity

These results also align with the experimental work of Legg and Sweeny (Legg & Sweeny, 2013) who examined whether news recipients would report a strong preference for receiving bad news or good news reports first. They argued that information often comes as a mix of good and bad news, prompting the question, *do you want*

Table 2. Effects of bad news reports on media audience.

One-Sample Statistics		One-Sample Test (CI: 95%)	
N	376	Df	375
Mean	26.88	T	25.66
Std. Deviation	5.20	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
		Test Value	20
		Mean Difference	6.88

the good news or the bad news first? Their results reveal that 78% of the respondents wanted to hear bad news reports first before good news reports. The majority preferred to end with good news to reduce the negative emotions caused by the bad news report. This shows that bad news reports adversely affect media audiences. However, Proctor (2021) notes that not all negative news leads to bad experiences. He realised that negative news reporting enables the public to be aware of issues that affect society. This may lead to a positive change in behaviour and attitude. For instance, pressure from negative news reporting can influence dubious organisations to change their ways for fear of reports that may affect their reputations or cause the government to enact favourable policies. In the same vein, Streitmatter (2015) argues exposure to negative news can be a tool for social progression and economic development.

4.4. Hypothesis Two: Bad News Reports Have Significantly Reduced Audience Exposure to the News Media More than Good News

Table 3 demonstrates the results of a One-Sample T-test; t (df = 375) = 3.42, $p < 0.05$, which reveals that bad news reports have significantly reduced audience exposure to the news media. The result of the test was statistically significant at the 0.05 level with a 95% confidence interval. The sample mean (2.72) was higher than the probable test mean of 2.5 (average agreement response).

These findings affirm Potter & Gantz (2000), who found that individuals consciously decided to watch less local broadcast news because the stories were too negative, too often about crime, and seldom presented positive information. One of the research participants in Potter & Gantz (2000) explains that "All you see is horrendous crime, murder, things like that… It's very stressful. And sometimes people just don't want to deal with that. So many good things are happening out there but everything has to be about crime or celebrities." Also, McIntyre & Gyldensted (2017) observed that some individuals are disengaging with the news because they realise it makes them feel bad. Skovsgaard & Anderson (2020) also realised some media audiences refrain from following the news media due to discontent with the predominant nature of negative news. However, the majority (76%) of the research participants in Potter & Gantz (2000) said they would be more interested in watching TV news if it covered more special events, neighbourhood clean-ups, programmes for kids and local

Table 3. Effects of bad news reports on news exposure.

One-Sample Statistics		One-Sample Test (CI: 95%)	
N	376	Df	
Mean	2.72	T	3.42
Std. Deviation	1.24	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001
		Test Value	2.5
		Mean Difference	0.220

council meetings. Williams (2023) asserts that humans are addicted to negative news. This addiction makes humans continue consuming bad news reports despite the negative implications on their attitudes and behaviour. Also, the desire to be informed about potential risks, to be a well-informed citizen and to engage in conversation based on the information gotten from the media makes it difficult for individuals to stay away from the news media.

4.5. News Preference among Molyko Inhabitants

Table 4 shows that most respondents (293, 77.9%) prefer good news reports to bad news reports (17, 4.5%) while 66 (17.6%) were neutral. Also, 161 (42.8%) respondents denied the idea of preferring more bad news reports, while 95 (25.3%) instead prefer it and 120 (31.9%) were neutral.

4.6. Hypothesis Three: Media Audience Significantly Prefer More of Good News than Bad News

Table 5 illustrates the result of a paired sample correlation (T-Test): t (df = 375) = 16.03, $p < 0.05$. The results are statistically significant at the 0.05 level, indicating that the media audience significantly wants more good news than bad news. This result is further confirmed by the descriptive statistics showing a higher mean response for Good News (4.14) compared to Bad News (2.63) which ties with the levels of agreement. Also, the "r" which shows a correlation between Good news and Bad news is weak, and negative, but significant. With an over 30% less average strength, the relationship is at opposing ends; more desire for good news leads to less desire for bad news. Finally, the Eta statistics still on the association of variables reveal that the presence of too much bad news in the media is strongly associated (0.10 > 0.08) with a decline in news viewership.

This finding contradicts previous studies that stated that humans naturally prefer bad news to good news. For instance, Soroka's (Soroka, 2006) findings reveal that people are generally more responsive to negative information than positive ones. Likewise, Grabe & Kamhawi (2006) disclose that humans are "hard-wired" to pay more attention (voluntarily or involuntarily) to bad news than good news. Shoemaker (1996) equally asserts that the news media exist because humans are

Table 4. News preference.

Preferred news type	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
More good news	178 (47.3 %)	115 (30.6%)	66 (17.6%)	9 (2.4%)	8 (2.1%)	293 (77.9%)	66 (17.6%)	17 (4.5%)
More bad news	33 (8.8%)	62 (16.5%)	120 (31.9%)	59 (15.7%)	102 (27.1%)	95 (25.3%)	120 (31.9%)	161 (42.8%)
Multiple Response Set (MRS)						454 (60.4%)	186 (24.7%)	112 (14.9%)

N_{cases} = 376; $N_{response}$ = 752.

Table 5. Audiences' preference of news type.

	Paired Sample T-Test	
	Focus on Good News	Focus on Bad News
N	376	376
Mean	4.17	2.63
Std. Deviation	0.97	1.28
R	−0.357 (0.000)	
T	16.03	
Df	375	
Mean	1.54	
St. Deviation	1.86	
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	Measures of Association	
	Because of too much bad news in the media, I do not watch news frequently as before	
Eta	0.103	0.086
Eta Squared	0.011	0.007

biologically built to look for environmental threats. This hard-wired predisposition toward threatening information is one reason that news is so often negative. However, the result of this finding demonstrates the majority of the media audience in Molyko (77.9%) significantly wants more good news reports than bad news reports. The respondents want more good news reports because it stimulate excitement, boost confidence, give hope, foster development and moulds positive attitude and behaviour.

Table 6 provides justification for news type preference. Some respondents prefer good news reports because they stimulate excitement and boost confidence (15.4%), give hope and foster development (13.3%), mould positive attitude and behaviour (11.7%), guarantee a healthy society (5.1%), traumatise people (4.3%), promote extremism (2.9%), sell the image of a country (1.6%), make people feel protected than endangered (1.1%), encourage hard work (0.5%), consolidates national unity (0.5%) and increases life span (0.3%). On the contrary, some respondents preferred bad news reports because they make people to be cautious (5.6%), reflect societal happenings (1.9%), express plight of the oppressed (0.5%), direct audience/policymakers to address societal problems (0.5%), set the pace for societal change (0.5%), exposes corruption (0.5%), generate profit (0.3%), and are entertaining (0.3%).

4.7. Bad News Domination in the News Media

Table 7 shows that bad news reports have dominated the news media. Statistically, 69.9% (263) of the respondents assert that bad news reports dominate the news media as opposed to 8.5% (32) who refuted the statement meanwhile 21.3%

Table 6. Reasons for respondents' news type preference.

Reasons for News type preference	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Reasons for more good news than bad news		
Good news stimulates excitement and boosts confidence	58	15.4
Good news gives hope and fosters development spirit	50	13.3
Good news moulds positive attitude and behavior	44	11.7
Good news guarantees a healthy society	19	5.1
Bad news traumatises me	16	4.3
Bad news promotes extremism	11	2.9
Good news sells the image of a country	6	1.6
Good news makes us feel protected than endangered	4	1.1
Good news encourages hard work	2	0.5
Good news consolidates national unity	2	0.5
Good news increases audience life span	1	0.3
Reasons for more bad news than good news		
Bad news makes us to be cautious	21	5.6
Bad news is simply what is happening in society	7	1.9
Bad news expresses plight of the oppressed	2	0.5
Ba news directs audience/policymakers to address societal problems	2	0.5
Bad news sets the pace for a change in society	2	0.5
Bad news is entertaining	1	0.3
Bad news sells a medium	1	0.3
Bad news exposes corruption	1	0.3
Neutral justifications		
Both are equally important	72	19.1
We want to be informed of both	44	11.7
No response	10	2.7
Total	**376**	**100**

Table 7. Bad news domination in the news media.

Scaling	Gender			Total
	Male	Female	No response	
Agree	100 (26.6%)	158 (42%)	5 (1.3%)	263 (69.9%)
Neutral	38 (10.1%)	42 (11.2%)	0 (0)	80 (21.3%)
Disagree	17 (4.5%)	14 (3.7%)	1 (0.3%)	32 (8.5%)
No response	0 (0%)	1 (0.3%)	0 (0%)	1 (0.3%)
Total	155 (41.2%)	215 (51.2%)	6 (1.6%)	376 (100)

(80) of the respondents were neutral. This findings align with previous studies. Researchers such as Shoemaker (1996); Edwards (2017); Arango-Kure, Garz and Rott (Arango-Kure et al., 2014); Zillmann, Chen, Knobloch, and Callison (Zillmann et al., 2004) affirmed that there is an intensification of negativities in the news. They assert that editors often consider news items that focus on corruption, scandal, murder, famine and natural disasters rather than good news. Arango-Kure, Garz and Rott (Arango-Kure et al., 2014) equally stipulated that bad news items such as conflict, accidents, flooding and famine tend to be more influential than comparably positive news items. Notwithstanding, some studies show more prevalence of good news in the media. For instance, Melnyk et al. (2023) prove that 70.54 news headlines on *Google News*, the world's largest news aggregator, were positive; thereby debunking evidences in support of high negativities in the news.

4.8. Reasons for Bad News Intensification in the New Media

Table 8 reveals that bad news reports have dominated the news media because journalists seek to satisfy the negatively inclined nature of humans (20.7%), bad news is good news to journalists (17.9%), lack of control of social media has increased the spread of bad news reports in society (10.9%), bad occurrences are more than good ones (13.8%), bad news reports spread widely than good ones

Table 8. Reasons for bad news and good news intensification in the news media.

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage (%s)
Reasons for bad news intensification		
The news media wish to satisfy the negative inclined nature of humans	78	20.7
Bad news is good news to journalists	67	17.9
Lack of control of social media has increased the spread of bad news	41	10.9
Bad occurrences in society are more than good ones	52	13.8
Bad news spreads widely than good news	46	12.2
Bad news sells a medium more than good news	9	2.4
To create awareness/cautiousness	1	0.3
Reasons for good news intensification		
Good news gives joy	15	4
Seminars have made journalists adopt silver lining approach to news reporting	2	0.5
Neutrality		
Both are equally reported	49	13
I do not know	1	0.3
No response	14	3.7
Total	376	100

(12.2%), bad news reports sell a medium more than good one (2.4%) and bad news reports create awareness and cautiousness (0.3%). Some respondents (13%) assert that both bad and news reports are equally represented in the news media. In line with this finding, research (Grabe & Kamhawi, 2006, Soroka, 2006 & Edwards, 2017) suggests that humans are more interested in bad news reports than good ones.

4.9. Ranked Media Outlets in Terms of Bad News Dissemination

Table 9 reveals that social media tops the list as the highest purveyor of bad news reports in Cameroon. Within this generic name, some respondents specified particular social media platforms that they believe are dominant in the spread of bad news reports in the nation. These platforms include: Facebook (36, 9.6%), WhatsApp (7, 1.9%), Mimi Mefo Info (3, 0.8%), My Kontri Pipo Dem (2, 0.5%), Twitter (1, 0.3%), and Instagram (1, 0.3%). 111 (29.6%) respondents simply indicated social media. Similar to this finding, a study conducted by Park et al. (2012) revealed that the advent of social media has brought major headaches to the corporate world as it facilitates the spread of bad contents such as accidents, rape, body mutilation, and scandals.

Table 9. Rank order of news outlets in terms of bad news dissemination.

Rank order of news outlets	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Social media	161	42.8
CRTV	84	22.4
Equinox radio and television	53	14.1
Newspaper	8	2.1
Le Television Monde (LTM)	7	1.9
Vision 4	4	1.1
The Guardian Post	3	0.8
My Media Prime	3	0.8
Television	3	0.8
Canal 2	2	0.5
Afrique Média	2	0.5
Municipal Updates	1	0.3
PEFSCOM television	1	0.3
Spectrum television	1	0.3
Cameroon Tribune	1	0.3
All media outlets	1	0.3
I do not know	16	4.3
None	5	1.3
No response	20	5.3
Total	376	100

Contrary to expectation, CRTV was ranked second before Equinox radio and television. Observation shows CRTV focuses on top to bottom approach in terms of news presentation. This approach means priority is given to news stories centred on government officials. This approach, unlike the bottom-top embraced by Equinox radio and television, limits CRTV's coverage and report of negative overtone stories such as accidents, killings, kidnappings, fire outbreaks, body mutilation, and rape. However, the phrase that your good news may be my bad news and my bad news may be your good news helps to explain the ranked position of CRTV. Humans are interested in negative overtone stories and they are likely to despise news channels such as CRTV since the medium does not meet their expectations of providing negative overtone stories. For this, the news disseminated by CRTV is interpreted as bad news.

4.10. Media Preference among Molyko Inhabitants

Four media outlets characterised this study: newspaper, radio, television and social media. The findings reveal that 169 (44.9%) respondents prefer television, 156 (41.5%) prefer social media, 25 (6.6%) prefer newspapers, and 24 (6.4%) prefer radio.

Table 10 demonstrates that the reasons for media preference. Television is preferred because it provides audio-visual contents (28.2%), it is credible (10.4%), easily accessible (5.1%), cheap (0.8%) and timely (0.8%); social media is preferred because it is easily accessible (22.1%), provides diverse and detailed news (8.2%), trending (4.8%), fast (3.7%), worldwide (0.5%), entertaining (0.5%), and credible (0.3%); newspaper is preferred because it is credible (3.7%), achievable (1.3%), cheap (0.3%), provides detailed information (1.3%), and improves reading skills (0.3%); radio is preferred because it is portable (2.9%); credible (2.7%) highly relational (1.1%) and fast (0.3%).

Table 10. Respondents' reasons for media preference.

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage (%s)
1. Television		
a) Provides audio-visual contents	106	28.2
b) Credible	39	10.4
c) Easily accessible	19	5.1
d) Cheap	3	0.8
e) Timely	3	0.8
2. Social media		
a) Easily accessible	83	22.1
b) Provides diverse and detailed news	31	8.2
c) Trending	18	4.8
d) Fast	14	3.7
e) Worldwide	2	0.5

Continued

f) Entertaining	2	0.5
g) Credible	1	0.3
3. Newspaper		
a) Credible	14	3.7
b) Provide detailed information	5	1.3
c) Achievable	5	1.3
d) Cheap	1	0.3
e) Improves reading skills	1	0.3
4. Radio		
a) Portable	11	2.9
b) Credible	10	2.7
c) Highly relational	4	1.1
e) Fast	1	0.3
5. No response	3	0.8
Total	376	100

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study took interest in examining the implications of bad news reports on media audiences. Findings suggest that bad news has a negative implication on audiences. It negatively influences their moods, makes them scared of their surroundings, triggers extremism, hatred and distrust for public officials. Positively, few respondents indicated that bad news gives them joy. Due to the high extent of the negative influences of bad news, some inhabitants are reducing the time span of watching the news media.

From the findings of this research, it is recommended that journalists should adopt the silver lining approach when reporting bad news. By this approach, journalists are to focus more on positive elements or features in every bad occurrence. For instance, journalists should focus more on efforts made by governments, religious bodies, and individuals towards developing a vaccine for the novel coronavirus rather than focusing on the number of deaths caused by the pandemic. The silver lining approach instils hope on media audiences as well as limits the aftermath effects associated with the consumption of bad contents from media outlets.

In addition, media audiences should be critical when consuming media contents. Media literacy is key. They should always question media contents rather than absorbing them without an iota of doubt. This is because the findings of this research show that the intensification of bad news in the media is driven by the self-interest of media institutions to sell their agenda and image in society by reporting on what they believe their audience will "want" to hear, rather than what they "need".

Finally, media audiences should be cautious in selecting their preferred news sources. For a safe and sound mind and body, and as this study shows, they should select media outlets that rarely disseminate bad news reports. This will contribute to reducing the implications associated with exposure to bad news reports. Future research on this subject could focus on trends of good news and bad news reports in specific media categories: print (newspapers), audio-visual (radio, television), and online (new/social media).

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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