Breaking News or Breaking Trust? The Impact of Credibility Menace on Indian Media

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Abstract: The credibility dilemma that is currently affecting the Indian media and the influence that it has on India's diverse population is the subject of this research paper on India. For the purpose of discussing the credibility threat posed by Indian media, the study mostly focuses on notable Indian media coverage, such as the rallies against the Citizen Amendment Bill (CAB) and the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA), as well as the COVID-19 controversy. The propaganda model, mass media theory, and reception theory have all been utilised to investigate the factors that contributed to the crisis in the media's credibility. These factors, such as sensationalism, biased reporting, and the influence of political parties, have been investigated. The quantitative approach was utilised to survey 203 media students who are residents of Bangalore and come from Delhi and Northeast communities. SPSS software is utilised to analyse the data provided by respondents. The remainder of the research presents insightful findings, and it concludes with a demand for media outlets to prioritise responsible and impartial reporting to restore the faith of the general public in the media and to maintain the integrity of Indian democracy.

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1. Introduction

Media plays a pivotal role as a fourth pillar in democracy. According to the latest data, urban regions have a literacy rate of 87.7%, while rural areas exhibit only 73.5%. In such a scenario, the media's role becomes more significant in broadening the thinking and shaping the opinion of the nationals with unbiased information [16]. Media news must promote unity and brotherhood among the nationals, which helps instil faith in democracy and justice. Media professionals must avoid drifting away into egotism, elitism, Isolationism, or nihilism. Instead, they need to work to empower the citizens by arranging informative stories and debates on current affairs and policies so that different views can be put forth. However, it has been noticed for almost one and a half decades that Indian mainstream media have strayed away from the established ethics of journalism and become a propaganda tool to set the different narratives of single news [6].

Media houses are now setting an agenda that distracts the community's attention from basic needs. It promotes nationalism and jingoism issues [13]. News is now turned into media trials. Live media coverage of the 26/11 terrorist attack on Mumbai is a prominent example of this, as it affected the rescue operation and became advertently or inadvertently the tool of the terrorists' hands [14]. This event shows that the media credibility crisis is not new. The 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai urged the urgent need to regulate media broadcasting, but the government chose to maintain freedom of speech. Indian broadcasting media is

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primarily self-regulated. News Broadcasting Standard Authority (NBSA), a self-regulatory organization, has its code of ethics and issues standards and guidelines [11].

The credibility crisis in the Indian news media has become a considerable concern as it affects social harmony by setting communal agendas in the news [10]. The internet has created a big challenge as this platform is used to spread anti-national activities, resentment, and hatred through fake audio and visual news posts.

This research becomes necessary when mainstream media of such a massive democracy like India pretend to be a public voice but decline ethical Journalism and work as political parties' agents. They set media discourse agendas to fulfil political parties' ulterior motives at the cost of communal peace and the country's law and order [7]. This paper aims to explore:

- To analyze the different patterns of news coverage on digital and mainstream media platforms and identify the factors contributing to the differences.
- To examine the impact of news biases and fabricated media discourse on the Indian audience and explore ways to mitigate their influence in distracting attention from primary needs and common issues to communal discourse by setting altered agendas.
- To investigate the role of the niche audience in influencing a mass audience to polarize audience perception by media.
- Identify strategies to prevent the manipulation of public opinion through such tactics.

2. Significance of the Study

As television channels serve as a vital source of news and information in a democracy, people rely heavily on the media's credibility. The audience forms their opinions and decisions based on their trust in what is being broadcasted. In India, trust in media has declined for an extended period due to the influence of certain commercial news channels that cast doubts over the credibility of other news channels.

The pressure of TRPs on news channels has led to a deterioration in the quality of news, with a focus on creating a saleable product without adequate consideration for journalistic ethics. Given that media significantly influences and shapes mass behaviour perception, this study aims to examine the surveillance function of media and the notable decline in media credibility. From this perspective, this study assumes critical importance.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

The present study is underpinned by the propaganda model of the Political Economy of the Mass Media (1988), authored by [9], which sheds light on the pervasive biases and propaganda in corporate mass media in India. The model puts forth five filters that shape the "raw material of news" before it reaches the audience. The filters determine what events are deemed newsworthy, how they are covered, where they are positioned within the media, and how much coverage they will receive [9].

The first filter pertains to the concentrated ownership of mass media firms, their wealth, and profit orientation, which means that corporate media houses share common interests with other sectors of the country's economy. The second filter relates to advertising, the primary income source for mass media. The third filter concerns the media's reliance on government, business houses, and "experts," backed or approved by primary sources and power representatives.

The fourth filter is flak, which disciplines the media by criticizing and correcting journalists or news organizations that diverge too far outside the consensus. Finally, the fifth filter is anti-communism, which suggests that corporate media serve to manufacture consent for a narrow range of self-serving elitist policy options.

The mass media theory, which is associated with both mass and niche audiences, supports this study in understanding the impact of media news on the audience. Niche audiences, which are smaller and possess a unique interest in influencing the masses, are frequently used by all media institutions to suit their convenience [16].

Stuart Hall's Reception Theory, 1980 [23], which examines audience behaviour concerning the reception and interpretation of media content, posits that the audience shares a specific interpretation framework and decodes media content according to their experiences and social and demographic thinking. Consequently, the audience decodes the meaning of a message according to their understanding. This theory can be linked to the present scenario of the Indian audience and their way of news reception and interpretation of media information.

2.2. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this research is based on four components, evident in Indian mainstream media. That is:

- Corporate media works for profits and media reliance/TRP. Neera Radia Tape case and Sudhir Chaudhary extortion case are some cases that indicate the biases of Indian media in news framing and agenda setting. Media is divided into a left and right ideology that serves only the political agenda, not the public interest.
- India's media sets a discourse agenda based on political polarization. This affects the tone of the news and sets a specific narration per the media ideology.
- Pro-government propaganda (Godi Media) vs Media Ethics (Presstitutes) Now, the media is not serving the public interest. However, they are working as Pro-government propaganda (Godi Media) vs. Media Ethics (Presstitutes).
- There is a High Risk to the Indian Social fabric through manipulated news content and degraded political discourse. Communal narration over factual and object narration threatens India's essence.

3. Review of Literature

The literature review includes the Neera Radia tape case, Sudhir Chaudhary extortion case, anti-CAB (Citizen Amendment Bill) and CAA (Citizen Amendment Act) protest, and Covid-19 crisis to discuss the credibility menace of Indian media. Discussing these cases will help to understand the media foundation and current media landscape, which lead to credibility crises.

3.1. Tracing the Roots of Credibility Crisis in Indian Media

The Neera Radia telephonic conversation tape leak case 2010 sent shockwaves through the Indian media industry, revealing unethical relationships between senior journalists, big media brands, influential corporate houses, and the government itself [2]. The leaked tapes exposed high-profile journalists such as Barkha Dutt, Vir Sanghavi, and Prabhu Chawala, who were included in lobbying for political parties and controversial telecom licenses. This revelation raised some serious questions about journalistic integrity. How can a journalist risk be compromising the sanctity of government and ministry information? Barkha Dutt defended herself by claiming to use journalistic tactics to extract information from sources.

However, the lack of substantial evidence leaves much to be desired. If she had known about Neera Radia's lobbying, why did she not report it on her bulletin? Where are the media reports that reveal evidence of monetary exchange? How can a well-known journalist disregard journalistic ethics and plant stories to fulfil a lobbyist's needs? Journalists must be held accountable for their actions and ensure that they adhere to the highest ethical standards to maintain the integrity of the media industry [20].

The Sudhir Chaudhary extortion case in 2012 is widely considered to be a significant stain on the reputation of Indian media. In November of that year, two editors from the Zee TV group were arrested on charges of extortion filed by Congress MP Naveen Jindal [17]. Specifically, Jindal accused the editors of attempting to extort 100 crore rupees worth of advertising from Zee TV in exchange for dropping stories related to the Coalgate scam that implicated Jindal Group. The accusations were found to have merit based on the evidence, and the editors were subsequently sent to jail [18]. This case again highlights the need for ethical journalism and the importance of upholding the integrity of the media industry.

In the aftermath of the 2014 Indian general election, a contentious debate was ignited among media professionals regarding the credibility of Indian media. The discussion accelerated after Magsaysay award-winning journalist Ravish Kumar from NDTV India used the "Godi Media" term to describe specific news channels he believed were mouthpieces for one political party [1]. In response, Union Minister General V.K. Singh used the term "Presstitutes" to refer to media outlets that he claimed were biased against the NDA-led central government and were being used as propaganda tools by Congress and Left parties. These two terms have created a never-ending debate over the integrity and objectivity of Indian media, with both sides fiercely defending their positions.

3.2. CAB, CAA, NRC and NPR

The anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protest has caused a massive uproar in India and gained international attention. The protests began in response to the act's passage on December 11, 2019, and subsequent assent by the president on December 12, 2019. Initially, the demonstrations were concentrated in the Northeastern states of Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, and Assam, but later, they became more intense in Assam. The Assam protest against the CAA is connected with the state's anti-foreigner agitation that lasted six years, from 1979 to 1985.

The All-Assam Students Union and All Assam Sangram Gana Parisad led the anti-foreigner agitation aimed at Bangladeshi illegal immigrants who entered Assam due to the state's proximity to the Bangladesh border and were included in the voter lists of the 1967 elections. The agitation was massive and violent, targeting this group.

The then Congress-led Central Government, headed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, tried hard to engage with the Assam agitators from 1980 to 1984, but no agreement could be reached. After Mrs Gandhi's assassination, her son, Late Mr. Rajiv Gandhi (then Prime Minister), initiated peace talks with the Assam agitators, which led to the signing of the Assam Accord on August 15, 1985.

The Assam Accord had 15 clauses, and its key points were to address the issue of foreigners, promote the economic expansion of Assam, prevent the acquisition of immovable property by foreigners, prevent the encroachment of government lands, register births and deaths to ensure political rights and safeguard the social, cultural, and economic development of the Assamese people [3].

Clauses 5 and 6 of the Assam Accord are very significant in this regard. It deals with foreign issues such as detecting foreigners in Assam, deleting their names from the voter lists, deporting them to their origin country, and safeguarding constitutional, legislative, and administrative rights [4].

These foreigners were differentiated and identified under three groups, and two dates had become important- January 1, 1966, and March 24, 1971. According to this, all foreigners who came to Assam before January 1, 1966, and their names appeared in the voter list for 1967, would be granted India's citizenship. Those people who arrived in Assam after January 1, 1966, up to March 24, 1971, would be detected under the provision of the Foreigner Act 1946 and Foreigner Tribunal Order 1964 [8]. They need to register as a foreigner under the registration of the Foreigner Act 1939. They would not be deported but would get voting rights after the expiry of 10 years from their detention as foreigners.

Anyone who entered Assam after March 25, 1971, needs to be expelled. At that time, citizenship was not granted based on religious persecution. Clause 6 of the Assam Accord includes Constitutional legislative and administrative safeguarding majors that need to be taken by the central government to protect, present, and promote the socio, cultural, linguistic identity, and heritage of Assamese people [15].

3.3. Assamese agitation against CAA 2019

To protect their indigenous identity, culture, language, and economic and political rights, Assam had bled for six years to get an updated National Register of Citizens (NRC). Now, the new CAA has shredded the Assam Accord into pieces. Assam and Tripura both share a border area with Bangladesh. They fear that through CAA 2019, naturalizing large numbers of immigrants will significantly threaten the regime's demographic, cultural, and political rights [21]. The accord is divided into pieces, and Assam and Tripura share border areas with Bangladesh. They fear that through CAA 2019, naturalizing large numbers of immigrants will significantly threaten the region's demographic, cultural and political rights [22].

According to the new CAA 2019, due to religious persecution, Indian citizenship will be given to Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain, and Parsi communities who have arrived in India before December 31, 2014, from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan [5]. They will no longer be treated as illegal immigrants. The law decreases the duration of refugees' residency from 11 years to just five years. Over the clamour of opposition parties about discriminatory law, the central government explains that Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Bangladesh are Islamic republic's where Muslims are in the majority. Hence, there is no need to treat Muslims as persecuted minorities. They mentioned that the central government would examine other applications from any other community on a case-to-case basis. The cut-off date is a colossal issue for the Assamese in CAA 2019. That is why they were protesting; if they accepted the new CAA, Assam would agree to receive a significant inflow of refuse, and Assamese identity would be lost.

Along with this, another protest was going on by those who were excluded from the NRC list and were considered illegal migrants from Bangladesh in India. They were 1.9 million people. Media had highlighted the second type of protest because it was religion and propagated that CAA and NRC were against Muslims. The Central government was planning to make India a Hindu Rastra. This narrative fits the characteristics of the Bhartiya Janta Party and the Narendra Modi government. Media feed Assam-phobia to the whole country by adding communal colour to the protests. Mainstream media hijacked Assames and highlighted Shaheen Bagh to serve their corporate benefits. Some have even said that Assam protests prove Indian Muslims are now alone in the fight against the citizenship law.

The Shaheen Bagh protest had received worldwide coverage in the media, and big-shot people started to share the stage to show solidarity with Shaheen Bagh Protesters. Soon, this agitation spread massively in the whole county. It was noticed that

protesters did not understand the bill but had come forward to protest without going into depth. The media failed to provide objective news stories and became a propaganda tool to polarize public opinion. The media discourse agenda has been set by including niche audiences to influence the mass audience.

The Indian media's coverage of the COVID-19 pandemic has been a concern for many, and the media credibility crisis has been severe. Rather than focusing on providing solutions to the problems related to the pandemic, some media coverages have been sensationalized and scary. This has resulted in creating a sense of fear and panic among people, which has a negative impact on their mental health and well-being [19]. Remembering people's sensitivity and mental health conditions before showing news related to the pandemic is crucial. News coverage should facilitate accurate information and educate people about the precautions they should take to stay safe and prevent the spread of the virus. By doing so, we can contribute towards creating a healthier and safer community. It is necessary to focus on providing solutions and information rather than sensationalizing the news and creating fear among people.

The media coverage of treatment options was found to be misleading. According to a study [11], 40% of media coverage of treatment options provided misleading information, such as suggesting that plasma therapy or chloroquine were effective. Moreover, only 1.9% of articles discussed equity issues, even though many prevention activities, like distancing, are less applicable in lower-income households. While 67% of articles quoted credible sources such as public health agencies and researchers, most of the coverage preceded WHO updates. These findings underscore the need for Indian media to focus on actionable and relevant reporting that guides individual responses. It is crucial that the media report on evidence-based prevention and treatment options to prevent the spread of misinformation.

4. Methodology

The present study has adopted an empirical research design to delve into the credibility crisis that has engulfed the mainstream media in India. The study aims to investigate the underlying reasons that have led to this crisis and its impact on the Indian audience. To achieve this, the study has employed quantitative data collected through close-ended questions formulated in English. The questionnaire was distributed to respondents through various social media platforms such as Messenger and WhatsApp. The study has identified media agenda, corporate benefits, political affiliations, TRP race, advertising revenue, media reliance, audience perception, and niche audience vs. mass audience as variables that will be considered in the present study.

The data required for this study was collected using the snowball sampling technique. The study was centred around media studies students and Assamese individuals. Media students were chosen due to their academic background and regular exposure to news media, enabling them to provide insights into the ongoing media crisis. The total sample size for this study is 203. The study has approached participants from various media institutions such as the School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Satya Group of Institutions Noida, Guru Govind Sigh Indraprastha University Dwaraka New Delhi, Institute of Management Studies Ghaziabad, Galgotias University Greater Noida, and media students from different states across India, including Uttar Pradesh, Delhi, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, Maharashtra, Guru gram Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh.

Participants from the Assamese society in Bangalore and Assam have also been approached. The media students participating in this study belong to different regions across India, bringing a diverse perspective to the study, which is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the credibility crisis in the Indian media.

5. Findings and Discussion

The data was gathered through survey responses, and IBM's SPSS*Statistics, version 25, was used to analyze this data. The graphs and tables are used to describe the 203 responses. The discussion focuses on media practices and how the audience perceives Indian media. Figure 1 shows the popularity and viewership of news channels in India. R- Bharat, India Today, NDTV India, and Zee News are the most-watched channels. Additionally, the data shows that news channels remain a prominent source of information in India and have the potential to influence the masses greatly.
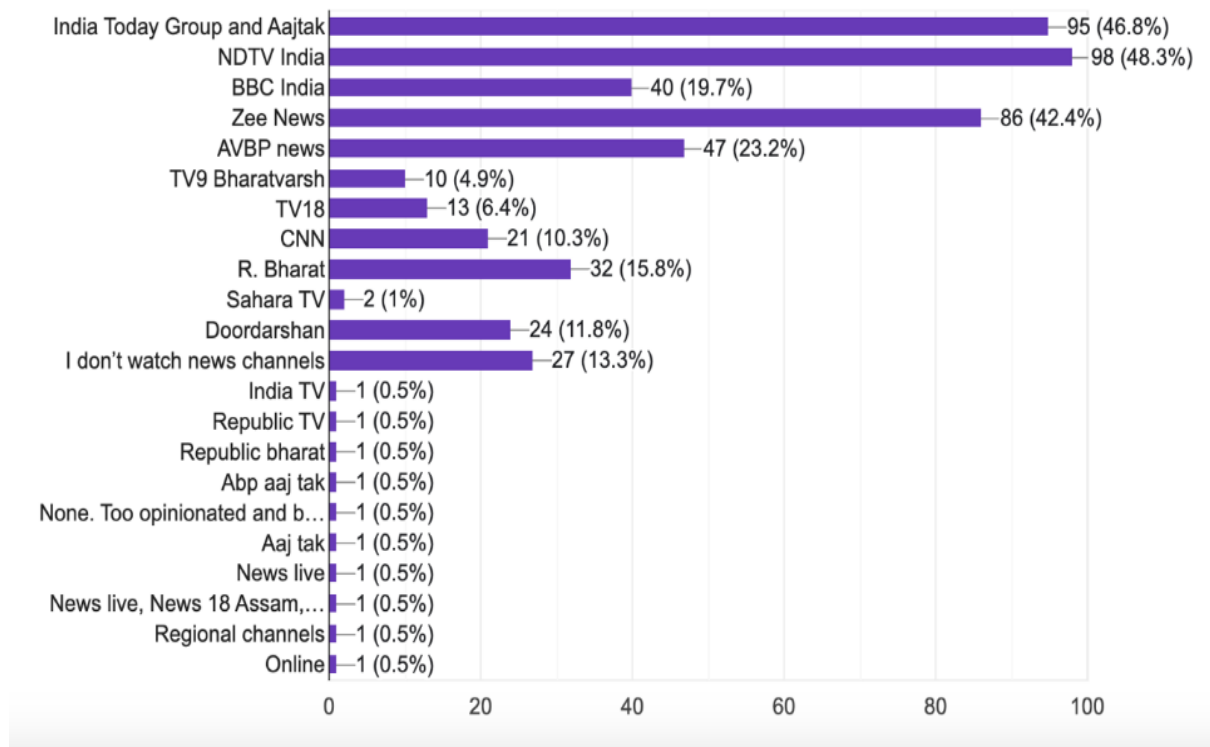
Figure 1: Popularity and viewership of News TV Channels

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of 203 media students and the audience's perception of Indian media. The research findings based on the descriptive statistics of 203 media students and the audience's perception of Indian media are as follows:

Division and controversy on the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA): 81.8% of respondents stated that Indian media has been divided on the CAA matter, resulting in widespread controversy worldwide. Only 18.2% of respondents do not believe that Indian media has created controversy on the CAA.

Lack of In-Depth Reporting and Chaos: 80% of the audience respondents expressed that mainstream Indian media's lack of in-depth reporting has left them in chaos and confusion regarding the CAA and other issues. However, 20% of respondents do not share this belief.

Perception of Indian Media as a Propaganda Tool: 73.8% of the audience believes that Indian media functions as a propaganda tool for political parties. 12.4% of respondents do not hold this belief.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of audience's perception of Indian media

	N	Range	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic
Source of Information	202	6.00	757.00	3.7475	1.43191	2.050
Preferable new channel	202	12.00	811.00	4.0149	4.06230	16.502
Biased Coverage	203	1.00	237.00	1.1675	.37433	.140
Corporate benefits	203	2.00	302.00	1.4877	.80444	.647
Fail to serve	201	1.00	254.00	1.2637	.44173	.195
Creating more chaos	200	1.00	240.00	1.2000	.40100	.161
Promoting fanaticism, nationalism, and populism	202	2.00	283.00	1.4010	.72111	.520
Fabricating News	196	1.00	259.00	1.3214	.46822	.219

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
News without facts	200	1.00	229.00	1.1450	.35298	.125
Promoted communal angle on CAB and CAA	200	1.00	225.00	1.1250	.33155	.110
Hijacked real Assam issue	198	4.00	510.00	2.5758	1.33360	1.778
Rely on mainstream media	199	2.00	337.00	1.6935	.87126	.759
Perception after watching JNU News	199	1.00	277.00	1.3920	.48942	.240
Less credibility	200	4.00	511.00	2.5550	1.62486	2.640
Media Trial	204	2.00	335.00	1.6422	.75226	.566
divisive media serving the democracy	201	2.00	408.00	2.0299	.88832	.789
Need for media regulation in India	199	1.00	217.00	1.0905	.28755	.083
Impact on the Indian audience	195	4.00	447.00	2.2923	1.34766	1.816
Valid N (listwise)	148					

Promotion of Fanaticism, Nationalism, and Populism: 67.9% of the audience believes that media content promotes fanaticism, nationalism, and populism among the Indian population, resulting in divisions between Indians as traitors and nationalists. However, 32.1% of respondents do not agree with this assessment.

Manipulation of Information: 85.55% of the audience believes that most of the information presented by Indian mainstream media is manipulated to create news. Only 14.55% still believe that Indian media reports are based on actual events.

Spread of Fake News and Confusion: 87.5% of the audience believes that people share fake news and "alternative facts" according to their ideology and trolling further adds to the confusion in media news. However, 12.5% of respondents do not view it this way.

Chaos and confusion surrounding NPR and NRC: 35.4% of the audience stated that Assam is protesting the inclusion of Bangladeshi Hindus in the CAA. 7.1% of the audience believes that illegal Bangladeshi Muslims are protesting because their names were not included in the new NRC list. 29.3% of respondents stated that both reasons contributed to the Assam protests.5.6% viewed the CAA as communal, and 22.7% admitted not having enough information.

Rushed Reporting on JNU Campus Attack: 63.5% of the audience agreed that Indian media seemed to be in a rush while reporting on the JNU campus attack. 14% believed that the leftist student union orchestrated the attack. In comparison, 8% believed the ABVP student union initiated it, 14.5% of respondents felt that news channels were framing the story as nationalism versus traitor, while 22.7% were unsure.

Perception of Indian Media's Role: 73.6% of the audience believes Indian media is not working in the public interest. 26.4% still have faith in the media.

Concerns about Divisive Media and the Need for Regulation: 91% of the audience believes that divisive media is dangerous as it can further divide societies and communities, harming democracy. Only 9% of respondents do not share this concern. 91% of the audience believes that regulation is urgently needed for Indian media. 9% of respondents believe regulation should be based on journalism ethics.

6. Conclusion

The conclusion drawn from the discussion and findings of this study leads to a recommendation. At the moment, the Indian media is going through a difficult time, which calls for the immediate introduction of stringent laws in order to address unethical behaviours. For the purpose of fostering high standards and ethical practices in the field of news broadcasting, the News Broadcasters Association was created in 2007. Having said that, its effectiveness is restricted due to the fact that it is a self-regulatory body that is open to influence from particular broadcasters. In light of this, it is suggested that a committee be constituted specifically to provide suggestions about the regulation of broadcasting. This committee ought to take into consideration a variety of aspects, and consequently, legislation regulating the media ought to be implemented on the basis of its suggestions. Similar to the Press Council, a Broadcasting Council ought to be established in order to guarantee the establishment of defined and objective advising rules without sacrificing the independence of the media. Media outlets must

maintain transparency in their reporting and identify their funding sources to eliminate the possibility of any group or individual exerting influence over them.

6.1. Recommendation

One of the most difficult tasks that can be undertaken is to stop the manipulation of public opinion through the Indian media. However, certain measures serve the public interest rather than the corporate interests that are the most inept. These efforts include media literacy, enhanced transparency, regulation of social media, and promotion of impartial journalism. Through the promotion of media literacy, the general public can recognize propaganda, biased reporting, and fake news, which can assist in preventing the manipulation of public opinion. Maintaining journalistic integrity and avoiding sensationalism, political biases, and disinformation are all significant responsibilities that fall under the purview of the media. To prevent the dissemination of propaganda and fake news, social media platforms ought to be subject to regulation. This action set is necessary to cultivate a more favourable future for the Indian media.

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