

Mass media credibility: A study of readers' perception of bias in leading english dailies

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ABSTRACT

The news media — particularly television and the press – are the chief purveyors of information. Increasingly, however, the public has become disenchanted with its news source. To many journalists, the growing tendency of the public to discount the news as biased and inaccurate is one of the more unsettling criticisms of their profession. In the recent years, mass media credibility and the issue of media bias has been talked about to a great extent. Mass media credibility has been defined and studied largely as an attribute of message sources. This paper argues that trust in media can be better understood as a relational variable—an audience response to media content. In addition, audience assessments of credibility are commonly explained as the result of each individual's skeptical disposition, either toward mass media in particular or as a general trait. To an increasing degree, news organizations are perceived as biased by the general public.

Key Words : Mass media credibility, Media bias, Media slant, Readers' perception

INTRODUCTION

By virtually all accounts, the mass media play a vital role in society. For most citizens, the news media — particularly television and the press – are the chief purveyors of information. Increasingly, however, the public has become disenchanted with its news source. To many journalists, the growing tendency of the public to discount the news as biased and inaccurate is one of the more unsettling criticisms of their profession. In the recent years, mass media credibility and the issue of media bias has been talked about to a great extent.

Mass media credibility has been defined and studied largely as an attribute of message sources. This paper argues that trust in media can be better understood as a relational variable—an audience response to media content. In addition, audience assessments of credibility are commonly explained as the result of each individual's skeptical disposition, either toward mass media in particular or as a general trait. To an increasing degree, news organizations are perceived as biased by the general public.

Review of literature:

Regarding media bias, a key finding is that perception of bias is negatively associated with the

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perception of accuracy. Gunther *et al.* (2001) suggest a mechanism for the impact of the perception of bias on media use. The perception of bias in a given article is positively related to the perception of the media being biased generally and also negatively related to accuracy perceptions. Each of these perceptions has the potential to impact users' perceptions of the credibility of their news sources, and a loss of belief in credibility of a news source renders the source less useful. Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, and Chia recruited partisans highly involved in the issue of primate research (from animal rights groups and from among workers at a primate research center) and presented four articles: two focused on animal rights issues and two on the value of primate research. Readers holding either position on the issue considered the articles slanted against their position. More important, the researchers found that perception of individual article bias led directly to perception of general media bias.

Baum and Gussin (2008) state that it has been often argued that whether or not bias is an objective characteristic of media content that social scientists can measure with some degree of precision. Certainly, many have tried. Self-described media watchdog groups such as the Media Research Center (MRC), the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), and Fairness and Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR) claim to objectively analyze media content. Yet they routinely disagree on the incidence, severity, and direction of bias in the media. Scholarly attempts to assess media bias are similarly inconclusive. An alternative possibility is that bias is, at least in significant measure, a matter of perception; a consumer's assessment based more on his or her own prior beliefs – however accurate or inaccurate — than the actual content of information presented by the media at a given point in time. This raises the possibility that in an increasingly fragmented media marketplace, individuals distinguish between media outlets. If so, outlet brand names, and the reputations they carry, may function as heuristics, influencing perceptions of bias in content.

Choi *et al.* (2009) stated that, it seems, however, that concerns about media bias are rooted not with journalists, editors, or media outlets in general, but with the presumed impact that the media have on others.

On similar grounds (Louis *et al.*, 2010) opined that the individuals may be less concerned with the actual content and quality of reporting and more troubled by how this coverage will impact the opinions of others.

In the United States, The Pew Research Center in 2011 reported that 66% of Americans feel that news stories are inaccurate, 77% perceive a one-sided favoritism in the news, and 80% believe that the media are influenced by powerful individuals and organizations (Kohut *et al.*, 2011)⁵.

Journalistic norms dictate that the media should aim for accuracy and balance in their reporting. As Ho *et al.* (2011) noted, the basic idea of media bias is incongruent with the most fundamental guidelines of media organizations.

Objectives of the study:

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To know the readers' perception of presence of media bias in English dailies;
2. To get the readers' opinion regarding the issue of media credibility;
3. To know about readers' perception of the most credible media.

METHODOLOGY

The Survey method of research has been adopted for this study. In this study we have developed

a structured questionnaire to collect the data regarding the readers' perception of presence of media bias in leading English dailies. The eligible respondents were the readers of four leading English dailies namely *The Indian Express*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Times of India* and *The Tribune*. The total number of respondents was 400 as one hundred readers of each newspaper were included in the survey. There were 266 males and 134 females in the sample. The respondents were asked several questions about the issue of media bias in general and also some specific questions regarding their perception of bias in their newspaper. The questionnaire was designed using Likert scale for achieving precise answers from the respondents. The survey was carried out in the four districts of Haryana, namely, *Panchkula*, *Ambala*, *Kurukshetra* and *Karnal*. The survey was conducted in the months of May-June, 2018.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It has been observed that majority of the respondents agreed upon the fact that the media, nowadays, is biased. Among the 400 respondents, 165 strongly agreed while 183 agreed to the fact. Thus 87 per cent respondents in total believe that media is biased.

Table 1 : Perception of bias in media						
Name of the Newspaper	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do Not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The Indian Express	40	48	4	5	3	100
Hindustan Times	36	52	6	4	2	100
The Times of India	42	44	3	7	4	100
The Tribune	47	39	5	8	1	100
Total	165	183	18	24	10	400

As far as the media content is concerned, majority of the readers believe that the media serves them a biased opinion rather than serving them factual information. Out of the 400 respondents 22 strongly agreed to the fact while 250 agreed to it.

Table 2 Perception of media serving biased opinion						
Name of the Newspaper	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do Not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The Indian Express	7	58	7	23	5	100
Hindustan Times	2	62	11	18	7	100
The Times of India	12	67	3	13	5	100
The Tribune	1	63	19	12	5	100
Total	22	250	40	66	22	400

The respondents, when asked about the credibility of Indian media, agreed in majority that it is losing its credibility. Thirty three respondents strongly agreed while 306 respondents out of 400 agreed to the fact.

Table 3 : Perception regarding Indian media's credibility						
Name of the Newspaper	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do Not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The Indian Express	9	78	2	3	8	100
Hindustan Times	11	70	8	3	8	100
The Times of India	6	77	8	7	2	100
The Tribune	7	81	3	2	7	100
Total	33	306	21	15	25	400

The majority of the respondents believe that the staff of the newspapers *i.e.* the reporters and the copy editors have a biased approach when it comes to the selection of news stories. A total of 79 per cent respondents replied to this question in the affirmative.

Table 4 : Perception regarding reporters'/copy editors' bias

Name of the Newspaper	Strongly Agree	Agree	Do Not Know	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
The Indian Express	7	73	10	8	2	100
Hindustan Times	1	68	13	8	10	100
The Times of India	3	80	4	5	8	100
The Tribune	3	81	2	11	3	100
Total	14	302	29	32	23	400

The most interesting part of the study is that when the respondents were asked to give their choice regarding the most credible media, they chose newspapers. A total of 334 respondents out of 400 agreed that newspaper is the most credible media while 27 respondents voted in favor of Television. A total of 18 respondents went with Radio while 16 registered Websites as their choice. The least credible media in the eyes of respondents was the Social Media which could gain only five votes.

Table 5 : Perception regarding the most credible media

Name of the Newspaper	Newspaper	Television	Radio	Websites	Social Media	Total
The Indian Express	82	8	5	4	1	100
Hindustan Times	87	4	2	5	2	100
The Times of India	80	7	6	6	1	100
The Tribune	85	8	5	1	1	100
Total	334	27	18	16	5	400

Findings:

The study revealed that majority of the respondents agreed upon the fact that the media, nowadays, is biased. 87 per cent respondents in total believe that media is biased. As far as the content of the media is concerned, the readers opined that they are being served a biased opinion by the media and media is not serving them factual information. The study also establishes the fact that Indian media is losing its credibility in the eyes of its consumers. The majority of the respondents also certified the fact that the staff of the newspapers *i.e.* the reporters and the copy editors have a biased approach when it comes to the selection of news stories. This, however, has a little effect on the popularity of newspapers as when the respondents were asked to give their choice regarding the most credible media, they chose newspapers. A total of 334 respondents out of 400 agreed that newspaper is the most credible media while 27 respondents voted in favor of Television. A total of 18 respondents went with Radio while 16 registered Websites as their choice. The least credible media in the eyes of respondents was the Social Media which could gain only five votes.

Conclusion:

It can be concluded that the public has become disenchanted with its news source, nowadays, and they perceive the media as biased. Not only this, they believe that the information providers

serve them with slanted and manipulated information. It must be mentioned here that it is quite possible that this assessment may be based more on their own prior beliefs – however accurate or inaccurate. Nevertheless, the fact remains that now the consumers have started doubting the news providers and the credibility of media is in question.

Thus it can be said that creating, enhancing and maintaining media credibility is extremely important for media companies, in view of the numerous options available to audience. We can conclude by quoting Porral *et al.* (2014) that, “The media managers should give more attention to the practices that can positively affect their news media credibility from the customer’s standpoint, which are the media associations or image, along with their loyalty and awareness. Additionally, news media managers should focus on increasing the perceived quality of their media brands in order to ensure the long-term survival and profitability of their media.”

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