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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Rising distrust: Digital media dethrones mainstream media

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary era, news reports are subject to intense public scrutiny due to the global credibility audit. This decline in public confidence in news poses a grave challenge to journalists, as their credibility is at stake. This decline is believed to be a consequence of the prevailing discontent and dismay with the contemporary journalism ecosystem, leading to a shift in public preference from mainstream media to social media as a news source. These trends have been in effect for over a decade and have profoundly impacted the digital landscape. Consequently, the central objective of this study is to comprehensively assess the profound shift in individuals' propensity to consume news, both through traditional channels and alternative online sources. The role of populism and polarization in eroding the integrity of journalism cannot be overlooked. The central inquiry of our study is to ascertain the existence of a nexus between the escalated use of social media and the pervasive mistrust in news or among consumers of news. To this end, we have employed the online survey of English-speaking internet users' tendencies commissioned by the Reuters Institute Digital News 2019 and 2021 reports. These reports have revealed that educated youth residing in cities extensively utilize Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms as their primary source for accessing online news, accompanied by a notable rise in distrust. This phenomenon endangers the long-term viability of mainstream media outlets, and the decline in objectivity observed in Indian media lends credibility to this concern.

Keywords: disinformation; misinformation; fake news; digital media; mainstream media; social media.

INTRODUCTION

IN THE contemporary era of complete digitization, society has been rapidly propelled towards an identity-driven frenzy, manifesting in both public and political spheres. This phenomenon, characterized by its queer nature, has not been beneficial; instead, it has propelled Indian society towards the brink of polarization. The increasing inclination towards identity politics has given rise to populism, which flourishes in a divisive environment. The prevailing tendency of the mainstream media in India to prioritize profit over principles has further exacerbated this trend, perpetuating a narrative that oscillates between ideological and affective polarization. This shift has led to a decline in public trust in media outlets, with many individuals seeking alternative sources of information. This phenomenon is further substantiated by the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021 findings, which acknowledge the prevailing trend. The report indicates that public trust in news outlets remains low

overall (44% globally) and that levels of trust vary significantly by country (Newman *et al.*, 2021).

In a small number of nations, election-centric politics has also had a detrimental effect on the objectivity and credibility of journalism. Consequently, extant research on the quality of information underscores the term "distrust in news media" (Gallup, 2018). This phenomenon is further compounded by the escalating influence of identity politics, exacerbated by the rise of populism and subsequent polarization. This study primarily employed the online survey data from the Reuters Institute India Digital News Report 2019 to further examine the growing distrust among individuals who access news via social media and other online platforms. The Reuters report indicates that globally, only 47% of individuals trust newspapers and magazines, rising to 49% for television and radio. In Malaysia, 68% of consumers expressed trust in media outlets, while in Poland, the figure stood at 27%. Online news websites and platforms found that 50% of respondents lacked trust in these channels, and 64% of those accessing the channels above via the internet admitted to distrust. The prevalence of distrust can be attributed to several factors, including political bias, the prioritization of speed over accuracy in reporting, and the publication of unverified news. According to the Ipsos Reputation Council, the media industry ranks among the top three globally regarding credibility challenges. Over the past five years, 34% reported a decrease in trust in newspapers and magazines, while 32% reported a decline in trust in online news websites and platforms. The proliferation of fake news has compounded these concerns, further eroding public trust in media outlets and their purported motives.

According to a survey conducted by Ipsos in 2019, 52% of respondents acknowledged the prevalence of fake news in various media outlets, including newspapers, magazines, television, and radio. However, only 50% expressed confidence in the integrity of news portals (Ipsos, 2019). A survey report in the Indian context revealed that most users perceive Hindi news channels as more inclined to sensationalize content and dramatize presentation compared to English channels. This tendency,

however, comes at the cost of factual accuracy as the channels compete for popularity. In this regard, India TV has been identified as a leader, followed closely by CNN IBN, Times Now, and Aaj Tak.

In contrast, Star TV and IBN 7 have been recognized for their balanced approach, with only 57% of respondents expressing confidence in their news coverage. The Edelman Trust Barometer, a survey conducted over 20 years in 28 countries, has revealed broader trends suggesting a gap in trust between different societal segments. The survey indicates that higher-income individuals are more inclined to support institutions while expressing skepticism towards the government and its officials. Additionally, there has been a rise in distrust concerning traditional media outlets' credibility, objectivity, and journalistic neutrality. Moreover, a pervasive sense of fear and despair has emerged, affecting individuals and communities across the globe (Edelman, 2020). A similar phenomenon has been observed among Indian journalists who have been subject to violence, trolling, threats of rape and death on social media, and the looming threat of sedition laws for criticizing government policies.

INDIAN MEDIA SCENARIO

According to the Registrar of Newspapers for India, as of March 31, 2023, India has 148,363 registered publications, of which 21,428 fall under the newspaper category (dailies, tri/bi-weekly periodicals) and the remaining 126,935 are periodicals. During 2022-2023, 2,318 new periodicals were registered, while 34 became defunct (See Table 1). The previous year, total registered publications grew by 1.05%, with the most significant number of vernacular (Hindi) publications at 57,050. The second largest number of newspapers and periodicals in English stands at 20,042. The total claimed circulation of publications during 2022-23 reached 4,027,492,225, with Hindi periodicals accounting for 1,996,368,883; English 393,112,277; Marathi 366,907,734; Telugu 213,056,637; Gujarati 171,571,74; Urdu 246,789,71; and Malayalam publications at 108,340,51. In 2022, the available data on the 885 existing television channels in the country reports a 1.5% decline in viewership. Of these

channels, 60% were free-to-air, a decrease from 64% in 2020. According to the Broadcasters Audience Research Council, all India TV reach dropped from 94% in 2018 to 82% in 2022. The weekly reach in 2017 was 91%, and it is now hovering around 83-84%. Prime-time TV viewership has decreased by 13%.

S. No.	Periodicity	Number of periodicals	Average circulation
1	Daily	10,152	23,22,92,405
2	Weekly	11,455	9,84,16,872
3	Fortnightly	2,989	1,88,28,556
4	Monthly	7,801	4,73,25,755
5	Quarterly	802	29,92,000
6	Half-Yearly	134	1,32,481
7	Annual	109	9,25,348
8	Others	325	18,35,808
Total		**33,767**	**40,27,49,225**
Miscellaneous		**178**	**33,56,456**

Table 1. Indian registered publications from 2022-2023 (Source: PIB Annual Statements 2022-2023).

The Republic of India has over 392 television news channels, including regional and private operators. In 2023, these channels collectively had an average minute audience (AMA) of approximately 1.5 trillion viewers. Additionally, India boasts 273,000 private FM radio stations, further diversifying its media landscape. According to the Broadcasters Audience Research Council, the All India TV reach has declined from 94% in 2018 to 82% in 2022. The weekly reach in 2017 was 91%, and it has now decreased to approximately 83-84%. A further analysis reveals a 13% decline in prime-time TV viewership. The nation currently boasts 1.12 billion cellular mobile active connections, representing 78% of the population. Of these, 751.5 million individuals are internet users, with a penetration rate of 52.4%, while 32.2% (462 million) utilize social media. Among all 366.9 million users, 462 million use Facebook, 362.9 million use Instagram, 121.6 million use Facebook Messenger, 120 million use LinkedIn, followed by Snapchat and X (Twitter), 120 and 26.08 million, respectively. The available data indicates that 383 million users aged 18 and above use social media, equivalent to 38.1% of the population. Of these users, 31.4% are female and 68.6% are male. In the contemporary landscape, social media platforms are constantly evolving and meticulously tailored to address a multifaceted user base's changing and emerging demands. With the rise of Artificial Intelligence, digital platforms are increasingly poised to address the demand for news and information from across the globe.

GLOBAL SOCIAL MEDIA SCENARIO

According to Priori data from 2025 (Shewale, 2024), the global social media user population was 5.20 billion, accounting for 64% of the world's population. Facebook leads the field with 3.15 billion active social media users per month. YouTube follows with 2.5 billion active users, Instagram with 2 billion, and TikTok, rapidly gaining popularity, has 1 billion active users globally. The data further delineates that 59% of social media users are within the 18 to 34 age demographic. The global social media landscape is predominantly male, with 48.4% of users identifying as male, compared to 51.6% female. The most prevalent activities among these social media users are watching videos (82%), reading news (76%), and interacting with friends and family (72%). Individuals currently allocate approximately 2 hours and 23 minutes daily to social media platforms. In the contemporary context, mobile devices account for approximately 98% of social media usage, with desktops and laptops accounting for the remaining 2%. Northern Europe has the highest social media penetration, with 82% of the population using social media, followed by Western Europe at 80% and Southern Europe at 75%. In contrast, Central and Southern Asia have low penetration rates of 41% and 45%, respectively.

GROWING DISTRUST AMONG INDIANS

The Indian news media landscape is confronted with a pervasive trust deficit between the public and the media. The factors contributing to this decline are multifaceted, including but not limited to a perceived lack of objectivity, sensationalism, biased reporting, and diminishing transparency. Trusted news media is essential for informed decision-making, and its erosion has significant implications for the public. However, the erosion of credibility and transparency in mainstream media has significantly

undermined public trust. The precipitous decline in public confidence in mainstream media can be attributed to a well-orchestrated strategy in which the right-wing government and its intermediaries began delegitimizing the former. Before the mainstream media outlets could respond, a significant number of them were acquired by crony conglomerates using substantial financial resources, and the rest is history. Consequently, the media has been transformed into a mere "parroting machine," deviating from its original purpose of serving the public. This shift has led to a significant void and despair among the younger generation, who have rapidly gravitated toward social media platforms in search of news, entertainment, information, and other content that aligns with their preferences. This paradigm shift, marked by the migration of a substantial population from mainstream media to social media, has profoundly impacted iconic and renowned media houses, which have found themselves increasingly controlled by large corporate entities. According to the Digital News Report 2021, a publication by the Reuters Institute, only 38% of Indians expressed trust in news, while 65% of individuals in Finland, 50% in Thailand, 54% in Brazil, and 61% in Kenya reported the same. The observed decline in public trust is often attributed to perceived bias in media reporting.

HOW DO POPULISM AND NEW MEDIA DEPEND UPON EACH OTHER?

Historically, populism has been characterized by a focus on economic grievances and class struggle. In contrast, 21st Century populism encompasses a broader range of issues, including cultural distress, identity politics, and the increasing influence of digital platforms (Jami & Kemmelmeier, 2022; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020; Noury & Roland, 2020). A more salient difference pertains to the role of digital platforms and social media in constructing and propagating the narratives underpinning 21st-century populism. Contemporary populist leaders have been adept at leveraging new media, specifically digital platforms and social media, to directly engage with their followers, enabling instantaneous dissemination of their messages. This process bypasses traditional media gatekeepers. This shift has facilitated the more effective dissemination of their rhetoric (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020).

Moreover, the resurgence of nationalist and nativist sentiments in the 21st century has given rise to a more complex and multilayered manifestation of the populist movement, which is prevalent in various countries worldwide. The concerted efforts of populist regimes to combat mainstream media have disseminated disinformation, prompting rapid societal polarization and the erosion of public trust in traditional media, ultimately leading to chaos (Huguet et al., 2019). The rapid advancements in technology have not only transformed the information landscape but also created challenges in the battle against the distortion of information and the discrediting of the media, thereby influencing the prevalence of disinformation and misinformation in society (Menczer & Hills, 2020).

In the contemporary context, populism has been increasingly bolstered by the advent of new media. This phenomenon, observed in various regions, initially manifested itself in the United States under the leadership of Donald Trump and subsequently in India under the leadership of Narendra Modi. Similar instances can be seen in the Swedish Democrats and Chinese nationalists. The success of these populist movements is primarily attributed to their strategic use of digital media to disseminate messages characterized by their incendiary nature and aggressive character, which is too extreme for mainstream media to cover. By circumventing the traditional gatekeepers of the press, populism has emerged as a dominant force in the political landscape. This dynamic relationship between populism and new media is crucial in understanding the current political landscape. The underlying logic behind populist political regimes' disdain for mainstream media is predicated on the latter's failure to censor inappropriate nationalistic rhetoric and profanity, which populists seek to disseminate to their target audience. To achieve this objective, populist political regimes clearly prefer digital media, facilitating direct communication with their intended audience.

Populism employs various strategies to discredit mainstream media outlets and reach a resolution. Right-wing populist regimes

espouse the propagation of falsehoods, seeking societal acceptance. These regimes have used such tactics to attain political legitimacy and establish themselves. The phenomenon of populism draws its strength from social conditions that give rise to movements and parties that brand "the people" in exclusionary terms. The success of populists could not have been achieved without non-mainstream digital media. The populists have gained a disproportionate advantage from the use of digital media. Populist messages, often deemed unsuitable for mainstream platforms, are disseminated online, often through alternative means of communication. In India and the United States, populism is characterized by a strong focus on leaders, while in Sweden, it takes the form of a party-centric movement. In China, populism manifests as a diffuse social and intellectual movement. In India and Sweden, populism has a robust foundation, while it is non-existent in China and America. The utilization of social media by these nations to circumvent the conventional gatekeepers of traditional media, political parties, and media establishments is a salient feature. The advent of populism as a potent force can be attributed, at least in part, to the influence of new media, which has facilitated the proliferation of populist ideas in the online public sphere and digital media, thereby contributing to a more effective mediation of political discourse (Hjarvard, 2008).

HOW DOES MEDIA POLARIZE THE ENVIRONMENT?

A consensus has been reached among scholars regarding the existence of systematic political polarization on a global scale. Contemporary political elites, elected officials, and the general populace are profoundly polarized due to the pernicious political atmosphere that prevails. This phenomenon manifests in two distinct forms: ideological and affective polarization. Ideological polarization is a deviation or departure from political opponents' political thinking, opinions, beliefs, and attitudes. Affective polarization, conversely, is predicated on the role of identity in politics and the exacerbation of animosity among out-groups (Gaertner *et al.,* 1993; Iyengar *et al.,* 2012). The ramifications of political polarization invariably impinge upon

the health of democratic institutions, engendering a centralization of power that, in turn, engenders widespread discontent. The process of political polarization serves to intensify the enmity between two opposing political factions. The media is pivotal in shaping public perceptions of the political environment. In the contemporary landscape, where media entities are becoming increasingly fragmented and overtly biased, individuals are compelled to align themselves with specific sides, thereby fostering a more pronounced sense of parochialism in terms of ideological orientation and emotional response.

The persistent trust deficit indicates a significant discrepancy between people's expectations and the quality of journalism. Consequently, various segments of Indian society seek alternative sources of trust and transparency. The extant statistics demonstrate an expansion of the aforementioned trust deficit. It is incumbent upon journalists to engage in introspection and renegotiation of their role orientation to ensure their relevance in this highly competitive environment. The core social responsibility of journalism, as a social phenomenon, and of journalists, as integral members of this altruistic force, is substantial. In alignment with the tenets of democratic principles, which are founded on the principles of the people, journalism's very purpose is to study, understand, serve, and create an informed and engaged society. However, in the current context, characterized by widespread chaos and anarchy, there is a conspicuous absence of the noble act of building trust and goodwill. The present moment necessitates a thorough examination of the factors that have led to the deviation from the original humanitarian purpose of journalism, which was to cultivate a sense of community. At this critical juncture, the onus falls on journalists to articulate narratives that resonate with the community and act as a catalyst for positive change, adopting a more thoughtful and inclusive approach in their reporting. The onus is not merely on journalists to craft narratives for the community; it is also incumbent upon them to meticulously craft these narratives in a manner that articulates their genuine intent to rebuild, inform, educate, and serve effectively.

IDENTITY POLITICS AND POLARIZATION

In the contemporary digital age, there has been a notable surge in the pursuit of identity, particularly within the public and political spheres. The question arises whether this recent inclination toward identity leads to any discernible outcomes. Intrinsically, this societal shift has led to the bifurcation of society into two distinct segments: one acquiescing to a set of proposed jingoistic and aggressive political ideologies and the other overtly rejecting them. The escalating polarization within society is particularly concerning, a phenomenon that emerges when influential figures or proponents of contentious ideologies seek to divide individuals into opposing factions. For an authoritarian regime predicated on exclusivity, free media is anathema, as it engenders the questioning of authority. Consequently, media outlets are swiftly compelled to toe the line, offering incentives in exchange for compliance. This process ultimately results in the curtailment of media freedom.

In contemporary times, the rise of far-rightist groups, particularly those adhering to the principles of "majoritarianism," has led to a palpable threat against those who do not acquiesce to their ideologies. Such political trends are still vibrant in some regions of the world, while others are on the decline as the expiration of their diabolical ideology approaches. These political movements, characterized by their self-identification with absurd "leaning" categories, exhibit characteristics of oppression, insularity, and political immaturity. The consequences of these political shifts have been profound, resulting in the erosion of social inclusivity and the breakdown of social cohesion. The media has been observed compromising its principles of neutrality and credibility in its coverage of these developments. In such circumstances, where the ruling regimes are perceived as self-centered and driven to maintain relevance, the media aligns itself with the former, thereby abdicating its core social responsibility. Consequently, the media becomes increasingly irrelevant, failing to fulfill its intended role. A similar phenomenon is likely occurring in other regions, including India.

It is noteworthy that such identity-focused groups do garner support, yet those who espouse truth, peaceful coexistence, and justice openly denounce them and the media that fawns over them. It is a curious phenomenon that the longevity of such authoritarian rulers or unconventional ideologies is often ephemeral. However, when these regimes or ideologies do end, they usually leave behind a considerable trail of destruction, causing irreparable harm to society. The media is frequently the primary victim of such destruction. This often engenders profound disdain and mistrust among the general public, with only a minority expressing support for public service media and other platforms. Consequently, the concentration of media ownership has increased, and individuals increasingly control media entities. This shift has led to a new norm of censorship and direct interference in media content. In such contexts, journalistic autonomy and discretion become secondary concerns. However, it is crucial to identify and study the factors that exacerbate this phenomenon to develop a scientific basis for our research and develop practical solutions.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

A seminal study by Hallin and Mancini (2004) offers a comprehensive classification system for media systems across Western nations. The study posits that media systems can be categorized into three distinct models: polarized pluralist, democratic corporatism, and liberal model. In this context, the United States is represented by the liberal model, characterized by high journalistic professionalism and the absence of state intervention. Conversely, India exhibits a mixture of characteristics indicative of the liberal model, though concerns regarding its credibility due to ongoing decadence are salient. However, India boasts a multichannel environment characterized by the robust presence of public broadcasters with operational autonomy (Sappal & Deshpande, 2023). However, concerns regarding India's cross-media ownership structure, its relationship with political elites, and the prevalence of "paid news" —whereby media entities offer preferential coverage in exchange for financial incentives, particularly during electoral periods— have led to questions regarding its journalistic integrity (Saeed, 2015). Conversely, South Korea,

despite its instrumental role in national democratization, has succumbed to the pressures of competitive media markets and advertising revenue, which have posed significant threats to newsrooms (Rhee *et al.,* 2011).

According to the Digital News Report 2021 findings, the internet penetration rate in both the United States and South Korea stands at 96%. In contrast, India exhibits a significantly lower rate of 54%. This is noteworthy given that 73% of the Indian population access news through their smartphones, compared to 63% in South Korea and 60% in the United States. In India, mobile aggregators and social media platforms play a dominant role in creating and consuming news. In South Korea, the emergence of discourse – *giraegi* (combination of journalist and trash in Korean), which conveys sentiments of disgust, hate, and shame surrounding the press, has engendered skepticism toward journalists (Shin *et al.,* 2021). According to the findings of the Freedom House's annual report for 2022, the overall freedom status of these three countries ranges from "partly free" in India to "free" in South Korea and the United States. This has led to a pervasive sense of distrust in the media. In India, for instance, the predominant news source for users is mobile aggregators, with Daily Hunt (23%), News Republic (19%), and News Point (15%) being the most popular. In the United States, most news consumers, constituting 72% of the population, rely on online sources for their news, with television (52%) and social media (42%) being the most prevalent sources. Consequently, the role of online intermediaries in curating news content becomes paramount in shaping users' perceptions of reliability and credibility (Park *et al.,* 2020).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

At this juncture, a considerable portion of the global population is rapidly disenchanted, dismayed, and disinterested in the journalistic ecosystem. This growing distrust has jeopardized media outlets' credibility, as people increasingly opt for social media over mainstream media due to its ability to cater to their needs and requirements. This study assesses the propensity of individuals who utilize social media and search engines to access news. The objective is to monitor the evolving dynamics and activities within the digital domain and to ascertain the interplay between online and offline media. The study will examine the relationship between users' demographic characteristics and engagement with news networks, mainly focusing on writers, journalists, and other stakeholders who play a pivotal role in shaping these networks.

Research question 1: Is there a link between the increasing use of social media to access news and general mistrust in the news?

Research question 2: Does heightened use of social media to consume news impact or cause distrust amongst news consumers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Journalism has faced significant challenges due to the declining public trust in news media over the past few decades. In the United States, this decline began in 1972, when 72% of Americans reported having a fair amount of confidence in mass media. However, recent data indicates a significant decrease in public trust, with a recent study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism reporting that only 20% of respondents in the US currently have a high level of trust in news outlets. A Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism survey (2021), which polled half of the global population, found that half of the countries surveyed expressed a lack of trust in the news. Furthermore, 30% of those who avoid such news believe it to be biased. These challenges pose a significant threat to the journalistic profession, as new readers may be reluctant to consume such news and are less likely to pay for it.

The erosion of trust in professional journalism is a key factor contributing to this trend, as it fosters a climate of suspicion and doubt among the public. This distrust prompts individuals to engage in fact-checking and selectively consume information that aligns with their personal beliefs, regardless of the credibility of the media outlets providing it (Nelson & Lewis, 2023). This growing distrust has led to animosity towards journalists, as evidenced by the rise in targeted harassment of journalists both online and offline (Mesmer, 2022). It is essential to acknowledge that members of the journalistic community share a common

concern regarding the pervasive nature of these sentiments, which include outrage, loathing, and distrust of their profession.

The rise of populist leaders worldwide has coincided with a decline in the trust placed in institutional elites and traditional governance models. This shift has led to growing social inequality and reduced economic opportunities. Such populist administrations took power under the guise of right-wing and parochial democracy in countries such as Hungary, India, Italy, Poland, Brazil, and the United States. Examples of this phenomenon include the rise of Podemos in Spain and the Bernie Sanders campaign in the United States (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018; Moffitt, 2020; Mouffe, 2018; Norris & Ingelhart, 2019).

In the 1950s and 1960s, individuals had limited news media and entertainment options. However, the world has significantly transformed media communication and related areas over the last 45 years. This considerable innovation has led to a proliferation of choices for the audience, empowering them to exercise discernment. Individuals can opt for platforms that align with their interests: news, entertainment, politics, business, sports, and more. Additionally, channels are led by renowned presenters with a distinct style and genres. Some of these presenters adhere to a mid-20th-century approach of presenting facts as they are, providing a contrast to the more modern methods of communication. Some blend it with opinion and analysis, while others adhere to their ideological niches, presenting information from either a liberal or conservative perspective.

According to Chelluri and Kaur (2012), globally, over 519 million printed newspapers reach an estimated 2.3 billion readers daily, 20% more than the Internet. However, the industry is shifting toward web, mobile, and interactive digital media. The newspaper industry generates an annual revenue of approximately $160 billion, and more than 3 billion people, accounting for 72% of the literate population, regularly read it. It is important to note that there are twice as many internet users worldwide as newspaper readers. Between 2006 and 2010, daily newspaper circulation saw a 17% decline in the US, 11.8% in Western Europe, 10% in Eastern and Central Europe, 16% in Asia-Pacific, and 4.5% in Latin America.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used data collected from the Reuters Institute Digital India News Report 2019. The data were intended to target the online English-language population of Indian descent in terms of age and region. YouGov established the target based on data from the Internet and Mobile Association of India, which reflects a small subset of English-speaking Indians who use the Internet. The survey included questions on news-seeking behaviors, trust in news, misinformation, and voting patterns. These questions were posed on various platforms and addressed factors such as trust in the news consumed by respondents and their concerns regarding misinformation. The sample size for India was 2,049, comprising young Indian English speakers, constituting a small subset of a larger, more diverse media market and not the national population. It was challenging to reach other groups via an online survey. Consequently, the online samples under-represent the news consumption tendency of older and less affluent groups, as online penetration in India is 54%. The respondents were relatively younger, came from wealthy backgrounds, had higher formal education, and resided in cities.

Therefore, the findings should not be assumed to be nationally representative. The study is marred with limitations, such as the reliance on recall in online surveys, which introduces potential biases. The study's findings are not comparable to industry data. While web-tracking is highly accurate, it is subject to certain limitations. However, the study attempts to mitigate these risks through meticulous question design and testing.

In some cases, data were drawn from other surveys and industry sources. Despite these limitations, the surveys were able to track changing patterns of media consumption across various platforms, such as social media and search engines. The survey posed a question regarding the reliability of news, seeking to gauge the country's overall trust in news sources. The news sources were as follows: 59% from TV, 82% from online sources (including social media), 63% from social media, and 50% from print media. Government broadcasters such as DD News (Doordarshan) and All India Radio (AIR) have a high level of trust

among consumers. Television brands, however, have been found to adopt a more polarized and sensational approach to their coverage, leading to a decline in overall trust. Despite its popularity, Republic TV exhibited lower trust scores compared to legacy print and television brands and the highest levels of distrust. Survey respondents reported extensively using WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram for news consumption.

ENGLISH-INTERNET USERS IN INDIA

According to the 2023 survey, 43% of internet users in urban India access the internet using English as their preferred language. Conversely, 57% of users access the internet using different Indian languages, with Hindi being the most preferred. It is estimated that over 300 million internet users reside in urban India. According to a joint report by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMI) and Kantar, approximately 45% of the Indian population lacked internet access as of 2023. The reasons for the gap in internet penetration in rural India may include inadequate awareness of the benefits of the internet, difficulty in understanding procedures, and a lack of interest. In recent years, there has been an uptick in the use of Indian languages for internet access, with Hindi leading the way. Currently, 45% of the population access the internet using English, 24% use Hindi, 6% use Tamil, 4% use Telugu, 3% use Malayalam, 3% use Marathi, 3% use Gujarati, 2% use Bengali, and 10% use other languages. By 2024, the internet penetration rate in India is projected to exceed 52% (886 million) users, and by 2025, it is likely to surpass 900 million. This has positioned India as the second-largest country in the world regarding active internet users, with half of the population of 1.4 billion having internet access. The urban population, which accounts for 55% of the internet population, is estimated to be 488 million.

Despite the affordability of internet services, India's digital potential remains untapped due to a lack of awareness and persistent gender disparities in the sector. In recent times, India has witnessed an unprecedented surge in digital living, with people increasingly turning to social media via smartphones for a wide range of information, education, research, and entertainment needs. The rapid growth in internet users in rural India, which is significantly higher than in urban areas, is a key driver of India's digital landscape. In 2023, rural India accounted for 442 million internet users, representing over half of the country's population. From 2015 to 2022, India's internet penetration rate increased from 27% to 49%. A recent development is the increasing consumption of regional language content by over 57% of urban internet users, highlighting the growing demand for local language content across various platforms. This trend also contributes to narrowing the gender gap, with 47% of all internet users in India being female. Female internet users also form a significant portion of shared devices in rural regions, accounting for 58%. Internet penetration has grown substantially in rural regions but remains limited in urban areas.

Rural India is rapidly catching up to urban regions by embracing digital technologies, such as over-the-top (OTT) video, music streaming, online communication, and social media usage. The growing digitization initiative has enabled many people in India to use the internet actively. Of the total internet users, 462 million are active social media users, with 83% and 80% using WhatsApp and Instagram, respectively. The 2023 edition of the English Proficiency Index (EPI) ranked India #60 globally, with an EPI score of 504 points out of 800. This indicates that approximately 10% of the population is proficient in English, with regional variations in English speaker populations. According to the 2011 census conducted by the Government of India, English was spoken by only 10.2% of the population. Of this statistic, 0.02% of Indians speak English as their first language, 6.57% as their second, and 3.5% as their third. However, a second survey by the Lok Foundation in partnership with Oxford University found a slightly lower percentage of 6% of Indians speak English. This discrepancy can be attributed to socio-economic factors.

RESULTS

The report is based on data from a survey of English-speaking internet users in India. This is a small subset of a larger, more diverse, complex Indian media market. The respondents are

affluent, highly educated, and urban residents. However, it is essential to note that this sample does not necessarily represent the broader population. The study revealed that 68% of respondents in India primarily use smartphones for online news consumption, with 38% reporting that they access news on their mobile devices. Most users employ various methods to access news, with 32% utilizing search engines, 24% turning to social media, and only 18% considering direct access as their primary news source. The study also revealed the widespread use of Facebook and WhatsApp. Among the respondents, 75% use Facebook, and 52% reported using it for news. WhatsApp was also used by 82% of respondents, with 52% of them using it for news.

Other social media platforms used to access news include Instagram (26%), Twitter (18%), and Facebook Messenger (16%). For respondents under 35, the primary news source was online, with 56% citing it as their primary source. Social media ranked second, at 28%, while print media was cited as the primary source by only 16% of respondents in this age group. By contrast, respondents over 35 demonstrated a more balanced approach to news consumption, with a higher propensity to integrate both online and offline media in their news consumption. Many respondents acknowledged sharing 50% of online news content and commenting on 33%, demonstrating robust engagement with social media handles such as Facebook and WhatsApp. However, many respondents expressed reservations about overtly expressing their political views online, as it could potentially impact their friends and family's perceptions of them (49%) and colleagues' perceptions of them (50%) and even lead to legal issues (55%). The respondents reported widespread use of websites from leading legacy media, including broadcasters and newspapers. The survey revealed a significant segment of respondents (36%) who expressed a low overall trust in news. However, a notable proportion (39%) of these individuals reported using news in their personal lives. Interestingly, a higher percentage of respondents in this group (45%) placed a high level of trust in news accessed through search engines, social media, and other online sources. This is a notable distinction from respondents in different countries.

Furthermore, approximately 57% of respondents expressed uncertainty regarding the authenticity of online news content. Concerns regarding potential disinformation were expressed by many respondents, with 51% citing hyperpartisan content, 51% citing poor journalism, and 50% citing fake news. Notably, a significant proportion of respondents expressed a desire for customized mobile news alerts, online news videos, and the option to donate to support news organizations or to pay for news in the future. Among those who currently do not pay for online news, 31% expressed a moderate likelihood of doing so in the future, while 9% indicated a strong inclination to do so.

DISCUSSION

The rapid and constant changes in the media landscape and the latest technological advancements should prompt news organizations to take note. It is crucial to recognize the rapid advancements in the digitized media landscape, which is generating, distributing, and catering to the diverse needs of a constantly evolving and informed audience. To maintain relevance, contemporary media must transform journalistic practices by adopting innovations and advancements at an unprecedented scale. To remain competitive and practical, it is essential that news organizations re-evaluate and modernize their entire value chain, encompassing technological integration and service delivery.

Similarly, the integration process must adhere to the fundamental principle of informing, making aware, and educating society. In the face of evolving technology and changing consumer habits, mainstream media must adapt by embracing digital technologies and innovative business models. Digital media not only disseminates information but also seeks end-user feedback to modify and reorganize itself to remain socially relevant and commercially viable in the rapidly changing competitive environment. The advent of digitization has endowed audience members with greater autonomy, diminishing news organizations' overbearing role. The traditional gatekeeping model will continue to face challenges. In India, social media was often accused of

manipulation, bias, and prejudice a decade ago. However, in the current landscape, we observe mainstream media (a select few TV channels and newspapers) overtly promoting biased and chauvinistic narratives that benefit certain political entities. This shift has profoundly altered the media landscape and its role in society. The increasing migration of users from mainstream media to digital platforms clearly indicates the latter's superior performance in meeting users' information needs. This trend has led many mainstream audiences to seek balanced news, views, and accurate information from alternative sources like YouTube.

The exodus that began in 2014 has led to a significant decline in viewership and readership (TRPs) of mainstream media. The ongoing debates on several prominent TV channels often result in heated confrontations and prominent headlines in major newspapers, highlighting the rapid rise of polarization. In this new media era, autonomy-driven audiences shape media consumption. To remain relevant and sustainable, TV and print media must accept collaboration and transformation in the context of new media. Television and print media can maintain their relevance and sustainability by embracing cooperation and adaptation in the digital landscape. However, it is unfortunate that mainstream media has seemingly abandoned its ethical standards and is currently refusing to acknowledge the imminent challenges.

Contribution statement

Conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, methodology, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing: Joseph Philips.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Declaration of data consent

No data was generated during the development of this study. ●

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