

The New York Times

The Morning

March 24, 2021



By [David Leonhardt](#)

Good morning. The U.S. media is offering a different picture of Covid-19 from science journals or the international media, a study finds.



News updates scrolling on the front of ABC studios in Times Square. John Lamparski/Getty Images

Is bad news the only kind?

Bruce Sacerdote, an economics professor at Dartmouth College, noticed something last year about the Covid-19 television coverage that he was watching on CNN and PBS. It almost always seemed negative, regardless of what was he seeing [in the data](#) or hearing from scientists he knew.

When Covid cases were rising in the U.S., the news coverage emphasized the increase. When cases were falling, the coverage instead focused on those places where cases were rising. And when vaccine research began showing positive results, the coverage downplayed it, as far as Sacerdote could tell.

But he was not sure whether his perception was correct. To check, he began working with two other researchers, building a database of Covid coverage from every major network, CNN, Fox News, Politico, The New York Times and hundreds of other sources, in the U.S. and overseas. The researchers then analyzed it with [a social-science technique](#) that classifies language as positive, neutral or negative.

The results showed that Sacerdote's instinct had been right — and not just because the pandemic has been mostly a grim story.

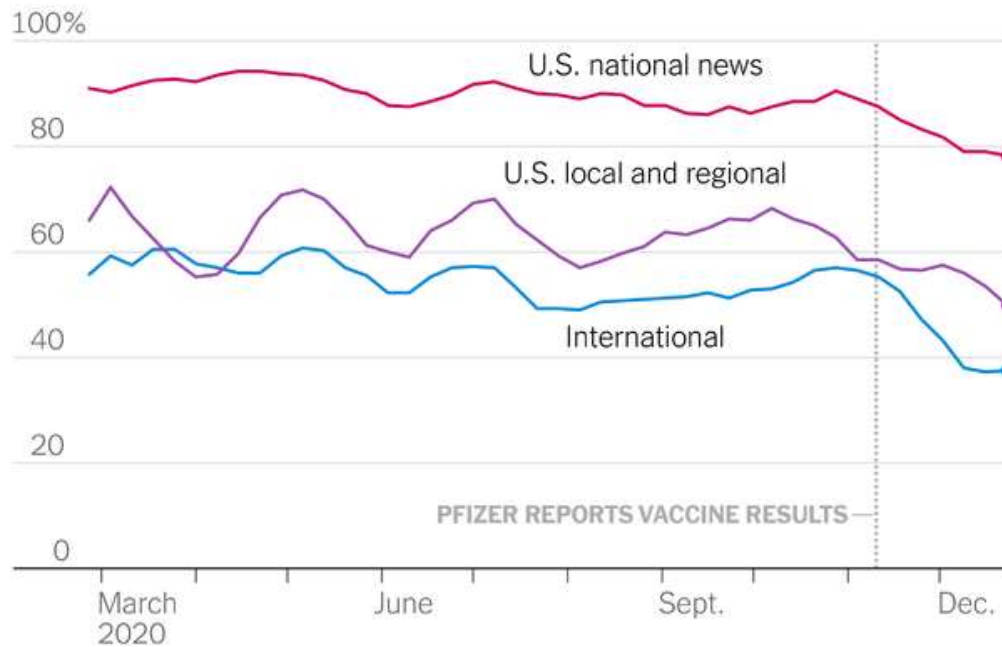
The U.S. media is an outlier

The coverage by U.S. publications with a national audience has been much more negative than coverage by any other source that the researchers analyzed, including scientific journals, major international publications and regional U.S. media. “The most well-read U.S. media are outliers in terms of their negativity,” Molly Cook, a co-author of the study, told me.

About 87 percent of Covid coverage in national U.S. media last year was negative. The share was 51 percent in international media, 53 percent in U.S. regional media and 64 percent in scientific journals.

Notably, the coverage was negative in both U.S. media outlets with liberal audiences (like MSNBC) and those with conservative audiences (like Fox News).

Share of Covid-19 Coverage That is Negative, by News Source



By The New York Times | Sources: Bruce Sacerdote, Ranjan Sehgal and Molly Cook

Sacerdote is careful to emphasize that he does not think journalists usually report falsehoods. The issue is which facts they emphasize. Still, the new study — which the National Bureau of Economic Research has published as a working paper, titled, [“Why is all Covid-19 news bad news?”](#) — calls for some self-reflection from those of us in the media.

If we’re constantly telling a negative story, we are not giving our audience [the most accurate portrait of reality](#). We are shading it. We are doing a good job telling you why Covid cases are rising in some places and how the vaccines are imperfect — but not such a good job explaining why cases are falling elsewhere or [how the vaccines save lives](#). Perhaps most important, we are not being clear about which Covid developments are truly alarming.

As Ranjan Sehgal, another co-author, told me, “The media is painting a picture that is a little bit different from what the scientists are saying.”

Why the bad-news bias?

The researchers say they are not sure what explains their findings, but they do have a leading contender: The U.S. media is giving the audience what it wants.

When the researchers examined which stories were the most read or the most shared on Facebook, they tended to be the most negative stories. To put it another way, the stories that people choose to read skew even more negative

than the stories that media organizations choose to publish. “Human beings, particularly consumers of major media, like negativity in their stories,” Sacerdote said. “We think the major media are responding to consumer demand.”

That idea is consistent with the patterns in the data, Sacerdote added: It makes sense that national publications have better instincts about reaching a large audience than, say, science journals. And overseas, some of the most influential English-language media organizations — like the BBC — [have long received government funding](#), potentially making them less focused on consumer demand.

All of that sounds plausible to me, but I don’t think it is the full explanation. I have worked in media for nearly three decades, and I think you might be surprised by how little time journalists spend talking about audience size. We care about it, obviously, but most journalists I know care much more about other factors, like doing work that has an impact.

In the modern era of journalism — dating roughly to the Vietnam War and [Watergate](#) — we tend to equate impact with asking tough questions and exposing problems. There are some good reasons for that. We are inundated by politicians, business executives, movie stars and others trying to portray themselves in the best light. Our job is to cut through the self-promotion and find the truth. If we don’t tell you the bad news, you may never hear it.

Sometimes, though, our healthy skepticism can turn into reflexive cynicism, and we end up telling something less than the complete story. I am grateful to Sacerdote, Cook and Sehgal for doing to us journalists what we normally do to others — holding up a mirror to our work and giving us a chance to do better.

THE LATEST NEWS

Colorado Shooting



A memorial near the King Soopers store in Boulder, Colo. Theo Stroomer for The New York Times

- The [victims of Monday's mass shooting](#) in Boulder, Colo., include a police officer with seven children and a “happy-go-lucky” grocery store worker.
- The authorities [charged a 21-year-old man with 10 counts of murder](#). The police said the man was armed with a handgun and a military-style rifle.
- President Biden [called on Congress](#) to ban assault weapons and strengthen background checks for gun buyers.

The Virus

- A panel reviewing AstraZeneca's vaccine trial data in the U.S. said the company had [cherry-picked results](#) to make the shot appear more effective. Dr. Anthony Fauci said it could undermine faith in what is “very likely a very good vaccine.”
- The E.U. is planning to temporarily [curb exports of Covid vaccines](#) that are made in the bloc to address supply shortages. It could reduce supply to Britain and other countries.
- Roughly one in four Americans [has received at least one dose of a Covid vaccine](#).

Politics

- The White House said it would appoint an official [to focus on Asian-American priorities](#) after the Senate's two Asian-American Democrats criticized a lack of representation at the Biden administration's highest levels.
- The Times obtained videos showing how Brian Sicknick, the Capitol Police officer who died after the Jan. 6 riot, was [attacked with chemical spray](#).

Other Big Stories



Supporters of Benjamin Netanyahu's party in Jerusalem yesterday. Ammar Awad/Reuters

- Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's party held a lead in Israel's fourth election in two years, but [it's unclear if he will have enough votes](#) to form a majority government.
- A popular gambling app used [invasive tracking and profiling techniques](#) to keep players hooked.

Opinions

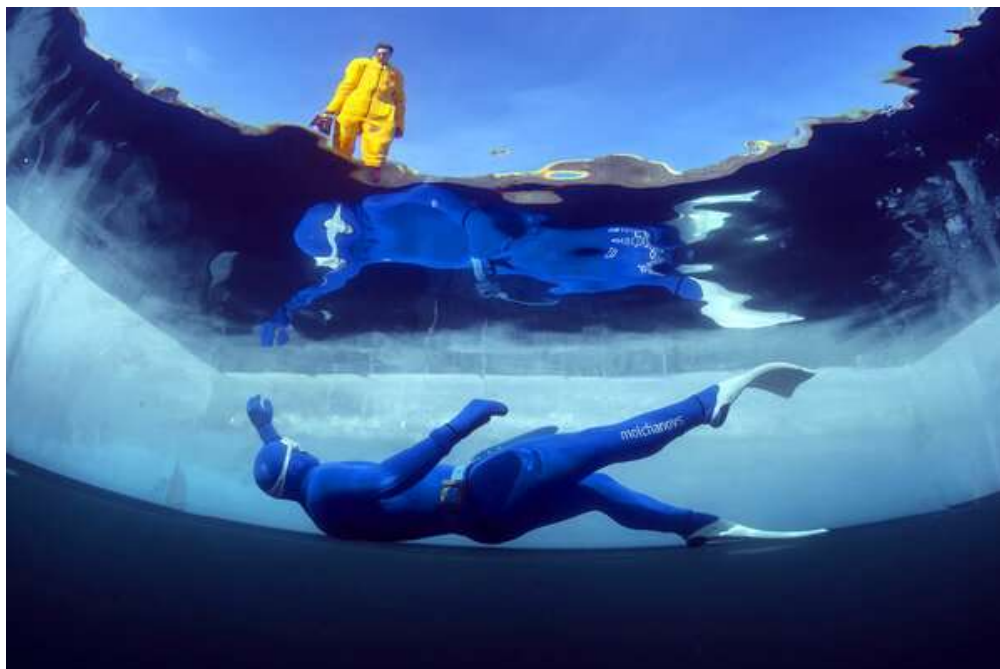
Commentary about the rise in attacks on Asian-Americans:

- Bad data may understate the increase, CNN's [Priya Krishnakumar](#)

explains.

- Attacks not classified as hate crimes can still reflect racism, Amherst's [Pawan Dhingra](#) argues in *The Conversation*.
- But not every crime is a hate crime and it's a mistake to pretend otherwise, [The Times's Bret Stephens writes](#).

Morning Reads



Alexey Molchanov beneath the surface before the dive. Viktor Lyagushkin

Polar Plunge: The world's best free diver sets his sights on a record: [80 meters below the ice](#).

Lives Lived: George Segal began his career in serious drama but became one of America's most reliable and familiar comic actors. Most recently he played "Pops" on the sitcom "The Goldbergs." [He died at 87](#).

ARTS AND IDEAS



Dr. Mehmet Oz Jeopardy!

Dr. Oz? ‘Jeopardy!’ fans revolt

This week, Dr. Mehmet Oz, a heart surgeon and television personality, became the latest guest host of the game show “Jeopardy!” after the death of Alex Trebek. The choice has angered [some of the show’s fans](#), who argue that Dr. Oz’s history of promoting dubious medical treatments goes against the show’s emphasis on facts.

“I’ve spent a lot of time talking to people in the ‘Jeopardy!’ community in the past few years,” Claire McNear [wrote in The Ringer](#). “I cannot remember outrage anything like the response” to the decision. On Twitter, Seung Min Kim, a reporter for The Washington Post, [wrote](#), “Dr. Oz on Jeopardy 🤔.”

An [accomplished cardiothoracic surgeon](#) in the 1990s, Dr. Oz gained attention on “The Oprah Winfrey Show,” eventually starting his own talk show in 2009. Over the years, other doctors have criticized him for pushing [weight-loss products](#) and suggesting hydroxychloroquine [as a treatment for Covid](#). In 2014, a British medical journal wrote that “no evidence could be found” for about a third of the recommendations Dr. Oz had made on his show.

He [defended himself](#) in 2015, writing: “I bring the public information that will help them on their path to be their best selves.”

Upcoming hosts include Anderson Cooper, Savannah Guthrie and Dr. Sanjay Gupta.

PLAY, WATCH, EAT

What to Cook



Christopher Simpson for The New York Times. Food Stylist: Simon Andrews. Prop Stylist: Paige Hicks.

[Pollo en fricasé](#) features bone-in chicken thighs and potatoes. Find more [essential Puerto Rican recipes here](#).

What to Read

Sharon Stone writes about her life and brushes with death in a new memoir. [Read a Q&A](#).

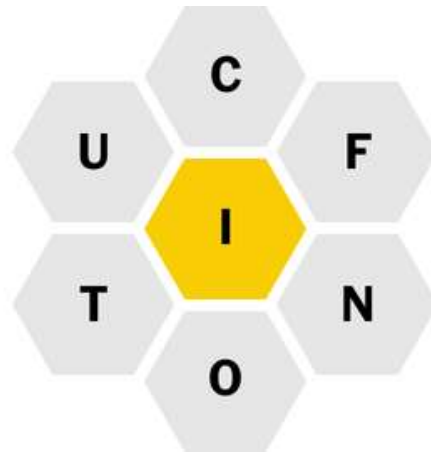
What to Watch

[This list of fresh movie recommendations includes](#) oddball genre movies and complex indie dramas.

Late Night

The hosts discussed [gun violence in the U.S.](#)

Now Time to Play



The pangrams from yesterday's Spelling Bee were *balletic*, *celibate* and *citable*. Here is today's puzzle — or you can [play online](#).

Here's [today's Mini Crossword](#), and a clue: Lowest singing voice (four letters).

If you're in the mood to play more, find [all our games here](#).

Thanks for spending part of your morning with The Times. See you tomorrow. — David

P.S. The Times covered [a public demonstration of Thomas Edison's newly patented phonograph](#) — including “Mary Had a Little Lamb” — 143 years ago today.

You can see [today's print front page here](#).

Today's episode of “[The Daily](#)” is about Biden and gun control. On “[The Argument](#),” a debate about cancel culture.

Lalena Fisher, Claire Moses, Ian Prasad Philbrick, Tom Wright-Piersanti and Sanam Yar contributed to The Morning. You can reach the team at themorning@nytimes.com.

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