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Media Ethics in Transition: Navigating Fake News, Paid News, and Journalistic Credibility in Indian Newsrooms

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Abstract:
All the news media in India are in the midst of an ethical metamorphosis that is being driven by commercial concentration, electoral competition, platform-centric information flows and uncoordinated regulation. This paper discusses three interrelated challenges to credibility in Indian newsrooms: paid news, fake news and misinformation, and loss of trust. It is a documentary and secondary data design. It spans evidence from the Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, the Reuters Institute Digital News Report, Parliamentary replies to complaints in the Press Council of India, orders issued by the News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority, fact-checking records by BOOM and Alt News and, last but not least, judicial rulings between 2020 and 2024. The study reveals that India was included in the list of 180 countries at 151st rank in 2025 as compared to the 161st position it occupied in 2023; that the number of complaints against paid news to the Press Council has gone up from 28 in 2023-24 to 290 in 2024-25; that the mainstream outlets themselves appear in the records of fact-checkers; and that self-regulation in broadcast media is not very active in sanctioning, with only 12 on 416 complaints. The paper argues these are not problems of the individual or the individual teacher, but part of a structural accountability gap. It calls for a multi-layered reform approach, including enforcing a new statute criminalizing paid news, establishing independent and transparent regulators, requiring disclosure of ownership and political advertising, strengthening newsroom verification, and promoting sustained media literacy.

Keywords: Paid News, Fake News, Misinformation, Journalistic Credibility, Press Freedom, Media Regulation, and Media Ethics.

1. Introduction

India's news media are in a unique situation. They operate in a democracy larger than any other in the world and are broadcast in dozens of languages across Print, television, radio, web-native websites, and—more and more—messaging and video platforms, where many citizens first encounter news. As for the Constitution, it has been firmly established that freedom of the press is encompassed within the broader scope of Article 19(1)(a) of the Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and expression. Romesh Thappar v. State of Madras (1950) is the Supreme Court decision that makes this clear. The question that

remains is whether the ethics that enable that freedom to be democratic – accuracy, independence and accountability – can withstand the environment that Indian newsrooms operate in today.

There are 3 key pressures. The first is paid news, which means that press coverage or broadcasting that is favourable to a commercial interest is paid for – or the commercial interest has other consideration – without the commercial interest being disclosed. According to the Press Council of India (PCI), it is anything printed or broadcast in any media "for a price in cash or kind as consideration" (Newslaundry, 2017). The second is fake news and the whole family of misinformation and disinformation, which now proliferates at the pace of WhatsApp forwards, YouTube channels, social video and synthetic media, which are beyond the editorial muscle that newspapers have traditionally had. The third is the loss of the credibility of news providers, which is reflected in the declining rankings in the press freedom index, very high rates of news avoidance among web users and the frequent occurrence of unverifiable or consensually constructed content in the mainstream media.

These pressures tend to be separated and discussed individually. Paid news is considered an election-law issue, fake news a platform issue, and credibility a matter of audience tastes. In this paper, they are connected. When both exist, and regulators do not seem to be able to deal with it effectively, paid news corrupts the supply of information from within the newsroom, fake news flows into the information environment from the outside, and credibility remains, or it does not.

The paper has four guiding questions. How do the indicators reflect the State of press freedom and public trust in news in India? What is the extent and longevity of the paid-news issue, according to official figures? How do mainstream newsrooms contribute to the spread of false and misleading information, and how do fact-checkers report it? Moreover, how effective is the existing framework – a weak statute-based Press Council, the self-regulation of the broadcast media, and the limited monitoring and Executive regulations during election periods for digital media?

The contribution is analytical and integrative. Instead of conducting a new survey, the paper collages the latest, publicly available data from international indices, parliamentary responses, regulator decisions, and fact-checking groups, and reads it against normative theories of media ethics. As will be argued in the sections ahead, India's media ethics have been changing from a gatekeeper model, which relied on a few key individuals—the professional editor and perhaps a few regulators—to set the bar, to a platform-mediated model in which "credibility" is built through repeated performance in a climate that prizes speed, partisanship, and virality. The conceptual framework is followed in Section 2, the description of the data and method in Section 3, the mapping of the regulatory landscape in Section 4, the analysis of paid news, fake news and credibility in turn in Sections 5, 6 and 7, the discussion on the convergence of the two data flows in Section 8 and the recommendations and conclusions in Sections 9 and 10.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

2.1 Normative foundations of media ethics

Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) differentiate between four classic models of the press: authoritarian, libertarian, social responsibility, and Soviet communist models. More recent normative studies (such as Christians et al., 2009) reframe media roles as Monitorial, Facilitative, Radical, and Collaborative, each with its own ethical responsibilities. These traditions share a common thread. Journalism has an obligation to be answerable for error, a discipline of verification, and independence from those it serves. The public expects the news media to be truthful, independent, has an obligation to be truthful, independent, has an obligation to verify and be answerable for error. As summarised by

Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), this is a discipline of verification that prioritizes citizens over owners, sources, and advertisers. In a global and digital world, Ward (2010) argues this core should be rearticulated as a shared ethics of humanity and truth-seeking, rather than a national professional code.

The responsibilities are formalized in the Norms of Journalistic Conduct in India, which include accuracy, fairness, separation of news from advertising, and the treatment of communal and sensitive issues, as well as the Code of Ethics and Broadcasting Standards set by the News Broadcasters and Digital Association (NBDA) in India. They are also backed up by the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of speech, as laid out in Article 19(2). The question then is not whether norms should be lacking, but how far apart norms are and how newsrooms actually behave.

2.2 Political economy and the capture of news

The other tradition is that of structural explanations. Herman and Chomsky (1988) identify two filters that shape news production: ownership and advertising. Ownership and reliance on official sources and political discipline are two filters known to shape news output, according to Herman and Chomsky (1988). Thussu (2007) shows how competitive commercial television diverts news toward entertainment and spectacle. These filters are particularly pertinent in India, where the "concentration of ownership" has been documented by the Media Ownership Monitor (RSF and DataLEADS, 2019); the proliferation of corporate conglomerates in news media; and the reliance on state and political advertising for many news outlets. They make this explicit by treating editorial space as a saleable product.

2.3 Information disorder

The frame most commonly used for misinformation is information disorder, which divides misinformation (false information being spread unintentionally), disinformation (false information being spread intentionally) and malinformation (true information being used to spread harm) (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). The term fake news' is used here in parallel with more precise terms because it includes a range of genres, as demonstrated by Tandoc, Lim and Ling (2018), such as satire, fabrication, manipulation, advertising and propaganda. Empirical evidence shows that false stories are able to spread more widely and rapidly than true stories on social platforms (Vosoughi, Roy and Aral, 2018), and that exposure is skewed to a small number of people who are highly active (Lazer et al., 2018). For newsrooms, it is a vicious circle: content that comes from social media platforms is collected by mainstream outlets, and the mainstream outlets thus gain the Authority of established brands.

2.4 Credibility as a relational asset

In this context, credibility is a relational asset. It is not something a newsroom owns; it is something audiences give—and take—based on repeated experience of accuracy, independence, and correction. Measuring credibility is therefore possible only indirectly, via trust surveys, brand trust scores, press freedom indices, and records from regulators and fact-checkers, all of which this paper employs. It also helps to understand that a few visible failures can affect the profession as a whole and, in turn, impact trust.

3. Research Design and Data

The study uses a documentary and secondary data design and a descriptive triangulation approach. It does not include primary survey/interview data. Five sets of evidence were compiled from publicly available data, and the most recent ones available prior to the end of 2025 were used.

The first are the international indices, namely, the RSF World Press Freedom Index (2002-2025) and the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (DNR; Newman et al., 2025) – India samples are from 2021 to 2025. The second is a record of official comments on paid news, such as when comments are made in Parliament on complaints received by the PCI and the numbers that the Election Commission of India (ECI) releases via its Media Certification and Monitoring Committees (MCMCs). The third is regulator output – the orders and complaint statistics of the News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA). The fourth is the record fact-checking of BOOM and Alt News for 2023 and 2024. The fifth category is judicial & legislative material, which covers various Supreme Court interim orders in the Sudarshan News case from 2020 and the Bombay High Court judgment in Kunal Kamra v Union of India from 2024.

The findings have some restrictions. The DNR India sample comprises online users, predominantly in English and Hindi, and is described by its authors as being "not nationally representative." Although PCI figures report complaints received, the 2024-25 figure was reported before the end of the year and was for the previous year. The counts are not the actual number of misinformation problems, but reflect which problems fact-checkers chose to check. Some figures come from press reports of parliamentary answers and/or regulatory orders, not the original documents. The data are used to identify direction, scale, and institutional behaviour to test causal claims.

4. Regulatory and Institutional Landscape

The Indian media regulation is complex and uneven. The Press Council of India, a statutory body established under the Press Council Act, 1978, regulates Print. The Council can warn, admonish or censure a newspaper, news agency, editor or journalist and, in serious cases, disapprove the conduct of an editor or journalist (Storyboard18, 2025). Its recommendations are not binding, and its remit does not extend to television or digital news. In 2010, the Council's own sub-committee on paid news recommended making its decisions binding, bringing electronic media within its purview, and amending the Representation of the People Act to make paid news an electoral malpractice. The detailed report was initially withheld, and it was released only after a Delhi High Court direction (MoneyLife, n.d.; Lok Sabha reply, 2013).

Television news is governed by the programme and advertising codes under the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995, and, for most major channels, by the NBDA's voluntary self-regulation. Its adjudicating arm, the NBDSA, is chaired by a retired Supreme Court judge and administers a code adopted by member broadcasters. Digital news publishers fall under the Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, which combine a code of ethics, a grievance mechanism, and oversight by the Executive. During elections, the ECI adds a further layer through district and state MCMCs, which monitor suspected paid news and issue notices to candidates; when paid news is confirmed, the expenditure is added to the candidate's election account (Storyboard18, 2025).

Table 1 summarises the main instruments.

Table 1. Regulatory and institutional instruments governing Indian news media

Instrument	Legal basis	Scope	Powers	Principal limitation
Press Council of India (PCI)	Press Council Act, 1978 (statutory)	Print media	Warn, admonish, censure; disapprove conduct of an editor or journalist	Recommendations not binding; no jurisdiction over television or digital news
News Broadcasting and Digital Standards Authority (NBDSA)	Voluntary self-regulation under the NBDA	Member television and digital news broadcasters	Warnings, content removal, apologies, fines	Membership-based; compliance not publicly verified
ECI Media Certification and Monitoring Committees	ECI guidelines; district and state committees	All media during elections	Identify paid news; issue notices to candidates; add cost to election expenditure.	No direct sanction on the publisher; cases passed to PCI
IT (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021	Executive rules under the Information Technology Act, 2000	Digital news publishers and intermediaries	Code of ethics; grievance redress; executive oversight	2023 Fact Check Unit amendment struck down in 2024; reliance on executive discretion
Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995	Statute: programme and advertising codes	Cable-carried television channels	Code compliance enforced by the Ministry	Enforcement rests with the Executive

Source: Compiled by the author from Storyboard18 (2025), Lok Sabha reply (2013), Deccan Herald (2024) and NBDA/NBDSA materials.

This table shows the main design question. The most powerful bodies over content are executive/electoral and therefore politically exposed; voluntary and therefore weak are the most legitimate. However, the judiciary has stepped in at both extremes. In September 2020, the Supreme Court had directed that Sudarshan News' 'UPSC Jihad' series should not be aired further, noting that the spread of electronic media is very broad and it is the 'vilification' of a community that must be 'disliked' (The News Minute,

2020; Newslaundry, 2020). The amendment of the IT Rules, 2023, which would have enabled a government-appointed Fact Check Unit to consider content about the Government to be false or misleading, was hit by a tie-breaking opinion issued by the Bombay High Court in 2024, which found it to be incompatible with Articles 14 and 19 of the Constitution (Deccan Herald, 2024; LiveLaw, 2024). Earlier, the Supreme Court had halted the Unit's notification. When combined, the two interventions suggest the courts are challenging unregulated hate broadcasting and executive efforts to determine truth.

5. Anatomy and evidence of paid news.

5.1 Private treaties to electoral packages

The issue of paid news gained currency in the country during the 2009 general and State elections, when candidates bought editorial space and presented it as positive, but it was actually paid. A similar scenario is perceived in the corporate world; the Securities and Exchange Board of India drew the PCI's attention to private treaties between the media and corporate entities, where the exchange is space for advertising in return for equity (Thakurta and Reddy, 2010). The two share an ethical structure. The audience doesn't know the difference between editorial content and promotion; the candidate/candidate's organization doesn't accurately reflect its spending or the extent of its promotion, and the newspaper or channel sells the credibility they are supposed to protect.

5.2 What official data show

The most systematic records are provided by the election monitoring. During the 2014 general election, ECI's media monitoring committees issued 3,053 notices on suspicion of paid news, of which 694 were found genuine, according to the Commission's then director general; the PCI at the time stated that it had received no formal communication on these cases (Business Standard, 2014; OneIndia, 2014). In Punjab's 2017 Assembly election, the ECI flagged 80 cases, with 13 more in Uttar Pradesh and two in Uttarakhand (Newslaundry, 2017). By 2018-19, the PCI had received 58 paid-news cases from the ECI and others (Rajya Sabha reply, 2019). In Himachal Pradesh's 2022 election, district committees had noticed 61 suspected cases, with notices issued to candidates in 37, by 11 Nov. (The Statesman, 2022). Table 2 collects these indicators.

Table 2. Selected official indicators of paid news in India

Period	Body	Indicator	Source
2014 general election	ECI MCMCs	3,053 notices issued; 694 found to be paid news	Business Standard (2014)
2017 Punjab Assembly	ECI	80 cases flagged	Newslaundry (2017)
2018-19	PCI	58 cases received from the ECI and others	Rajya Sabha reply (2019)
2021-22	PCI	74 complaints	Storyboard18 (2025)

Period	Body	Indicator	Source
2022 Himachal Pradesh Assembly (as of 11 Nov.)	District MCMCs	61 suspected cases; notices to candidates in 37	The Statesman (2022)
2022-23	PCI	76 complaints	Storyboard18 (2025)
2023-24	PCI	28 complaints	Storyboard18 (2025)
2024-25 (year incomplete)	PCI	290 complaints (Rajasthan: 111)	Storyboard18 (2025); Newslaundry (2025a)

Source: Compiled by the author. Figures are reported as cited and are not strictly comparable across sources.

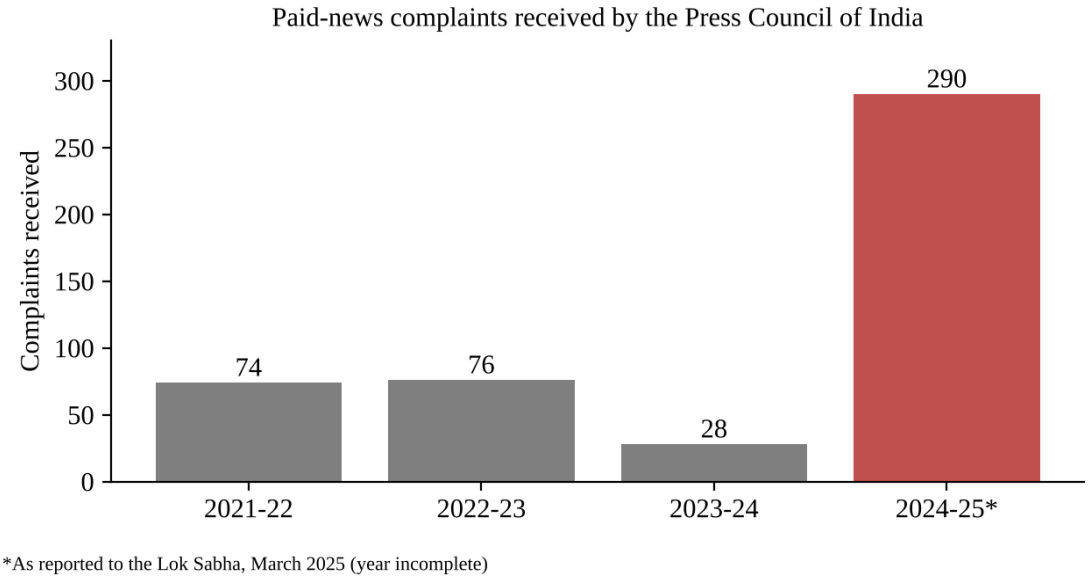


Figure 1. Paid-news complaints received by the Press Council of India, 2021-22 to 2024-25. Source: Storyboard18 (2025); Indian Printer and Publisher (2025).

The latest data, which was presented in the Lok Sabha in March 2025, shows a significant disconnect, as shown in Figure 1. In 2021-22 the PCI received 74 complaints about paid news, 76 in 2022-23 and 28 in 2023-24, while in 2024-25, the number of complaints for print media grew to 290, an increase of about 936 per cent from the previous year (Indian Printer and Publisher, 2025; Exchange4media, 2025). Rajasthan received 111 complaints in 2022-23, up from 13 in 2021-22 (Newslaundry, 2025a). The timing aligns them with the 2024 general and several state elections, as has been the pattern in the past for paid news to be located around election periods. The number of complaints does not directly reflect the number of cases adjudicated, so this figure should not be interpreted as reflecting the practice. It does, however, indicate a much greater use of complaint procedures than in the previous three years.

5.3 The enforcement gap

Official responses highlight the importance of this. The minister's response said that the PCI has a case-by-case approach and can warn, admonish or censure, and that the ECI's mechanism would turn paid news, if confirmed, into candidate expenditure (Storyboard18, 2025). Neither approach punishes the

publisher. The PCI has previously suggested that paid news should be declared electoral malpractice or a corrupt practice under the Representation of the People Act, 1951, in its Rajya Sabha answer (2019) and Lok Sabha answer (2013). No evidence is reported in the official answers retrieved for this paper that this amendment has been passed. In practice, the detection, costing, and recording of paid news is done, but only the candidates are subjected to an accounting consequence. At best, the institutions selling the space are censured.

This is an ethical imbalance. It treats paid news from a campaign-funding perspective, not a journalistic-integrity perspective, so it does not remove incentives for newsrooms.

6. Fake News, Misinformation and the Mainstream Newsroom

6.1 A high-exposure environment

India is consistently termed as one of the countries highly vulnerable to fake news. India's vulnerability to misinformation and disinformation in Indian media reporting on the 2024 elections ranked highest in the Global Risks Report 2024 by the World Economic Forum (WEF) (Counter Currents, 2024). The Reuters Institute's 2025 survey adds a platform dimension: 53 per cent of Indian respondents named WhatsApp as the biggest source of false or misleading information, the highest level recorded in any market surveyed (Rural India Online, 2025). At the same time, YouTube is the leading platform for news among the sample, used by 55 per cent, followed by WhatsApp at 46 per cent, Instagram at 37 per cent and Facebook at 36 per cent (ACJ, 2025; ThePrint, 2025). The platforms audiences rely on most for news are also the ones they identify as most contaminated (Figure 2).

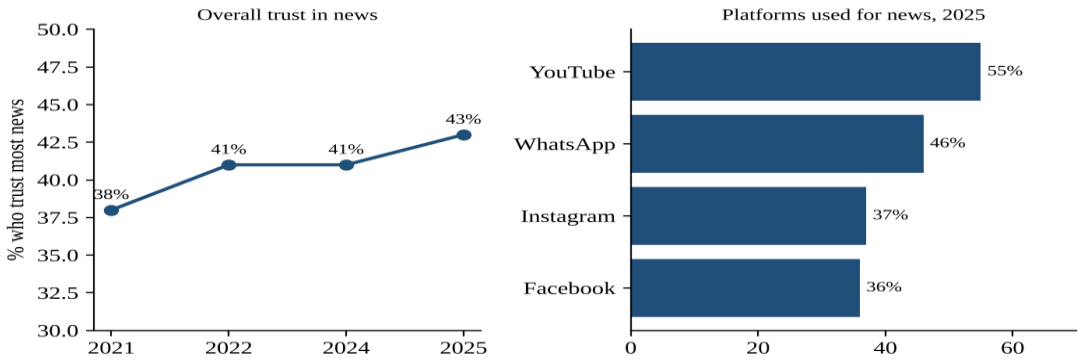


Figure 2. Trust in news and platform use among Indian DNR respondents. Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Report (via ACJ, 2025; ThePrint, 2025; Newslaundry, 2021; The Quint, 2022).

Fifty per cent of the English-speaking online respondents reported that they sometimes or often avoid the news, placing India fourth globally on this measure (C4S, 2025). Eighteen per cent used AI chatbots weekly to access news, with 44 per cent comfortable with AI-generated news, far higher than in several Western markets (ThePrint, 2025; afaqs, 2025). These figures describe an audience that is highly connected, selectively disengaged and open to automated mediation, which is the context in which verification becomes both harder and more valuable.

6.2 What fact-checkers record

Fact-checking organizations provide the best available window into detected falsehoods. BOOM published 1,280 fact-checks in English, Hindi and Bengali in 2024, and during the three months from

March to May 2024, it alone debunked 258 election-related items, ranging from fake opinion polls to cloned voices and communal claims (BOOM, 2024a; Jacob, 2024). Alt News published 347 reports in 2024, of which at least 299 were fact-checks; 42 per cent concerned national politics and 39 per cent, or 118 reports, communal misinformation (Alt News, 2025). Table 3 summarises these records.

Table 3. Fact-checking output relevant to news integrity, 2023-2024

Source	Period	Volume of output	Notable pattern
BOOM	2023	Over 1,000 fact-checks in three languages	77 stories on misreporting by Indian news outlets
BOOM	2024	1,280 fact-checks in English, Hindi and Bengali	51 on mainstream channels, websites and wire agencies
BOOM	Mar-May 2024	258 election-related fact-checks	AI-generated fakes, cloned voices, fake polls, communal claims
Alt News	2024	347 reports, including at least 299 fact-checks	42% on national politics; 39% (118 reports) on communal misinformation
Alt News	Apr-Jun 2024	42 election-related fact-checks	Concentrated in the Lok Sabha election period

Source: Compiled by the author from BOOM (2024a, 2024b), Jacob (2024) and Alt News (2025).

Table 3 reveals a pattern that false content is not limited to social media. Newsroom purveyors are not only focused on checking viral claims; misinformation is highly communal and political in nature and is tied to the question of how newsrooms report on sensitive events. Mainstream news outlets now frequently tap social media, a hub for fake news, and fact-checking itself is subject to the same news values and ethics as traditional news reporting (Mass Communicator, 2025).

6.3 When mainstream outlets are the source

BOOM is a direct look at the newsroom side with its annual review of media misreporting. In 2023, it wrote 77 stories on misreporting or false information by Indian news outlets; in 2024, 51 of its 1,280 fact-checks addressed mainstream channels, websites and wire agencies (BOOM, 2024b; BOOM, 2024a). News18 appeared among the most-checked outlets in 2022, 2023 and 2024, with 14, 19 and 9 fact-checks respectively; Hindustan Times figured in one in 2020, five in 2021, eight in 2022, eleven in 2023 and nine in 2024 (BOOM, 2024a), as Figure 3 shows.

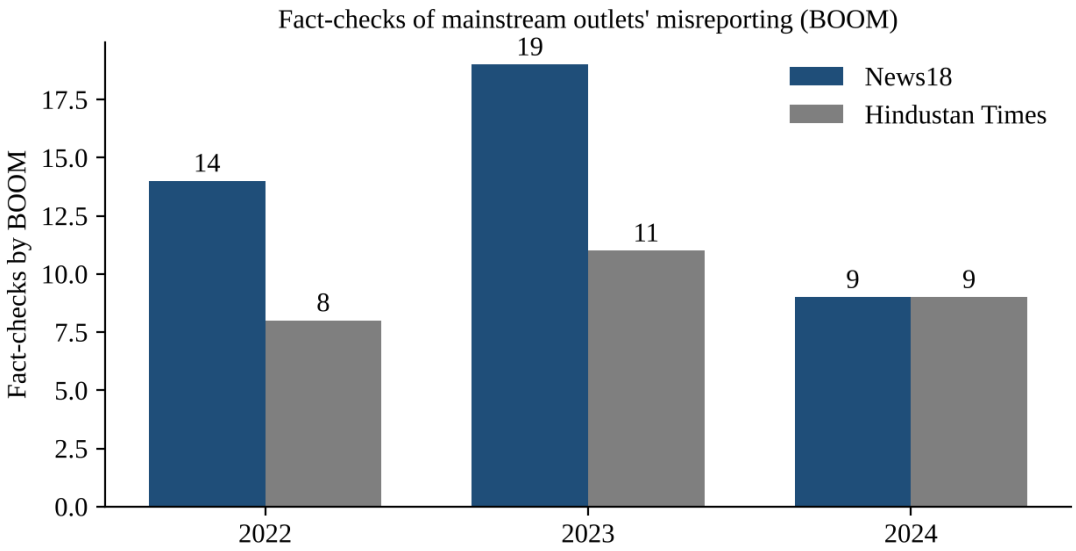


Figure 3. Fact-checks of misreporting by News18 and Hindustan Times, 2022-2024. Source: BOOM (2024a).

This is a low figure for such a large daily output, and it is the figure BOOM has chosen. They should not be interpreted as a set of league tables of 'ethical performance'. Their importance is in something else. Large, established brands come back every year, indicating that the risk of out-of-context visuals, misidentified people and unverified claims in breaking news is not a one-off accident, but a common occurrence in the newsroom. The NBDSA's findings support these conclusions. In February 2024, in a set of orders, the Authority determined that using visuals out of context infringed on the concept of accuracy. It recommended that the broadcaster be mindful of using factually correct images in the future (AdGully, 2024).

6.4 Controlling falsehoods without controlling speech

The State has been criticized for its response. The 2023 Fact Check Unit amendment was based on the assumption that the Government could judge what content is inaccurate regarding its own business. The Bombay High Court majority said it was unconstitutional, and the petitioners included a satirical writer, as well as the Editors Guild of India, the News Broadcast and Digital Association, and the Association of Indian Magazines (ThePrint, 2024). The decision highlights a conundrum for any ethics policy: the actor who can enforce such standards at scale is also one with an interest in how those standards are applied. Truthful answers to falsehoods must therefore be grounded in independent verification, as well as transparent corrections and professional accountability, rather than executive adjudication of truth.

7. Journalistic Credibility: Trust, Ownership and Freedom

7.1 Press freedom indicators

The RSF index has the longest comparative series. India ranked 80th in 2002, 140th in 2019, 161st in 2023, 159th in 2024 and 151st in 2025 (Free Press Journal, 2025; Scroll, 2025a). In RSF's own commentary, the improvement in 2025 is "deceptive" because it remained in the "very serious" category, with only a slight increase in the overall score (RSF, 2025). The overall score fell from 40.34 in 2014 to 31.28 in 2024 (Free Press Journal, 2025). Within South Asia in 2025, India sat behind Nepal (90), the

Maldives (104), Sri Lanka (139), and Bangladesh (149), and ahead of Bhutan (152) and Pakistan (158) (StudyIQ, 2025).

Figures 4 and 5 present the rank trajectory and regional comparison, respectively.

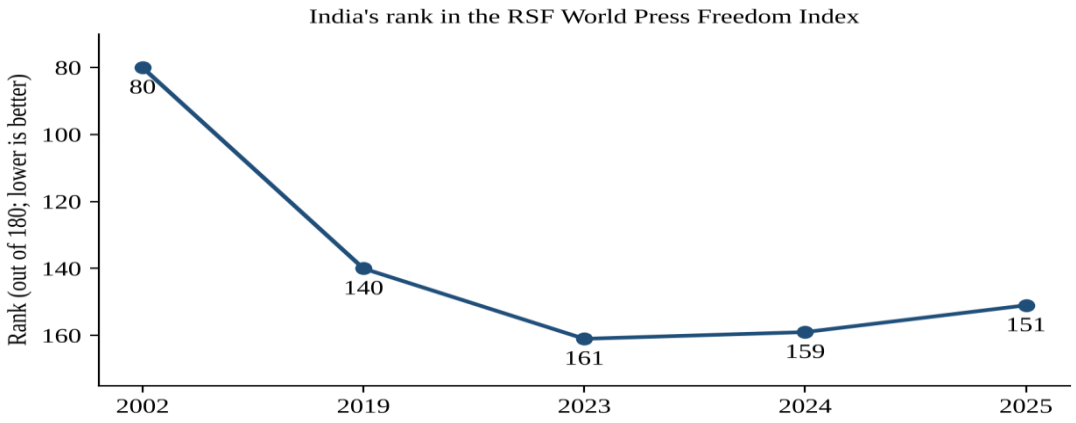


Figure 4. India's rank in the RSF World Press Freedom Index (selected years).
Source: Free Press Journal (2025); Scroll (2025a).

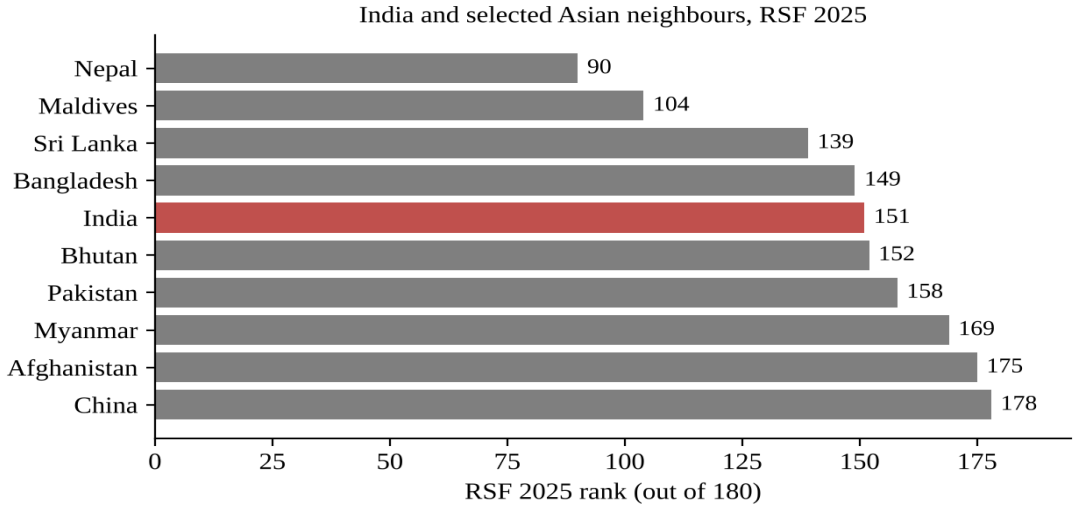


Figure 5. India and selected Asian neighbours in the RSF index, 2025
source: StudyIQ (2025).

Journalists' physical security forms part of the equation. India is the seventh most dangerous country for journalists in the past 10 years, with 31 journalists killed since 2015 (Committee to Protect Journalists data, reported in The Hindu, 2024). RSF's 2024 round-up listed five journalists in detention in India (Newsreel Asia, 2024), and the Free Speech Collective reported eight journalists killed in India in 2025 (Scroll, 2025b). The Government of India's position, stated in Parliament in April 2025, is that India has a vibrant press that does not need validation from foreign organizations (Business Standard, 2025). Whatever the weight given to external indices, the divergence between official and independent assessments is itself relevant to credibility, because audiences cannot resolve it from within the system.

7.2 Ownership and economic dependence

RSF and DataLEADS's Media Ownership Monitor analyzed 58 leading outlets and found high concentration in Print, fragmentary and ineffective legal safeguards, no regulation of cross-media concentration and opaque television ratings (RSF and DataLEADS, 2019). Reliance Industries took complete control of Network18 in 2014 (Al Jazeera, 2023), and the Adani Group acquired a majority stake in NDTV in 2022-23 (Statista, 2023). Defenders of such deals argue that they rescue indebted outlets and bring capital. Critics counter that no editor should assume any "conglomerate" outlet is editorially independent because it is owned by a firm with regulatory exposure and political connections. The relevant issue in the current debate is not whether any particular group is dependent, but the lack of disclosure to audiences to make such evaluations.

7.3 Trust among audiences

The DNR is the most uniform audience measure. Among its English-speaking online respondents in India, trust in most news most of the time was 38 per cent in 2021, 41 per cent in 2022 and 2024, and 43 per cent in 2025, which was above the 40 per cent average across 48 markets (ThePrint, 2025; ACJ, 2025). Legacy print and public broadcasters retain the highest brand trust. In 2022, The Times of India scored 75 per cent, All India Radio 72 per cent, and DD News 71 per cent, compared with 61 per cent for ThePrint and 57 per cent for Republic and The Wire (Rural India Online, 2022; The (Quint, 2022). Table 4 presents the brand-trust figures the sources report.

Table 4. Brand trust among English-speaking online users in India (per cent)

News brand	DNR 2021	DNR 2022
The Times of India	74	75
All India Radio	73	72
DD News	73	71
Hindustan Times	71	n/r
The Hindu	70	n/r
ThePrint	n/r	61
Republic	n/r	57
The Wire	n/r	57

Source: Compiled from Newslaundry (2021) and Rural India Online (2022); n/r = not reported in the sources consulted.

At first glance, the high ranking in the press freedom index and the relatively stable level of audience trust are counterintuitive. This reflects differences in what is measured and who is being asked. The DNR's survey uses a relatively urban, online, English- and Hindi-literate sample and explicitly warns against interpreting it as nationally representative. It measures how much trust consumers have in familiar brands. RSF evaluates the political, legal, economic, social, and safety situation. Although structural independence may be low, trust in established brands can remain high, especially if it stems from habit and familiarity

rather than proof of performance. If mistakes are repeated and communal formings are not corrected, the habit will be weak.

7.4 Self-regulation in practice

The NBDSA's history illustrates the limits of professional self-control. In 416 complaints against member channels since 2019, the Authority has issued fines in 12 cases, requested on-air apologies in five and requested its own order to be aired in nine. Since 2019, the Authority has fined in 12 cases, requested on-air apologies in 5, and requested its own order to be broadcast in 9 cases (Newslaundry, 2025b). The reason that the sanctioning tail is so thin is exhibited in Figure 6. In February 2023, News18 India was fined 50,000 rupees and 25,000 rupees for its communally divisive programmes and, in March 2024, 50,000 rupees for its coverage of a criminal case (Legal Service India, n.d.). However, there is no public verification of compliance, as neither the website nor the annual reports provide any information on it, and from 2020 onwards, broadcasters were no longer asked for recordings for checking (Newslaundry, 2025b). Such self-regulation is no good, but it is certainly not a system that an audience could trust.

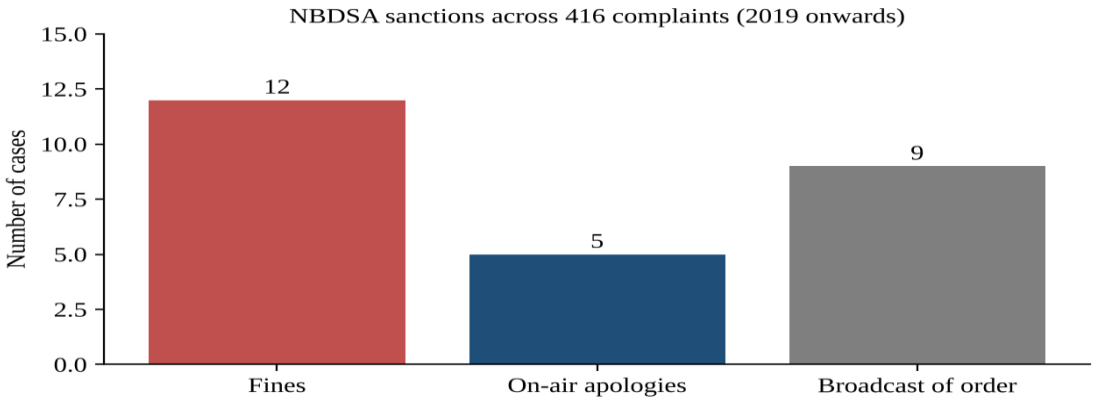


Figure 6. Sanctions imposed by the NBDSA across 416 complaints filed since 2019. Source: Newslaundry (2025b).

8. Discussion: Media Ethics in Transition

These are three related propositions that can be substantiated by the evidence.

The first is convergence. The concept of paid news is best seen as a continuum alongside fake news and poor credibility. Business and political factors such as concentrated ownership, advertising reliance, and election spending reduce editorial resistance and create opportunities for hidden promotions. Newsrooms are burdened with the task of verifying or risking the spread of information disorder, which is being driven by platforms and AI. If there is no strong correlation with failure, then there is no strong incentive to

change behaviour. What comes from it is a loss of credibility, not a dramatic overnight occurrence, but a gradual erosion of trust that audiences can trust the word 'news' (Figure 7).

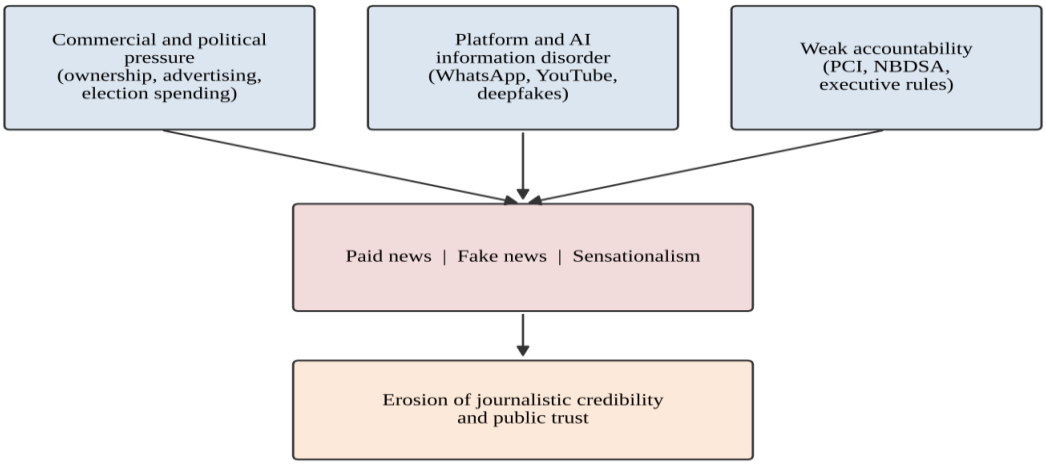


Figure 7. Conceptual framework: convergence of commercial, platform and accountability pressures. Source: Author's construction.

The second is regulatory asymmetry. The tools India has in the hands of the Executive are strong, while the tools it has in the hands of the profession are weak. The first was demonstrated by the Fact Check Unit episode; the second was lived out by the NBDSA and PCI. Another example of this asymmetry is the legal regime around paid news – a candidate can be required to explain how they spent money on, say, a radio advertisement, while the publisher's role is left, at best, to being reprimanded. However, no single mechanism of executive control or of voluntary self-restraint can give the accountability that is required for credibility – independent, transparent, and proportionate.

The third is the shifting centre of Authority. The traditional approach for editors was to decide what to show the public. The majority of news discovery is now done through platforms and video services, and a growing number of the audience welcomes news provided by personalities and creators rather than institutions. At the same time, a large percentage are okay with automated news summaries. Here, a masthead would not serve as a source of credibility. It must be shown in action – such as labelled sponsored content, public corrections, transparency of sourcing, disclosure of ownership. This is the meaning of the word "transition" in the title of this paper. The ethical requirements are mostly known, but the requirement to make them public to audiences who are sceptical and accustomed to seeing things differently is new. A word of warning is in order. Evidence is inconsistent, and some indicators are partial, notably the DNR sample and fact-checker counts. The paper, however, does not seek to argue that Indian journalism as a whole is corrupt. High standards are maintained for much reporting, including investigative and regional reports, many of which are conducted at the reporter's personal risk. The argument is about the system that envelops such work and the incentives it engenders.

9. Recommendations

Based on the analysis, six measures are proposed, presented in order from legislative to professional.

1. Define the requirements for paid news. Amend the Representation of the People Act, 1951, to bring paid news under electoral strictures as recommended by the ECI and PCI, and include the publisher/broadcaster as well as the candidate in liability.
2. Re-establish and revitalize the Press Council. Implement its recommendations as legally binding; extend its scope to digital news publishers without a viable alternative; and make its decisions and reasoning public quickly, following its 2010 sub-committee recommendations.
3. Ensure that broadcast self-regulation is measurable. The NBDSA should release compliance reports, take action in the event of repeated violations, and implement graduated sanctions (including existing fines) for repeat violators. An independent body should conduct a membership audit to review membership and standards.
4. Ensure that the determination of the truth is not in the hands of the Executive. Fact checks must remain independent. This is because the Government can publish corrections and information, but should not be the point of contention for falsehoods about itself, as the Bombay High Court reasoning suggests.
5. Disclose ownership and political advertising. Publication of outlets' ownership and major lenders/holders, Government and political advertising revenue must be in a standard, easily accessible format and clearly marked sponsored and election-time paid advertising content.
6. Provide verification and literacy investment. Establish written verification procedures for social media content, visuals and AI-generated content; make corrections visible and educate journalists in digital forensics. Promote media and AI literacy in universities and civil society to reach the audience that uses WhatsApp and YouTube as primary sources.

10. Conclusion

The paper has tried to make the case that paid news is part of the fake news phenomenon and part of the demise of news credibility in India, all resulting from one structural issue: news that is not accountable to commercial, political, and technological powers. The evidence supports this reading. The 151st ranking in the 2025 press freedom index hides a slight improvement: complaints against paid news to the Press Council rose from 28 to 290 in a year, fact-checkers have reported inaccuracies in various established media outlets numerous times and the major professional body covering television has fined on 12 of its 416 complaints. Meanwhile, internet users' trust in the media remains moderate, and courts have shown they will not tolerate hate broadcasting or executive interference in matters of truth.

It is not through good habits that are expected to take place, nor will it be through giving up the control of regulation to the State, that the way forward will be found. Independent, transparent, and enforceable accountability, along with newsroom practices that give the public a glimpse of newsroom ethics, are what matter. Combined, these three - legislative recognition of paid news as an electoral offence, verifiable self-regulation, and ownership disclosure and continued investment in verification and media literacy - would help address the structural gaps identified here.

This analysis could be furthered in three ways: by expanding the scope of audience studies to include audiences in regional languages, beyond the English-speaking online sample; by extending the ethnographic investigation of the newsroom-level decision-making process for verification and sponsored content; and by tracking the outcomes of regulation over time as the 2024 and 2025 election cycles are

evaluated. Media ethics in India is changing, but the direction is yet to be decided. It will be up to institutions, owners, and journalists whether they make credibility a claim that can be checked.

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