

GOVERNMENTAL INFORMATION HOARDING AND ITS EFFECTS ON JOURNALISM PRACTICE

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Abstract

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It has been observed that government hoards certain information that journalists should access and publish for the development of Cameroon. This study examines the extent to which government news sources in Cameroon hoard information, and how this affects journalism practice. Agenda setting (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) and gatekeeping (Lewin, 1947) are used. A total of 170 journalists were surveyed in Buea, Limbe, Douala, Yaounde, Bamenda, and Garoua. The journalists were selected based on their experiences in working with news sources. Findings suggest that 16.5 percent often get information from the Presidency, while 50.6 percent rarely do. Also, 27.1 percent often access information from the Prime Ministry, while 41.7 percent rarely do. Not even 50 percent of journalists have regular access to government ministers and ministries. Meanwhile, 44.1 percent often access communication units of government structures. Access to governors and regional delegates is relatively higher. Of the 17 sources examined in government regarding journalists' accessibility to information, mayors are the most accessible (57.6 percent). Generally, a significant relationship ($p = 0.000$) exists between access to government news sources and journalism practice. Lack of information access promotes unprofessionalism in practice (biased reporting, sensationalism, armchair journalism, fake news). To enhance professionalism, it is recommended that government news sources be more accessible to journalists.

Keywords: Information Hoarding, Government News Sources, Journalism Practice, Cameroon

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1. INTRODUCTION

Every government has a major duty to its citizenry to make available to them information that is true and needed, and an even greater responsibility to provide this information to those who seek it. Unfortunately, this conception does not augur well in some government circles, for reasons best known

to those who hoard information from journalists. This can be likened to the earliest monarchs of the East who ruled under the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, in which the ruler was responsible only to God (Figgis, 1914).

In the 17th century, the doctrine was supported by English royalists against the parliamentarians who believed that the exercise of political power

springs from the will of the people (Milton, 1644). Milton's *Areopagitica* opposed censorship at the time and is considered as one of the first intellectual pieces to advocate for free speech. This has implications for freedom of the press and journalism; a profession deeply rooted in the reporters' ability to access, treat, and disseminate news and information, whether verbal or written.

Within the context of Cameroon, Law No. 90/052 of December 19, 1990, relating to the Freedom of Mass Communication (hereinafter, Law No. 90/052) spells out modalities of access to information. Section 49(1) of the Law affirms that "unless otherwise provided by the law and regulation, persons shall be free to have access to official documents" (p. 10). Section 49(2) of the Law specifies that "the documents concerned are all files, reports, studies, minutes, statistics, directives, instructions, circulars, memoranda, and all documents relating to acts of positive law" (p. 10). This law seems to be mostly theoretical, rather than one expected to practically facilitate the work of journalists in Cameroon.

Following the passing of the 1966 law in Cameroon, there was heavy repression of the press. Even with the 1990 liberty laws, journalists in Cameroon have not found it easy to access, research, and publish information. Some journalists are overtly denied access to information, while others are imprisoned or treated with disdain when they publish information that authorities may judge as inappropriate. This is distinct from journalists who intentionally publish malicious content. The 1966 press law, described as draconian (Churchill, 1992) gave tough conditions for journalists to operate in Cameroon. This also complicated efforts by journalists to feed the public with authentic information. Without information, citizens are disarmed and cannot make any informed choices on participating in the political, economic, and social life of the country.

The doctrine of rights was defeated in the glorious revolution of 1688-1689 following the signing of the Bill of Rights. It is the inspiration and content of the Bill of Rights that was later used in the drawing up of the American Constitution and the promulgation of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 1687 and 1966, respectively (Lyman, 1998). The 1966 federal law intended "to pierce the veil of administrative secrecy" (Wagner, 2021, p. 1).

In the wake of the Watergate scandal, the United States government made amendments to strengthen the statute of the FOIA which is based on the belief that the government is accountable for its actions and the public possesses a right to obtain information about government actions (Lyman, 1998). This was done to push public officials to be accountable; a factor (accountability) that did not receive much attention in the public space before the Watergate scandal. The Cold War led to a steep rise in government secrecy; a situation that was assessed as unhealthy for the United States' socioeconomic, cultural, and political progress. Curiously though, while the United States was enacting the FOIA in 1966, Cameroon was passing the draconian media law (1966) which gave tough working conditions to journalists and restrained access of the press to information, and overall freedom of the press.

From the inception of the press and the growth of the mass media, there has been a constant struggle for oppressive regimes to suppress the power of the media as a tool for widespread information dissemination. At about the same time that printing was introduced in England, the authoritarian theory of the press came into existence with the belief that public dissent and criticism were harmful to the government and the people. As such, public criticism was not tolerated (Dominick, 1990).

In 1530, James VIII after realizing the potential of the printing press, asked all printers to obtain royal approval before operating a printing shop. The notion of publishing "under authority" from the government soon became a prominent feature of the press. Even John Milton who wrote the *Areopagitica*; a defence of the freedom to publish later became a government censor (Dominick, 1990). As time went on, other theories like the libertarian theory developed, and with the continued growth of the mass media and information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the 20th and 21st centuries, and increasing challenges for censorship, theories favouring the hoarding of information by the government were abandoned in favour of more contemporary theories like the social responsibility theory and the development media theory (McQuail, 2010).

The value of developmental journalism seems to be the prevailing trend in Africa's media landscape (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Most African countries made remarkable progress in their early years as sovereign states, but the euphoria did not last long as several of them began to fall successively because their leaders became despots, and military coups ushered in dictators. With the political and economic crises, few dared to be optimistic about the future of Africa. It seemed to many that this was proof that Africans were unable to govern Africa (Obadina, 2000).

In the 1990s, the wind of change blew across Africa, causing African leaders to engage with democratic values (Schedler, 2002). When Africa gained political independence, the press also gained a considerable degree of independence. However, as leaders turned to despots and dictators instead of the nation-builders they promised to be at independence, they clamped down on media through censorship and information hoarding on the pretext of consolidating national unity and other social needs (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Freedom of expression and freedom of the press were rare commodities in Africa.

Denying journalists access to information is ironic, considering that information and communication play a crucial role in the development of a country. Hoarding information in government circles is thus contradictory to the expected norms of feeding the media with accurate and vital information necessary for the development of a country like Cameroon, including the relationship between the country and its key stakeholders.

The fact that journalists are denied access to vital information in Cameroon contradicts Law No. 90/052. The provisions of this law are not respected; thereby making the work of journalists complicated.

Furthermore, denying journalists access to information infringes on their professionalism. Section 47(1) of Law No. 90/052 states that, “a journalist shall be bound to process information in an objective and responsible manner”, and Section 47(2) of the law specifies that, “the requirements of the ethics of journalism shall also be binding on the collaborators of journalists”. So, which information will the journalist be “processing” if access to the same information is denied (Section 47(1)). Then, collaborators in Section 47(2), operationalized in this paper, refer to government officials. How are journalists expected to perform their journalistic functions and inform citizens when they are denied access to vital information? This is the crucial question that this paper addresses.

In fact, Thomas Jefferson, former United States President, clarifies the need for information and communication, by asserting that “were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I will not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter” (Jefferson, 1787, p. 45). By this, Jefferson ascertained the need for information in human, group, community, regional, and national development. To date, this assertion remains relevant. This means that governments should open up information necessary for national development; an issue which remains problematic in some government circles and with certain information in Cameroon today.

The urgent need for accurate information falls in line with the role of journalism in development; especially at a time when many voices are clamouring for the emergence of developing countries, like the case of the Vision 2035 Agenda in Cameroon. Therefore, this research examines the role of information — especially relating to journalists’ access to government information — in the development of Cameroon. By drawing on the effects of governmental information hoarding, this paper poses theoretical and practical questions on journalism’s role in society and the worrying trends regarding the conceptualization of journalism as a profession.

The objectives of the research are to determine the extent to which government news sources in Cameroon hoard information and ascertain the effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice. The research questions of the study are as follows:

RQ1: To what extent do journalists access government news sources in Cameroon?

RQ2: What are the effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice in Cameroon?

The importance of this paper is predicated on its contemporary nature. Global and national discourse on journalists’ access to information from government news sources is trending. This subject is crucial in that, it has direct implications on journalists’ professionalism — a very preoccupying issue. By so doing, the performance and credibility of journalists depend on the type of information they access, the sources they mention, and how well this information is relayed to the public.

In terms of gaps, this study is designed to fill information, legal, regulation, and practice gap. With emerging trends in globalization (Ngange et al., 2019), countries are considering new dynamics on how to relate with their internal and external stakeholders towards community, national, and global development.

Since 1990 when the government promulgated Law No. 90/052, many questions are yet to be answered on journalists’ access to certain government information. The Law, in Section 49, gives journalists freedom of access. Yet, access is still an issue. Yongka (2008), eighteen years after promulgation of the Law, regretted that governmental information hoarding in Cameroon thwarts nation-building. This caught the researchers’ attention, coupled with several research conferences, workshops, and seminars which the authors have presented on, attended, or organized on this subject. The latest of these were two separate workshops on journalists’ access to information in Cameroon organized in Yaounde (February 15, 2022) and Buea (March 24, 2022). Hence, the authors agree that journalists’ access to vital information is still a burning issue and merits research attention. The research questions, hypotheses, objectives, conceptual and theoretical framework, and methodology are modelled within this context. The findings are valuable to the government (for policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation), journalists, researchers, and mass media audiences.

The general structure of the paper is as follows. Section 1 is the introduction. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 presents the methodology that has been used to conduct empirical research on the effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice in Cameroon. Section 4 is the presentation and interpretation of results. Section 5 is the discussion, and Section 6 is the conclusion.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. News as development information

Boyd (2001) regards news as unusual. Lord Northcliffe’s motto states that “news is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress; all the rest is advertising” (Mayer, 1987, p. 9). This assertion provides a fair basis for this study, given that the context is governmental information hoarding. The question is “Why would someone want to suppress information?”. The answer could be as good as that of the researchers of this work if one considers the treatment of certain information in particular contexts. It is also important to recall that information is power.

The news became a subject of scientific analysis in the 20th century (Lippmann, 1922). Walter Lippmann was one of the first individuals who saw the news as a product of standardized procedures and journalistic routines. Hanitzsch and Hoxha (2016) support that news is crucial for daily living.

The Royal Commission on the Press states that in order for an event to be news, it must be new and interesting to the public. That is, be about people

and their various strange or funny experiences, tragedies, accidents, crime, or sports events (Frost, 2015). An interesting point was introduced by Schramm (1949), who pointed out that news exists in the minds of people, “news is not the event but is the report of the event” (p. 259). The conceptualization of news is extended in this research to incorporate essential information that public officials hold, including official records that will enable citizens better participate in the affairs of the state.

DeFleur and Dennis (2002) uphold that “news is current or fresh knowledge about an event that is gathered, processed and disseminated via a medium to a significant number of interested people” (pp. 73-74). This characterization has three elements: time, medium, and audience.

Brighton and Foy (2007) assert that it is news values that give journalists and editors a set of rules from which to plan and execute the content of a publication or a broadcast. In its purest sense, everything that happens in the world is a new event and somebody somewhere will have some level of interest in that occurrence. The set of values applied by different media: local, regional, national, and international, print, television, radio, Internet, and bulletin board are as varied as the media themselves.

News values, sometimes called news criteria, determine how much prominence a news story is given by a media outlet and the attention it is given by the audience. Boyd (2001) indicated that news journalism can broadly agree on a set of values, often referred to as “newsworthiness”. The criteria (Fowler, 1991, p. 13) are as follows: frequency, threshold, unambiguity, meaningfulness, unexpectedness, continuity, composition, reference to elite people, and reference to persons (personalization). News has the potential to stimulate development.

2.2. Journalists’ access to government news sources

Edmund Burke, the Irish politician and philosopher, conceived the media as the Fourth Estate (1787). This places the media at the same level as the other powerful arms of government — the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary. Also, Thomas Jefferson said he would prefer the media without the government over the government without the media. Hence, the importance of the media to every nation is clear, especially the media’s role in shaping public opinion.

Besides the main role of informing the society of government actions and relaying to the government the plights of the society, which is the watchdog role of the media, the media are expected to accompany the government to achieve development goals. Unfortunately, the relationship between the government/politicians and the media in some contexts is fierce, or a tug of war (Ciboh, 2017). As a result, media are often hindered by governments that use regulations, attacks, arrests, intimidation, and imprisonment to control, censor, and limit the activity of journalists, media institutions and unions. Control of information and restricted access are very common. This thwarts the watchdog role of journalists (Curran, 2005; McQuail, 2010).

Even with the putting in place of Law No. 90/052, there are questions on how free and functional the media can be in a country that has no freedom of information (FOI) law that allows for access to information — a necessity in journalism. Scholars (e.g., Holsen, 2007) have emphasized the importance of freedom of access to information as a feature of democracy through a FOIA that gives the public the right to ask for and receive information held by public officials and institutions.

It is now clearly established that the right to freedom of expression, which includes the right to media freedom, is directly linked to the right of access to information held by public bodies and officials. This means that any journalist who is requesting information from a public body has a right to that information linked to international protection for media freedom. However, it does not mean that journalists have a stronger right than other citizens — freedom of expression is the right of everyone. At moment, there is no legal support in Cameroon that empowers journalists or obliges government officials to provide information to journalists.

2.3. Effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism

There have been a number of questions regarding the effects which may arise on journalists when governments decide to hoard information from them. To this, a study was conducted by the U.S. Congressional Research Service on how the state gives sanctions on media personnel who engage in publishing information which had been kept by the government.

The ability of the government to keep some issues secret may seem or be eminently important or necessary to national security. Excessive government secrecy is incompatible with democratic self-governance (Congressional Research Service, 2003).

From this, it can be understood that the state stands as an institution that ensures that all content of the media is being checked to ensure that they have not published private information which pertains to the state. If they go against it, sanctions follow (Silver, 2008).

This is unlike the write-ups of other scholars who uphold that print, broadcast, and digital media are becoming pervasive across the developing world.

Government-based media bias can be achieved through distortion, agenda-setting, and framing. Distortion can entail falsely reporting, or be created by the government itself, like Nazi or Hutu pro-genocide propaganda agenda setting, which makes media frame stories in a more favourable light or emphasize those with the potential to generate more collective action (King et al., 2013, p. 11).

The fact that governments keep back some information from media practitioners affects the way journalists frame their news stories — either positively or negatively. Also, when government hoards information, it is likely to render audiences passive.

A gap exists in the scholarly arguments of King et al. (2013) because they did not provide a way out for journalists whose content has been limited due

to governmental information hoarding to safeguard their priorities from public view. They failed to lay down stages the media professionals should follow to manage this situation and continue their function as watchdogs in society. These arguments are relevant to this study because they portray that the government has a way of gatekeeping some information from media personnel and this has various effects as it encourages malpractices, makes audiences passive, limits transparency, and promotes little or no accountability (King et al., 2013).

A survey conducted in 2004 by the Freedom of Information Center (Banisar, 2004) asserts that 98% of journalists had claim that they often saw illegal refusal to provide information in their practices. This is partly because of the lack of awareness of the functions of information on the part of some government officials, or a deliberate act to keep journalists in the dark. This affects journalism practice negatively.

Bunker (1993) asserted that the largest obstacle to access government information is that state laws do not prioritize access. The situation in Cameroon is not different; the 1990 liberty law is ambiguous. This provokes discussions that may cause one to think that journalists are people who, all the time, seek to jeopardize the state's interest or harm other people.

The many restraints and regulations imposed by the authorities reduce Cameroonians' access to vital information and push journalists to work in fear and adopt survival journalism (Nyamnjoh, 2005). FOI laws determine journalism practice (Dunu & Ugbo, 2014; Feintuck & Varney, 2006).

Chukwu (2019) confirmed that journalists in Port Harcourt, Nigeria access information within the framework of the 2011 Nigerian Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), though findings further revealed that the extent of access to information was low. The author notes that low information access leads to low citizen participation. This could be connected to the situation in Cameroon.

2.4. Government structures as news sources

The idea of the free press acting as watchdogs of the government makes it imperative that the mass media go to government structures and personnel as prime sources of information. Archaic ideas that government is the sole actor in society have changed and more governments are increasingly cooperating with other actors like the media and the public (Goldsmith & Eggers, 2004). It is widely accepted that new communication technologies change governance for the better because make the government open and accountable (Lollar, 2006). Access to information helps keep the government honest and secrecy allows corruption to flourish (Susman, 2001).

As part of a means to enable the public, including the media to have access to government information, Layne and Lee (2001) proposed a four-stage ICT model of information access. This model has the following elements: cataloguing (government establishes an online presence by making all information readily available through their websites); transaction (government does not only make information available on their websites, but

gives the public an opportunity to interact through feedback, questions, and comments which the government responds to); vertical integration (the website provides the possibility of linking to other websites related to the system's functions at various levels within similar functionalities, including municipal, regional, national, and international); horizontal integration (establishing links to other websites that may even be outside of the system's scope). These four stages are important in that they hinge on possibilities where one could obtain information, through ICT means, even without getting in contact (one-on-one) with the information source. This is key in this paper.

In his overview of politics and governance in China, Saich (2004) revealed that one of the government's main use of the media is for seeking information. Saich (2004) adds that the Chinese government has traditionally practiced a system of withholding information, which permits the government to be in control of information access and distribution.

The opportunity that the Internet affords to most governments to act as news sources is being adequately used in most parts of the world. The tendency, however, is for authoritarian governments to overemphasize their achievement and successes while sidelining their failures and mistakes (Lollar, 2006).

Information sources can be classified under three broad topics: personified or verbal sources, company sources, and documented sources. Personified sources include human beings who could also be opinion leaders; company sources include social institutions, political institutions, ministries, and the presidency. Meanwhile, documented sources include archives, libraries, journals, and press releases.

The administration is the greatest source of official information. Public and private journalists need to have easy access to administrative information. On the contrary, private journalists are denied access to administrative information. Due to the inability to access governmental information, observations prove that most private journalists resort to armchair journalism and speculative news reports, which are detrimental to journalism practice.

A journalist has a duty to inform citizens by making public those actions, activities, events, and opinions of which he/she is aware. This role of informing and enlightening the public implies researching from the appropriate sources, which may be officials, documents, or organizations considered credible.

2.5. Access to information in Cameroon

Cameroon, located in West Africa with about 28,000,000 inhabitants has in recent years been intensifying efforts towards building a strong economy that should lead Cameroon to emergence by 2035. In order to achieve these goals, there is a need for a good information base since it is primordial in the development of any human society. Information acts as the life wire of any vibrant economy. Therefore, if Cameroon must

emerge, the government must be concerned with access to information and knowledge (Shafack, 2015).

Africa Media Barometer (2018) stated that public information in Cameroon is not easily accessible to journalists and that there is no law in the pipeline aimed at facilitating access to information for journalists. The difficulty to access information causes journalists to rely on whistle-blowers or personal relations (Africa Media Barometer, 2018).

Besides the 1990 press law that has been held in some quarters as a landmark, the government of Cameroon has made some efforts in other areas to promote access to information and knowledge (Shafack, 2015).

The private press in Cameroon faces the daunting challenges of accessing certain information when compared to the public press. Counteracting the act of dishing out information only to state journalists, Blake's (1997) prototype policy framework for Africa posits that governments should ensure information access to all journalists; be they private or public journalists. Blake's (1997) prototype policy framework for Africa rests on an optimistic view of promoting greater freedoms and access to information in Africa. His model has an essential dimension on the liberalization of media and proper journalism practice.

There are restrictions as to who can cover government activities. Only journalists that have been issued press cards can be allowed to cover government events (Alobwede, 2005). Meanwhile, Shafack (2015) lists the following constraints that challenge effective access to information in Cameroon: lack of freedom of information legislation, lack of protection for journalists, lack of accurate information and public awareness, and delay in law applicability.

2.6. Promoting freedom of information laws

The right to investigate and report freely without any form of hindrance lies at the core of quality journalism. According to Baglo (2008), the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) has reiterated its stance on the need for passing of Freedom of Information Bills in African parliaments. This is because good governance centers on the principles of accountability and transparency. Kocaoglu et al. (2006) indicated that the purpose of FOIAs, also known as access to information laws, is to make a government more open and accountable to its people.

This cannot be achieved anywhere if information that is vital for the public interest continues to be hoarded by governments. It is a major challenge for the African media. Journalism associations and civil society organizations in Cameroon have been advocating for a law on access to information in the country. One of such organizations is AFRICaphonie, a civil society organization based in Buea, Cameroon, that organized two separate seminars in Yaounde (February 15, 2022) and Buea (March 24, 2022) to allow professional journalists and communicators to come together to chat the way forward for access to information law in Cameroon. The general public has the right to know, and journalists who seek

information to report on events that are of public interest should be provided with the details they seek, in order to inform, educate and empower the public. However, most government officials continue to conceal information in the name of national security and other personal reasons (Baglo, 2008).

Contrary to Baglo (2008), Banisar (2004) asserted that governments around the world are increasingly making more information about their activities available. The author noted that over 50 countries around the world have now adopted comprehensive freedom of information acts to facilitate access to records held by government bodies. Such enactment is a result of internal and external pressures meted on governments (Banisar, 2004).

In September 2006, media and civil society organizations from Africa met in Lagos in a regional workshop on freedom of information to discuss ways to promote the right of access to information held by public authorities and, in particular, to share experiences regarding strategies for advancing the adoptions of laws that fully protect this right. The participating organizations expressed concern that Africa is lagging behind in the global movement toward the adoption of FOI laws.

A number of countries across the globe such as Nigeria have toed the trend of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948; although scholars have conflicting records as regards the exact number of countries that have adopted the FOI law (Mendel, 2003; Newman, 2022; Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], 2012).

2.7. Theoretical perspective

This study employed two communication theories: agenda-setting and gatekeeping.

2.7.1. Agenda-setting theory

The beginning of agenda-setting can be traced to over 100 years ago when in 1922, Walter Lippmann expressed concern about the vital role of the mass media in influencing and helping to create certain images in the minds of the audience (Lippmann, 1922, p. 9). As Lippmann (1922) notes, the news media are a primary source of those pictures in our heads about the larger world of affairs, a world that for most citizens is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (p. 29). The author adds that what we know about the world is largely based on what the media decide to tell us. More specifically, the result of this mediated view of the world is that the priorities of the media strongly influence the priorities of the public. Elements prominent in the media agenda become prominent in the public's mind (Lippmann, 1922).

The agenda-setting theory was developed by McCombs and Shaw (1972). They studied the capacity of the mass media in influencing the voters' choice in the 1968 U.S. Presidential election. From their research, the scholars found that the mass media influence members of the public who frequently refer to the information provided by the media.

The theory postulates that mass media set the agenda for public opinion by highlighting certain issues. Studying the way political campaigns were covered in the media, McCombs and Shaw (1972) found that the main effect of news media was agenda-setting, telling people not what to think, but what to think about.

From the foregoing, two assumptions of agenda setting can be deduced. Firstly, the media filters and shapes what we see rather than just reflecting stories to the audience, and secondly, the more attention the media gives to an issue, the more likely the public will consider that issue to be important.

Agenda-setting is linked to this study in that, the more government news sources hoard information the more journalism content will be constrained to suit what is available to the journalists. The information available from government news sources is the same information journalists will use to mold and shape the audience's perception of issues. The more information is hoarded the narrower media and audience's knowledge and perception of reality.

2.7.2. Gatekeeping theory

The concept of gatekeeping originates from social psychology. The theory was developed by Lewin (1947). Building on the gatekeeping concept, Lewin's student, David Manning White, introduced it in journalism in 1950, while analyzing the gatekeeping decisions of a small-town daily newspaper editor, called Mr. Gates. White understood the editor as the gatekeeper, and the abstract entity of all selected information as news (White, 1950).

Gatekeeping can be broadly understood as the control of information passing through a gate or filter (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Essentially, gatekeeping is a judgment or decision-making about what information should be gathered, evaluated, and ultimately shared.

Underlying the theory of gatekeeping is the fundamental assumption that information affects what happens in society and helps shape social reality (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Whoever controls the flow of information can influence social reality. Gatekeepers "facilitate or constrain the diffusion of information as they decide which messages to allow pass the gates" (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009, p.21). In recent years, gatekeeping is increasingly carried out by non-journalistic actors and platforms. Such actors, as examined in this research, are government officials.

From the foregoing literature review, two hypotheses were formulated for the current research. These hypotheses were framed from a deeper reflection of the conceptual, empirical, and theoretical reviews of the literature, as follows:

H1: Governmental information hoarding in Cameroon is significantly high.

H2: Governmental information hoarding has a significantly negative effect on journalism practice in Cameroon.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a quantitative approach. To address the research problem of this study, it was necessary to get a wider sample. This is important

because information hoarding has been a perennial problem in the media landscape in Cameroon. Many journalists witness it but seem helpless. So, it was essential to talk to as many journalists as possible, as a way to begin proposing solutions to the problem of information hoarding in Cameroon.

The research method for the study is survey. Journalists were asked to express their opinions and perceptions about governmental information hoarding in Cameroon. The survey targeted private and public journalists. The study was conducted in five regions. These regions, which are described as media-rich, include Centre (Yaoundé), Littoral (Douala), South West (Buea and Limbe), North (Garoua), and North West (Bamenda). Alternatively, this study could have used in-depth interviews (qualitative approach), by conducting interviews with the journalists. However, the interviews could not have permitted the gathering of huge data as is the case here. Also, the interviews could have prevented the generalization of the research findings on a crucial subject of this nature. In addition, interviews might have equally been conducted with government news sources in order to complement information from journalists. This could have required a mixed methods perspective. However, the study focused only on journalists' perspectives.

Essentially, the definition of a journalist, as used in this study, refers to those who have undergone formal training and are fit to gather, treat, and disseminate information for public consumption.

The sample of the study is 170 journalists. They were selected using the simple random sampling technique. Qualified journalists who were available and willing to voluntarily participate in the study were surveyed.

The research instrument used was the questionnaire. It had seven sections: journalists' knowledge and use of news sources; journalists' accessibility to government information; forms of accessibility to government information; accessibility to different news categories; effects of information hoarding on journalism practice; solutions to governmental information hoarding; demographics.

A pretest was done (10%) of the sample before final data collection. The pretest was conducted in Buea, South West region of Cameroon. All errors identified were corrected (wording, question numbering, question format) before final data collection.

Data were collected from the six towns earmarked for the study. 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 team also worked with key contact persons in media institutions (journalists, editors, station managers, and publishers) in the towns under study. The data were coded, entered into the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21, cleaned and analysed. Both descriptive and inferential tests were used. Thematic elements were also derived, mainly from open-ended questions which allowed journalists to express themselves on various aspects of the study.

The reliability statistic is 0.765, which shows the strength of the research instrument. Validity was

ensured through face validity, content validity, and construct validity. All key concepts and constructs of the study were tested in the research instrument. Ethical considerations like informed consent and voluntary participation were employed.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Demographic characteristics of sample

Empirical evidence on the gender distribution of respondents in this study suggests that 47.6% (81) are male, while 52.4% (89) are female.

Data on the marital status of respondents indicate that 59.4% (101) respondents are single, 37.1% (63) are married, 2.9% (5) co-habit, and 0.6% (1) divorced.

Regarding the age of respondents, 2.9% (5) are 20 or below, 30% (51) fall between 21 and 25 years old, 32.4% (55) are aged between 26 and 30 years old, 18.8% (32) are of 31 to 35 years old, 6.5% (11) fall between 36 and 40 years old, 4.7% (8) are aged between 41 and 45 years old, 3.5% (6) are of the category between 46 and 50 years old, while 0.6% (1) respondent is of 51 to 55 years old, and 0.6% (1) is also 56 years old and above. Most of the journalists surveyed are young (reflective of the Cameroon media landscape). Up to 62.4% (106) of respondents are between 21 and 30 years old, while 34.7% (59) are between 31 and 60 years old.

Out of the 170 journalists successfully sampled, 85.3% (146) have basic functions as reporters charged with researching, gathering, treating, and disseminating news and information. Meanwhile, a segment of the sample, apart from serving as journalists, has administrative functions. This includes 6.5% (11) as editors, 2.4% (4) as editors-in-chief, 1.8% (3) as station managers, 1.2% (2) as publishers, 1.2% (2) as directors, 0.6% (1) as deputy editor-in-chief, and 0.6% (1) as producer. Journalists with administrative ranks are, in some cases, expected to serve as a liaison between the media institution and government news sources.

The data show that the majority of the journalists are from the North West Region, with 48.8% (83). This is followed by South West Region, constituting 33.5% (57), Centre Region 5.9% (10), West Region 5.9% (10), Littoral Region 3.5% (6), Adamawa Region 1.2% (2), South Region 0.6% (1), and North Region 0.6% (1).

Journalists were from 44 media institutions in these towns, including 6 public media institutions, and 38 private media institutions. This number is not strange, considering that in Cameroon, there are more private media than public media. More specifically, the distribution is as follows: Cameroon Radio Television (CRTV) Yaounde 10.6% (18), CRTV Buea 7.6% (13), CRTV Douala 6.5% (11), HiTV 5.9% (10), The Guardian Post 5.9% (10), The Post Newspaper 4.7% (8), STV 4.7% (8), CRTV Bamenda 4.1% (7), Equinox 3.5% (6), 2.9% (5) each for My Media Prime, PSTV Buea, Dash Media, and CRTV Garoua;

1.8% (3) each for Radio Balafon and Mediafrique radio; 1.2% (2) each for Cameroon Tribune, The Sun Newspaper, Dream FM, Eden Newspaper, Cam1 TV Limbe, City FM, Abakwa FM, LDTV Buea, and MySoccer.com; and 0.6% (1) each for Canal Campus TV, The Herald Tribune, The Star Newspaper, The Voice Newspaper, Radio Salaman, Prodigy blog, Le Gideon, The Chronicle Times, Civic Lens, Catholic Information Services, The Median Newspaper, DBS TV, News Upfront, Freelance, and The Advocate Newspaper.

Further analysis shows that there are a total of 114 journalists from the private media sector, representing 67.1%, and 56 journalists from the public media sector, representing 32.9%.

As concerns religion, up to 95.3% (162) respondents are Christians, only 1.2% (2) are of the Islamic faith, 1.2% (2) have no religion, 0.6% (1) is of the African Traditional Religion, and 1.8% did not respond to this question. The statistics about religion are also valid, considering that in Cameroon, the majority of people are Christians. Such distribution is reflected in this study.

There are three major educational qualifications of respondents that have been uncovered in this study: the Higher National Diploma (HND), Bachelor's degree, and Master's degree. The highest of these educational qualifications is the Bachelor's degree with 77.6% (132), followed by the Master's degree with 17.1% (29), and the HND with 5.5% (9).

The political affiliation of respondents shows that up to 93.5% (159) do not belong to a political party. Meanwhile, 4.1% (7) are of the ruling political party — the Cameroon People's Democratic Movement (CPDM), 1.8% (3) are of the Social Democratic Front (SDF), and 0.6% (1) are members of the Cameroon Renaissance Movement (CRM) political party.

Most respondents work with radio (28.2%, 48). This is followed by TV (22.4%, 38), radio and TV (17.1%, 29), print (15.3%, 26), online (3.5%, 6), print and online (2.9%, 5), TV and online (2.9%, 5), 1.8% (3) each for radio and online; print, TV, and online; and radio, online, and TV. Meanwhile, 1.2% (2) indicated that they work for all media platforms (print, radio, TV, and online), while 0.6% (1) work each for print and radio; and radio, print, and online.

4.2. The extent journalists access government news sources in Cameroon

As a way to address the first research question (*RQ1*), the journalists surveyed were asked to ascertain the extent to which they have access to information from various government news sources. The purpose of this inquiry was to spot government sources that have a higher tendency to hoard information from journalists, and those that are more likely to collaborate with journalists in the information-sharing process. The various responses that were obtained from the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. The extent of journalists' accessibility to government information

S/N	Government news sources	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Total
1.	Presidency	16.5% (28)	20% (34)	50.6% (86)	12.9% (22)	100% (170)
2.	Prime minister	27.1% (46)	20.6% (35)	41.7% (71)	10.6% (18)	100% (170)
3.	Vice prime ministers	11.8% (20)	23.5% (40)	44.1% (75)	20.6% (35)	100% (170)
4.	Ministers of state	21.7% (37)	21.7% (37)	46.5% (79)	10% (17)	100% (170)
5.	Ministers	38.7% (66)	27.1% (46)	28.2% (48)	5.9% (10)	100% (170)
6.	Secretaries of state	19.4% (33)	31.2% (53)	38.2% (65)	11.2% (19)	100% (170)
7.	Secretaries-general of ministries	20% (34)	25.3% (43)	44.7% (76)	10% (17)	100% (170)
8.	Senior officials of ministries	22.9% (39)	25.3% (43)	45.9% (78)	5.9% (10)	100% (170)
9.	Communication units of ministries	44.1% (75)	25.9% (44)	26.4% (45)	3.5% (6)	100% (170)
10.	General managers of parastatals	24.1% (41)	40% (68)	31.1% (53)	4.7% (8)	100% (170)
11.	Regional governors	48.3% (82)	34.1% (58)	16.5% (28)	1.2% (2)	100% (170)
12.	Regional delegates of ministries	40% (68)	30.6% (52)	27% (46)	2.4% (4)	100% (170)
13.	Senior divisional officers	45.9% (78)	25.9% (44)	26.4% (45)	1.8% (3)	100% (170)
14.	Divisional officers	41.2% (70)	32.9% (56)	24.7% (42)	1.2% (2)	100% (170)
15.	Mayors	57.6% (98)	22.9% (39)	17.6% (30)	1.8% (3)	100% (170)
16.	Other regional officials of ministries	37% (63)	24.7% (42)	33.5% (57)	4.7% (8)	100% (170)
17.	Others (specify)	12.4% (21)	35.3% (60)	10.6% (18)	41.8% (71)	100% (170)

Source: Field data, 2021.

Journalists reported their access to information from government sources at the Presidency of Cameroon as follows: 6.5% (11) every time, 3.5% (6) usually, 6.5% (11) frequently, 20% (34) sometimes, 18.8% (32) occasionally, 31.8% (54) rarely, and 12.9% (22) never. Furthermore, the collapsed scale shows that 16.5% (28) often get information from sources at the Presidency, 20% (34) sometimes do, 50.6% (86) rarely get information from sources at the Presidency, and 12.9% (22) never get information from sources at the Presidency. In all, therefore, it can be seen that the majority of journalists in Cameroon hardly obtain information from sources at the Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon. This may not be surprising because the Presidency is not close to the majority of the journalists (physically and psychologically), and the Presidency has a sort of restricted access to journalists, especially those of the private media sector in Cameroon.

Also, statistics obtained from journalists' access to information from sources at the Prime Minister's Office show the following trend: 5.9% (10) every time, 4.1% (7) usually, 17.1% (29) frequently, 20.6% (35) sometimes, 24.1% (41) occasionally, 17.6% (30) rarely, and 10.6% (18) never. The collapsed scale shows that 27.1% (46) often have access to information at the Prime Minister's Office, 20.6% (35) sometimes have access, 41.7% (71) rarely have access, and 10.6% (18) do not have access. Thus, a bulk of the statistics indicates that the majority of journalists rarely cover the Prime Ministry in Cameroon. The Prime Ministry in Cameroon is at the centre of planning, implementing, and communicating government actions, policies, and agendas.

Furthermore, statistics show that most journalists in Cameroon rarely cover vice prime

ministers. Also, data show that 21.7% (37) often have access to ministers of state, 21.7% (37) sometimes get information from ministers of state, 46.5% (79) rarely obtain information from ministers of state, and 10% (17) never get information from ministers of state. The statistics show that most journalists rarely cover ministers of state. Curiously, not even 50% of journalists in Cameroon have indicated that they have regular access to government ministers and ministries.

Journalists also reported access to secretaries of state as follows: 4.7% (8) every time, 5.3% (9) usually, 9.4% (16) frequently, 31.2% (53) sometimes, 18.8% (32) occasionally, 19.4% (33) rarely, and 11.2% (19) never. The collapsed scale for coverage of secretaries of state shows the following trend: 19.4% (33) often, 31.2% (53) sometimes, 38.2% (65) rarely, and 11.2% (19) for never. Again, the statistics show journalists' low access to and coverage of secretaries of state.

In addition, 20% (34) often have access to information from secretaries-general of ministries, 25.3% (43) sometimes have access to them, 44.7% (76) rarely have access, while 10% (17) noted that they never have access to information from secretaries-general of ministries in Cameroon. Hence, it can be deduced that fewer journalists have access to information from the secretaries-general of ministries in Cameroon.

The journalists obtain information from senior officials of ministries as follows: 22.9% (39) often, 25.3% (43) sometimes, 45.9% (78) rarely, and 5.9% (10) never. From the statistics presented therefore, it can be seen that the majority of the journalists have limited access to information from senior officials of ministries in Cameroon.

Regarding access to information from communication units of ministries in Cameroon, the respondents of this research reported as follows: 7.6% (13) every time, 14.7% (25) usually, 21.8% (37) frequently, 25.9% (44) sometimes, 18.2% (31) occasionally, 8.2% (14) rarely, and 3.5% (6) never. Meanwhile, the summarized scale shows the following trend: 44.1% (75) often, 25.9% (44) sometimes, 26.4% (45) rarely, and 3.5% (6) never. Hence, it can be deduced that a majority of journalists depend on their colleagues in the communication units of ministries in Cameroon. This is because as colleagues, they are likely to understand themselves, including the challenges they face in the field as journalists.

Furthermore, the journalists expressed the extent to which they access information from general managers of parastatals, with the following statistics obtained: 3.5% (6) every time, 7.1% (12) usually, 13.5% (23) frequently, 40% (68) sometimes, 17.6% (30) occasionally, 13.5% (23) rarely, and 4.7% (8) never. The collapsed scale shows that 24.1% (41) often access information from general managers of parastatals, 40% (68) sometimes do so, 31.1% (53) rarely do so, and 4.7% (8) never access information from general managers of parastatals. The implication of these statistics is that the majority of the journalists do not easily access information from the general managers of parastatals in Cameroon. This has implications for the corporation, including public perceptions of the corporation.

As concerns regional governors, respondents reported access to information as follows: 12.4% (21) every time, 15.9% (27) usually, 20% (34) frequently, 34.1% (58) sometimes, 10.6% (18) occasionally, 5.9% (10) rarely, and 1.2% (2) never. The collapsed scale shows the following trend regarding journalists' access to regional governors: 48.3% (82) often, 34.1% (58) sometimes, 16.5% (28) rarely, and 1.2% (2) never. Hence, the majority of journalists surveyed have access to their regional governors. This is crucial because the governors mostly serve as representatives of the government in the regions. So, the agenda of the government is spearheaded and communicated to the media by the governors.

Also, journalists rated the extent to which they access information from regional delegates of ministries, as follows: 10% (17) every time, 11.8% (20) usually, 18.2% (31) frequently, 30.6% (52) sometimes, 17.6% (30) occasionally, 9.4% (16) rarely, and 2.4% (4) never. The collapsed scale of journalists' access to regional delegates of ministries shows the following trend: 40% (68) often, 30.6% (52) sometimes, 27% (46) rarely, and 2.4% (4) never. From these statistics, it can be deduced that the majority of journalists have access to information from regional delegates of ministries. This has implications for further communication and follow-up of government agenda in the regions, through the regional delegates. They are a liaison between the ministries and the representation of the ministries in the regions.

Equally, respondents were asked to assess the extent to which they access information from senior divisional officers, with the following statistics recorded: 9.4% (16) every time, 9.4% (16) usually, 27.1% (46) frequently, 25.9% (44) sometimes, 18.2% (31) occasionally, 8.2% (14) rarely, and 1.8% (3) never. The collapsed scale on journalists' access to information from senior divisional officers is as

follows: 45.9% (78) often, 25.9% (44) sometimes, 26.4% (45) rarely, and 1.8% (3) never. Consequently, the statistics reveal that the majority of the journalists, though less than 50%, have attested that they have access to information from the senior divisional officer. These officials serve as government representatives in respective divisions, and so, their relationship with media personnel is also crucial in planning, implementing, and communicating government agendas and policies.

To add, journalists gave the following details regarding the extent of access to information from the divisional officers: 8.2% (14) every time, 11.2% (19) usually, 21.8% (37) frequently, 32.9% (56) sometimes, 14.1% (24) occasionally, 10.6% (18) rarely, and 1.2% (2) never. Meanwhile, the collapsed scale shows the following trend regarding journalists' accessibility to divisional officers: 41.2% (70) often, 32.9% (56) sometimes, 24.7% (42) rarely, and 1.2% (2) never. The statistics show that the majority of the journalists have access to information from senior divisional officers (though the proportion < 50%). Divisional officers are also expected to liaise with the media for further communication and follow-up of government policies and agenda.

With regards to mayors, journalists revealed the following in terms of access to information: 57.6% (98) every time, 22.9% (39) sometimes, 17.6% (30) rarely, and 1.8% (3) never. There is evidence that of all the 17 major stakeholders examined in relation to journalists' accessibility to information, mayors top the chart. This could be explained by the fact that mayors are closer to the people daily, and the work of journalists is about people. In addition, councils play an essential role in community life and community relations. The mass media are thus an essential component that enhances such relationships between councils and the people. In Cameroon, councils are known for spearheading key developmental projects in communities like the provision of pipe-borne water, follow-up of education through scholarship schemes, poverty alleviation, sanitation, health, and environmental protection, amongst others. Councils can only connect the people to these projects through the apt use of the media of mass communication.

Furthermore, the respondents' access to information from other regional officials of ministries, is as follows: 8.8% (15) every time, 9.4% (16) usually, 18.8% (32) frequently, 24.7% (42) sometimes, 18.2% (31) occasionally, 15.3% (26) rarely, and 4.7% (8) never. In addition, the collapsed scale on the extent to which they access information from other regional officials of ministries shows the following trend: 37% (63) often, 24.7% (42) sometimes, 33.5% (57) rarely, and 4.7% (8) never. This implies that to some extent, journalists rely on other regional officials of ministries for information in the daily execution of their assignments.

Finally, the journalists also ranked the extent to which they access other sources of governmental information, with the following results recorded: 4.7% (8) every time, 2.4% (4) usually, 5.3% (9) frequently, 35.3% (60) sometimes, 5.9% (10) occasionally, 4.7% (8) rarely, and 41.8% (71) never. In addition, the collapsed scale on the extent to which journalists access information from other

governmental sources shows the following trend: 12.4% (21) every time, 35.3% (60) sometimes, 10.6% (18) rarely, and 41.8% (71) never. This shows that to some degree, journalists access information from other governmental sources, apart from the key ones listed in the aforementioned analysis.

4.2.1. Forms of accessibility to government information

The journalists were asked to ascertain the extent to which they obtain information from government sources using various ways/means. This is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Forms of accessibility to government information

S/N	Means of obtaining information from government sources	Often (E + U + F)	Sometimes	Rarely (O + R)	Never	Total
1.	Press briefings	61.1% (104)	16.5% (28)	21.1% (36)	1.2% (2)	100% (170)
2.	Press releases	70.5% (120)	17.6% (30)	11.2% (19)	.6% (1)	100% (170)
3.	Press conferences	54.8% (27)	22.9% (39)	22.4% (38)	0% (0)	100% (170)
4.	One-on-one interviews	40% (68)	27.1% (46)	31.2% (53)	1.8% (3)	100% (170)
5.	Group interviews (especially at events)	55.8% (95)	21.2% (36)	21.7% (37)	1.2% (2)	100% (170)

Note: E = Every time, U = Usually, F = Frequently, O = Occasionally, and R = Rarely.
Source: Field data, 2021.

The journalists indicated that they mostly get governmental information from press briefings, press releases, press conferences, one-on-one interviews, and group interviews. Of these, press releases are top (70.5%, 120 regular access).

4.2.2. Journalists' accessibility to different news and information categories/sectors

In addition, the respondents rated the degree to which they access information from different sectors (politics, economics, social, and cultural issues) as given in Table 3.

Table 3. Journalists' accessibility to different subject areas of news and information

S/N	News subjects	Often (E + U + F)	Sometimes	Rarely (O + R)	Never	Total
1.	Politics	64.1% (109)	13.5% (23)	21.2% (36)	1.2% (2)	100% (170)
2.	Economics	55.2% (94)	26.5% (45)	18.2% (31)	0% (0)	100% (170)
3.	Social issues	53.6% (92)	24.1% (41)	21.8% (37)	0% (0)	100% (170)
4.	Cultural issues	39.4% (67)	28.2% (48)	31.8% (54)	.6% (1)	100% (170)

Source: Field data, 2021.

Journalists also rated the spheres from which they collect governmental information: politics, economics, society, and culture. Politics was rated highest.

4.2.3. Test of the first hypothesis

From the data presented that addresses RQ1, it can be asserted that governmental information hoarding in Cameroon is significantly high. This is seen especially at the top levels of government like the Presidency, Prime Ministry, Vice Prime Ministry, secretaries-general, ministers of state, and ministers, amongst others. In other words, and generally speaking, the study found a significant relationship between government news and information sources and the tendency for these sources to hoard information ($p \leq 0.05$).

Meanwhile, it has been realized that governmental information hoarding is lower when it concerns government units that are closer to the grassroots. These include mayors, regional delegates, divisional officers, senior divisional officers, and Governors amongst others. Journalists also reported having more access to information from the communication units of ministries. The data further suggest there are no significant

differences in information hoarding from one government unit to the next.

4.3. The extent governmental information hoarding affects the practice of journalism in Cameroon

4.3.1. Effects of information hoarding on journalism practice

Journalists were asked to agree/disagree on whether they think governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism practice. Their responses are provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Negative effects of information hoarding on journalism practice

Values	Frequency	Percent
Strongly disagree	1	0.6
Disagree	2	1.2
Somewhat disagree	1	0.6
Neutral	19	11.2
Somewhat agree	23	13.5
Agree	49	28.8
Strongly agree	75	44.1
Total	170	100.0

Source: Field data, 2021.

Table 4 shows that only 0.6% (1) strongly disagreed that governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism, 1.2% (2) disagreed, 0.6% (1) somewhat disagreed, 11.2% (19) were neutral, 13.5% (23) somewhat agreed, 28.8% (49) agreed, and 44.1% (75) strongly agreed. To summarize, an overwhelming 86.4% (147) agreed that governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism. More specifically, journalists enumerated the effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice in Cameroon, as follows.

4.3.2. Effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice in Cameroon

To continue, journalists were asked to enumerate (through an open-ended question that gave them the latitude to express themselves) the effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice. The effects are interpreted and presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Effects of governmental information hoarding on journalism practice in Cameroon

<i>Effects</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Biased writing and reporting	41	24.1
Fake news	36	21.8
Difficulties in practicing journalism	18	10.6
Truth is hidden	13	7.6
Leads to speculation and rumours	9	5.3
Affects the credibility of media houses	9	5.3
Limited information to the public	6	3.5
Hinders progress of news organs	3	1.8
Discourages investigative reporting	3	1.8
Opinion reporting	3	1.8
Journalism becomes public relations and praise singing	3	1.8
Sidelining the private media from major events	2	1.2
Armchair journalism	2	1.2
Limited press freedom	2	1.2
Arrest, victimization, and intimidation of journalists	2	1.2
Corruption	1	0.6
Gatekeeping	1	0.6
Does not give room for open thinking	1	0.6
Puts to question journalism practice in Cameroon	1	0.6
Only one media house has the clear facts	1	0.6
Procrastination	1	0.6
Creates a divide between private and state media	1	0.6
Bureaucratic bottlenecks	1	0.6
Leads to sensational journalism	1	0.6
Limits the power of the media	1	0.6
No response	8	4.7

Source: Field data, 2021.

A total of 24.1% (41) of journalists affirmed that governmental information hoarding promotes biased writing and reporting. This is not good for the image of journalism and journalists. When journalists write and report in a biased manner, they take sides. They become subjective, rather than objective as journalism rules require. Biased writing and reporting also implicate the public negatively, as people are fed with especially one-sided stories, thereby misinforming public opinion. The rule of neutrality in journalism is also breached, as only a fraction of the available evidence is presented, which waters down the essence of journalism.

In addition, 21.8% (36) affirmed that governmental information hoarding enhances the circulation of fake news. This is detrimental to journalism, public perception of journalism, and audience understanding of local, national, and international affairs. The situation is made worse today with the advent of social media; as people who encounter inaccurate information are likely to forward it to others as received, and the cycle continues.

Meanwhile, 10.6% (18) indicated that governmental information hoarding ensures difficulties in practicing journalism. This can be seen in terms of difficulties in researching, gathering,

treating, and disseminating news and information. This is verifiable because journalism relies on truthful information from the right sources. Without such information, the practice of journalism is rendered fruitless. Each time journalists attempt to get closer to governmental news sources and are turned down, feelings of frustration increase. The journalists are also likely to feel that they have failed in their mission to serve the public interest and contribute meaningfully to national development. Access to information is likely to facilitate the work of journalists.

Equally, 7.6% (13) reported that when journalists do not have access to governmental information, the truth is hidden. Interestingly, journalism relies on truth as the first principle. Without truth, therefore, there can be no journalism. Hiding the truth from reporters promotes tension between the media and government, and also translates into a lack of credibility for the media and government actions and policies.

Furthermore, 5.3% (9) noted that when journalists do not have access to governmental information, it leads to speculation and rumours. Speculation and rumours are destructive to journalism practice. With speculation, journalists do not have the right information, and that leads to

unverified publications. Rumours also spread a negative trend and they underscore the lack of evidence in the news. Journalism cannot thrive in speculation and rumours.

Another 5.3% (9) indicated that when journalists do not have access to governmental information, it affects the credibility of media houses. For media audiences to continue trusting their services, journalists must preserve their credibility. When credibility in the media is lost, everything that journalists work for is likely to be lost as well. To maintain credibility, journalists need access to trustworthy information.

Meanwhile, 3.5% (6) remarked that when journalists do not have access to governmental information, it leads to limited information for the public. This is valid because journalists depend on news sources, key amongst which are governmental news sources, to be able to gather, treat, and disseminate news and information. When government news sources do not provide journalists with the required details, the consequence is that limited information crucial for development will filter to the public. When this happens, the image of the public service and that of the journalism profession are affected in the process. People need maximum information about governmental policies for information and education.

To add, 1.3% (8) of respondents noted that when journalists are denied access to governmental information, it hinders the progress of news organs.

Another 1.8% (3) attested that when journalists are denied access to information, it discourages investigative reporting.

Again, the data suggest that 1.8% (3) revealed that in the absence of access to governmental information, journalism resorts to opinion reporting. Usually, opinions are not necessarily facts; and when different media give diverse opinions on core issues that would have rather been reported with evidence from recognized sources, it becomes problematic. Such scenarios can further stir confusion in the media and public domains. Opinion reporting is subjective, and contradicts the norms of

mainstream/traditional journalism. When journalists personalize reports, such stories also affect the credibility of individual journalists and media institutions. Consequently, access to governmental sources is crucial to limiting opinionated reporting.

Empirical evidence in this study also shows that 1.8% (3) respondents are of the view that when journalists are denied access to information, journalism becomes public relations and praise singing. Praise singing may be orchestrated by the few who have available governmental information. Journalism is distinct from public relations because the two share opposite values. Journalists are expected to report issues the way they are, while public relations specialists make efforts to see the good in every situation.

In addition, 1.2% (2) each reported that denial of access to governmental information promotes the sidelining of private media from major events, promotes armchair journalism, gives rise to limited press freedom, and triggers the arrest, victimization, and intimidation of journalists. This is bad for journalism practice.

Meanwhile, 0.6% (1) each reported that governmental information hoarding in Cameroon affects journalism practice in the country in the following ways: leads to corruption; reinforces gatekeeping; does not give room for open thinking; puts to question journalism practice in Cameroon; only one media house has the clear facts; procrastination; creates a divide between private and state media; promotes bureaucratic bottlenecks; leads to sensational journalism; and limits power of the media.

4.3.3. Test of the second hypothesis

A test was conducted to determine the relationship between the independent variable of the study (governmental information hoarding) and the dependent variable (journalism practice). The results in Table 6 demonstrate that governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism practice.

Table 6. Test of the second hypothesis

Model		Coefficients			t	Sig.
		Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	Information hoarding affects the practice of journalism negatively.	16.739	4.619		3.624	0.000
		-0.967	0.757	-0.098	-1.278	0.203

Note: Independent variable = Governmental information hoarding. Dependent variable = Journalism practice.

Source: Field data, 2022.

Using the independent t-test, with $t = 3.624$, $Beta = -0.098$, and $p = 0.000$, there is evidence that a significantly negative relationship exists between governmental information hoarding and journalism practice in Cameroon.

In other words, governmental information hoarding has a significantly negative effect on journalism practice in Cameroon. Hence, the second hypothesis (H_2) is confirmed.

4.3.4. Steps journalists take when they are denied access to governmental information

Furthermore, the researchers asked journalists to enumerate what they do in cases when they are denied access to vital information by government news and information sources. The responses are presented and discussed in Table 7.

Table 7. Steps to counter governmental information hoarding in Cameroon

<i>Steps taken by journalists to handle governmental information hoarding</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Visit online platforms for research	16	9.4
Look for alternative sources	15	8.8
Kill the story	13	7.6
Coin story from the little available information	13	7.6
Become persistent	11	5.9
Report my story and mention they refused to talk	9	5.3
Seek help from an insider	8	4.7
Follow state media and get updates	7	4.1
Go to the hierarchy to try and break the barrier	6	3.5
Call resource persons	6	3.5
Contact other media organs	5	2.9
Call some colleagues in communication departments of ministries and request information	5	2.9
Report human interest stories	4	2.4
Delay the story	4	2.4
Speak to officials on conditions of anonymity	3	1.8
Seek help from senior colleagues	3	1.8
Visit archives	3	1.8
Create personal contacts in the government	3	1.8
Obtain a press card for easy access	3	1.8
Disguise	3	1.8
Fake news	2	1.2
Go to social media	2	1.2
Visit websites of ministries	2	1.2
Seek public opinion	2	1.2
Analyze rumours	1	0.6
Avoid government stories	1	0.6
Join journalism associations	1	0.6
Request for an interview	1	0.6
No response	18	10.6
Total	170	100.0

Source: Field data, 2021.

Respondents reported on the various steps they take when they are denied access to government information. These include, amongst others, responses to the effect that they: visit online platforms for research, look for alternative sources, kill the story, coin the story from the little available information, or become persistent. These strategies affect journalism practice.

4.3.5. Recommendations to overcome governmental information hoarding in Cameroon

Respondents gave the following recommendations with regard to the contentious issue of governmental information hoarding provided in Table 8.

Table 8. Recommendations regarding governmental information hoarding in Cameroon

<i>Recommendations</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Enact laws/policies to compel government officials to give out information to the press without any hesitation	55	32.4
Government should work hand-in-glove with media houses	12	7.1
Journalists should be responsible	10	5.9
Press freedom should be encouraged	8	4.7
Private and public media should be treated equally	8	4.7
Government should give information on time	8	4.7
Sensitize officials	7	4.1
Pressure groups should rise up	7	4.1
Government should be transparent and credible	6	3.5
Private media should boycott government events	3	1.8
Create journalism trade unions	2	1.2
Organize training sessions for journalists	2	1.2
Government offices should have good PR departments	2	1.2
Journalists should be given accreditation to access governmental information	2	1.2
Nothing can be done	2	1.2
The interest of the masses is fundamental	2	1.2
Sanction sources who hoard information	2	1.2
Government officials should take lessons on media literacy	2	1.2
More press releases should be issued	1	0.6
Ministries should regularly update their websites	1	0.6
Journalism unions and associations should denounce information hoarding	1	0.6
Press briefings should be regular	1	0.6
Investigative journalism	1	0.6
No response	25	14.7
Total	170	100.0

Source: Field data, 2021.

Respondents discussed solutions to governmental information hoarding, key among them, the need to enact laws/policies to compel government officials to give out information to the press without any hesitation. These recommendations have implications for journalism practice.

5. DISCUSSION

This study is conducted at a time when information has become an increasingly important commodity to journalists, governments, and society. The study builds on the premise that information is power, and that such power can only manifest when truthful and significant information is given out to journalists, and journalists use the same information to positively shape and direct public and policy agenda and discourse (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Eide, 2007; McQuail, 2010; Ali & Hassoun, 2019; Trappel & Tomaz, 2021). Journalists are expected to use the information to sensitize the public on government activities, and the role of different government actors in the process of nation-building.

In addition, governmental information is expected to provide directives to citizens on how they can effectively participate in governmental activities and nation-building. This is expected to fill the gap in thought, words, and actions on claims that in certain instances, citizens are not given the opportunity to participate in government activities (participatory development). Apologists of such a stance are quick to conclude that most government policies and decisions are top-bottom approaches, and fail to consider those at the base (the masses). This thesis, therefore, sets a new trend on expected outcomes when government news sources positively collaborate in giving the media information. Eide (2007) concurs with this perspective by asserting that "journalism deserves a prominent place in the agenda for discussions of power" (p. 21).

This research also advances the negative implications of information hoarding on journalism. Within the context of this research, information hoarding is the deliberate act of keeping information away from journalists. Some arguments in this direction point to what is referred to in government circles as sensitive information (but how sensitive?), while others point to the individual and social responsibility of journalists and the media (Newman, 2022).

The first research question (*RQ1*) asks what government news sources hoard information from journalists in Cameroon. Beginning with the Presidency, 16.5% (28) of respondents revealed that they often get information from sources at the Presidency, 20% (34) sometimes do, 50.6% (86) rarely get information from sources at the Presidency, and 12.9% (22) never get information from sources at the Presidency. Hence, empirical findings suggest that the majority of journalists in Cameroon hardly obtain information from sources at the Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon. This may not be surprising because the Presidency is not close to the majority of the journalists (physically and psychologically), and the Presidency has a sort of restricted access to journalists, especially those of the private media sector in Cameroon.

This revelation confirms research by Alobwede (2005), who asserts that it is difficult to obtain information from certain quarters of the Cameroon government, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon of information hoarding in government circles. The author confirms that the government gate keeps certain or pivotal information from journalists, especially journalists from the private sector. Furthermore, the author notes that there is no law in Cameroon that gives the media or anyone else a right to access government information. This has been a general bond of contention, given that the Presidency, for instance, is in no way compelled to give out information to journalists. Rather, most information at the level of the Presidency is treated as top secret and mostly classified as confidential. In Cameroon, it is also very rare to see press conferences organized by the Presidency. This confirms findings that journalists rarely get information from the Presidency of Cameroon.

Furthermore, this research shows that 27.1% (46) often have access to information at the Prime Minister's office, 20.6% (35) sometimes have access, 41.7% (71) rarely have access, and 10.6% (18) do not have access. By implication, therefore, the majority of the journalists surveyed rarely cover the Prime Ministry in Cameroon. This is detrimental because the Prime Ministry in Cameroon is at the center of planning, implementing, and communicating government actions, policies, and agendas.

Thus, access to such important information from the Prime Ministry is expected to open up media to a wide range of policy issues that people need to be aware of. Such access could also speed up development journalism (Nyamnjoh, 2005; McQuail, 2010) where the media become interested in development news and information meant to propel the economic, political, and socio-cultural viability of a country (Forcha & Ngange, 2022). Lerner (1958) also talked about the modernization paradigm in this direction, where the media are expected to modernize every aspect of an economy, while Schramm (1964) capitalized on the role of information in developing countries. It is important for the media to gain greater access to information from key offices like the Prime Ministry.

To continue, journalists' access to information from vice prime ministers shows that 11.8% (20) journalists often cover vice prime ministers, 23.5% (40) sometimes have access to vice prime ministers, 44.1% (75) rarely cover vice prime ministers, and 20.6% (35) never cover vice prime ministers. Just like the prime minister's office, most journalists surveyed rarely cover vice prime ministers. Basically, the world runs on information (Cover & Thomas, 2006), and Cameroon is not left out of this race. This is why offices like those of vice prime ministers could serve as a good liaison between the media and government, through favourable policies that would enable the media to access and disseminate information on the functions of these offices in line with national priorities and national development.

This investigation equally reveals that 21.7% (37) often have access to ministers of state, 21.7% (37) sometimes get information from ministers of state, 46.5% (79) rarely obtain information from ministers of state, and 10% (17) never get information from ministers of state. This generally shows that most journalists surveyed rarely have

access to information from ministers of state, whereas these ministers head particular ministries that serve millions of citizens. It is therefore surprising that despite policy frameworks put in place to guarantee free access to information for journalists (like Law No. 90/052), information hoarding still strives in Cameroon.

It also becomes worrying to discover that not even up to 50% of journalists sampled in this research have indicated that they have regular access to government ministers and ministries. The ministries are at the heartbeat of the nation, and freedom of access to information for the media is important for the communication of the agenda of the ministries. As the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA, 2015) states, since the early 1990s, "Africa has been experiencing major political changes with the people of the continent taking resolute steps to demand participatory and democratic systems of governance" (p. 15). These transformations are spearheaded by government ministries. So, if the ministries fail to grant information access to the media, who then should? And how do the media help the ministries to attain short, medium, and long-term objectives when they do not have ready access to the information? The answers to these puzzles reside in the willingness of government ministries to share information with journalists of the public and private sectors on an equal basis.

In addition, statistics show journalists' low access to and coverage of secretaries of state, with 38.2% (65) respondents indicating that they rarely have access to secretaries of state, and 11.2% (19) indicating that they have never had access to secretaries of state. DeFleur and Dennis (2002) agree that the news media have the potential to connect with individuals for news of greater impact. When journalists connect with secretaries of state, for instance, one expects to see quality government information that such personalities would share with the public with the intention of engineering transformations from such positions.

The findings of this research further reveal that 20% (34) respondents often have access to information from secretaries-general of ministries, 25.3% (43) sometimes have access to them, 44.7% (76) reported that they rarely have access to information from secretaries-general of ministries, while 10% (17) noted that they never have access to information from secretaries-general of ministries in Cameroon. This means a bulk of journalists surveyed do not have access to information from the secretaries-general of ministries in Cameroon. Challenges with regard to obtaining information from such government quarters could be attributed to the personality of journalists and media institutions, as well as respective in-house and government policies regarding the relationship between such government offices with the media in Cameroon. Notably, Holsen (2007) reiterates the importance of freedom of access to information as a feature that gives the public the right to ask for and receive information held by public officials and institutions.

Furthermore, this research shows that the majority of the journalists have limited access to information from senior officials of ministries in Cameroon. This is typified by the following trends

on journalists' access to information from senior officials of ministries in Cameroon: 22.9% (39) often, 25.3% (43) sometimes, 45.9% (78) rarely, and 5.9% (10) never. Given the development agenda of the country, it is important that the role of the media in development in Cameroon be reassessed, especially in terms of the media's role in the positive transformation of the country. This explains why Banisar (2004) asserts that 98% of journalists had claimed that they often saw illegal refusal to provide information in their practices, partly because of the lack of awareness on the functions of information on the part of some government officials, or a deliberate act to keep journalists in the dark. The scholar regrets that this affects journalism negatively because information promotes citizen participation.

Also interesting in this study is the revelation that journalists gave regarding their access to information from communication units of ministries in Cameroon. The data on access to information by journalists here shows the following trend: 44.1% (75) often, 25.9% (44) sometimes, 26.4% (45) rarely, and 3.5% (6) never. This is interesting as only 3.6% (6) respondents noted that they never have access to communication units of ministries. This is a fair signal and hints at a more positive relationship shared between journalists and communication units of ministries in Cameroon. This may be because most persons who work in communication units are themselves journalists, or have undergone some form of training in communication or a related field. This trend, therefore, suggests some form of professional solidarity between the communication units of ministries in Cameroon and journalists.

Notably, journalism as a profession continues to receive praise for its role in information, education, and entertainment in society, as well as criticisms towards the direction that it has had several challenges at the level of organization, with most questions centered on who a journalist is (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1975; Dennis et al., 1989; Deuze, 2005; Kim & Lee, 2021). Consequently, the sanctity of the profession depends on those who are granted admission or who admit themselves into it. Here, an individual's social responsibility remains a key issue to address. The relationship between journalists and the rest of society including those that journalism serves at all levels is also crucial.

This research also shows that 24.1% (41) often access information from general managers of parastatals, 40% (68) sometimes do so, 31.1% (53) rarely do so, and 4.7% (8) never access information from general managers of parastatals. Interestingly, parastatals play a major role in the development drive of a country. Access to information in this sector is important, especially as most of these parastatals are strong economic forces on which the overall economic strength of the country depends. Curran (2005) affirms that journalism can push a country to invest and secure a strong economic base with the rest of the world. Investments in the economic sector should thus take into consideration information accessibility to the media. Journalists are those mandated with the responsibility to give such economic information the impetus it deserves and attend to desired economic outcomes in a country like Cameroon.

Furthermore, it was realized that journalists have relatively greater access to information from regional governors. The statistics uncovered in this research show that 48.3% (82) respondents often access regional governors, 34.1% (58) sometimes, 16.5% (28) rarely, and 1.2% (2) never. Hence, the results point towards the direction that the majority of journalists surveyed have access to their regional governors. This is crucial in this research because regional governors in Cameroon have a major role to play in the development drive of the country. In fact, every citizen of Cameroon is from a region and lives in a region. So, the activities of the governors are important for the coordination of activities on the ground, especially at the grassroots level. It is therefore plausible that governors are relatively concerned and more accessible when it comes to sharing information with journalists. This is likely to encourage greater citizen participation at the local level (Deuze, 2005; Kim & Lee, 2021).

Again, this study has shown that the majority of journalists have access to information from regional delegates, with accessibility trends indicating the following: 40% (68) often, 30.6% (52) sometimes, 27% (46) rarely, and 2.4% (4) never. So, it can be deduced that the closer the office is to the grassroots, the more likely journalists are to have greater access to it. Regional delegates also play a key role in terms of strengthening government policy at different levels; including national security, public health, education, labour, agriculture and lands, livestock and fisheries, commerce, economy and finance, transport, civic education, mines, water resources and energy, decentralization, and local development, amongst others. Regional delegates are thus closer to the population, and giving information on their different activities helps to boost the overall functioning of the state machinery.

To continue, statistics reveal that the majority of the journalists, though less than 50%, have attested that they have access to information from the Senior Divisional Officer. This is important especially as these officials serve as government representatives in respective divisions, and so, their relationship with journalists is crucial for the planning, implementation, and communication of government agenda and policies. It is also important to highlight here that control of information and restricted access are very common, especially in countries like Cameroon. All these are part of a bid to avert powerful critiques and deprive journalists of performing their watchdog role (Curran, 2005; McQuail, 2010). This is detrimental because the media serve the interest of the public by watching over society and monitoring power. Power is accountable to citizens and media are expected to play a positive mediation role in bringing power to the people, and people closer to power.

Also, this study shows that the majority of journalists have access to information from senior divisional officers. They are also instrumental in the implementation of government policies on the ground. So, a good relationship between them and the media will lead to citizens' greater understanding and participation in government affairs at the grassroots level.

Meanwhile, journalists' extent of access to information from mayors shows the following trend: 57.6% (98) every time, 22.9% (39) sometimes, 17.6% (30) rarely, and 1.8% (3) never. There is evidence that of all the 17 major stakeholders examined in government in relation to journalists' accessibility to information, mayors top the chart. This is important because mayors head municipalities, and act as the people's representatives.

This research has also identified five ways in which journalists access information from government officials: press briefings, press releases, press conferences, one-on-one interviews, and group interviews (especially at events). Of these four, only press releases are not interactive. The rest of the means of gathering information are. In these processes, journalists are expected to exercise a degree of professionalism when it comes to collecting, treating, and disseminating news and information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001). This is important because the way information is collected, treated, and disseminated determines future relations with officials, especially those in government circles. In other words, individual and social responsibility become paramount (Lewin, 1947; Deuze, 2005; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The manner in which this information is equally circulated in online media is important. This is so because new communication technologies are likely to change governance for the better because they tend to make the government open and accountable (Lollar, 2006). Thus, openness to journalists gives room for an open and plural society, encourages more involvement of people in decision-making, and encourages a more effective administration (Olugbenga, 2001).

This discussion equally considers the spheres where journalists work daily and the extent to which it is easy or difficult to access news sources from those spheres, which include politics, economics, social, cultural, and religious issues. Accordingly, journalists' accessibility to political issues from government sources shows that 64.1% (109) often access political information, 13.5% (23) often access political information, 21.2% (36) rarely access political information, and 1.2% (2) never access political information. Scholars are keen to highlight the contributions of political news and information toward shaping the overall destiny of a people and a country (Curran, 2005; Nyamnjoh, 2005; Ngange, 2012; Katz & Blumler, 1974; McQuail, 1983, 2010; Kim & Lee, 2021).

Furthermore, this research has highlighted accessibility to information from economic actors in government, with 55.2% (94) indicating that they often access news and information from economic sources, and 0% (0) indicating that they never have access to economic information from government sources. So, the fact that all journalists access information from the economic sector is important because a successful and resilient economy remains the backbone of every successful country. The media need to communicate the economic agenda to obtain desired effects. This is where deliberate withholding of information is dangerous (Saich, 2004).

Access to information at the level of social affairs also received the following responses: 53.6% (92) often, 24.1% (41) sometimes, 21.8% (37) rarely, and 0% (0) never. This means that many journalists

agree that they access social information from government sources. Again, no journalist (0%) indicated complete inaccessibility, just as the case with the economic sector. Klang and Murray (2005) called for greater access to information because information sharing serves all members of society.

Also, journalists assessed the degree to which they access information on cultural issues from government sources, with the following statistics reported: 39.4% (67) often, 28.2% (48) sometimes, 31.8% (54) rarely, and 0.6% (1) never. As seen in trends of the data, access to information on cultural issues is minimal, when compared to politics and economic issues. Also, cultural information is crucial in the life of a country like Cameroon which has a variety of cultures. Cultural trends are also important in explaining the relationship between media and all components of society (Curran, 2005).

Further to this discussion, the second research question (H2) asks to what extent governmental information hoarding affects journalism practice in Cameroon.

To begin, journalists were asked to indicate whether or not they think information hoarding affects journalism practice, with the following responses recorded: only 2.4% (4) disagreed that governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism, 11.2% (19) remained neutral, and an overwhelming 86.4% (147) agreed that governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism practice. This data has implications for this research in that journalists are of the view that when valid information is kept away from them, it prevents them from effectively and efficiently practicing.

The gatekeeping theory (Lewin, 1947), used as one of the theoretical focuses of this study, is applicable here. In this case, government officials serve as gates that withhold information from reaching journalists who are in turn expected to make such information available for public consumption. When information is therefore kept, it permits journalists to frame what should go out to the public using only zero or minute details they may have, or better still speculate and disseminate rumour.

More concretely, journalists listed what they consider as the negative effects of information hoarding on journalism, as has been analyzed in the previous section. These core negative consequences include biased writing and reporting; inaccurate information circulation (fake news); difficulties in practicing journalism; disinformation and misinformation; the truth is hidden; leads to speculation and rumours; affects the credibility of media houses; limited information to the public; hinders the progress of news organs; discourages investigative reporting; opinion reporting; journalism becomes public relations and praise singing; sidelining the private media from major events; armchair journalism; limited press freedom; arrest, victimization, and intimidation of journalists; corruption; gatekeeping; does not give room for open thinking; puts to question journalism practice in Cameroon; only one media house has the clear facts; procrastination; creates a divide between private and state media; bureaucratic bottlenecks; leads to sensational journalism; and limits the power of the media.

What is clear from this analysis and in the discussion is that the negative consequences mentioned here are the opposite of professional journalism; that is, they go against the norms of principled and professional journalism. In essence, professional journalism has laid down rules and canons such as objectivity, fairness, accuracy, and balance (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; Deuze, 2005; McQuail, 2010). Inaccurate and biased reports, for instance, promote chaos, acrimony, bitterness, and confusion in society. So, it is important to contain the phenomenon of information hoarding, especially in government circles, as this research suggests.

In addition, the most controversial issues that are shaking the very foundations of journalism today are the dissemination of fake news, speculations, and rumours. This study has revealed that information hoarding promotes these tendencies. For example, individuals comfortably sit behind computers, fabricate information and circulate it on social media platforms. Some of these incidences can be prevented when journalists have the right information. In fact, Ireton and Posetti (2018) wrote extensively on "*Journalism, Fake News, and Disinformation: A Handbook for Journalism Education and Training*". The study revealed that fake news is bad, and should be avoided at all costs. This confirms the findings by Ngange and Mokondo (2019). In relation to fake news, misinformation (unintentional spreading of the wrong information) and disinformation (intentional spreading of the wrong information) become rife during moments of information scarcity. Accordingly, accessibility to government information can help in mitigating these ills in society.

This research contributes to theoretical and practical knowledge of journalists' accessibility to government news sources in Cameroon. The study is peculiar to Cameroon, but findings can be extrapolated to other contexts, especially around the African continent. This is so because most African countries share a similar or almost similar position on matters of governance, and the relationship between the press and governments in Africa (Nyamnjoh, 2005).

In addition, this research has been able to show that information is power and that denying journalists access to information is tantamount to denying a country the opportunity to develop; or better still, denying citizens the opportunity to participate in governance at the community, local, national, and international levels.

Again, journalists have several challenges when it comes to accessing government news sources. Most of the frustrations journalists encounter in accessing such useful information go unreported. This study has shown that this practice is dangerous as journalists are likely to resort to unscrupulous means of information gathering, treatment, and dissemination which may not align with core principles of journalism and journalism ethics (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2001; McQuail, 2010; Ngange, 2012).

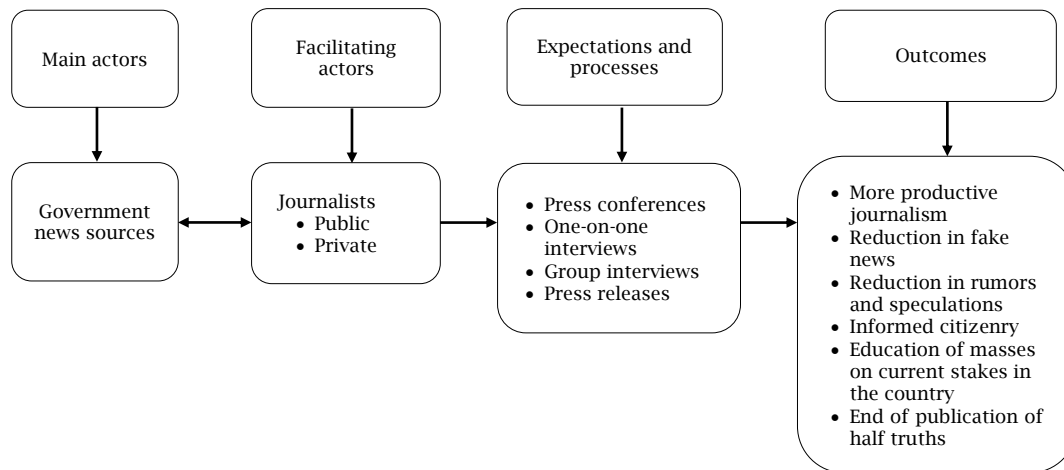
Furthermore, this research contributes to scientific knowledge through its due contributions to the kinds of attitudes that, first and foremost, government news sources should have about journalists and journalism; and secondly,

the attitudes and behaviour the journalists should have about journalism and government news sources. This study has established that government news sources and journalists are partners in national development. Hence, the kind of anarchy that exists between some media personnel and

institutions and some government news sources is expected to be reshaped and redefined, as the findings of this study suggest.

The following model in Figure 1 is designed from the empirical data of the study.

Figure 1. Empirical model on effects of governmental information hoarding



Source: Authors' conception.

The model explains that government news sources are the main actors that are expected to work with facilitating actors (journalists) for the expected results which centre on good journalism practice in Cameroon. Journalists' access to government information is thus expected to mitigate the ills that currently plague journalism; including biased reporting and fake news.

6. CONCLUSION

The conclusion of the study is based on the specific objectives: to assess the extent to which journalists access governmental news sources in Cameroon and evaluate the extent to which governmental information hoarding affects the practice of journalism in Cameroon.

Various government sources which journalists use for news and information have been uncovered, as well as the extent to which journalists access these sources. A stunning revelation is that government news sources that are closer to the grassroots (mayors, regional delegates, divisional officers, senior divisional officers, and governors) grant more accessibility to journalists when compared to the Presidency, Prime Minister's Office, vice prime ministers, secretaries-general of ministries, and ministers. This is probably because these sources are on the ground and so, are likely to interact more with journalists. These findings could be suggesting the need for government to give more power to the local authorities if the government is to think of having information properly filtered to the masses at the grassroots level.

Then, this study shows that governmental information hoarding negatively affects journalism practice in Cameroon. This is seen through biased coverage and reporting, fake news, rumour-mongering, sensationalism, and armchair journalism.

From the aforementioned findings of this research, recommendations are made to the following stakeholders.

Government: From the findings of this study, it is important for government news sources to readily make available information to journalists, including updating official websites. This will reduce speculation, increase media credibility, and ensure an informed citizenry that can be able to make critically informed decisions about the life of the country. It is also important for government news sources to treat all journalists (public or private) with fairness.

Journalists: Journalists should, as much as possible, be ethical and individually/socially responsible in their professional practice. This is crucial because when journalists follow ethical norms, it is likely that news sources will confidently give out information to them.

Media audiences: It is important for media audiences to proactively engage in government information. By so doing, they can contribute significantly towards good journalism (through participation in and questioning of media reports) and nation-building.

In terms of future research, this article can be used by researchers to probe further into the relationship between access to information from government news sources and journalism practice. Individual ministries could also be studied in future research endeavours. Future research could also consider the qualitative approach to this subject, through in-depth interviews, case studies, and narratives, amongst others. Future research could also consider access to information from the private sector. This is so because the private sector equally contributes significantly to the national economy of Cameroon.

The major limitation of this study is the lack of empirical data from government news sources. It could have been more methodologically comprehensive to listen to government news sources explain why they hoard information. However, such reasons have indeed been examined in the problematic and literature of this study such

as concerns relating to the individual and social responsibility of journalists. However, listening to government news sources per se could have been gainful. That is why the researchers are proposing that further research should consider this since the focus of the current study was on journalists and journalism practice.

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