

NET CREDIBILITY: HOW THE YOUNG INCREASINGLY TRUST THE NEWS ONLINE

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Abstract

Media Dependency theory postulates that the more one depends on a particular media for meeting their needs, the more important that media will be in a person's life. Digital media seems to be the new media for the present generation- everything they do from networking with friends to getting information, playing games and watching movies happens on this platform. The young hardly read the newspaper, have very little time for television news and listen to only music on radio. As future citizens of a democracy, the younger generation needs vital news and comment to take active part in the political, social and cultural life of the country. An attempt is made to find the media consumption habits of the young with emphasis on the digital media. The fact that smartphones are proliferating among the young raises the question of trust and credibility of the new medium. What is the credibility perception of the digital media among the young and is it a vital consideration in news consumption? This study tries to address this by conducting a survey among the 16-25 year olds of Bangalore city.

Key words: Digital media, credibility, news consumption, youth, social media

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** **Guide**

Introduction

World over there is a staggering increase in the use of digital media. In western countries the near total net connectivity enables the citizens to avail of the facilities that internet provides. In newly developed countries like South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore the internet is consumed by a majority of the population. In the BRICS nations, India lags behind Brazil and South Africa in net connectivity. The latest figures claim that net connectivity in India has crossed the 20% mark in 2014 with hope that growths in this sector will double the population having access to internet by 2020.

The digital technology is linked to the growth and development in a society. Increasing reliance on Information Communication Technologies (ICT) is bringing about rapid transformation of the developing countries both urban and rural areas. It is only the lack of connectivity that comes in the way of millions of Indians not connected to this growth imperative. Transforming India into a developed economy requires a huge effort in terms of commitment, funding and implementation to increase the net connectivity to majority of the population. Government and the private internet service providers are investing huge amounts of resources to make India a digitally connected country in the near future.

News is very important to any society. News about politics, society and economy along with the entertainment world deluge the media space. People in any democracy depend on newspaper, radio, television and now increasingly on digital media for their daily requirement of news and views on news. The growth of media in a country is often linked to the growth of the economy as a whole. Newspaper circulation or television viewership is highest in developed economies and low in developing countries.

Newspaper circulation peaked in 2013 in India while it saw a further decline in the West. Registrar of Newspapers of India statistics provides a healthy and vibrant growth story of Indian newspaper industry. There are 7710 newspapers registered in the country with a circulation of 36 million copies every day. The growth registered in 2013 over the previous year 2012 was 8%.

Television is growing much faster than newspapers. 145 million Indian households are connected with cable or DTH as per 2014 stats by TAM. It shows a growth of 10% over the previous year. That makes for approximately 600 million Indian television viewers. Only China

is ahead of India in sheer numbers. There are more than 150 news channels in different languages. The audience share of Hindi news channels is over 33% compared to English which is only 1%. The rest is divided among the other regional language news channels.

Radio in India is mostly for entertainment- listening to songs. Only AIR is allowed to broadcast news in India and its listenership is steady over the years. 510 news bulletins every day in more than 44 languages covering 99% of India geographically gives AIR a virtual monopoly. The decision to allow news bulletins on private FM stations will increase the listenership tenfold.

But the most impressive and visible growth is in the digital industry. Net access is growing at 27% and this will take India into the second spot in a few years' time, just behind China. Approximately 300 million Indians are now connected to the net, but the true picture may be much more as there is no statistics on the numbers using common/public systems to access the net in educational institutions and in cyber cafes across India. Many of the Indians are shifting to online news due to the easy and free access, instant updates and multiple choices, all available on their handsets. Online newspapers, news sites, blogs and social media offer Indians a wide range of options through their laptops, tabs or smartphones. The rapid fall in the cost of handsets coupled with a decline in the charges by the internet services providers is having a positive impact on the general population switching to net for their everyday communication needs.

The number of mobile handsets in India stood at 930 million in 2014 and expected to reach a saturation point by 2018- that means one cell phone for every Indian. The smartphone market which stood at 150 million in 2014, next only to US and China, is expected to grow at a faster pace of 45% and we may see majority of mobile phones in the form of smartphones having internet connection in five years' time. This has the potential to connect a major part of urban Indians with the global communication networks. News and other communication needs of this population will then be met by and through smartphones- at the cost of traditional media.

Credibility of news and specially the news sources is an important aspect of a vibrant democracy. What we read in a newspaper is taken to be true; what we see on television news is factual; and what internet news sources provide is authentic information- is only an assumption. The reality is different- the perception of the audience about media credibility differs due a number of factors. All we get from the industry sources is the circulation data, TRP (Television Rating Point)

figures and other statistics about media consumption habits that give us an idea about what is popular. Studies have thrown up interesting contrasts- a newspaper that is popular need not be perceived as being credible. Most people in the West have forsaken newspapers for online news sources but still perceive newspapers to be highly credible.

As billionaire Warren Buffett likes to tell student visitors, trust is a matter of reputation -- individual and company -- built over long periods of time. "It takes 20 years to build a reputation and five minutes to ruin it. If you think about that, you'll do things differently." The problem with Internet is that it is a very young media source. The building of reputation is a long term process and this depends on the staying power of the media outlets in the digital format. Public trust will follow once the news websites establish their reputation over a relative time period.

The gap in the knowledge about the credibility of media, in particular the digital media, is the reason for this study. The researcher would like to know what the young in the age group 16-25 feel about news sources, what they rely on, why they rely on a particular medium and the trust they have in the news they consume.

Review of Literature

A Pew Research Center study done in 2010 found that internet is the main source of national and international news for a majority of young Americans (Internet gains on Television as Public's main news source , 2011). Overall, internet is closing on television as the most preferred news source in the USA. It is predicted that in a couple of years' time, internet will become the number one news medium for all Americans.

A 2013 study by Pew Research Journalism Project found that Facebook (64%) is preferred by most Americans among social mediasites for getting their daily dose of news (Jesse Holcomb, 2013). Facebook news consumers are significantly more likely to be female than news consumers on YouTube, Twitter or LinkedIn. The study also reveals that social media news consumers also get news from other sources, including the traditional news sources like television and newspapers.

The latest State of the News Media survey in the United States however shows a decline in the number of Facebook users consuming news from news sites (Mitchell, 2014). At the same time

news aggregators, which use computer algorithm to select news from different sources, are providing news that is consumed by the majority of Americans online. Majority of the people get their news first online.

Majority of the American get their news on smartphones, a recent study has revealed (How Americans get their news, 2014). More than 73% of Americans possess smartphones and 53% use it to access news. Surprisingly, most of the smartphone users rely on multiple media for news verification. But majority trust news that is gathered by news organizations and that is where online newspapers and news agency sites are trusted more than news aggregator sites.

In South Korea, one of the most wired nations in the world, a study (Johnson, 2009) revealed the shift in credibility from the traditional news sources like newspapers and television news channels to independent web based news sites. It has been believed for some time now that traditional media is more credible than new media, especially when it comes to political communication. But, in countries where more than 90% of the population has net connection, internet based news sources are trusted in relation to traditional forms of news sources.

Sundar (1999) suggested that a credibility scale for both traditional and online news sources is inappropriate by arguing that striking similarities exist between the factor structures underlying receivers' perceptions of print and online news. This similarity made it possible to use the same scale for different media. Considering that researchers have already transferred the dimensions of media credibility from offline to online contexts, the current study adapts items from earlier credibility studies to explore the credibility of online news sources.

Technology is a significant determinant of media credibility. Marshall McLuhan in *Medium is the Message* argued that there is a direct effect of technology on culture. Studies have tried to link the issues of credibility and technology. A study on online news credibility (Chung Joo Chung, 2012) reveals the shift in credibility of online news with the additional technological features. The websites that provide hyper-textuality and multimediality score higher on credibility ratings than those which are plain news websites.

The importance of news aggregators, both human and machine-powered, in the media consumption habit of online media by the American public is growing at the cost of socialmedia

(Ingram, 2012). Majority of the online news consumption, even of the online newspapers, is driven by the news aggregators- people are not directly going to the news websites. *Huffington Post* is the most preferred site for those looking for news aggregation as they are not satisfied with viewing the contents of one newspaper. Even Facebook and Twitter are now providing news aggregated for their subscribers.

Sundar(2008) argues that machine heuristic is a way through which the online news consumers use shortcut method to perceive the news as more credible if it is verified or chosen by a machine or computer than by a person. This has implications on which news sites will be perceived as more credible and therefore attract more traffic. Studies reveal that India is fast catching up with other developing countries in both net connectivity (20%) and use of net for news. A survey conducted by comScore World Metrix service(Online news attracts rapidly growing audience in India, 2009) reveals that there is a 37% increase in the traffic to news websites in India in 2009 over the previous year. Well known news brands like *The Hindu* and *The Times of India* news sites were the most visited for accessing online news.

Methodology

A survey of the young in the age group of 16-25 was undertaken using a standardized instrument that has been tested for validity and reliability. A total of 250 respondents took the survey answering the 23 questions pertaining to their media use and gave the opinion on the reliability of news sources including digital media. A convenience sampling technique was adopted to draw a representative sample from among the young population of Bangalore city.

Simple statistical tests were used to analyze the data and draw inferences in a bid to answer the following research questions-

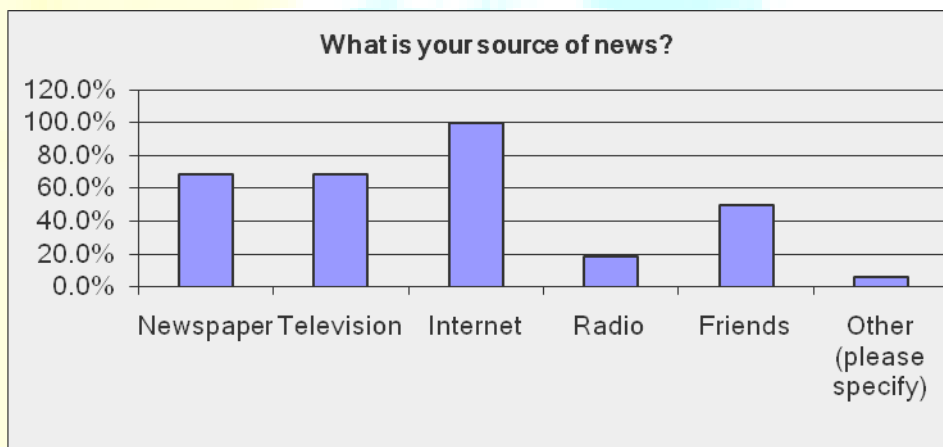
1. How do the young get their news?
2. Is digital media becoming the media of preference for the young?
3. Are online news sources more credible to the young than traditional media sources?
4. Is the future of news media digital?
5. What implications will this have on news organizations?

Findings and Analysis

Out of the 250 respondents, 55% were male and the rest 45% female. Majority, 75% were of the age group of 18-21 College going students. All of them accessed news to some degree or other- only a few said they do it infrequently.

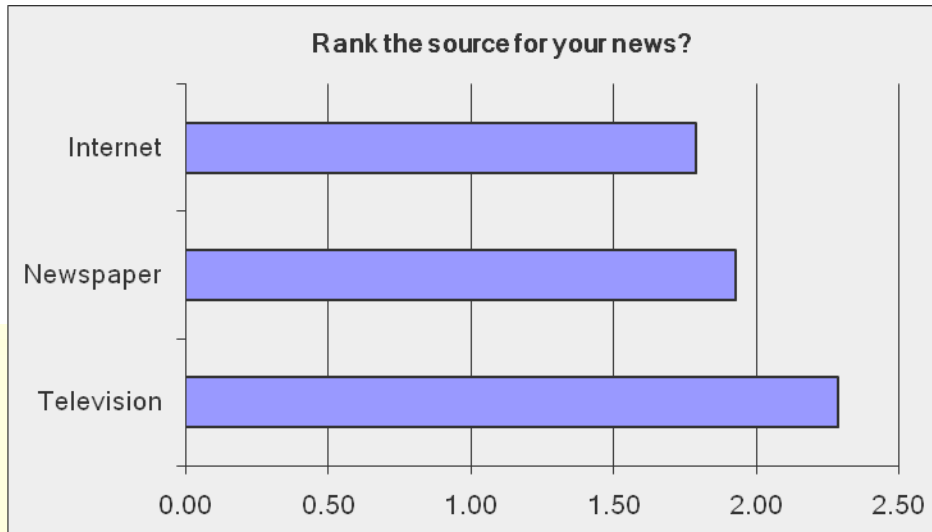
The young surprisingly get their news from a variety of sources and media. Newspaper is still an important source of news followed by television. But the majority of the respondents prefer to get their news from the Internet. This is not at all surprising, given the fact that this generation grew up on internet and is considered digital natives. Technology is easy to adopt for this age group and this can be seen in all of their activities.

Chart 1: News Source



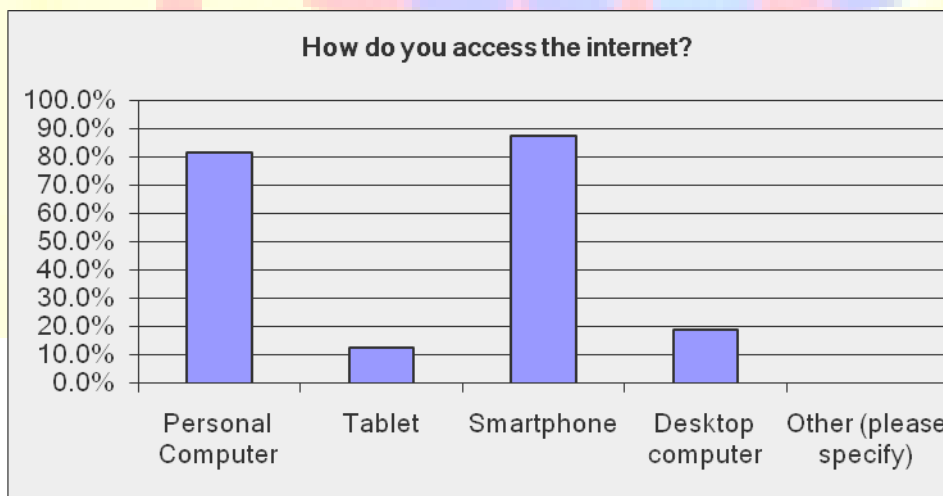
At the same time when asked to rank the three main media sources for news, television came first followed by newspaper and the last spot was for internet. Young respondents feel that television is the best source for news and has overtaken newspaper, which is losing out because it is not fast enough. Television has established itself, in the Indian context, as a powerful medium for disseminating news and analysis of news. Newspapers are constantly facing competition for other mediums but the slowness in meeting the demand for news is its biggest drawback thus alienating the young.

Chart 2: Sources of news



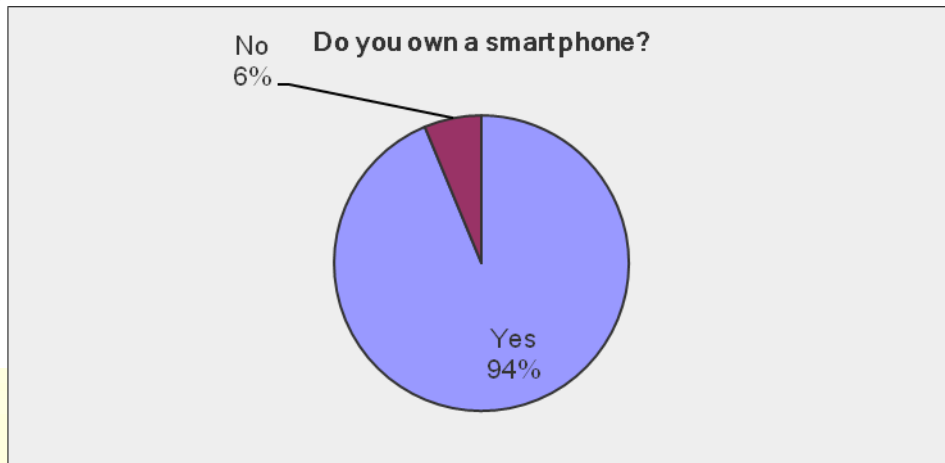
Smartphones are becoming the device through which news is accessed by the young followed by laptops, desktops and tablets. The proliferation of smartphones, cheaper internet rates and quick access to news has made this technology indispensable for the younger generation. Smartphones are always with the young and provide all their needs on the go. They are indispensable as a communication tool but double up as a medium for accessing news. It is like carrying the world in their pockets.

Chart 3: Access to the internet



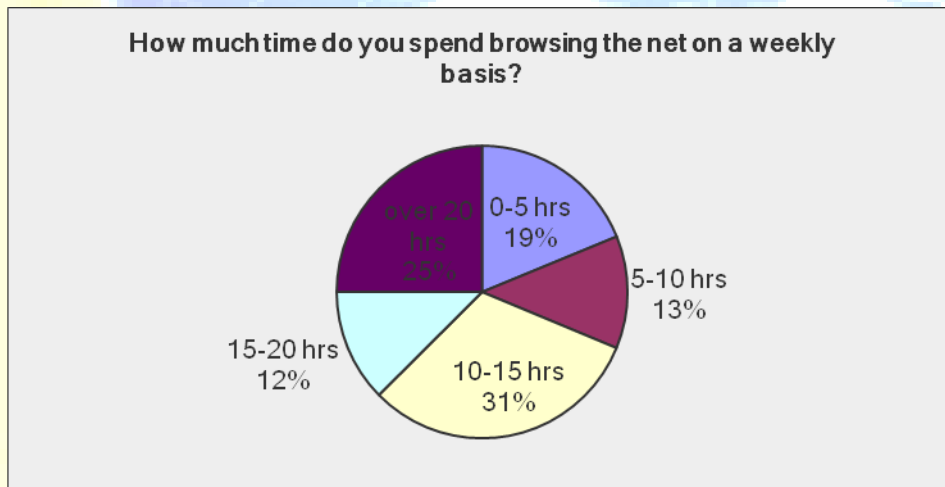
Very few people in this age category don't own a smartphone. Easy affordability and multi-functionality is seen as the reasons for its indispensability.

Chart 4: Smartphone ownership



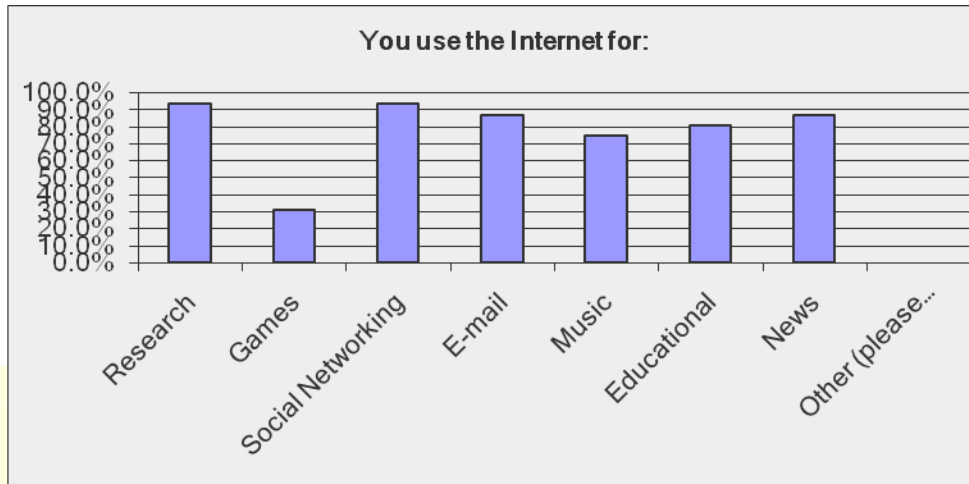
The young spend a lot of time on the net- on an average more than 10 hours per week. But the surprise is that very few use it all the time- a belief that we have when we watch the young population with smartphones.

Chart 5: Time on the Net



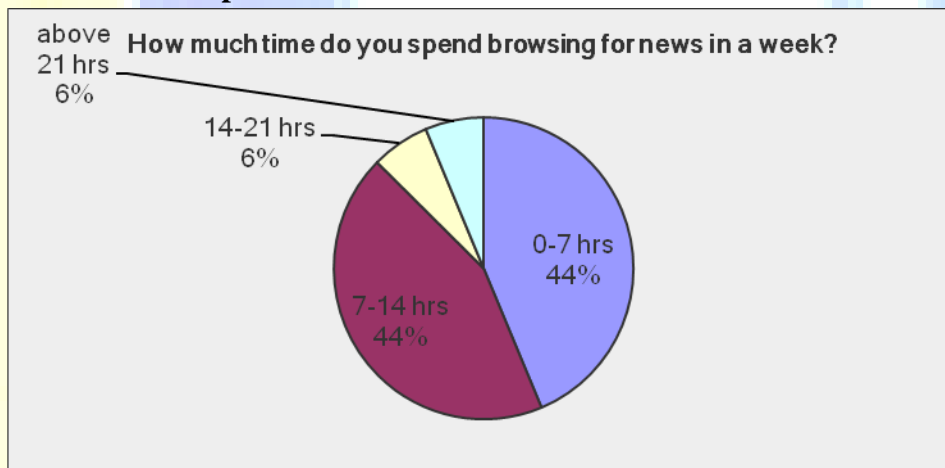
The time spent on browsing for news is very similar to that for social networking and research for educational purpose. This is also surprising as instinct tells us that youth must be obsessed with networking on social media.

Chart 6: Purpose behind using the Net



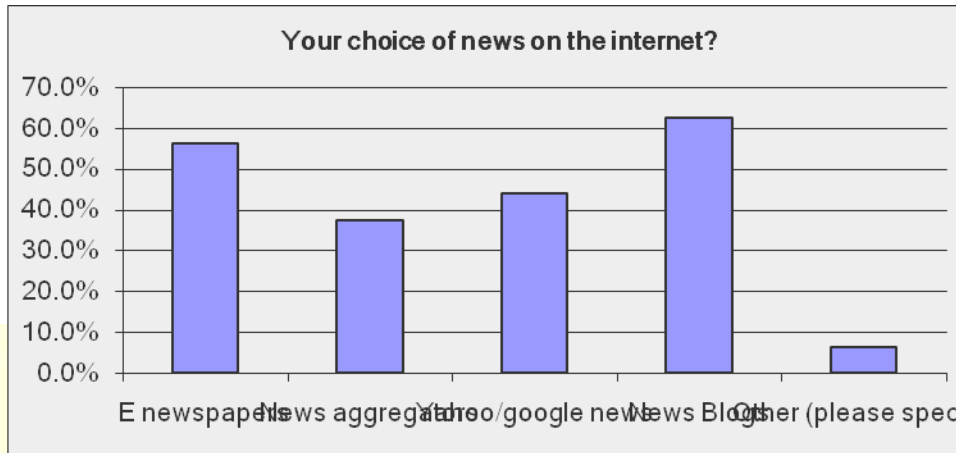
There is a healthy trend among the young when it comes to making time for reading news. The average time spent on news online is 7 hours in a week. The feeling that Social Networking sites take up all the time of the young and not enough time is devoted for other uses of the net is not true. At the same time social media does take the prime of place in a young man or woman today.

Chart 7: Time spent on web news



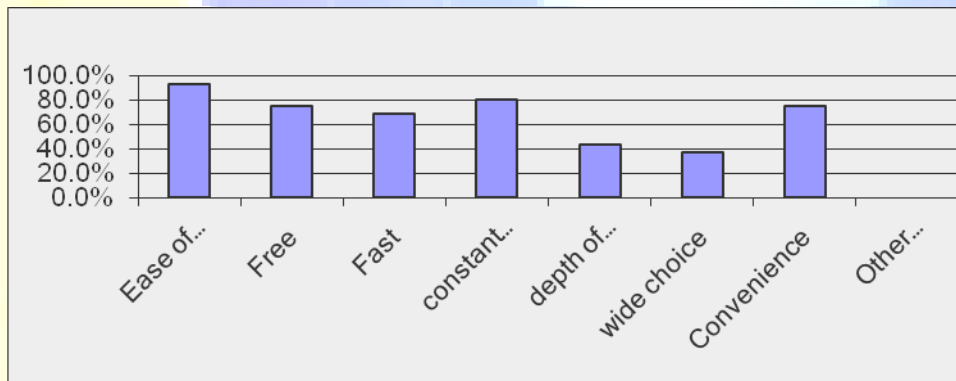
News Blogs provide the Y generation with their requirement of news along with online newspapers. News aggregators are picking up and may, like in the West, overtake the other sources for online news. Familiar news sites like Yahoo news and Google news are still popular among the young. News through social media sites is the least preferred among the options available. The preference is for well-established names in the news business as they trust the sites.

Chart 8: News sources on Internet



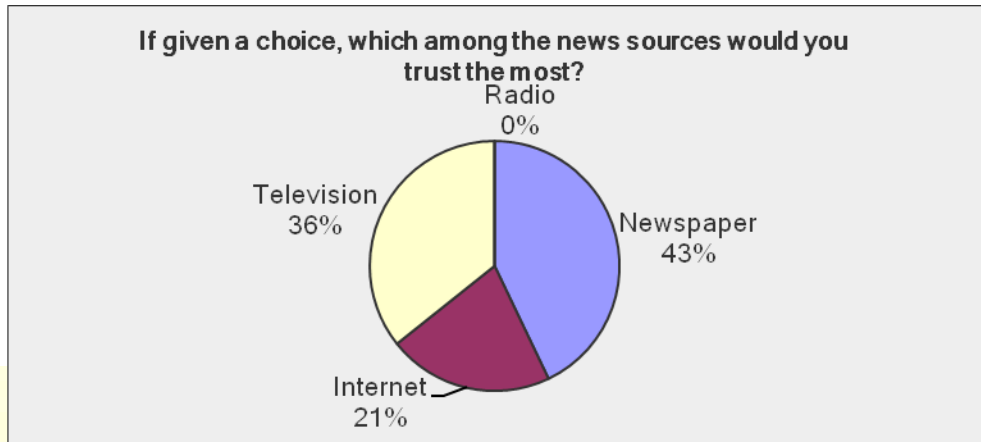
Majority prefers news online because of the ease of access and real time updation along with convenience as the same device can be used for multiple purposes. The fact that it is free and fast is also a consideration for the young. But depth of coverage is not attributed to the online news sources- newspapers still provide deep analysis among the various mediums. Digital media provides news fast but has a long way to go in providing adequate and full coverage. We see this in case of television news- they tend to shift focus as and when something news comes up.

Chart 9: Preference for online news sources



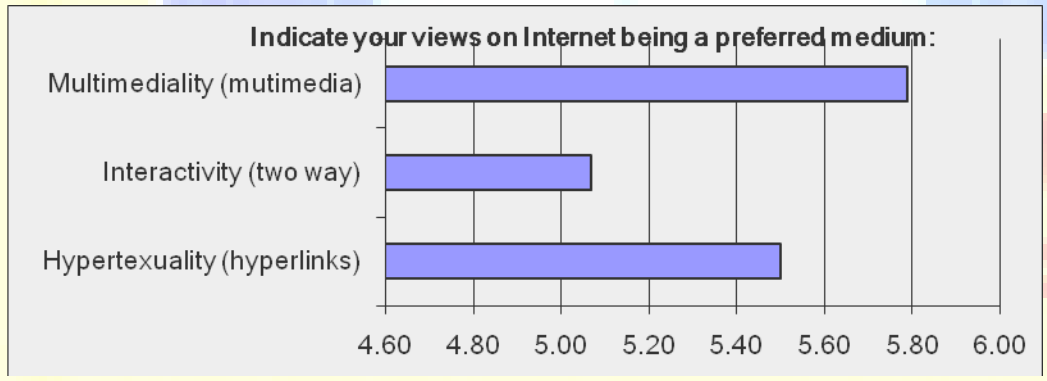
The most interesting revelation of this study was the admission that newspapers are the most credible/ trustworthy medium among the young population. One would have thought that as the young preferred the digital media, it would in turn be credible. Internet news sources are behind even television news channels and have a task cut out to prove worthy of people’s trust.

Chart 10 Trusted medium



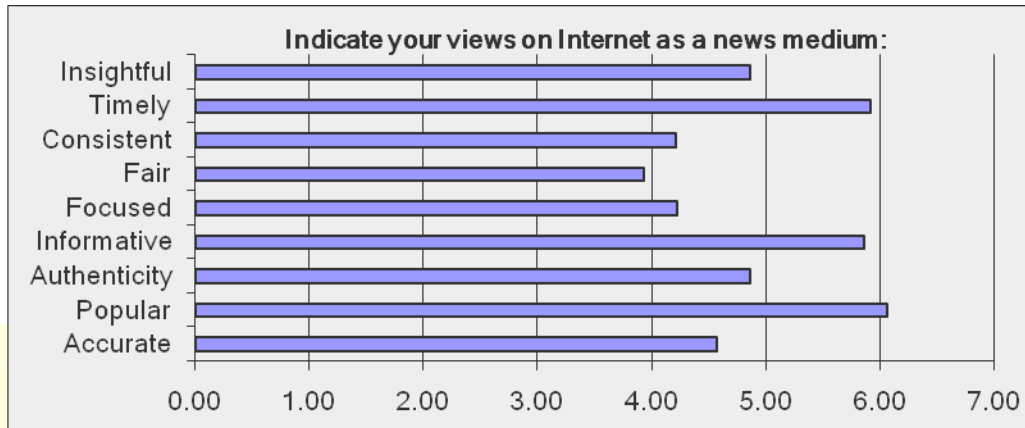
The technological dimension of new media is bringing about both more viewers and increased credibility. Multimediality- one platform providing a multitude of media in the form of text, video, animation and voice; Interactivity- two way communication; and hypertextuality- provision for additional information by linking to other sites are the major features that add value to the online news sources and make them desirable, especially for the young. Verification, the basis for believability, will in time increase the credibility of online news sources.

Chart 11: Reason for net preference



Why the young trust the internet? Internet is seen as providing news that is timely, popular and informative. On the issue of believability of news which is based on the factors of accuracy, authenticity and consistency, online news gets only an average rating. The not so high credibility is understandable because of the newness of the medium and the lack of time in establishing the reputation and name of the online news sources. Like other mediums before, digital media will also gain credibility with time and usage.

Chart 12: Views on digital news



Conclusion

News organizations around the world are moving quickly to online space in a bid to cut their losses and attract the young readers/viewers. The newspapers in the West have more or less gone digital and very few newspapers are still being printed. Television channels are scrambling to have a digital presence on the net as they continue to suffer viewership decline. Many online news organizations have come up to take advantage of the low cost and high reach that internet affords. Advertising money is slowly moving from traditional media to digital space as they are not only assured of a sizable audience but the net affords niche groups who can be directly targeted by advertisers. People are spoilt for choice but credibility is a real issue.

The young always set the trend, especially with the technology enabled innovations. Newspapers were the most important source of news and current affairs for centuries but radio and television took over the function of providing news faster to the audience. Now it is the turn of internet with devices like tab and smartphones allowing news to reach very quickly and in the way that people want it. Technological determinism theory states that technology, especially media technology will change society and its influence will bring about a whole new culture. This has happened very fast with the rapid advances in digital technology. Society is changing and people young and old, are using smartphones for all their daily requirements of entertainment, information and education. All other forms of media are taking a back seat- it may take a few years for them to completely disappear. As in the West young users are determining and demanding the rapid strides made in technology and content. Newspapers are becoming extinct and online newspapers have taken their place. Television news channels have moved online and

so have other traditional forms of media. One single platform provides user with all options instead of subscribing to many varied news sources.

Credibility, trust, and believability of the content and sources of content is directly linked to the media usage. As more and more people switch to digital mode for their requirements of news, it automatically becomes credible and they believe and trust the news sites and their content.

It may mean the beginning of the end for traditional sources like newspapers and television news channels. As more people move away to digital platforms, advertising revenue will also shift to digital news sources and without advertisers support newspapers and television news channels will struggle to survive. The future is for digital media and smartphones will bring about that digital revolution soon, first among the young.

It bodes well for the online news providers. The proliferation of news websites in the form of online newspapers, news blogs, news aggregators and news agency sites means that one can get news on the move. Social media is doing its mite to cater to the increasing demand for specialized news. The future of the existing social networking sites to a large extent will depend on two things- how well they are able to serve their existing customers with all the features they want but also add quickly the needs of an ever changing and demanding clientele. The competition will throw up a few winners in years to come. Credibility will then be a priority as further consolidation will depend on reputation and brand image. For now newspapers rule when it comes to trust among the readers- young and old. But, who knows what tomorrow holds.

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