



## Understanding Fake News in India

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### ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This study examines public trust in Indian media and the prevalence of fake news by investigating trends across traditional outlets, digital platforms, and social media. It aims to identify factors shaping trust and highlight indicators of misinformation in the Indian information ecosystem.

**Methodology:** A quantitative approach was adopted using secondary data from credible sources such as Reuters and Statista. The analysis covered trust levels in media outlets and digital platforms from 2013 to 2023, the frequency of fake news encounters, and user perceptions regarding misinformation. Data were presented through charts and patterns to capture shifts and variations.

**Findings:** The results reveal fluctuating trust levels over the decade, with no consistent long-term trend. Traditional outlets such as DD India, All India Radio, and The Times of India remain more trusted, while Republic TV, The Wire, and Scroll.in show lower trust scores. Social media platforms exhibit mixed perceptions, with Twitter and WhatsApp considered relatively reliable, whereas Clubhouse and Signal face skepticism. Alarmingly, 80% of Indian internet users encounter fake news, most frequently through informal networks like WhatsApp and word of mouth.

**Implications:** The study underscores the urgent need to promote evidence-based journalism, strengthen media literacy programs, and foster critical thinking skills to enable users to identify misinformation, thereby enhancing trust and resilience in India's media landscape.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

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In the dynamic landscape of India's media ecosystem, the transition from traditional media to digital platforms has revolutionized the consumption of news. With an expansive array of television channels, newspapers, and an ever-growing digital space, the accessibility and immediacy of information have reshaped how individuals engage with news content. However, this shift has brought to the forefront a pervasive challenge i.e. the proliferation of fake news and misinformation through online and social media channels. Fake news and misinformation have become increasingly prevalent in India in recent years, especially on social media and messaging apps, endangering public health, democracy, and communal harmony. Studies reveal that political and social narratives are the most widely disseminated lies, typically disseminated through WhatsApp groups and magnified during elections (Kumar & Shah, 2018; Reshma et al., 2020). Researchers also point to the absence of a precise legal definition of "fake news," lax regulatory oversight, and low media literacy as factors that contribute to the spread of false information (Kumar & Narula, 2020). Despite their growth, fact-checking efforts are still limited by political pressures and scarce resources (Kumar & Shah, 2018).

As social media platforms have become the primary source for news dissemination, concerns over the authenticity and reliability of information have increased considerably. A substantial portion of India's internet users rely on platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for their daily dose of news, which can expose them to misinformation or fake news. Studies show that there is an indication of a growing apprehension among users, in which a considerable number of users are expressing worries about the distortion of facts to serve specific agendas, especially for political or commercial motives.

Despite the wide usage of digital media, trust remains low. Surveys reveal a spectrum of attitudes towards technology, social media platforms, and fact-checking organizations, reflecting varying levels of confidence in the information landscape. While some consumers show and have ability to fact check of truth from falsehood, others support for stringent measures to curb this fake news, which include temporary social media bans during crises, to stop the spread of false information. Moreover, a notable proportion remains unaware of fact-checking organizations or holds neutral opinions regarding trust in digital media beyond social platforms and technology.

The abundance of fake news highlights the critical need for media literacy. As stories circulate with very high speed and reach, individuals must be very vigilant in information consumption, checking sources and exercising critical thinking to combat the spread of misinformation. In doing so, they become the guard for truth, safeguarding the integrity of public interest in an era where trust in media institutions and digital platforms hangs in the balance.

### 1.1.OBJECTIVES

- To examine patterns of trust in media and news sources among consumers.
- To explore perceptions of credibility across different news platforms and channels.
- To explore the prevalence of misinformation in online environments.
- To assess user confidence in evaluating the accuracy of news content published among various sources.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The phenomenon of fake news has emerged as a critical challenge in the digital age, profoundly affecting public discourse, democracy, and societal trust. The spread of fake news is not only a technological issue but also a deeply social, political, and epistemological problem, demanding comprehensive, interdisciplinary approaches.

Molina, Sundar, Le, and Lee (2019) provide a key conceptual framework that disambiguates the term “fake news.” They classify it into seven distinct types of online content false news, polarized content, satire, misreporting, commentary, persuasive information, and citizen journalism mapped across four operational domains: message, source, structure, and network. This taxonomy helps clarify what constitutes fake news and underlines the challenge of developing effective detection models.

Expanding on the conceptual ambiguity, Weatherall and O’Connor (2024) explore philosophical dimensions, focusing on the epistemology of misinformation. Their study shows how belief polarization and rational models complicate the definition of fake news and emphasize that traditional epistemological theories are insufficient to capture the dynamics of contemporary misinformation.

Egelhofer and Lecheler (2019) present a two-dimensional framework differentiating the fake news genre (pseudojournalistic disinformation) from the fake news label (politically motivated delegitimization of media outlets). They argue that much scholarly attention has been given to the genre, while the label’s political instrumentalization requires further study.

Olan et al. (2022) provide an important empirical study that examines how fake news on social media disrupts societal values and redefines accepted facts and truths. Their fuzzy set-theoretic comparative analysis shows a fragmented societal understanding of true versus fake news, highlighting how misinformation divides public opinion and erodes societal cohesion.

Lazer et al. (2018) frame fake news as a societal vulnerability exacerbated by the decline of traditional institutional safeguards. They stress the need for a new system of checks and balances informed by both social and computer science research, pointing out the lack of a comprehensive understanding of why individuals, institutions, and society at large are susceptible to misinformation.

Sharma et al. (2019) offer a comprehensive survey of technical methods for fake news detection and mitigation. Their work highlights that much prior research focused on identifying fake news based on content and user engagement, while pointing out significant dataset limitations. They advocate for interdisciplinary solutions and better dataset quality to advance the field.

Reis et al. (2019) analyse various features used in supervised learning models for automatic detection of fake news. They contribute new sets of features and systematically evaluate their predictive performance, offering critical insights into which features are most effective and practical for real-world applications. However, they emphasize that practical deployment remains challenging due to the heterogeneity of fake news content.

Zhou, Jain, Phoha, and Zafarani (2019) focus on early detection, proposing a theory-driven model that examines content at lexical, syntactic, semantic, and discourse levels. Their approach moves beyond propagation-based methods, which are ineffective at the point of

publication, and enhances interpretability in fake news feature engineering, promoting explainable detection mechanisms.

Zhou (2020) conducts a broad survey of fake news detection techniques, categorizing them by false knowledge, writing style, propagation patterns, and source credibility. Zhou highlights the need to integrate fundamental theories from diverse disciplines, thus encouraging collaborative efforts for developing explainable and efficient detection systems.

Although significant advancements have been made, the literature reveals persistent gaps. There is a critical need for interdisciplinary collaboration combining insights from political science, journalism, computer science, and epistemology. Data quality remains a recurring limitation in research, as noted by Sharma et al. (2019), requiring better and more representative datasets.

Moreover, while many detection models focus on post-facto identification, proactive interventions such as educational strategies and algorithmic design that prevent the initial spread are underexplored. The political instrumentalization of the fake news label (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019) also remains under-researched.

While global research on fake news has advanced, India's unique socio-cultural, political, and technological landscape requires focused study. High social media use in such a unique environment creates space for fake news.

Widespread use of messaging apps like WhatsApp and regionally distinct media ecosystems can amplify misinformation. There has been very little research on how Indian consumers evaluate credibility, check authenticity, and develop trust in media sources. Understanding these points is very crucial for designing effective media literacy programs and policy initiatives tailored to the Indian context.

Furthermore, research exploring a user-centered approach is missing. Addressing this gap will provide a path for scholars, media organizations, and policymakers aiming to remove misinformation and strengthen informed public discourse in India.

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**3.1. Data Collection:** The data for this study were collected from Statista & Reuters. Statista is a reputable online statistics portal that collects data from various verified sources. The focus was on gathering quantitative data related to public trust in media outlets, encounters with fake news, and perceptions of online news consumption behaviour in India. Statista provided access to pre-compiled datasets, surveys, and reports that have been compiled by trusted research organizations, ensuring the reliability of the data used in this study.

**3.2. Data Analysis:** A quantitative analytical approach was used to identify key trends and patterns in the collected data. The analysis focused on measuring trust levels across different media platforms, the frequency of encountering fake news, and public perceptions related to fake news identification. Visual representations, including bar charts and trend lines, were generated to facilitate the clear presentation of patterns over time. For this excel was used.

**3.3. Interpretation and Reporting:** The analysed data was analysed to see deep into online news consumption behaviour in India, focusing on three main areas:

- i. Trust in media outlets and digital platforms
- ii. Experiences and perceptions related to fake news encounters
- iii. Public attitudes towards the credibility of news sources

Findings were systematically compiled into a structured report, highlighting key trends and supporting them with visualizations. Data sources from Statista were clearly cited to ensure transparency, authenticity, and traceability of the findings.

**3.4. Limitations and Future Research:** The methodology recognizes several limitations:

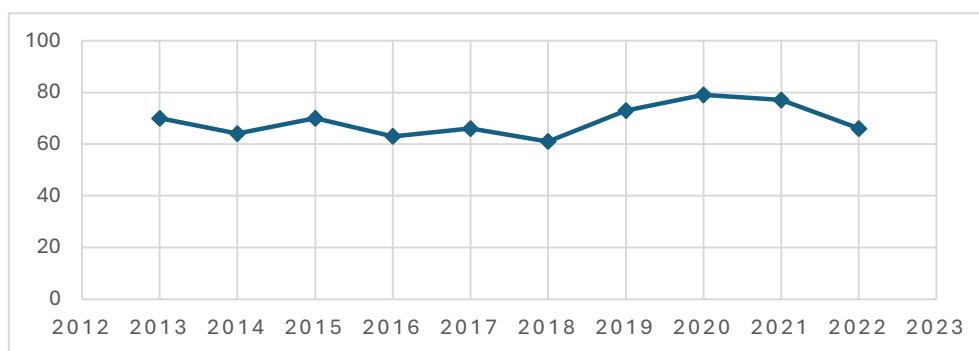
- i. The study relies solely on secondary data from Statista, which limits the ability to customize the dataset or control for sampling methods.
- ii. Trust and perception are subjective constructs and may vary over time or by demographic groups, which cannot be deeply analysed using aggregated data.

Future research directions were suggested, such as conducting primary surveys to investigate the influence of demographic factors (age, education, region) on media trust and to assess the effectiveness of media literacy programs in combating the spread of misinformation in India.

## 4. RESULTS & FINDINGS

### 4.1. Data Analysis & Results

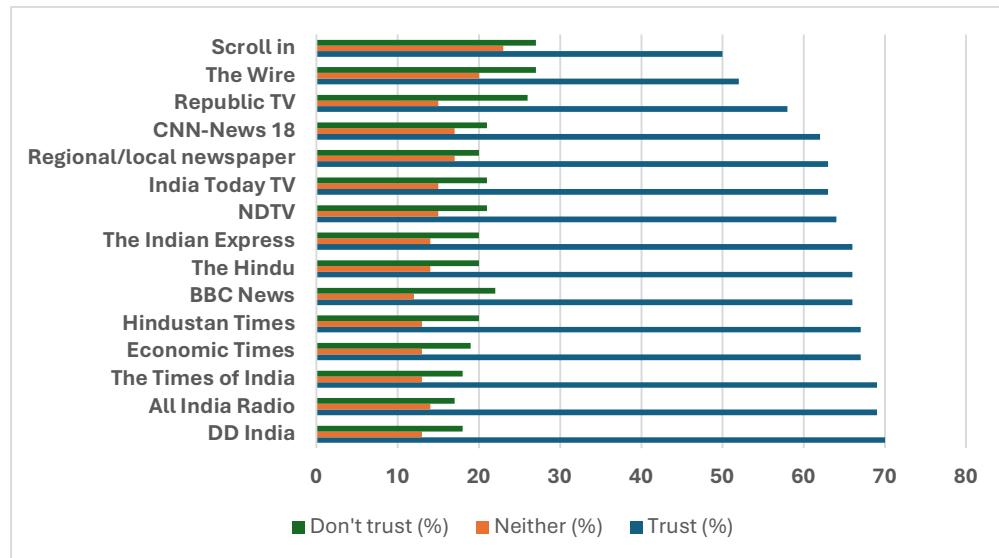
The analysis of the level of trust in media in India over the period from 2013 to 2022 reveals a complex and fluctuating pattern, indicating that public trust is influenced by various external and internal factors rather than following a linear or consistent trajectory. As illustrated in Figure 1, the trust level was highest in 2020 at 79%, possibly driven by the reliance on media during the COVID-19 pandemic for critical information. However, prior to this, trust levels exhibited significant ups and downs, with a notable decline in 2016 (63%) and 2018 (61%). The absence of a clear upward or downward trend suggests the impact of episodic events, political developments, media scandals, and societal changes, which collectively shape public sentiment toward media outlets in India.



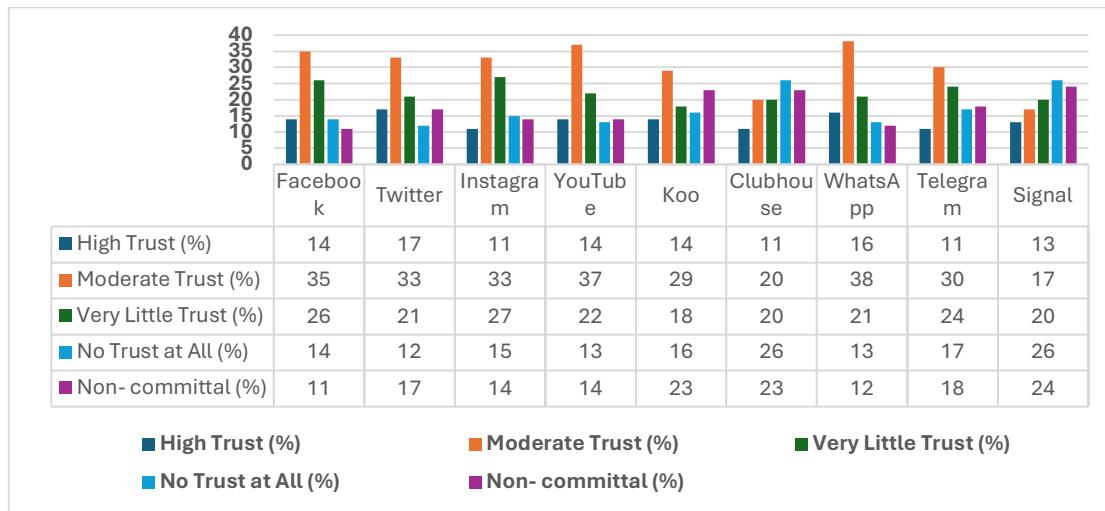
**Figure 1: level of trust in media in India over the period from 2013 to 2022**

An in-depth look at trust in selected news outlets in 2023 reveals significant differences in public perception across various organizations. As shown in Figure 2, public service broadcasters such as DD India and All India Radio emerged as the most trusted sources, with

trust levels of 70% and 69% respectively. Traditional print media outlets like The Times of India and The Economic Times also maintained high trust, indicating the enduring credibility of well-established media institutions. In contrast, digital-native and politically polarizing outlets such as Republic TV, The Wire, and Scroll.in showed considerably lower trust levels, ranging from 50% to 58%. This distribution underscores the public's stronger reliance on government-run and legacy media outlets, likely due to their perceived editorial rigor and accountability, while newer or more opinion-driven platforms face greater public skepticism.



**Figure 2: News Brand Trust Score**

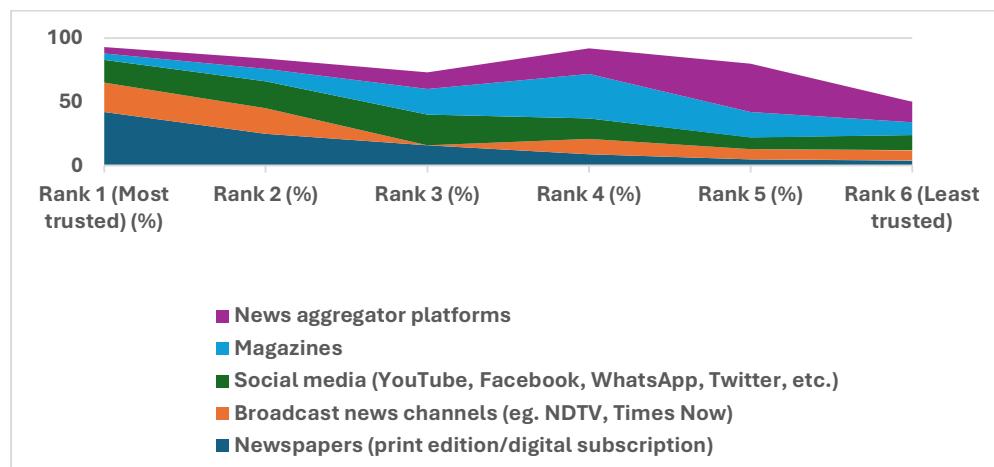


**Figure 3: Trust in News received on Social Media Platforms**

When examining trust in information received via social media platforms in India during January 2022, as depicted in Figure 3, it becomes evident that Twitter (17%) and WhatsApp (16%) were perceived as the most trustworthy platforms in terms of news and information. Conversely, platforms like Clubhouse and Signal were met with the highest distrust, with 26% of respondents indicating no trust at all. Across all platforms, the dominant category was

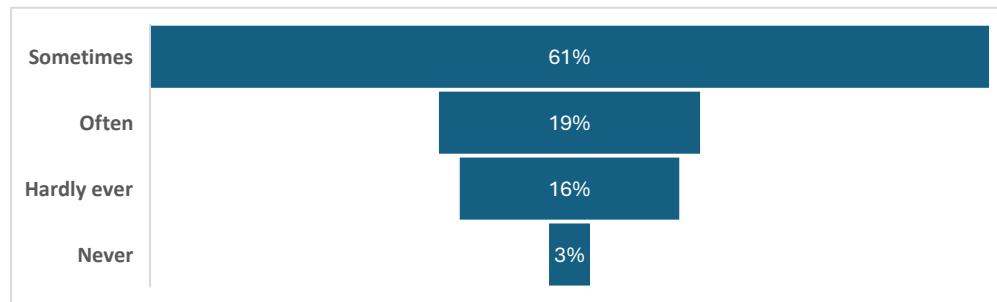
moderate trust, highlighting a general sense of ambivalence or cautious acceptance of social media as a news source. Notably, the high percentage of non-committal responses, especially for emerging platforms such as Koo (23%) indicates uncertainty among users, possibly due to limited familiarity or a lack of established reputation.

The investigation of overall trust in various news sources in 2022 further reinforces the dominance of traditional media in public perception. As shown in Figure 4, a significant 42% of respondents rated newspapers (both print and digital subscriptions) as the most trusted source of news. This is likely attributable to the editorial processes, fact-checking mechanisms, and perceived reliability of established print outlets. Broadcast news channels like NDTV and Times Now were seen as moderately trusted but displayed a polarized perception, with a non-negligible proportion of respondents ranking them among the least trusted sources. Social media platforms exhibited a more distributed trust profile, with 21% of respondents placing them in the second most trusted position, reflecting their growing role in news dissemination but also underlying doubts about their credibility. Magazines were perceived with varied trust levels, leaning toward moderate trust, while news aggregator platforms faced the highest skepticism. A striking 38% of respondents rated aggregator platforms as the least trusted, suggesting a lack of confidence in the curation algorithms and the source transparency of aggregated content.



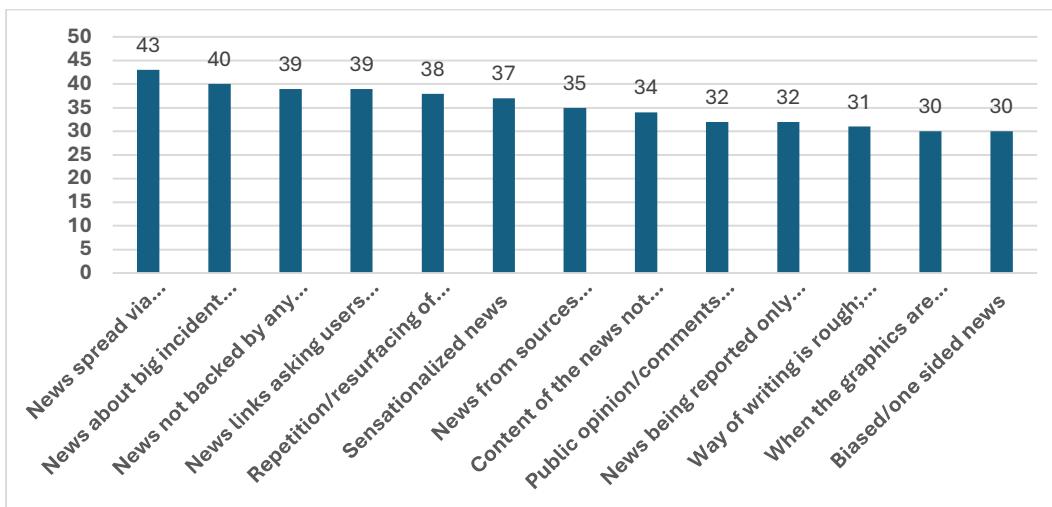
**Figure 4: Levels of Trust in Various News Sources**

The prevalence of potentially fake news online was particularly alarming. As illustrated in Figure 5, data from March 2023 shows that 80% of Indian internet users encountered fake news, with 61% reporting occasional encounters and 19% experiencing frequent exposure. Only a small minority (3%) claimed never to come across fake news. This data underscores the pervasive nature of misinformation in the digital landscape and highlights the challenge of combating fake news, especially when it becomes an almost routine part of online interactions.



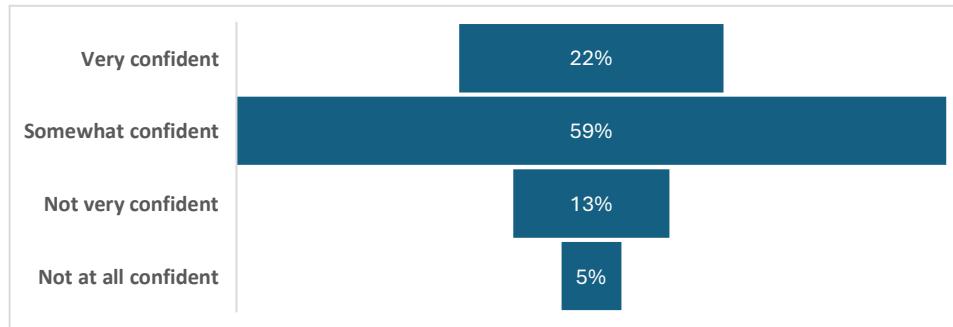
**Figure 5 : Frequency of Encountering Potentially Fake News Online**

An important dimension of this study involved exploring the indicators used by online news consumers to detect fake news, as shown in Figure 6. The most prominent indicator was the source of news spreading via informal channels such as WhatsApp or Word of Mouth, cited by 43% of respondents. Equally significant was the absence of corroboration from official news websites or applications (40%), and the lack of supporting evidence for the news content (39%). Other common red flags included sensationalized content (37%), repetition of old news as current events (38%), and biased or one-sided reporting (30%). These results emphasize the critical role of media literacy in helping consumers identify misinformation. Moreover, the findings reveal a substantial reliance on heuristics such as the quality of writing and graphic design, and public opinion trends as indirect indicators of news authenticity, underscoring the need for more structured critical thinking education.



**Figure 6: Indicators of Fake News Among Online News Consumers**

Finally, the study assessed the confidence of online news consumers in spotting misinformation, with results illustrated in Figure 7. A significant majority (81%) reported being either very confident (22%) or somewhat confident (59%) in their ability to identify fake news. However, 18% admitted to low confidence, which reflects a significantly vulnerable segment. This suggests that while public awareness of fake news indicators is relatively widespread, there remains a crucial need for enhanced public education, media literacy initiatives, and user-friendly fact-checking tools to further empower consumers in combating the spread of misinformation.



**Figure 7: Online News Consumers' Confidence in Spotting Online Misinformation**

## 4.2. Findings

Concise of findings of this research with a maximum of three points for each theme are given under the following points:

### 4.2.1 Trust in Media Sources

- a) Trusted Outlets: DD India, All India Radio, The Times of India, and Economic Times are highly trusted (67% to 70%).
- b) Neutral Outlets: The Hindu, The Indian Express, NDTV, India Today TV, and regional/local newspapers are perceived neutrally (62% to 66%).
- c) Less Trusted Outlets: Republic TV, The Wire, and Scroll.in are viewed with less trust (50% to 58%).

### 4.2.2. Perception of Social Media Platforms

- a) Trusted Platforms: Twitter and WhatsApp are the most trusted (17% and 16% express high trust, respectively).
- b) Distrusted Platforms: Clubhouse and Signal have the highest percentage expressing no trust (26% each).
- c) Ambiguous Trust: Instagram has 14% of respondents with unclear levels of trust, while Koo has 23% with uncertain opinions.

### 4.3.3. Confidence in News Sources and Channels

- a) Trusted Sources: Newspapers are considered most trustworthy by 42% of respondents.
- b) Mixed Perception: Broadcast news channels have varied trust perceptions (23% most trusted, 16% least trusted).
- c) Distrust in Aggregators: News aggregator platforms face skepticism, with 38% considering them the least trusted source.

## 5. DISCUSSIONS

By integrating both empirical data and the lived experiences of online news consumers, the following actionable recommendations will provide a practical and targeted roadmap for combating misinformation. Implementing such measures can significantly reduce the spread

of fake news, strengthen public trust in credible news sources, and empower individuals to critically evaluate information in the digital ecosystem.

**5.1. For Media Outlets:** Media outlets should reinforce their role as credible information providers by strengthening fact-checking practices and offering clear sourcing of news content. Given that 42% of respondents consider newspapers the most trusted source (see Figure 4), this is an opportunity to rebuild public confidence. Awareness campaigns must target digital consumers to raise attention about the critical need to verify news sources, especially since 40% of respondents recognize fake news when absent from official sources (see Figure 6). Additionally, offering easy-to-understand guidelines and checklists for evaluating news credibility will empower users, considering only 22% feel very confident in spotting fake news (see Figure 7).

**5.2. For Social Media Platforms:** Social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, which is cited by 43% of users as a key vector for fake news (see Figure 6), should introduce stricter forwarding limits, automated warnings on unverified content, and fact-checking bots. Platforms should flag sensationalized content, as 37% of respondents rely on this as a key indicator of fake news (see Figure 6). User education should be integrated directly into platforms, for example, through interactive prompts or tutorials, given that a large portion (59%) of users are only somewhat confident in identifying misinformation (see Figure 7).

**5.3. For Policymakers:** Policymakers should enforce transparency mandates, requiring social media companies to disclose content moderation and recommendation algorithm practices, as evident by low public trust in platforms such as The Wire (52%) and Scroll.in (50%) (see Figure 2). Large-scale media literacy programs should be funded and deployed to address the 18% of users who feel not confident in spotting fake news (see Figure 7). Support for independent research on explainable fake news detection algorithms is essential, as users rely heavily on subjective measures (e.g., lack of evidence and biased tone) to identify misinformation (see Figure 6).

**5.4. From the User's Perspective:** Many users rely on informal indicators such as poorly designed graphics (30%) or biased tone (30%) to detect fake news (see Figure 6). Media stakeholders should translate these red flags into actionable, easy-to-use tools for users. Furthermore, as 32% of respondents rely on public comments to assess the credibility of a news article, interventions must also address the risk of echo chambers, where misinformation appears valid due to widespread acceptance within a community. Improving the visibility and accessibility of credible news sources in search results and social feeds will help combat this issue.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The analysis provides significant insights into trust in media, the prevalence of fake news, and public confidence in spotting misinformation in India. Trust in media outlets has fluctuated between 2013 and 2022, showing no consistent long-term pattern, with values ranging from a low of 61% in 2018 to a peak of 79% in 2020 (see Figure 1). Newspapers and traditional broadcast channels enjoy relatively higher trust, with 42% of respondents ranking newspapers as the most trusted source in 2022, compared to only 18% for social media platforms (see Figure 4). Notably, news aggregators were considered the least trusted source by 38% of respondents. Regarding social media platforms, Twitter (17%) and WhatsApp (16%) are the

most trusted, whereas platforms like Clubhouse and Signal show very high distrust (26%) (see Figure 3).

Alarmingly, as of March 2023, 80% of Indian internet users reported encountering potentially fake news online, with 61% experiencing it sometimes and 19% often (see Figure 5). Consumers primarily identify fake news through informal channels, such as messages received on WhatsApp or via word of mouth (43%), or by noticing the absence of the news on official media outlets (40%) (see Figure 6). Importantly, users express a need for better guidance in identifying misinformation. Only 22% feel very confident in spotting fake news, while 59% are somewhat confident, and 18% report low or no confidence (see Figure 7). This indicates a significant gap in media literacy and highlights an urgent need for user-centric interventions.

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