



THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA OWNERSHIP AND MEDIA CREDIBILITY

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ABSTRACT

News media is an important source of news and opinion in a democracy. People trust what is given by the media and their decisions are based on this trust. But increasingly the commercial nature of news media in India is casting doubts about the credibility of the news that is disseminated. People's trust in media is declining the world over and it is not different in India. Studies have shown the lack of credibility in news channels and online news sources. This study uses past literature to conclude that corporate ownership and credibility have a close and inverse relationship. More and more media houses are owned by corporates today and this is showing in the declining credibility news emanating from these media outlets have in the eyes of the consumers. TRPs rule the roost and every news channel is under pressure to convert the news into a saleable commodity for profits. News has deteriorated into a product to be sold without consideration for any ethics.

KEYWORDS : Media Ownership, Credibility, Trp, News Channel**Introduction**

Journalism is a profession that takes great pride in its freedom. Freedom is important as author George A. Ricker (2006) explains, "A free press can only exist in a free society and a free society cannot flourish without a free and independent press. Each is indispensable to the other." Freedom brings autonomy to control oneself. Professional autonomy is the key of journalism and any restrictions to it can be detrimental to democracy.

Sadly, independence of this profession is under attack. Today, it is constrained by, among other things, the organization itself. Media organizations today are big business entities and their profit motto challenges journalist's role in the news reporting landscape. Before their responsibilities towards the society, organizational and business responsibilities are to be fulfilled by the journalists first. Tension is always between the basic news values of journalists and the organizational values of business executives (Price, 2003). Country's media system, with high level of political influence and corporate ownership pattern, on one hand and the commercialization of news media on the other; in such a situation what do journalists do? And for the citizens - How credible is the news that they consume and also the news delivering medium, as such?

Credibility of a news media is attached to balance and honesty in storytelling, providing complete information, accurate, unbiased and believable (Abdulla, Garrison, Salwen, Driscoll, & Casey, 2002), be it any form of mass media. In a large functioning democracy population requires to stay informed and this is done by multiple competing information sources active within the country. The proliferation of numerous private-owned media outlets is one of the most notable developments this country has seen, as today any number of private newspapers, television news channels and internet spaces are vocal and very much active than any other organization in the market, continuously dissipating information. People receive and accept this information with trust in the communicator. Credibility is one variable attributed to communicators of media messages (Schweiger, 2000).

Research says there are two domains to study credibility of media. One is the 'source credibility' that looks into interpersonal, organizational, and how different communicator's intension and characteristics influence the processing of messages whereas the other is 'medium credibility' that focus on the channel through which content is delivered rather than the sender of that content (Kioussis, 2001). However these two domains sometimes overlap. Taking into consideration the first domain this research tries

to dig into the influence on the context of the media content by the communicator. Communicator is the sender, the editor and can be the person controlling the media. Today's media is widely known to be in the hands of a few super powers owning a chain of media outlets of every form say print, broadcast or online. In the study of media credibility the issue of who owns the media, matters. Many researchers have expressed concern on media pluralism and the potential harm to the democracy due to abuse of political powers by media owners and under representation of significant groups and information (Doyle, 2002). Individuals and societies need diverse and plural media. Concentration of media ownership in the hands of a few powerful business groups and politicians suppress the voice and freedom of expression of media and pose a threat to the interests of the society. Credibility is sure to be affected in such situations.

Research design

This article reviews literature related to media ownership and credibility of information. There are several studies on measuring credibility of different types of media say traditional or online, but this study primarily talks about credibility of traditional news media, that is print and television. News sources like newspaper and television news channels are suffering credibility crisis due to some known and accepted factors like emergence of internet and more and more people using it for seeking news. However this doesn't mean that online news mediums are credible. There are already several reasons suggested by critics as to why the online sources should be judged as less credible. Anyone can post information opening a website of their own that lacks editorial hand and moreover professional and social pressures to provide accurate and unbiased information are less for online media (Johnson & Kaye, 2004). The objective of this study is to synthesize the fact that media ownership is one dominating factor affecting credibility of news media (traditional) today. But why and how, the following literature review attempts to explore and explain it.

The contribution of this paper is to provide an analysis of the available literature on news media credibility from studies not limited to India but the entire world. The literature was selected based on its novelty and experiments done to know what affects credibility and whether media ownership has anything to do with it.

Literature Media Credibility

"Media credibility can be defined as perceptions of a news channel's believability, as distinct from individual sources, media organizations or the content of the news itself" (Bucy, 2003). It

focuses on characteristics of message senders. Erik Bucy's study on *'Media Credibility Reconsidered: Synergy Effects between On-Air and Online News'* states that more knowledgeable and well educated consumers are most critical of media while less educated news consumers are likely to be accepting whatever comes their way as news or information and consider the source to be credible. Other factors that makes audience skeptical of news and the media are sophistication, life experiences, knowledge of the press or news literacy.

Credibility differs from one type to another type of media. Reliance on media for information is what determines credibility rather than amount of the use of the media. Media-use taps behaviour while reliance measure attitude of individual towards that media. For example, a person may use internet for long hours and more frequently as web is an interesting and emerging medium but their level of experiencing the medium may not influence judgements of credibility. By comparing previous and the current research on measuring media credibility Johnson & Kaye in their study *'Cruising is believing?: Comparing internet and traditional sources on media credibility measures'* in 1998 stated that whether traditional or online media, consumers/users with high socioeconomic status and high education are critical of the sources of news and do not easily trust them. However, there is no standardized scale or an instrument for accurately measuring consumer's trust in news media. Kohring and Matthes in 2007 attempted to develop one and validate it. They developed a model called *"trust in news media"* and tested several times with many modifications. Finally, the results confirmed their developed scale to be appropriate to some extent. It proved that trust in news media is hierarchical. It consists of four orders; firstly, 'trust in the selectivity of topics' where consumers trust that the news media will bring in topics most pertinent to them, secondly, 'trust in selectivity of facts' that concerns trust in facts or information selected to be delivered, thirdly, 'trust in the accuracy of depictions' which is trust that what is depicted happened in real and lastly, 'trust in journalistic assessment' where the selection of an event or information already represents an evaluation. These hierarchies advise, estimate and also appeals for action to the consumers.

A credible source of information can be frequently used by consumers, referred to others and in the process gain popularity. However, a popular medium does not necessarily imply a credible medium. Jaggi and Majumdar (2009) in this context tried to explain credibility against popularity. They meant journalism is news reporting free from personal perspectives, but news today on television is highly fancy and based on channel's perspective. There is arrogance, insensitivity, bias, inaccuracies, in short, sensationalism, but these are actually the channels that enjoy maximum TRPs which imply their extreme popularity among the audience. However, Jaggi and Majumdar's research with a few case studies and analytical survey indicated that audience can discriminate between what is actual content and what is sensationalism. News channels are found denying audience sensibilities in their race to TRPs. That is one reason why people are losing confidence in news channels in India.

Ernst, Kühne, & Wirth (2017) said credibility is an essential heuristic that enables information processing, less reactions and more positive attitudes. Messages of credible communicators lead to more attitude change than messages from sources with low credibility. Generally 'truth effect' suggests that if a particular statement or message is repeated several times it is true and is considered credible. But too many repetitions can decrease message credibility, argues this study. Moderate repetition of message positively influences credibility. However, if there is negativity in the message, the best possible number of repetitions for gaining credibility is affected. Repeat of negative messages results in negative attitude toward the issue which lead to decreased credibility judgments.

Ernst, Kühne, & Wirth's results can be considered similar to the effects of negative publicity on consumer loyalty. Publicity requires

repeated promotion of a subject and any negativity might influence its effect on consumers. Media group and channels are brands today and "branding is basically a shortcut to trust", says Mark Zuckerberg. Media as a brand can lose consumer's trust due to one negative aspect about it. One good example is US media losing credibility due to Trump. One recent BBC article *"President Trump's challenge to media credibility"* (2018), states that "the media has become the least-trusted institution in the world according to Edelman's trust barometer." In the US, more than 70% of Donald Trump's supporters distrust mainstream outlets (Miller, 2018). Trump, through his tweets, attacks the media being critical on his deeds and attempts to damage their reputation. Donald Trump has had fraught and fractious relationship with the press and this has led the press mislay trust from a good percentage of people.

This concept of news media as brand and customer loyalty as media credibility was well explained by Porral, Fernández & Boga in 2014. Their study said media brand image helps improve consumer value and it is the main source of media credibility. There is a proved relationship between brand equity and media credibility and media credibility equals to customer loyalty. Media brand value influences both credibility and media attitude. For that matter media person shall put efforts on defining their media brand positively in the minds of consumers, in order to gain their trust. Declining media credibility is due to poor quality news, media image, and unfamiliarity of the media brand. For improving media credibility one must develop new ways of meeting the information needs of consumers.

In seeking studies explaining factors that affect media credibility the researchers came across a number of studies that emphasized on measuring credibility or finding mediums that is more credible compared to the other. For example, television vs. newspaper, which is more credible? One such study on 'TV news channel's degrading quality of journalism' by Bhargava and Balhara (2017) highlighted how news channels have lost the sense and essence of 'news'. According to the study, newspaper still holds some principles of journalism and a credible stand in society but TV journalism is not even acceptable today. Sensationalism is the main principle behind TV journalism. However, this decline in the quality of journalism is not just due to journalists but people above them who control the channel. Sensationalism and their race for TRP are the factor visible in these studies affecting media credibility. Sensationalism is to gain audience attention and audience attention leads to more viewing that gets TRP for the channel. More the TRP, more advertisements the channel gets and more advertisement brings more money. It is very simple if it is only business, but very complicated if it is journalism.

Studies reflect that journalism today is merely a business that looks for profit, but what has actually made journalism a business? Is it because everything today runs on money and if you cannot make money you cannot run a channel, pay bills for technology used, maintenance, reporters, writers and producers? Money marketing has changed it all and need for revenue has resulted in new challenges among news media. If news publishers are to be both profitable and credible, they need to balance the interests of advertisers with the interests of readers (Satell, 2015). However this isn't an easy task.

Media Ownership affecting Journalism

"Financial interests of corporate owners lead news organizations to downplay the significant issues." Gilens & Hertzman through their study *'Corporate Ownership and News Bias'* (2000), attempted to address this claim against American news media. The study examined newspaper coverage of '1996 Telecommunications Act - the loosening of restrictions on television ownership.' The results provided clear evidence that financial interests of media owners do influence newspaper editorials and news reporting. Newspapers that stood to gain the proposed loosening of TV ownership offered favourable coverage of the act, with positive comments. While newspapers that did not stand to gain, was extremely unfavourable

with negative consequences spread repeatedly. The study also suggests that, the more media outlets come under the control of fewer corporate owners, more is the conflict of interest. News media under large conglomerates find reporting issues of public interest risky for their owner's financial health.

The shift from responsible profession to business has clearly led to decline in content quality. Pew Research Centre's study in 2004 explains this decline in quality of news due to pressure from media owners. 'Pew Research Centre for The People & The Press' and the 'Project for Excellence in Journalism' conducted a major survey of journalists. Although their study was based on American news media, it gives a good idea on what can be the problems with quality of news reported in general. The very point that comes out of this study is economic pressure on the news media can be pernicious. An increasing percentage of journalists argue that business and financial factors are behind the poor quality of news. Bottom-line pressures, emergence of the 24-hour news cycle has weakened journalism, they say. On the whole, track of journalism allude to sensational news reporting and race for ratings is the biggest problem of this profession. Earlier, pressure in the newsroom was not from executives or advertisers to the journalists on what and how to write or say. Today, there is a lot of pressure on journalists either from advertisers or from corporate owners. The liberty of editorial decision-making in the newsroom in reality is breached, the study states.

Another study relates the capitalist theory with it. Covering various aspects of communication network Balkin (2004) in his study *Digital Speech and Democratic Culture: A Theory of Freedom of Expression for the Information Society* meant that networks for communication are 'public' (as many people use and rely on them for communication), but their technology is privately owned. Regulation of network is regulation of the freedom of speech of the communicator or information giver, as they speak through owner's decision on which content to favour or disfavour. Ownership interferes with the ability of media to produce and send their content to people objectively.

Effect of ownership on the content of media is associated with democratic value. Media provides a platform for public debate which is very important for diverse voices and perspectives in a democracy and it nurtures an informed citizenry. An informed citizenry brings a perfect polity, but ownership structure of media today is believed to be destroying this democratic value as argued by Cho, Kong and Lin in their study *The effect of ownership on content in newspapers*. This study through content analysis of news coverage of California recall election investigated the relationship between the ownership of newspapers and diversity issues in its content. Unlike other researches that emphasizes on-if the content is biased or if editor's ideology reflecting on it- this study digs into what sources reporters seek to get news from, news length, volume and value. After analysing six newspapers the study found that there is no difference in number of words or length of a report but there is difference in story source, topic and lead of each newspaper. Writers in well financed newspapers are considered experts while writers in relatively small newspapers even though they are well qualified are not considered as experts. The points that comes out unique in this study is that too much reliance on staff reporter alone for news may raise problems in terms of diversity, as it is obvious that staff reporters are not free from owner's pressure.

On a similar context Guyot (2009) explains influence of ownership and market forces on journalism practices. By reviewing relevant research and interview responses of journalists of Europe, the study states that media today are part of a global strategy of profit making. Content produced is mere short term financial products or operations of markets like any other industry or organizations. News business in order to survive adapts ways that affect the work of journalists. They experience limitations from owners and these limitations are formulated in economic, organisational and technical terms. Journalists have to face financial and political pressures not directly as they do not get the call directly but through

the editor-in-chief. Commands are filtered but still the pressure is felt. Person having most influential power over the editorial line today are the middle managers who are the executives hired by the owners that keeps constant eye on what goes to the public.

Free and independent functioning of journalists is put under pressure through their proprietors. There are many instances in India about disrupted television signals of some known news channel for showing content critical of the government. One such channel is the 'ABP News' whose primetime show 'Masterstroke' anchored by a veteran journalist PP Bajpai, was blocked to prevent viewers from watching it. On August 3, Congress leader Mallikarjun Kharge raised this issue of 'government restricting media' in the Lok Sabha and Editor's Guild commented that this is due to inability of some media owners to survive direct or indirect pressures from the political establishment in the country. As mentioned earlier, media owners today are mostly business people having great association with the government or political parties or the politicians themselves. "Institutional strength and respect is directly linked to editorial independence and undermining the former can result in curtailing the latter" states an article in *The Indian Express* - "Editor's Guild slams government pressure on media" (2018). Media owners attempt to suppress the voice and content to make it less critical of the government left two senior journalists of ABP with no other option but to resign. One surely can understand how intense the pressure can be here.

Media Ownership affecting Credibility

There are enough literature proving intense pressure on the journalists or the media persons worldwide from owners who are less bothered about people and the society. What matters to them is their business or political power. If the control of media is actually in hands of these rich and powerful, what is left for consumers? Ashley, Poepsel, & Willis in 2010 through their study on 'Media Literacy and News Credibility' pointed the importance of knowledge that give media consumers power to decide what is real news and what is news for business. They hypothesized that knowledge about media ownership leads media consumers to offer lower credibility ratings to news stories. In their attempt to study how increased knowledge of media ownership may affect credibility of news media they conducted an experiment with 80 university students. At first the students were exposed to the pros and cons of corporate ownership of media and then they were made to read four news stories from different print mediums. The researcher claims that most people are unaware of how the commercial media system shapes the news they receive. Because of their primary requirement to return value to the shareholders, corporate media does not bother about issues of citizens and democracy. Greater awareness of media ownership might encourage readers to think sceptically about the content and people who construct them. Just an insight on who actually owns media might lower credibility when credibility is defined as judgments about superficiality and general accuracy. Participants who learned about media ownership were more critical of their tendency to sensationalize or trivialize the news which is 'superficiality factor' the study proves. 'General accuracy factor' says when consumers are aware of the corporate media system that controls and finances the news media; they find loopholes in the accuracy of news.

The way ownership is influencing media content today, a day will come when media will be defined through its ownership. Kenix in his study of *Defining Media through Ownership* (2011) explained monolithically owned media create unidirectional content that lead to less-informed public. Concentration of media ownership in a few powerful hands harms freedom of expression and plurality of voices, one condition repeatedly mentioned in every study. Conglomeration of media is actually conglomeration of power which is not healthy for a democracy. Media then tends to become instruments of that power reflecting the needs, strengthening their voice if it is a political party and advancing their policies. Propaganda as news by the media will only inform citizens what they want them to know about not what the citizens need to know.

From a business point, media today is a product that responds to consumer desires more than citizen initiatives. Ownership and the owners today are supreme in deciding journalistic norms, their behaviours and activities. They have the greatest influence over the final product.

Indian news industry is well known to the world. Decline in journalistic quality due to media increasingly coming under political and business powers has led to credibility crisis and this is very much visible to the world. Murali Krishnan from New Delhi in 2017 attempted to examine this disturbing media trend in India for a very popular German based international broadcaster *DW (Deutsche Welle)*. The study at the very beginning pointed recoil of the public sphere due to media expansion and skewed concentration. Today elitist and socially conservative values are spread more. Quoting a few personalities the article said media has become the mouthpiece for political parties. Corporate owners of media houses have close association with the politicians and the government. Precisely, Indian media has lost its voice. Poor quality content is evidenced; Indian mainstream media has allowed itself to be undermined by the present government. **Again, quoting Rajdeep Sardesai, the article said** there is a credibility crisis. Journalists out of pressure and fear of being denied access address those in power.

A recent article in *'The Wire'* by Deepanshu Mohan (2018) had a very interesting title *"For the Media to Regain Credibility, the Business of News Needs to Change."* The article points that the revenue structure of most mainstream media organisations is skewed. This structure has evolved from countries like the US and gradually flowing to other countries. Market share of private investment in the media remains greater than the public sector media. Commercialising news through maximum advertising and sales unfold business mindedness in news reporting. Revenue generated through such business puts media's relationship with democracy at stake. Existence of numerous channels or outlets of news across the country hold back the power of government power to control and manage information. As there isn't any proper structure of funds and revenue, trust of people ingrained in journalism and its obligation to safeguard democratic values is reversed and now it is irreparable.

Findings and discussion

Before answering the question 'does media ownership affect media credibility' this study highlight points that popped out of the previous significant studies mentioned above. It must be clarified that there are enough studies on defining media credibility, measuring it and reasons for decline in credibility but very few in establishing a relationship between media ownership and credibility issues of a news media.

Media as Business

The above literature very clearly proves that media ownership has immense control over the content of media. Restriction in freedom of press has imposed restriction on plurality and diversity of opinions, either from the press or from the public. The voices are suppressed or one can say most media houses have lost their voice not limited to just one nation but worldwide. Instead of pressure of responsibilities to serve the nation through news reporting and better communication, journalist's backs are loaded with pressure of the market as Guyot (2009) said news content produced today is just a product to be sold in markets. A product that responds to consumer desires more than citizen initiatives. News media from a simple business of informing people transformed into a global strategy of making profits. However, what makes them different from the traditional market is that media in their market sell joint products. They sell content to consumers and consumer's attention to advertisers.

Another threat of having corporate owners is that they have close association with the politicians and the government. The concept of public sphere and public debate has disappeared but media today is

exponentially providing platforms for abuse of political powers. They act as a mouthpiece for political parties and if not they suppress voices and make situations worst for a journalist to perform their duties responsibly. However, this situation is not only with corporate owners, Doordarshan, a public sector media from the time of 1975 emergency during Indira Gandhi's reign became a propaganda tool and mouthpiece of the government (Panthukala, 2017).

It is sad to see that media has completely forgotten the public service ethos. "The press was to serve the governed not the governors" as Hugo Black a jurist and an American politician said. They have the power to question the establishment and be critical about their operations but this whole swirl of politics and money has snatched it away from them.

Most media houses have executives not necessarily having the sense of journalism, walking in and around the newsrooms, interfering with the work of editors, anchors and field reporters. They are managers hired by owners to see if their business is right by monitoring what goes out to public. Newsrooms that traditionally provided most original journalism are radically shrinking (Simons, 2017). Media has allowed itself to be undermined.

Compromising Ethics and Principles of Journalism

Editors, reporters, writers today are all in a situation where they have to risk their profession and ethics to survive in the giant media market based on business and politics rather than social responsibilities. When there is business, there isn't objectivity in the news. Studies points that corporate or political media ownership interferes or restricts the exercise of free expression in several ways and the principles of news being sober, accurate, unbiased and objective is put at stake. There are even cases where people willing to work ethically and contribute to a given media outlet are forced to compromise or bound to resign. Studies also point that ownership and the owners are supreme in deciding journalistic norms. They have greatest influence on the final product. A need for community action on ownership and control of media may be a step in the right direction (Hitchens, 1994).

Challenging People's Trust

Funding methods of modern journalism has undermined trust of news consumers in it. Media today are challenging people's trust on them to make money (Blanda, 2017). The whole point of removing government regulation and allowing private entities to run media was not only arranging funds to operate a media channel but also to safeguard freedom of expression and encourage media pluralism. Initiative like Green Paper arose in countries of Europe encouraging competitiveness and diversity in media, protecting journalistic ethics, eliminating risk of subordination of small companies, etc., (Hitchens, 1994). They thought national regulation would harm media pluralism and the channels will then just remain the mouthpiece or puppets of the government. However, the scenario now is much different then what was expected.

Increased knowledge of media ownership affect credibility of news media, studies prove. However, this needs to be tested empirically from time to time. Studies also prove that news consumers with high education can well understand and differentiate between news and sensationalism. People with knowledge of press and ownership are critical in choosing their source of news. So, people should be informed about who owns the media.

Conclusion

Yet news media denies audiences' potential in deciding credible source of news for them. Whether high or low, race is always about TRP. This obsession makes news media claim and counterclaim to be the No.1 channel themselves. On one hand media is constantly running the race of collecting more and more advertisements to generate revenue, on the other hand politicians and groups of political interest misuse such a massive and powerful platform for vested interests. The challenge is for journalists today who have to

keep hold of their respected profession while at the same time make products (news) that are commercially feasible.

In this system of media acting more as a business, audiences are not mere information receivers as studies explain. They are sensible and hold good knowledge of the press. But if you critically look at it, how the competition is still about popularity and not credibility? What percentage do these knowledgeable consumers make in the entire population of news consumers? One can only wonder and expect that these news channels no matter who owns it, will concede audiences' sensibilities and produce their content especially news with discretion.

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