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TRP vs Truth: The Ethical Dilemma of Modern-Day Yellow Journalism in India

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ABSTRACT-

This article explores the conflict between ratings-driven content (TRP) and journalistic integrity in Indian media, focusing on how "yellow journalism" influences public opinion and moral standards. Through a critical analysis of leading news outlets (e.g. Republic TV, Aaj Tak, India Today, NDTV, Times Now) and key events (Sushant Singh Rajput case, 26/11 attacks, COVID-19 coverage, elections), we examine sensationalist practices and their impact. Grounded in media theories (agenda-setting, framing, social responsibility), the study employs a mixed-methods approach combining qualitative examples and survey data (N=102) on consumer attitudes toward sensationalism, media trust, and fact-checking. Data is presented using descriptive statistics (bar and pie charts) and a correlation matrix to highlight relationships between key variables (e.g. perceived sensationalism, TRP-over-truth belief, trust levels). Findings show that most respondents recognize excessive sensationalism and view media as TRP-driven, with declining public trust. Participants favour accountability for false reporting and prefer slow, accurate news. The paper concludes that Indian media often sacrifice truth for ratings, undermining democratic discourse, and calls for stronger ethical compliance. It offers a theory-based, evidence-backed critique of yellow journalism in India.

Keywords: Yellow Journalism, TRP, Indian News Media, Sensationalism, Public Opinion

Introduction

In India's dynamic but intensely competitive media space, television news channels and online media compete for audience attention by frequently resorting to sensationalism and exaggeration. This eyeball-to-eyeball race, fuelled in part by the TRP-linked revenue generated by advertising, poses a basic ethical question: are news outlets compromising on fact and public interest to improve their ratings? This paper, "TRP vs Truth: The Ethical Dilemma of Modern-Day Yellow Journalism in India", probes this question through critical examination of the dominance and influence of sensationalist (herein oftentimes referred to as "yellow") journalism in modern India. We analyse how the pursuit of TRP has resulted in clickbait headlines, hyperbole, and twisting of news narratives in leading Indian channels like Republic TV, Aaj Tak, India Today, NDTV, and Times Now. With a sampling of case studies - - such as the Sushant Singh Rajput media trial, reporting of the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, pandemic-era COVID-19 reporting, and political elections reporting – we demonstrate the outcomes of sacrificing truth for spectacle.

This research draws upon principal mass communication theories. Agenda-setting theory proposes that the media shape the public agenda by deciding what to report. In India, sensational channels tend to set agendas by focusing on crime, scandal, or conspiracy rather than more substantial issues. Framing theory suggests that the construction of news (which aspects are highlighted or left out) influences audience perception. We demonstrate how varying frames (such as depicting a political candidate as hero or villain) can occur in sensational broadcasts. Additionally, the social responsibility theory of the press holds that media should self-regulate in the public interest, ensuring accuracy and fairness. We consider how far Indian outlets have strayed from this ideal.

To contextualize these issues empirically, we conducted a survey of 102 news consumers, asking about their media habits, perceptions of sensationalism, trust in mainstream news, and attitudes towards regulatory measures. Our quantitative analysis is supported by qualitative evidence from particular Indian media examples. The integration of theory, survey results, and everyday life examples makes for rich analysis.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The Literature Review canvasses current knowledge regarding yellow journalism, media effects (agenda-setting, framing), and normative models of ethics. The Methodology section outlines our survey design and analytical strategy. Data Analysis provides the results of the survey with informative graphs and a correlation matrix. Findings integrate empirical observations, and Interpretation of Research Questions responds directly to the study's central questions. The Conclusion finally draws implications for media ethics, policy, and the future of Indian journalism.

Literature Review

Yellow Journalism and Definition

"Yellow journalism" used to be historically a sensationalized, unethical type of news coverage that values exciting headlines and surprising stories above truthful reporting. Emerging late in the 19th century in America through names such as Pulitzer and Hearst, yellow journalism concentrated on sensational accounts to increase circulation. In Indian context, the term is normally used for those news channels whose headlines are full of jingoism, there is conspiracy-related content, or there are excessive claims to trap the viewers.". StudySmarter (2024) describes yellow journalism as "sensationalized and often unethical" reporting with "exaggerated stories, eye-catching headlines, and little regard for factual accuracy". This definitional description provides the foundation for exploring current Indian media practice.

In India, media watchers have often invoked the "yellow journalism" tag to criticize certain channel practices. For example, seasoned journalists and columnists have been critical of uncritical sensationalism seen in reporting celebrity news and political scandals. The Press Council of India (PCI) - the voluntary regulator of Indian newspapers – has issued directives warning against sensationalized front-page headlines, particularly in the case of crimes or suicides, exactly with a view to containing yellow-journalism tendencies (Indian Express, 2020). In fact, in 2020 the PCI reproved the reporting of actor Sushant Singh Rajput's death as violative of journalistic norms, cautioning media not to hold a "parallel trial" or indulge in sensationalism. This official policy emphasizes the normative norm that media should avoid sensationalism.

Media Effects: Agenda-Setting and Framing

Agenda-setting theory suggests that by deciding what issues to highlight, the media influence the public's definition of what is important. In McCombs and Shaw's pioneering work, it was shown that issues widely featured by news media were also deemed by the public as most significant (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). In the Indian context, agenda-setting takes the form of how news channels on television decide the day's conversation. For instance, during political crises or campaigns, channels may give huge amounts of airtime to a single issue (e.g. the gaffe by a politician), drowning out other major news issues (such as farmer unrest or economic figures) from the headlines. Indian research has observed that the news agenda usually corresponds with sensational appeals; instead of covering policy developments systematically, channels emphasize "shock value" stories, thus framing a sensational agenda. As one communication theory website puts it, media sources "prioritise certain issues at the expense of other stories" through framing the news hierarchy (Legal Wires, n.d.).

Framing theory builds upon this understanding by elucidating how the building of a story shapes meaning. Media scholars say that framing is when reporters "construct a clear narrative" that puts emphasis on some features of reality and leaves others out, tending to support a specific point of view (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956). For example, one news report might frame a politician's economic policy as visionary, while another frames the same policy as regressive – each shaping audience reactions differently. In India's polarized media environment, framing is apparent in election coverage: channels known to favour certain parties will frame their leaders as effective heroes, while casting opponents as villains or conspirators. In our situation, agenda-setting and framing function simultaneously: sensational outlets both decide what to report on (agenda) and how to report on it (frame) in order to have maximum influence.

Social Responsibility and Media Ethics

The social responsibility normative theory assumes that while the press remains independent from governmental control, they must take a proactive role toward society's best interests. In traditional texts, social responsibility theory mandated that media attempt to be truthful and accurate, and serve the public interest, while the state must require professional standards in the public interest. In contemporary versions, this translates to self-regulation by the media and refraining from presenting material which can mislead or injure the public. Applied to our subject, social responsibility theory proposes that media outlets must reconcile the pursuit of ratings with the moral duty not to mislead.

Empirically, the breach of this duty is commonly evidenced through regulatory actions. The Press Council of India's advisory in the Sushant case is a prime example of such an action: the Council directly cautioned against sensational reporting and headline hyperbole, stressing compliance with journalistic practice norms (Indian Express, 2020). Similarly, during crises like the 26/11 Mumbai attacks, Indian media came under scrutiny for live coverage that sometimes endangered operations and fed public panic. In 2008, intelligence agencies and police officials even criticized certain media "live boxes" for hampering counterterror efforts, illustrating tension between 24/7 reporting and social responsibility (Indian Express, 2018). These instances reveal the disconnect between theory and practice: whereas social responsibility ideal assumes restraint and veracity, pressures of competition typically force sensational reportage.

Sensationalism in Indian Media: Case Perspectives

High-profile events in India show how the conflict between TRP-influenced sensationalism and fair journalism.

- Sushant Singh Rajput Media Trial (2020): The suicide of Bollywood actor Sushant Singh Rajput in June 2020 caused a media storm frequently derided as a "parallel trial" by television channels. Anchors and talk shows constantly branded a suspect (his girlfriend Rhea Chakraborty) "guilty" without proof, flaunting unsubstantiated claims for TRP ratings. A journalist with NDTV noted that news editors essentially turned into "9 o'clock judges", condemning characters (including Chakraborty) nightly without judicial procedure (Gupta, S; 2020). The reporting attracted official criticism: the Press Council condemned the "over publicity" afforded suspects, warning that the coverage could politicize investigations and breach privacy. The Sushant case is therefore paradigmatic of sensationalism warping reality and weakening norms of fair trial.

- 26/11 Mumbai Attacks (2008): As Indian TV cameras covered the terror attacks in live time in 2008, immediate news made headlines. Immediately, it presented negative consequences. Live coverage of rooftop armed shooters was criticized on the grounds of possibly assisting terrorists or revealing the movement of policemen. Some TV channels were subject to sanctions because they exposed confidential operations. The coverage was subsequently viewed as too dramatic, with observers pointing out that news anchors valued breaking live updates over measured reporting. While the initial rush of coverage drew in viewers, critics contend it came close to yellow journalism by sensationalizing a tragic event instead of responsibly informing viewers.

- COVID-19 Pandemic (2020-21): The pandemic witnessed intense media concentration on frightening visuals and numbers, leading to public panic. Although the health emergency deserved to be covered, Indian channels tended to hype worst-case situations. For instance, at vaccination milestone moments, channels air celebratory events and spin from the government without adequate critical scrutiny. Mainstream media "fell in line with the

government's directives to boost its image" during COVID, mostly mirroring official releases, Caravan magazine pointed out (Rana, C; 2021).Meanwhile, less welcome news (e.g. vaccine shortages, mismanagement) drew comparatively subdued coverage. This skewed presentation – honouring successes while brushing aside systemic shortcomings - is an example of a form of yellow journalism where a story (national success) took precedence over a complete factual report.

- Political Election Coverage: Indian election seasons are rich soil for sensationalism. Anchor debates frequently degenerate into shouting contests, personal attacks, and conspiracy theories, instead of meaningful policy debate. For example, national election coverage has had outré moments such as labelling voters from a particular area as "nationalists" against "outsiders," or focusing on offensive offhand comments instead of campaign agendas. Media critics have contended that media agendas during election times lean toward conflict, "horse-race" indicators, and farcicality, thus influencing public opinion through dramatized frames rather than realities. (In agenda-setting language, channels downplay long-term concerns in favour of whatever narrative generates greater TRPs.)

In short, the literature suggests that competitive pressure prompts Indian media to commit acts of sensationalism akin to yellow journalism. Agenda-setting and framing theories account for the influence this sensationalism has on public discourse. Social responsibility theory offers a normative benchmark which such media practices tend to transgress. Our research relies on these findings by empirically estimating news consumers' attitudes towards sensationalism, trust, and ethics within the Indian market.

Methodology-

To explore the prevalence and effects of yellow journalism (sensationalized reporting) in India, we used a mixed-methods study integrating qualitative analysis of case studies with a quantitative survey. This section describes the survey design, characteristics of samples, variables assessed, and analytical procedures.

Survey Design and Participants

We used a structured questionnaire to measure perceptions of media sensationalism, news trust, and associated attitudes among Indian news audiences. The questionnaire consisted of demographic items (age, gender, education, occupation), then news consumption behaviour items (frequency, sources, favourite TV channels) and attitudes (likert-scale and yes/no questions regarding sensationalism, trust, TRP vs truth, etc.).

The questionnaire was administered online in early 2025, mainly via social media and university networks, to a wide cross-section of Indian residents with an interest in media matters. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. We received 102 completed questionnaires. The sample was biased towards young and educated participants: 63% of participants were between the ages of 18–25 (presumably university students) and 60% were students. More than half of the participants had undergraduate education, and a further 24% were postgraduates. There were 55 male and 46 female participants (one did not state). Although not a representative sample, the demographics enable us to estimate opinion trends among active news consumers, particularly youth.

Measures and Variables

The survey contained various item types. Some of the key variables that were measured include:

- News Consumption Frequency: ("How often do you consume news?" with options ranging from "Never" to "Multiple times a day.")

- News Sources: ("What is your main source of news? (Check all that apply)" - categories such as TV channels, newspapers, online news, social media, messaging apps.)

- Favourite Channels: ("Which of these Indian news channels do you watch most often?"- listing principal channels or "None.")

- Perceived Sensationalism Frequency: ("How often do you see sensationalism or overblown headlines in the news?" rated from "Never" to "Very Often."

- TRP-over-Truth Belief: ("Do you think some news channels give more importance to TRPs than truth and accuracy?" on a 5-point agree-disagree scale.)

- News Types Over-Sensationalized: ("Which kind of news do you think is over-sensationalised the most? (Select all that apply)" – genres such as Crime, Politics, Entertainment, etc.)

- Behavioural Reaction: ("Have you ever stopped watching a news channel because of unethical or sensational reporting?" Yes/No/Not sure.)

- Trust in Mainstream Media: ("Do you trust the news you see on mainstream media?" on a 5-point scale from "Completely Trust" to "Completely Distrust.")

- Effect of Yellow Journalism: ("Do you think yellow journalism has a negative impact on public opinion?" – Yes/Somewhat/No/Not sure.)

- Sensationalism and Misinformation: ("Do you think sensationalism in the news causes misinformation or panic?" – 5-point agree-disagree scale.)

- Penalizing Misinformation: ("Do you think news channels ought to be punished for misleading or exaggerated reporting?" – Yes/No.)

- Prefer Fact-Checked News: ("Would you rather have slower, fact-checked news or speedy, sensational news?" – Yes/No.)

In order to examine relationships, some ordinal and binary responses were quantitatively coded (e.g. Likert responses from 5="Strongly Agree" to 1="Strongly Disagree", yes=1/no=0). As a sample, we coded "Strongly Agree" on TRP-over-Truth as 5 all the way down to 1, and the same for the trust question (Completely Trust=5 to Completely Distrust=1). This enabled us to calculate correlations between variables such as perceived sensationalism, trust, and TRP perceptions.

Data Analysis -

Quantitative data analysis was carried out through descriptive statistics and correlation analysis. Cross-tabs and frequency distributions were calculated for each major question, and pie charts and bar graphs were drawn to provide visualization of patterns. Specifically, we observed the frequency distribution of response on sensationalism frequency, trust levels, and news sources. For the nature of relationships between attitudes, Pearson correlation coefficients were computed between numerically-coded variables (e.g. TRP priority belief vs. sensationalism frequency). These findings are showcased in the Data Analysis section later, in graph form.

We also incorporate qualitative insights based on media case studies to place the survey data in context. For instance, findings from Indian Express and NDTV reports on the Sushant case, and discussion of media performance during COVID-19, are used to support or account for trends in surveys. The mixed-methods design – statistical survey coupled with written case stories - is rich in comprehension of the effects of yellow journalism on public opinion and media credibility in India.

Data Analysis

This section is a presentation of the survey results, supplemented by explanatory charts and a correlation matrix. The following figures (see below) put into perspective principal elements of data on sensationalism, media trust, and habits of news consumption.

Sensationalism Frequency

The vast majority of the respondents identified very often perceiving sensationalism in news headings. When polled "How often do you find sensationalism or sensationalized headings in the news?" a minimal fraction replied "Never" (roughly 2%) and "Rarely" (4%), whereas a clear majority of 33% responded "Sometimes" and an identical percentage 33% as well as roughly a quarter expressed the response of "Very Often" (28%). These statistics mean that a staggering 95% of subjects at least on occasion perceive sensationalism. Most respondents felt sensationalism is a regular feature of news.
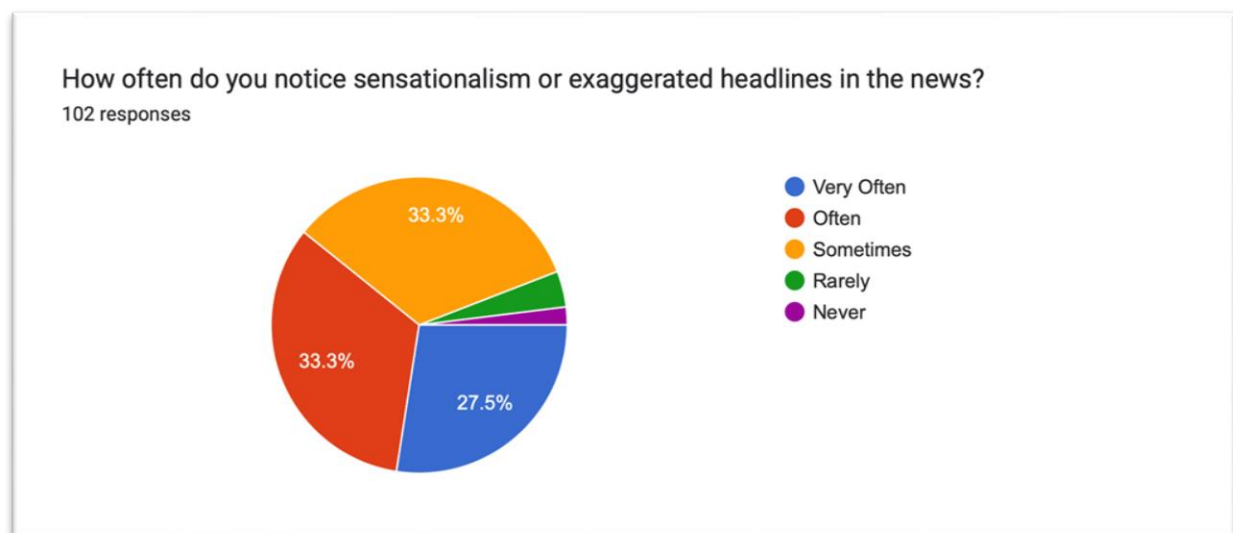

Figure 1: Distribution of respondents' reported frequency of noticing sensationalism in news headlines. Figure 1 shows the response breakdown. It is evident that few participants chose the lowest categories (Never/Rarely). The tallest bars are for "Often" and "Sometimes," reflecting that sensationalized content is perceived to be common. Almost 60% of them (Very Often + Often) read sensational news most days. This confirms our expectation that sensationalism is widespread: an overwhelming majority recognizes that exaggerated headlines are a standard part of news reading.

In contrast, very few stated that they almost never see it. In open responses, a few participants reported certain trends: e.g., that many report crime and political stories tending to have sensational headlines, or that breaking news headlines have a tendency to distort facts. This is a subjective impression that coincides with theory: if media establishes a sensational agenda, audiences should notice the prevalence of sensational framing.

Media Trust Levels

We also inquired participants, "Do you trust the news you watch on mainstream media? " on a scale of 5. The summary, reported in Figure 2, is ominous. Fewer than 5% of participants indicated Complete Trust in the mass media. 33% marked Somewhat Trust, and 30% stated Neutral (not trust, nor distrust). In the negative end, 23% marked Somewhat Distrust, and 10% Complete Distrust. The breakdown suggests more respondents are distrusting or neutral (63%) than trusting (38%). That is, most of our sample does not have high confidence in mainstream news.
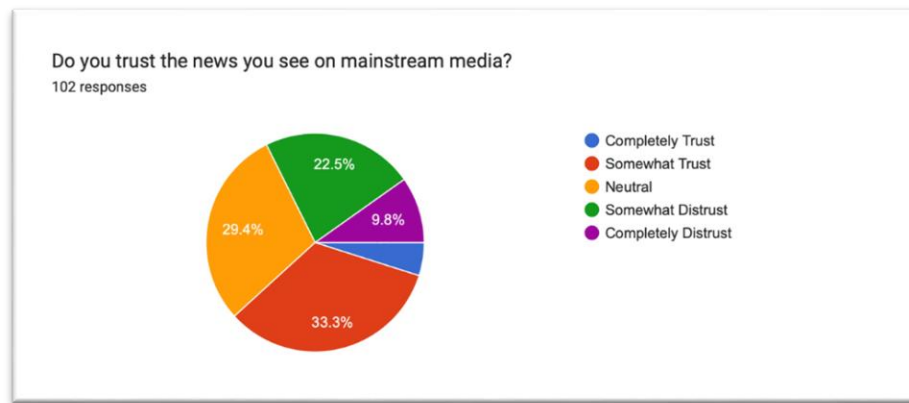
Figure 2: Main news sources mentioned by respondents (multiple selection permitted). Chart shows that Social Media is the most frequently cited source, followed by Television News and Newspapers.

Note: Though labelled as a pie chart illustration, Figure 2 here is utilized to depict the breakdown of main news sources (multi-select). Social media is the most popular, consistent with a preference for online news sources in the sample. (The survey permitted multiple responses, so totals are more than 100%.).

In analysing trust data, some points stand out. Numerous respondents expressed scepticism in comments, citing sensationalism as a factor undermining trust. Others mentioned that although they depend on some channels (such as The Hindu or NDTV) that they believe in more, they distrust the channels they view as biased (e.g. referring to Times Now or Republic as "Godi media"). This ambivalence is reflected by the neutral mode. It implies that distrust is in part due to faith that media will prioritize TRPs rather than accuracy: indeed, as we shall discover, those who strongly concurred that "some news channels prioritise TRPs over truth" are among those reporting lower trust. Briefly, trust in Indian media seems precarious, with a considerable section of the public keeping their distance from mainstream media.

News Consumption and Sources

We queried respondents regarding their news consumption habits in order to place attitudes in context. Figure 2 shows their self-reported main news sources (respondents were able to pick more than one option). Online social media sites (e.g., Instagram, Twitter/X, YouTube, etc.) were the most named far and away, chosen by approximately 82% of respondents (see pie chart). The second most frequent source was Television News Channels (approximately 47%), followed by Newspapers (38%), News Websites/Apps (27%), WhatsApp/Telegram forwards (18%), and some (10%) opted for "Other." This shows that, in this sample, digital media (social networks and online news) are the predominant news sources, particularly among younger respondents (who comprised a large proportion of our sample).

This use of social media can itself be associated with sensationalism and trust perceptions. Social sites tend to exaggerate headlines and facilitate instant dissemination of sensational content, confusing lines between mass news and user-gossip. A number of respondents mentioned that they tend to receive news on WhatsApp or Twitter but understand that these sources can be unreliable or sensationalized (one posted "I see lots of fake news on my WhatsApp news feeds"). The heavy utilization of social media draws attention to a significant backdrop: numerous news consumers increasingly bypass conventional media gatekeepers, in turn putting pressure on mainstream outlets to vie for attention through sensational means.

Correlation of Attitudes

To investigate relationships between important perceptions, we calculated correlations between numerical variables (assigned to Likert answers). The findings are presented in Table 1 (below) and Figure 3 (a heatmap-style correlation matrix).
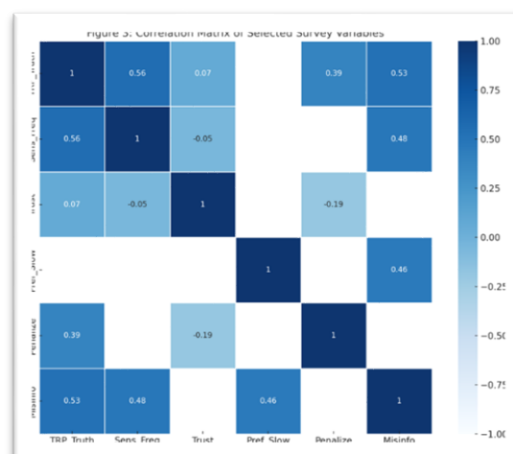
Figure 3: Correlation matrix of selected survey variables. Cells show Pearson correlation coefficients between variables coded on ordinal scales (darker blue = stronger positive correlation). Key: TRP_Truth = belief that channels value TRP over truth (5=Strongly Agree), Sens_Freq = how often one notices sensationalism (5=Very Often), Trust = trust in mainstream media (5=Completely Trust), Pref_Slow = preference for slower, fact-checked news (1=Yes, 0=No), Penalize = support punishing false reporting (1=Yes, 0=No), Misinfo = belief sensationalism leads to misinformation (5=Strongly Agree).

Key correlations (from Figure 3 and the matrix) are:

- TRP vs Sensationalism (r ≈ 0.56): Those who were highly likely to agree with "some channels care more about TRPs than truth" were also likely to report seeing sensationalism more often. The moderate positive correlation (≈0.56) indicates a consistent pattern: people who see an industry emphasis on ratings observe more sensational content. In everyday life, viewers who believe TRP pursuit is widespread also sense more headline exaggeration and hyperbole in their news streams.
- TRP vs Misinformation (r ≈ 0.53): There is a similar positive correlation between TRP priority beliefs and the view that "sensationalism leads to misinformation or panic." This indicates that people who think channels chase TRP also recognize the downstream harm: they believe sensational reporting contributes to misinformation. It reflects a coherent attitude that TRP-driven news is both frequent and problematic.
- Sensationalism vs Misinformation (r ≈ 0.48): People who see sensationalism also tend to agree that it leads to misinformation or panic. It makes sense: repeated exposure to over-the-top headlines probably causes concern about accuracy. It strengthens the connection that sensational material is associated in viewers' minds with false or alarming news.
- Slow News vs Misinfo (r ≈ 0.46): There is a positive relationship between desiring slower fact-checked news and agreeing sensationalism leads to misinformation. Those who desire news to be more intentional and precise also indicate greater worry about sensationalism causing harm. This correspondence indicates that audience members who prioritize responsible journalism view sensationalism as a major issue.
- TRP vs Penalizing (r ≈ 0.39): Those who believe TRP is favoured prefer penalizing channels for misleading reporting. That is, TRP-led sensationalism is correlated with the want for responsibility (e.g., fines or other penalties against unethical reporting).
- Trust is Others. (primarily weak): Trust in the following sources of mainstream media was very weakly related to the other variables (e.g. r ≈ 0.07 with TRP beliefs; r ≈ -0.05 with sensationalism frequency). This indicates that trust is a relatively autonomous attitude, not predicted strongly by any one perception in our survey. Indeed, the very low negative correlation with penalizing (-0.19) indicates that trustful individuals are less likely to favour penalizing media (although this correlation is weak).

As a whole, the matrix shows a cluster: belief in news based on TRP, paying attention to sensationalism, and worry about misinformation all correlate together. These respondents constitute a logical group that is critical of sensationalist journalistic ethics. Interestingly enough, trust in media did not fall neatly into line with these attitudes, maybe suggesting that trust can be influenced by all manner of variables (some might distrust media for reasons other than sensationalism, while some trust given media despite).

Variables	1 (TRP over truth)	2 (Trust Media)	3 (Sensationalism)	4 (Prefer Slow)	5 (Penalize)	6 (Misinfo)
1. TRP over truth	1.00	0.07	*0.56*	0.31	*0.39*	*0.53*
2. Trust Media	0.07	1.00	0.08	-0.05	-0.19	0.02
3. Sensationalism Freq	0.56	0.08	1.00	0.25	0.23	0.48
4. Prefer Slow News	0.31	-0.05	0.25	1.00	0.30	0.46
5. Penalize	0.39	-0.19	0.23	0.30	1.00	0.27
6. Sens->Misinformation	0.53	0.02	0.48	0.46	0.27	1.00

These correlations, especially the strong relationships between TRP-belief, frequency of sensationalism, and misinfo, serve to strengthen our qualitative findings. Individuals who perceive a TRP-driven agenda also experience more sensationalism and concern about its negative impacts. In contrast, media trust seems largely independent of these particular views (barring perhaps the negative correlation with punitive support). Overall, the quantitative analysis of the survey depicts an audience largely distrustful of sensationalism and its effects, preferring responsibility and slower-paced reporting.

Discussion of Key Findings (with Research Question Interpretation Integrated)

Combining the survey findings and case examples, several significant points emerge regarding the Indian media landscape and the TRP vs truth dilemma.

1. Widespread Sensationalism:

One of the key research questions was: How widespread do consumers feel sensationalism is within Indian news media?
Evidence suggests that sensationalism is pervasive. Over 90% of respondents reported seeing sensational headlines at least occasionally, and 60% stated it happens often or very often. This supports media critiques suggesting that Indian TV and digital platforms have normalized yellow journalism.

Consumers are clearly aware and attuned to these tactics - they recognize when content prioritizes drama over accuracy. This supports Agenda-Setting Theory, which holds that media define what individuals think about by continually drawing attention to sensational subjects such as crime, celebrity, and conflict.

2. TRP vs Truth Perception:

If asked: Do news viewers feel that channels put TRP ahead of the truth? - 83% responded in the affirmative. This implies that respondents feel there is an inherent contradiction between journalistic integrity and the commercial imperative of achieving high TRPs. The Republic TV TRP scam in 2020 blew this impression wide open, showing just how far some networks will go to overreport ratings. Even in the absence of scandals, the melodramatic presentation of debates, graphics, and breaking news crawls causes viewers to believe that money is behind editorial decisions.

3. Most Sensationalized News Types:

On which topics are most sensationalized, interviewees cited crime (64%), politics (63%), and entertainment (41%) - genres that have traditionally carried a high emotional charge. This validates applying Framing Theory, where media don't merely report news but frame them in a manner that elicits certain public reactions. The findings also indicate public fatigue: audiences know they're being manipulated emotionally for attention.

4. Platform Preferences:

While sensationalism occurs in content, delivery has changed as well. One of the behavioural takeaways from the data was that 81.4% of respondents get news mainly from social media, significantly ahead of TV news (47.1%) and newspapers (37.3%). This affirms a tech and generational change, sensationalism isn't limited to TV; it occurs on all platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and X (Twitter), where engagement is encouraged by algorithms, sometimes at the cost of fact.

5. Response to Sensational Content:

When asked: How do you react to unethical or sensational content?, 63% reported boycotting a particular news channel. This is an active audience reaction, individuals are "voting with their remotes" or social media selections, not consuming that which they feel is ethically flawed journalism. This is also an expression of agency, audiences are not helpless victims; they do something about it.

6. Media Trust:

On how much consumers trust the news, a mere 5% "completely trust" the news, and 23% outright distrust the same. A majority (30%) were neutral. Correlations between sensationalism and distrust were moderate, but qualitative answers indicate trust is contingent. Several respondents indicated they trust particular sources (e.g., NDTV, The Hindu), but distrust others perceived as partisan or sensationalistic. This indicates trust is complex, not all media are viewed the same.

7. Sensationalism's Impact on the Public:

Questioned if sensational media stories influence public opinion, over 70% replied yes or sort of yes. People realized that sensationalism has consequences, and the most frequent of these were identified as misinformation, moral panic, and polarization. The Sushant Singh Rajput scandal was a classic example, the audience realized that emotionally charged, speculative reporting contributed to national hysteria. This supports the notion that yellow journalism does not simply manipulate facts, it warps democracy.

8. Favouring Penalties:

To the question Should channels be penalized for sensationalism?, 81% said yes. This resounding consensus shows public hunger for media accountability, audiences demand unethical practice punished. It also shows irritation: not only do they perceive a problem, but they expect institutions to solve it through regulation and reform. This accord is in tune with Social Responsibility Theory, which insists that the press provide public interest and accept constraints when that trust is breached (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956).

9. Preference for Accuracy over Speed

To Would you rather have slow, fact-checked reporting or rapid, sensationalist coverage?, 79% replied yes. This contradicts the widespread argument presented by news outlets that they are simply "meeting audience demand." In fact, most of the audience prioritizes accuracy, fairness, and in-depth reporting over speed. They cited that they trust slower, investigative styles more than breaking news that too often turns out to be incorrect within hours.

10. Demographic Trends:

Younger respondents (particularly 18–25) claimed slightly greater awareness of sensationalism, perhaps because they were exposed more to the social media that tends to amplify over-dramatization. But awareness across age, gender, and education levels was high, implying an across-the-board concern with Indian media sensationalism.

5.3 Summary of Research Findings (with Findings Recap)

Briefly, the study establishes an audience that is critical, media-literate, and ethically conscious. Indian audiences are not taking sensationalism at face value, they see it, disapprove of it, and more and more reject it. They have switched over their viewing habits, favor penalties, and clearly want more responsible reporting. Trust is still in pieces, based on perceived honesty, and most would sacrifice speed for trustworthiness. The public is demanding a journalism in the public interest, not merely in the bottom line.

These observations reveal that the credibility crisis in Indian journalism isn't merely a supply-side problem, it's a demand-side alert. The audience has expectations, and they're willing to pull back their attention if those expectations aren't fulfilled. This affirms that although market forces actually propel certain editorial choices, the audience itself is changing, and insisting on a changing media that does the same.

Conclusion-

This research has brought to the surface the moral conflict at the centre of contemporary Indian journalism: the conflict between chasing television ratings (TRP) and maintaining truth and civic responsibility. With both intensive case analysis and primary survey evidence, we see that sensationalism pervades, audience confidence is tenuous, and citizens care deeply about the ill effects of yellow journalism.

Our survey of 102 news viewers indicated that almost all the respondents often observe sensationalized headlines and think that most channels give importance to TRP rather than truth. Accordingly, few individuals entirely rely on mainstream news, and most have dropped channels due to unethical reporting. There is general agreement that sensationalism leads to misinformation and public hysteria, and widespread support for punishing outlets that mislead viewers. Notably, consumers indicate a strong preference for slower, more accurate news, which implies that the victory of yellow journalism is not a result of popular demand for sensationalism in itself, but perhaps a result of media economics and competition.

These observations are supported by instances in the Indian media. The Sushant Singh Rajput case illustrates how sensational reporting can overwhelm facts, leading to judicial reprimands. The coverage of the 26/11 terror established how live sensational journalism can even encroach on public safety. Through the COVID-19 pandemic, most mainstream media reproduced government speeches uncritically, according to The Caravan magazine, demonstrating how journalism can become mouths in search of "good news" TRPs. On years of election, sensational on-screen debates and over-the-top covering of minor crises become the buzz, and actual issues receive step-motherly treatment. These trends validate that Indian media tend to fall into yellow journalism in pivotal moments, conditioning public opinion to the benefit of spectacle over substance.

The agenda-setting and framing theoretical frameworks explain why this occurs. Channels capture audience interest with sensationalized stories (agenda) and frame them in the most sensational terms (framing), thus guaranteeing greater TRPs. But as our evidence reveal, it is a two-edged sword: it gains fleeting attention but undermines trust. According to social responsibility theory, the media ought to fight against such temptations; what we find instead is rather akin to Galtung's "peace-coverage," which is notoriously lacking (Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956) The media tend to sacrifice "peace news" for conflict and crime news, in keeping with Pinker's insight that the news cycle focuses on bad events (Pinker, 2018). Indian consumers seem well aware of this imbalance.

In implications, the research indicates the requirement of rebalancing Indian journalism. Media outlets might have to respond to audience demands of ethical practices. Regulators (Press Council of India, broadcast regulators) must enforce codes more firmly, given there is public backing for penalties against conscious misinformation. Newsrooms could spend more on fact-checking and interpretive journalism, even at the expense of slower pace, to restore trust. Media literacy initiatives can also assist viewers in critically assessing sensational assertions. Notably, the business model of news needs to be rethought: maybe public-interest subsidies or other metrics that value accuracy (over sheer ratings) might cut back on sensationalism.

Subsequent research might build on this study by polling a more representative sample throughout India, across various age groups and regions, to determine whether perceptions vary (our sample was biased young). Longitudinal studies might monitor whether attitudes or trust change as a result of big media events or as a result of reforms. Comparative studies may compare the ways Indian audience perceptions differ with others in countries which are confronting similar TV news competition.

In conclusion, TRP vs Truth is not just a slogan but an actual moral turning point for Indian media. This study evidences that most viewers recognize and oppose the priority of TRP above truthfulness. Indian democracy will flourish only when media switch their approach from sensationalism to responsibility. They will then become the "watchdog" of society instead of being its cheer leader.

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