

## *The Enigmatic Literary Gradations of News as Mass Media Staple/Consumables*

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### **Abstract**

News is the enigmatic representation of factual and sometimes concocted daily events. But the presentation of news as a mass media staple goes beyond the mere portrayal of events as they occur. The journalistic output is mostly defined by gatekeepers and entrepreneurs of media outfits. This study adopts a dispassionate look at news as a mass media literary staple and the contributing factors in news portrayals. It discovered that apart from the heuristic perception of news, there is a conundrum behind news-fare and this conundrum is inherent in the internal factor of the mass media stable's setup itself (house-style and literary ideology), qualifying factors such as media ownership (entrepreneurship), media system (environment) and external factors such as audience/readership as well as individual's literary perception of the importance of media fare, and the utility of the news-fare itself. The study proffers a mitigation of these influences on the mass media portrayals in order to resolve the conundrum that media fare has become, and to prevent its perception as media farce. News items should not be reduced to a conundrum due to contrived gatekeeper choices in mass media portrayals. This would play a mitigating role in moderating the resulting perception of news as a ruse or as a mere shibboleth that should be endured for its nuisance value.

### **Keywords**

News-Fare, Enigma, Conundrum, Mass Media Farce, Anagram, Gatekeeper

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## **Introduction**

Before The anagrammatic epigram of NEWS as a mass media staple or offering is rendered as N.E.W.S, which is casually rendered as N-North; E-East; W-West; S-South. The causal symbolism inherent in this rendering underscores the fact that the news is happening everywhere, simultaneously in the four cardinal points of the earth and in every geographical location of respective countries and right now, even as we speak, we are making news in our very locality. However, not all news or happenstances is reported or reportable due to certain factors and indices of the mass media phenomenon. Engaging with the news-rendering or reportage involves an appreciation of the literary and the literal, as well as the emotive and psychosomatic factors of education, socialization and innate ability to relate intelligently with mass media-fare. Being able to engage with mass media-fare and relate with its import and implications for us in our daily lives is known as media-literacy. Having this ability further predisposes us to the concept of “news media literacy”. News media literacy as an adjunct of the mass media has gained prominence in very recent years, and the effect of news media staple or news-fare is likewise receiving no less a deserved attention. In this wise, Maksl, A., Ashley, S., & Craft, S. (2015) aver that “News media literacy refers to the knowledge and motivations needed to identify and engage with journalism.” Using Potter’s model of media literacy adapted to news media specifically, the trio were able to posit that “news media-literate individuals think deeply about media experiences, believe they are in control of media’s influence, and have high levels of basic knowledge about media content, industries and effects.”

## **Nature of News: Good News and Bad News?**

What is NEWS in news? NEWS could be etymologically viewed as anything that is new. But is there really anything new under the earth, in the real sense of newness, as the renowned sage, King Solomon mused? The first recorded instance of seeking something new as a current event was when some ever-questing folks, the famed Athenians were described as having no other serious vocation other than to gather to hear the latest gist or gossip about events or happenings in town. That in itself is a semblance of information-hounding or novelty seeking, which translates as news-questing. There is good news and there is bad news. The Christian scriptures aver that good news is like water to a thirsty soul, while bad news is like taking the wind out of someone’s sails, wrecking someone’s hopes. This is reminiscent of the scene in Shakespeare’s “Merchant of Venice” where Antonio received the “ill-tidings” of the wreck of his ships carrying all of his life’s fortunes. This bad news quickly spread, and emboldened Shylock to rashly demand his pound of flesh, as earlier agreed by the duo. Were the reverse to have been the case, it would have taken some time and even the begging of belief, before Shylock and any other person, for that matter, would have believed the good news. As can be deduced from this instance, there is more

expectations of bad news or negative outcomes, than good news or positive outcomes. Thus, bad news sells better and moves faster than good news. That is a fact! If you want to argue that, then you have to compare the level of emotions stimulated in yourself when you hear or read a “good” news headline such as “Labour Unions Agree Terms with Industry Chiefs”, or a “bad” news headline “Breaking News – President’s Plane Crashes into Sea”. You must admit how your emotions shift into emergency or panic gear when bad news headline hits you even you are not directly involved. When bad news hits, your emotions sure run into high gear, eyes widen and ears preen, senses sharpen to get the most of the bad news, with the intent to share or discuss it with others. Good news sure does not elicit such depths of emotions, as it is deemed to be the norm, nothing out of the ordinary or *deja-vu*. News that sells faster and ensures newspaper sustenance is mainly bad news and happenstances out of the ordinary or *‘jamais-vu’*.

In our contemporary world, news is any newly emergent story, information or happenstance written by reporters/journalists (newshounds) moderated and packaged by editors for dissemination to an expectant audience, be it in the paper format, or in the electronic or online format. News by its very nature possesses certain intrinsic qualities that make it a consumable or desirable. News is any emergent information that is bizarre, novel or groundbreaking and that affects society’s constituents in diverse ways. News of a necessity must be prompt, pungent, incisive, and affective, but not artificial, staged or sentimentally contrived. Its reportage must be literarily literal, crafted in words meant to elicit emotive interest and create a yearning for more exposure or serial exposés of the salient facts and the associated extensions as it impinges on society. That is why in journalistic fare, news is packaged or cast in suspenseful headlines and sub-headlines in order to relate with and meet the audiences’ expectations.

### **News as Enigma - Purpose and Function of News**

To what extent and for what purpose is news in our society? News as a consumable mass media staple serves the basic function of information dissemination in the society – to keep the members of the society abreast of events as they daily unfold and as such, enable them to make informed decisions. The extent and scope of news as a consumable mass media staple goes beyond what is disseminated or portrayed in the newspaper or the electronic media. Many issues, principles, policies and concepts impinge on the mass media itself, and this poses serious consequences on the content and context of the consumable mass media staple. The implementations of such concepts such as the “Gatekeeping” and the “Magic-Bullet” play critical roles in what is disseminated and consumed as news. This means there is more to the “news” than meets the eye. News is characterised as a literal offering from the ‘god of media’, to the worshippers who are adherents made to bow to worship at the altar of the perspective foisted upon the audience and prescribed by the ‘media god’. But “news” transcends mere literal presentation of stories or happenstances in the society. In today’s mass media newsrooms, “news” is most often ‘balanced’ with other existential considerations, before dissemination. It thus morphs into policy, principles. Other extraneous influences, such as the reporter’s beat assignment, the reporter’s individual preferences in the gathering or reportage of “news”, the production and dissemination of “news” can fall into an environment rife with a conflict of interests. In the consideration of mass media choices for the audiences and consumers of mass media fare, as evidenced in the “gatekeeping and magic-bullet or hypodermic needle” assertion, persons with vested interests in the mass media fare portrayals can play God to the unwitting audiences, thereby propagating exclusive, prismatic and prescriptive perspectives for the audience’s consumption. This, no doubt gives ‘news’ forced kaleidoscopic colourations within mass media space, different media-stables and media businesses because of nuanced information subliminally presented to the audience or readership as “news”. “News” is what the mass media outfit packages per time and space for their anticipated audience, not necessarily what the audience needs, but what gatekeepers think they need. Thus, it is evident that news is an enigmatic offering that is mediated by the newshounds

(selective newsgathering), the gatekeepers (news filtering/selection based on certain fixed parameters of portrayals or reportage) and the selection of usefulness or adaptability of specific news items based on the news stable's choice and the individual audience's preferences, or the uses to which news offerings and staples are applied (uses and gratification).

### **Gradations of News**

It is still another conundrum who decides what is good news or bad news. Is it the audience or the newshound or the editor? Is it the media mogul, the government, the media or journalistic professional organization by way of self-censoring, or the independent monitoring organization established for that purpose? As evidenced earlier in the preceding paragraph, newshounds who are involved in selective newsgathering due to assignation of beat by their editors, the gatekeepers or editors who are paid by their employer for news filtering/selection based on certain fixed parameters of portrayals or reportage and the selection of usefulness or adaptability of specific news items based on the news stable's choice, as well as the individual audience's preferences, or the uses to which news offerings and staples are applied (uses and gratification), all play a role in determining what is good, or bad news.

Therefore, the choice of good or bad news is dependent on the stage at which the mass media-fare is at any given point in time. Of course, since the newshound and the editor are like the cooks who serve the prepared broth and other dishes to the diners or take-out customers, they must sample or taste the broth or dish first, in order to determine its suitability or otherwise, for their customers' tastes and needs. As Morley (1992) observes, "creators of media content have a preferred reading that they would like the audience to take out of the text... the audience might reject it, or negotiate some compromise interpretation between what they think and what the text is saying, or contest what the text says with some alternative interpretation" But ultimately, the taste of the pudding is in the eating, so it is in the audience's mind that one can really gain an appraisal of the literal goodness (positivity) or badness (negativity) of news, largely because of their perceptive intuition to relate with the news-fare as either good (positive) or bad (negative) based on their needs and uses which they assign to the news-fare. However, the manner of how each individual audience and group perceives any given media-fare is an independent psychosomatic and innate autochthonous activity. As Levy and Windahl (1984) aver, "audience activity postulates a voluntaristic and selective orientation by audiences... motivated by needs and goals that are defined by audience members themselves".

<b>Good News (Positive)</b>	<b>Bad News (Negative)</b>	<b>Neutral (Indifferent)</b>
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### **Conclusion**

Much preceding research has revealed that the affirmation and confirmation quotient of negative "news" has a more lasting impact than that of positive "news", as evidenced in society's expectation of and usual quick response (such as punishment or reinforcement) to the negative event than the positively influencing event, which are news consumables in their respective rights. Using various explanations such as "diagnosticity and salience to explain some findings about the impact of bad (negative) "news" over good (positive) "news", Baumeister, Bratslavsky, and Vohs (2001) observe, "the greater power of bad events is still found when such variables are controlled. Consequently, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, and Vohs (2001) emphatically opine that

The greater power of bad events over good ones is found in everyday events, major life events (e.g., trauma), close relationship outcomes, social network patterns, interpersonal interactions, and learning processes. Bad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good. The self is

more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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