

## A Survey on the Media Information Flow to Contribute Bulgaria's Destination Image and Perception

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*“No news is bad news.  
Bad news is good news.  
And good news is no news”  
R.Siilasmaa*

### Abstract

*Travel and tourism business has proved to be powerful accelerator and contributor to the global economy. As a flexible and highly adaptive to many disruptive events industry, it has been handling crises of various nature, origin and background. The current publication is focused on the role the media information flow exerts on to the image and perception of destination Bulgaria. The survey aims to perform a quality analysis of the news published and announced by leading media broadcasts and to evaluate their influence when making a decision to undertake travel. The study period is limited to the 2023 summer season. For the purposes of the survey, Web service tool for semantic analysis is implemented. In the course of the research, it is revealed that negative news related to tourism prevails and this could have a negative impact on the destination.*

*Keywords: image, information flow, media, summer season 2023, destination Bulgaria*

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### Introduction

By its very nature, travel and tourism has evolved as a vital and powerful weapon against fatigue, loneliness, disrupted health conditions. Considering its particular economic impact, the industry has proved to be a great contributor to the global economy as a distinguished driver and accelerator to the transport sector, retail business, infra- and superstructure innovation. On the other hand, the tourism business had suffered various crises: the recent pandemic years and their consequences, military conflicts, causing insecurity to travellers and travel professionals, force majeure events caused by natural phenomena. All these turbulences influence potential transformation in the consumers' behaviour, their expectations and intentions to change travel itineraries or cancel trips in the last minute. In the long term, the travel and tourism industry will still have to work hard in retaining tourists and gaining secure ground. Some of the ways to do so is: by improving destinations' image and performance, emphasizing on the quality in service and keeping consecutive and strong advertising policy. A special attention is drawn to the information flow appearing in the mass media, introduced by national television and broadcast, telegraph agencies, the internet. The current publication sets a focus on the role the media information flow exerts on to the image and perception of destination Bulgaria. **The object** of the research are the main Bulgaria-based media representatives. **The subject** of research is the information flow, which describes and represents the appearance and image of the destination. **The scientific goal** is to make a profound survey on the number and polarization in news and information flow broadcasted by the media and to evaluate their potential effect on travelers making decision to undertake travel and their overall perception of destination Bulgaria.

### **1. Theoretical review and literature background**

Media information flow occupies special place in the relation news-broadcast-audience. It is tightly related with the broadcasting process which has the ability to disseminate information to a broad and diverse audience. Broadcasting has played a vital role in informing people about current events, political developments, military conflicts, pandemics and social issues.

Historically, news broadcasts have been a primary source to keep people informed of what is happening around the world. This has helped to create a community engaged in essential for its own development processes such as – establishing image and perception of the territory, eliminating negative stereotyping, fighting discrimination. Newbold (2002) maintains that too often audiences were perceived as passive receivers of information, which may direct them to wrong perception of the surrounding environment and local societies. Lull (2000) summarizes: the reason behind this statement can be uncovered by the speculation that media information flow has the ability to create a positive outlook, shape public opinion and outline certain apprehension on specific matters. Scholars (Spencer et al., 2016; Gu et al., 2019; Martins et al., 2021) reveal that messages provided in a positive-negative dimension bring threats or rewards to the stakeholders and their customers. According to Curran (2002), the mass media may exert significant influence - so complex and contingent, that to be broadly apprehended and announced as the so-called Fourth Pillar. This is partly due to the general power and authority it acquires, but also to the simple necessity - to stay informed. In his study, Arias (2019) ratiocinates over the matter how while supplying the public with necessary information, media influences beliefs, attitude and behaviours. The author claims that media provides new information which in turn persuades individuals to accept it, establishing an individual channel. In addition, he believes, that media informs listeners about what others learn, thus facilitating coordination and establishes a social channel.

Analysing the power of the mass media, Macnamara (2006) assumes that the information flow, broadcasted should not be based on assumptions, ideology or outdated theories. The leading approach to follow has to primary rely on contemporary events, proved standards in representing news, data and official reports. According to Wasen (1959) media statements could imply four kinds of expressions and declaration: true affirmatives, false affirmatives, true negatives and false negatives, but only two kinds of information: positive and negative. When referring to the media in general, claim Saddiqi and Silab (2023), individuals decide independently to watch, listen or stream, based on their current mood state and expectations. We can assume that individual perception varies for each personality and their intention to stream and research the media flow and thus to identify the right information channel, either individual or social, towards their need. According to Pavlova (2015) in her study about the social semantic journalism, after 2010 the development of the Semantic Web 3.0., places "things" in the center of the communication process – the so called "Internet of Things" (IoT), the Internet of media contents, users and the connections between them. This Semantic Web effectively shifts the emphasis of the communication process to the user. In turn – when the consumer desires and preferences are primary and stated on the Web, they receive an automated response from intelligent, searching and linking machines.

In a study led by Hristozova et al. (2011) about the language used in newspapers, it was carried out that when reading press materials, the competition between the media to attract keen readers is expressed in a quest for the supremacy of the titles. To a *busy* reader, if provoked by the title, just "casts" an eye on the material than actually reading the entire article. Very often the reader is basically disinterested to an event, but is tempted to know how it is reflected. In other words – the reader is rather interested in what is written about the event, than from the event itself. The authors conclude that the title should provoke reader activity, impress, fight for the reader, to support the reader's choice, to create interest so that the information material is read. This is actually an important issue when fake or *distressful* news and their effect on the audience is taken into consideration. Ireton and Poseti (2018) focus deeply on the fake news and disinformation when regarding to journalism and the spread of information flow. According to the authors the emergence of the new information and

communication technologies opened up vast opportunities for people to express themselves. However, tendentious provision of news by media can cause serious damage to the mass apprehension of the real news system, thus resulting in mis- or disinformation.

Eftimova (2022) provides another interesting opinion of the credibility of the news flow. The core of the study is set on the accuracy, informativeness and objectivity, which through a system of linguistic means at different levels characterize the manifestations of credibility in the news discourse. The author divides the means into five groups: denotative correspondence with reality (unconditional credibility), denoting inconsistency with reality (unconditional unreliability), denoting possible correspondence/inconsistency with reality (problematic credibility), promotion or the lowering of the credibility status of the discourse. The topic became increasingly important during past years as in media literacy and accurately broadcasted information became the problem of the credibility of the information in general and affected destination images.

According to Weinberger et al. (1981) since past times managers of destinations were confronted by hostile and hard to be controlled external information environment. The scholars studied several consumer groups and came to the conclusion that negative information flow had strong effect on the attitude and behaviour in customers decisions. Moreover, they continue, the potential cumulative effect could create general assumptions towards business practices, institutions and in our case – travel and tourism industry. The authors revealed that negative information in specific, could lead to short or long-term memory for the customers, with a potential withdrawn of current or further purchase decision. Negative messages not only affect perception, emotion, and behavior, but also have the power to modulate brain activity (Wraga et al., 2007; Krendl et al., 2008; Cikara et al., 2011; Forbes and Leitner, 2014; Forbes et al., 2018). Similar findings are discovered by Soroka et al. (2019) whose paper is focused on the human propensity to give more weight to negative information than to positive one and the relevance of this tendency for the nature of news coverage. According to the authors, news selection and news production and broadcast is biased, as well as audience's attitude about current affairs and events. They also reveal, that considerable differences in the way in which individuals react to negative versus positive news content occur. They maintain, the individual-level differences are not easy to be explained due to specific cultural comprehension or country peculiarities, that is why such analysis have considerable within-country variation in reactions to news content.

Examining the role of the media to contribute destination's image and perception we have to mention social media as well. Recent technological innovation and improvements brought a new trend in providing, distributing, discussing and even producing news (Nielsen & Schröder, 2014) The invasion of social media and their various channels engaged the attention of all generations. The interactive possibilities to post reels, short videos and stories make it easy-accessing platform to view and compare, to get acquainted with certain spot or destination. Video sharing has become a convenient tool for presenting a variety of information, which prompted traditional media representatives to include it in their broadcast. Exchanging photo libraries, short videos and news reports contribute to consumers' apprehension of certain destination. In his study Kim (2019) focuses on the role of social communication considering social motivations for information exchanges. He confirms Baumeisters' and Leary (2017) statement that because of the desire for positive social relations, information received from ingroup members may motivate people to share it with other ingroup members. Moreover, Kim (2019) summarizes that a certain news (either positive or negative) and the content of an article has the ability to spread easily in a group or social gathering.

As the current article aims to investigate and provide a close follow up of the media information flow and its potential contribution to the image of destination Bulgaria, special attention needs to be paid to destination image index. According to Stepchenkova (2009), DII reflects positive and negative events that occurred in a certain a destination. This is a dynamic index which reflects actual and potential mutation of the destination's natural and cultural resources. The author reveals how important it is to present in the mass media attributes which outline the destination market and

they reflect travellers' safety, infrastructure status and improvements, overall wellbeing of local communities. In the study it is assumed that media messages published about a destination are quantified in a time series that reflect changes in destination image through time. The authors of the current publication also unite around the idea that such surveys should be based on the quantity of media news about the destination, "topics raised, and the favourability of that media coverage" (Stepchenkova, 2009). However, the authors will set focus on the leading representatives in news broadcasting and will try to examine their role in contributing the image of destination Bulgaria.

For the purposes of the current research, semantic analysis has been applied. This kind of analysis aims to survey people's opinions, sentiments, evaluations, attitudes, and emotions from written language (Vera et al., 2018). In the travel and tourism industry in specific, semantic analysis is primarily used in research related to customer reviews (Wu et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). Few of them focus on tourism-related news (Hao et al., 2020). The present study aims to fill this gap and analyze the sentiments of news related to tourism in the largest media in Bulgaria.

## **2. Methodology**

The current publication analyzes significant number of news published on the websites of the leading television (TV) media and broadcast groups in Bulgaria - BNT, bTV, NOVA. The latest were chosen for two main reasons. The first reason is that TV media is amongst the most popular and preferred source of information for the Bulgarian audience. According to a recent Eurobarometer 98 survey held in 2023, nearly 90% of the Bulgarians watch television every day or almost every day. This is the highest percentage revealed in the countries of the European Union. The second reason is that all three media broadcast groups offer convenient online platforms from which news articles over a past period of time can be extracted and duly analyzed.

The current research was conducted in November 2023. The news included in the research were published in the summer season 2023 and relate to the Bulgarian tourism. Sentiment analysis has been apprehended due to **three main reasons**: *First* of all, recently semantic analysis has broad application in various text contents; (Öztürk and Ayvaz, 2018); *secondly* – it gives the option to conduct analysis on different levels: document-level sentiment analysis; sentence-level sentiment analysis; aspect-based sentiment analysis; comparative sentiment analysis and sentiment lexicon acquisition (Feldman, 2013), allowing broader possibilities for deep analysis. The current research apprehends two of the levels quoted: document-level sentiment analysis – for the text content; sentence-level sentiment analysis – for the titles in specific. The **third reason** is that the analysis classifies texts in three main directions: positive, negative and neutral (Wang et al., 2013), which is the major task to achieve the objectives of the present study. The process follows the analysis based on the Rambocas and Garna model(2013).

In the study, Text2Data's real-time Sentiment Analysis API web service was also applied. This web service was chosen due to its widespread use in scientific research (Azizi et al. 2023). Considering the incomplete accuracy of the web services for semantic analysis (Gao et al., 2015), the results of the analysis were further verified by manual coding by the authors of the article. In order to form the researched sample, two key words were used in the search engine of the news sections: "traveler" and "tourism". They were applied to the entire content of the articles, as well as to the titles in specific.

The study concludes with a Wordcloud analysis of the news headlines. The tool performs a visual summary of a document highlighting most important words and their frequency in a document (Heimerl et al., 2014). The greater the frequency is, the greater the size of the word appears. Thus, an accurate idea of the context is immediately granted (Chandrapaul et al., 2019).

### 3. Results

According to the keywords applied in the survey - "traveler" and "tourism", as of 01.11.2023, a total of 267 news items published in the period - 01.06.2023 - 31.08.2023 were found in the online platforms of the leading television media (Table 1).

Table 1. News selection by keywords

Media	„Tourism”	„Traveler”	Total
<b>Media 1</b>	5	45	50
<b>Media 2</b>	23	77	100
<b>Media 3</b>	59	58	117
<b>Total</b>	87	180	267

*Source: The table was created by the authors*

As per the data displayed, in all three media portals, an abundance of articles is reported under the keyword "traveler", all of them amounting to 180 news. In comparison, 87 number of news relate to those under the keyword "tourism". It is necessary to be outlined that the keywords are not always present in the title of the published news. The relevance to them is determined by the specific topic of the article object of interest.

In order to analyze the news related only to tourism in Bulgaria, three leading directions have been defined and apprehended (Table 2). The first part comprises news related to Bulgaria (*i.e. domestic*). The second one - news related to *foreign countries' affairs*. Under the section *others* respond news that are not related to the researched issues (most often, they are related to synoptic forecasts and election tourism).

Table 2. News selection by directions

Media	Bulgaria	Foreign Countries	Others	Total
<b>Media 1</b>	32	15	3	50
<b>Media 2</b>	62	30	8	100
<b>Media 3</b>	49	38	30	117
<b>Total</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>267</b>

*Source: The table was created by the authors*

The strand analysis was carried out by the authors of the article, using double manual coding. The results display that for the researched period around 143 news concerning Bulgarian tourism in specific were published on the three media sites. Another 83 news refer to tourism affairs abroad and just 41 correspond to the heading "others". Before moving on to the semantic analysis and to finalize the *text preparation step* apprehended by the model of Rambocas, the news selected under the two keywords "traveler" and "tourism" related to Bulgaria were merged in order to clear duplicate articles. As it turned out, in one of the media, they amounted into three and in the other - eight. Thus, the final number of news articles on the topic selected became 132 (Table 3).

Table 3. Travel news about Bulgaria

Media	Bulgaria	Percentage
<b>Media 1</b>	32	24,2 %
<b>Media 2</b>	54	40,9 %
<b>Media 3</b>	46	34,9 %
<b>Total</b>	132	100 %

*Source: The table was created by the authors*

The figures reveal average predominance of news regarding Bulgarian tourism broadcasted by Media 2 (with 40,9 %), followed by Media 3 (with 34,9%). Media 1 demonstrated the least number - 24,2%, compared to the previous two, though as a whole the amount of news presented is also significant.

The next stage of the research comprises a semantic analysis of the content of the articles using specialized webservice Text2data software. Through this tool, the news articles were distributed in three main directories - with positive, negative and neutral impact. In order to verify the results obtained from the software tool, the authors of the article performed an additional manual analysis (Table 4).

Table 4. Semantic analysis – 1

Media	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Total
Media 1	17	3	12	32
Media 2	42	2	10	54
Media 3	31	4	11	46
<b>Total</b>	90	9	33	132

Source: The table was created by the authors

According to the data of the analysis, articles with a negative impact predominate. As displayed in table 4, in all three media, they significantly exceed those with a positive impact. In addition, as a proportion of various impact news broadcasted in the same media, the results report corresponding differences. Figure 1 demonstrates the average ratio between fair and balanced news impact.

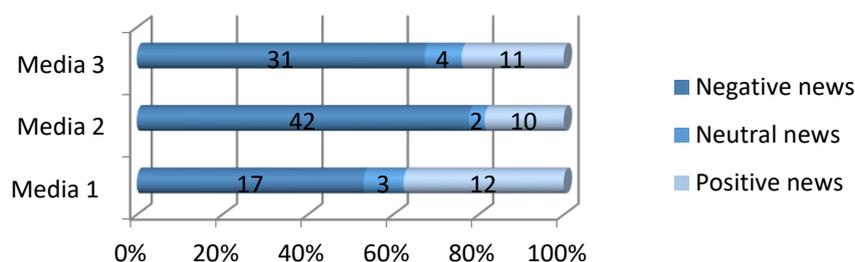


Figure 1. Average fair-balanced news impact ratio

Source: Created by the authors

As revealed in the figure, Media 2 displays the highest percentage of news with negative impact (close to 80% of the total ratio). In the second place, with a preponderance of negative news stands Media 3 with about 65% of the total ratio. Media 1 mostly reports a "fair - balanced" ratio between negative and positive news.

The second part of the semantic analysis involves titles' analysis of the positive and negative news. By implementing this type of analysis, the authors aim to check to what extent the titles of the articles correspond to the polarity impact of their content (Table 5).

Table 5. Semantic analysis of titles - 2

Polarity	Media 1	Media 2	Media 3
Negative news	Negative 76.8%	Negative 72.9%	Negative 64,4%
Positive news	Negative 54.7%	Positive 76%	Positive 62.9%

Source: The table was created by the authors

All positive and negative news published by the medias are surveyed. For negative news, the headlines of all three medias confirm the polarity of their content. With a range of 64.4% to 76.8%, the semantic analysis classifies them as negative. In the case of the positive news, the results do not report a complete match. In Media 1, despite the positive content, the headlines have more of a negative impact in the current comparison.

At the final stage of the research, an analysis of the headlines was carried out through the Wordcloud platform, both positive and negative news included. In order to visualize more clearly and with focus on the most used words in them, the authors pre-processed the texts according to the following steps:

1. Eliminating names of people, geographical locations and natural resources, such as Rila, Pirin, Alibegov, Prof. Gachev, Bezbog, Kranevo, Primorsko, etc. For the purposes of the research, only the word "Bulgaria" has been retained;
2. Eliminating of words related to a certain nationality;
3. Numerical nouns such as one, two, three... have been eliminated;
4. Eliminating of possessive pronouns - his, her, our...;
5. Various adverbs, conjunctions, prepositions like: whether, much, along, almost, just, near have been removed;
6. Stemming has been applied in order to identify groups of words that are syntactic models of one another and represent a one common word stem per group, for instance: "wait-waiting" transforms into "wait", "vacation-vacationer" - "vacation", "rescue-rescued - as "rescue" only, "hotelier-hoteliers" as "hotelier" only.

After preparing the texts according to the steps set, analysis was carried out for each media headlines separately in regard to the positive and negative news published. For Media 1, the results clearly confirm the semantic analysis of positive news(fig.2).

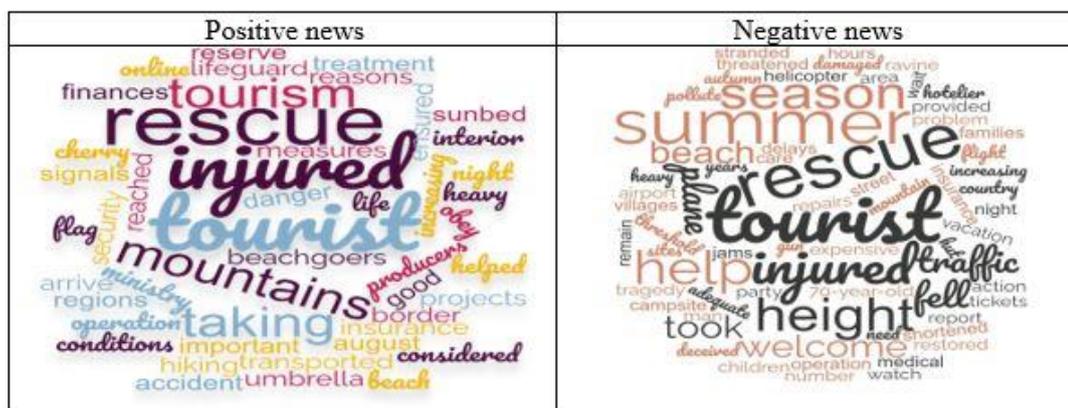


Figure 2. Wordcloud analysis – Media 1

Source: Created by the authors

Regardless of the fact that the context of the articles is in a positive aspect, the titles containing words like "rescue" and "injured" have a negative impact on the reader. Separately, judging by their scale in the visualization, we could conclude that they occur more often than the others (fig.3). An additional in-depth author's analysis of the Media 1 headlines reveals that nearly half of the positive news stories are related to reporting favorable subsequent results of various incidents. However, the headlines are presented with an ambiguous impact on the reader. On the one hand, presumably this could generate more interest in the audience, on the other hand, it could enable a faster association with previously reported news on the subject. In the case of negative news, the main topic concerns incidents related to tourists.



to accidents with tourists of different nature - from such related to falling and injury in the mountains, to ones involving drowning in the sea incidents. Topics such as the pollution of natural resources are also subject of discussion as well as the labour and medical service deficiency, traffic jams, flight delays and others. According to the authors of the study, these results are expected and comprehensible. The negative direction of the news can be explained both by the traditional marketing media strategies to attract attention, and by the new trend of doomscrolling (the English words doom and scrolling), which contributes the effect sought by the media - attracting a larger audience.

2. News headlines in Bulgaria often start with powerful expressive words such as: "traveler injured", "Polish tourist drowned", "labor crisis", "rescue operation", "tragedy on the beach", "tourist died", "four drowned" etc. This type of headlines provokes reader activity, create interest, influence and "support" the viewer's choice. But despite the benefits they bring to the sources of information (media), according to the authors, they could harm the tourist destination by increasing levels of anxiety and uncertainty.

3. Positive news, according to the survey, represents on average only 25% of the total share, and a significant part of them actually informs about the favorable outcome of various incidents related to tourists. News associated with good practices, innovations, new travel trends, new opportunities for inbound and domestic tourism are significantly insufficient to create favorable conditions for tourism.

The travel and tourism industry is highly sensitive to information flow - both negative and positive. Our research revealed that in terms of news, information flow has a negative rather than a stimulating effect on Bulgarian tourism. Considering the fact that only news related to Bulgaria from national media were considered, we could assume that this effect has a stronger impact on domestic tourism and reflects significantly on the Bulgarian tourist. And taking into account that the Covid-19 crisis changed the perception of the value of "inbound" tourism, we could conclude that more is still to be done in order to promote Bulgaria as a destination among its citizens.

#### **4. Limitation and future research**

The research has its limitations. First of all, news included in the study is only for a certain period of time (June-August 2023). Secondly, the news selected follow the results of only two keywords - "traveler" and "tourism" and in the study could be included some more for a more detailed picture. In the third place, only the platforms of three TV media were surveyed. The research could be expanded on to more media channels and compared with other mass media. The results of the study are useful to scholars and researchers in the travel industry, as well as in setting out a national and regional marketing strategy.

#### **Conclusion**

The authors of the research presented a quality analysis of the news published and announced by leading Bulgarian media emphasizing on their image impact on the destination. The results of the study demonstrated a significant predominance of negative tourism-related news over positive ones. The main issues related to the current state of Bulgaria's tourist image cannot be examined only by analysing the spread of positive or negative news. In this regard, the authors believe that brand and image managers should coordinate their approach towards establishing a conceptual framework for media destination image.

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