



Research Paper

A study on the perception and visualization of media bias of the readers of leading English dailies

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Abstract: The practice of journalism as a profession has raised many ethical issues. While some people believe that ethics and journalism are incompatible, the others describe and analyze journalism in the light of concepts which are essentially ethical, such as freedom, objectivity, truth, honesty, privacy and above all the unbiased approach. Even democracy, too, is an ethical term since it is concerned with the right or the best form of social and political organization. Thus, Ethics is inseparable from journalism, and ethical discussion must be a part of understanding journalism, its practice and its problems. We know that Ethics involves what is right, impartial, fair, just, and responsible. Ethical practice is as important in media as it is in other walks of life. Ethics based journalism having values such as unbiasedness, objectivity, accountability, fairness and truth is the need of the hour. The present study aimed at knowing the perception and visualization of media bias of readers of four leading national dailies. The respondents were asked to rate their newspaper in context of its credibility. They were also asked to suggest ways so that the media bias can be reduced.

Keywords: Media bias, credibility, newspapers, journalistic ethics.

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I. Introduction:

Are they (mass media) informing people about all the issues? How and to what extent are newspapers disseminating information? Is the information supplied by the media credible? Are the readers satisfied with what they are being served by the media? What is the actual state of journalism? These are some such questions which are always relevant and need to be analyzed. It has been noticed that, there has been an increasing public debate about such matters in the recent years. The accusations of bias, press cynicism, media manipulation, condemnations of journalistic intrusions into privacy, worries about the damaging or distortive effect of the media and hotly contested pronouncements about the appropriate forms of media regulation or censorship have all hit the headlines with ever greater frequency.

Media bias: Meaning and definitions:

Generally, the term media bias is explained as the bias or perceived bias of journalists and news producers within the mass media in the selection of events and stories that are reported and how they are covered. In order to have a more clear understanding of the term media bias, let's try to understand the meaning of the term bias itself:

According to the Collins Dictionary, "Bias is a tendency to prefer one person or thing to another, and to favor that person or thing."

According to the Oxford Dictionary, "Bias is a concentration on or interest in one particular area or subject."

Thus for the purpose of this study, media bias can be understood as the bias or perceived bias of the journalists and news producers within the mass media when they concentrate upon certain particular issues while ignoring the others.

Media bias has been defined in a number of ways:

According to **Chyi and McCombs, 2004¹**, “the news media often reframe the event by emphasizing different attributes of the event, consciously or unconsciously, in order to keep the story alive and fresh”. It is often the case that various media outlets have differing viewpoints on high-profile news stories. Agenda-setting theory relates closely with media framing. The salience of an object (the importance of an object) increases the amount of news coverage about the topic. The topic could be a public figure, an issue, or any other topic the media is focused on. News media can increase the importance of a news story by the amount of time spent reporting on the issue.

Quackenbush, Daniel, 2013² defines bias “as any form of preferential and unbalanced treatment, or favoritism”. He clearly mentions in his study that a pattern of behavior associated with biased reporting is known as “bias by placement.” This pattern reflects the practice of journalists intentionally depicting news stories in either a prominent or negligible way so as to magnify or downplay the information; this pattern is often, but not always, attributed to the issue’s coincidence with the journalist’s personal political or social belief system. He further states that traditionally, print stories that receive the biggest headlines and/or “above the fold,” front page placement are perceived by readers as the most timely and appealing stories in the entire paper, thus garnering reader attention. This particular form of bias is directly linked to the third type of bias, known as “coverage” bias. In this context, coverage bias reflects the amount of calculable physical space each issue is allotted.

Media bias and journalism:

Journalism has been defined as, “the business or practice of regularly producing and disseminating information about current affairs of public interest and importance. It is a set of institutions that publicizes periodically (usually daily but now with online updates continuously) information and commentary on contemporary affairs, normally presented as true and sincere, to a dispersed and usually anonymous audience so as to publicly include that audience in a discourse taken to be publicly important”.³

McCleneghan, 2005⁴ wrote that “journalists are still the people entrusted with the honor of informing the public”

Similarly, Pavlik, 2004⁵ stated that “a journalist maintains a fine balance between telling the public what it needs to know, even when the truth may cause hurt or pain, and being responsible and ethical in reporting and respecting privacy”.

Deuze, 2005⁶ identifies journalism as having four traits (beyond its stated commitment to public service): objectivity, autonomy, immediacy and ethics. He also declared that “one of the most fundamental truths in journalism” is that its practitioners determine what we see, hear and read about the world.

Thus journalism has always been considered as a profession of repute. However, in recent times, it too has been criticized for one reason or another. The media bias is one such most important reason.

Kieran M; 2003⁷ says that both the image and the essence of journalism are hard to pin down because each appears to contain contradictory strands. “By ‘image’ I mean the way in which journalism is generally regarded by the public. By ‘essence’ I mean the reality that lies behind (or apart from) the image”.

He further states that, it is well known that journalism has a poor image with the public. They do not regard it highly. Keiran suggests that people are suspicious of journalists and the way they practice their trade. They are regarded in much the same way as politicians, as disreputable, untrustworthy and dishonest, pushing a personal or sectional interest rather than the facts of the case. If people are told that the essence of journalism is truth-telling, they will react with some scepticism or derision. If they are told that the practice of journalism is founded on ethical principles they will either laugh or, if they are prepared to take the matter seriously, point out

¹ Chyi, H. & McCombs, M. (2004). Media salience and the process of framing. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 81(1), pp. 22-35.

² Quackenbush, Daniel (2013) " Public Perceptions of Media Bias: A Meta-Analysis of American Media Outlets during the 2012 Presidential Election." *The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications* • Vol. 4, No. 2 • (Fall 2013)

³ Schudson, M. (2012). *The sociology of news* (p. 11). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

⁴ McCleneghan, J. S. (2005). Interactivity with ‘Generation Y’ and small southwestern community newspapers. *The Social Science Journal*, 42(1), 141-148.

⁵ Pavlik, J. V. (2004). A Sea-Change in Journalism: Convergence, Journalists, their Audiences and Sources. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 10(4), 21-29.

⁶ Deuze, M. (2005). What is journalism? *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 6(4), 442-464.

⁷ Kieran, M. (2003). *Media ethics* (p. 1). London ; New York: Routledge.

that the typical tabloid story is trivial, scurrilous or invented.

David Randall, in his book *The Universal Journalist*, mentions that a newspaper's role is to find out fresh information on matters of public interest and to relay it as quickly and as accurately as possible to readers in an honest and balanced way. That's it. He, on one hand, loved journalism and newspapers and recognized the criticisms of both, on the other. Randall was intolerant of journalism that failed to meet his high standards, but he maintained that there is more good journalism than bad, and that there are more honest journalists than twisters of the truth. He believed in the fact that journalism and newspapers can, and should, be an influential force for good, and often are.

But we also recognize that the story is not as simple as that. Beneath it lays a complex web of debates and issues. These debates sometimes involve the content of newspapers, the economics of newspapers, their policies (editorial and commercial); the threats and so on. Not only this, the extent to which the society and the social forces wish to regulate or control newspapers, the freedom of a free press; the responsibility of newspapers with regard to matters such as privacy, taste and decency, the age-old contest between public interest and what interests the public have become a subject of debate.

There are some other vital issues as well which are currently being debated about the effects of the press we have on public attitudes to politics and politicians, on the susceptibility of newspapers to the influence of an increasingly sophisticated public-relations industry, on whether newspapers are coping with declining sales by 'dumbing down', trivialising, or whether changes in the news agenda are simply a response to changes in society and its interests.

Three words, namely brand, trust and content dominate the current discourse on newspaper practice. They are a product of media convergence, and they are, or are used as, approximate but not precise synonyms for the traditional words newspaper, accuracy and stories. In such circumstances, the question that comes to our mind is that: Have standards been maintained, if they were high in the first place? Have newspapers 'dumbed down'? Are these changes ethical?

Impact of media bias upon the readers:

The concerns about the effects of media bias upon consumers go back to the 1920s when Walter Lippmann noted that citizens have limited personal experience with government and the world and the media, through their stories, place ideas in citizens' minds. These ideas become part of the citizens' frame of reference and affect their decisions. Lippmann's statements led to the hypodermic theory, which argues that information is "shot" into the receiver's mind and readily accepted.⁸

Although the studies in the 1930s and 1940s found that information was transmitted in two steps, with one person reading the news and then sharing the information with friends. People listened to their friends, but not to those with whom they disagreed. The newspaper's effect was thus diminished through conversation. This discovery led to the minimal effects theory, which argues the media have little effect on citizens and voters.⁹

With the advent of the 1970s, a new idea, the cultivation theory, stated that media develops a person's view of the world by presenting a perceived reality.¹⁰ What we see on a regular basis is our reality. Media can then set norms for readers and viewers by choosing what is covered or discussed.

Thus it can be said that media have some effect, even if the effect is subtle. This raises the question of how the media can affect the citizens. One of the ways is through framing: the creation of a narrative, or context, for a news story. The news often uses frames to place a story in a context so the reader understands its importance or relevance. Yet, at the same time, framing affects the way the reader or viewer processes the story. There are other ways as well in which the media affects the readers. For example, the media can become selective through gatekeeping when it comes to the coverage of events and the readers will consider only those events to be important that are reported by the media.

We know that the media choose what they want to discuss. This agenda setting creates a reality for readers and affects the way people think and act. Thus the media bias not only has an effect upon how the information is gathered and served but also it effects the way in which the information supplied is processed by the receivers.

⁸ Walter Lippmann. 1922. *Public Opinion*. <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/Lippman/contents.html>

⁹ Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee. 1954. *Voting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan, Nancy Signorielli, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck. 1979. "The Demonstration of Power: Violence Profile," *Journal of Communication* 29, No.10: 177–196.

Media bias as a social challenge:

“As the media has become one of the fastest growing industries in the world, its credibility has become the most sensitive issue.”

-David Hayward

Veteran media writer, Alicia Shepard, once remarked, “Media beware, your credibility is all you have.”¹¹ It is undisputed that the media has the power to influence the public opinion in the most potent manner. It is known as ‘The fourth estate’, ‘The watchdog of democracy’, ‘Voice of the people’ and the ‘Pillar of democracy’. But in recent years it has been observed that the media is facing credibility issues. Both, the content and character of media has been repeatedly questioned. The media is often accused of supplying biased and incomplete information.

The role of media is to give citizens information they need to make decisions on matters, ranging from policy issues to consumer goods. It must be mentioned here that the effects of consumers' perceptions of news media credibility are extremely important in today's climate of increasing political and ideological polarization. However, the audience perception of media credibility has been dropping. In fact, the news media are suffering a credibility crisis, with academic and industry consistently showing a growing skepticism about the fairness, accuracy and trustworthiness of media reports. In an article titled, ‘Mass communication media credibility: an approach from the Credible Brand Model’, it has been stated that, “Some researchers attribute the erosion of public credibility and confidence in the media to factors such as the media institutions takeover by profit companies, along with the creation and consolidation of media conglomerates in few hands, shifting the focus of media from their informative role to profitability goals.”¹²

It is said that media is the mirror of society. It is because of media that the people are aware of what is happening around them. Media not only bridges the gap between the government and the general public but also provides information about what is happening around the world. It widens the lens of the people to acknowledge justice as well as injustice and policies and political processes. It also plays a big role in creating awareness regarding problems of national importance with their comprehensive background. Media is the watchdog of all the activities which happen in the society. In short we can say that media helps in building an aware and enlightened society. But there is a flipside also. Today, the media is seen as being biased. It is accused of being providing slanted information and biased opinions to the public. It's a general perception nowadays that the media houses surrender before the powerful market forces such as advertisers. It is also said that the media often allows the politicians to manipulate it for their own petty interests. Whatsoever the reason is, but the fact remains that the media is considered to be biased which is neither good for the consumers of the media nor for the society as a whole.

II. Review of literature:

Nowadays, mass media has constantly been lured into overstepping the fire line of informing, educating or entertaining the public. The habits and practices of media have time and again often resulted in sensationalizing, misleading, instigating or giving ulterior ideas leading to mistakes, triggering catastrophe or toppling governance established by law. The trend is also trickling down to the domestic media. Time and again media bias and its reasons have been discussed by various thinkers and social scientists. Some thinkers are of the view that media outlets are primarily driven by profit motives, as opposed to political motives. Here, the bias may arise from the preferences of consumers of the media. Under the assumption that consumers prefer to consume news that confirms their prior beliefs, competition forces newspapers to differentiate themselves by moving to the ideological extremes. The present study aims to study the bias in leading English dailies. The review of related literature is done in that perspective. The reviewed literature is related with the issue of media bias. A lot of work has been done in the field of media bias at the international level. However, there are no significant Indian studies available related with the subject. Let's have a look at some major contributions upon the issue:

¹¹ Media beware, your credibility is all you have: Column. (2017, January 13). Retrieved from <https://www.usatoday.com/story/opinion/2017/01/13/media-credibility-buzzfeed-dossier-cnn-alicia-shepard-column/96466624/>

¹² Mass communication media credibility: an approach from the Credible Brand Model. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://www.scielo.br/scielo.php?pid=S1809-58442014000200021 &script=sci_arttext&lng=en

Tetteh and King (2011)¹³ conducted a study titled, 'Newspaper coverage of the U.S. healthcare reform debate' in which they tried to examine the extent to which U.S. newspapers covered the chatter surrounding the 2009/10 healthcare reform debate. In this study they concluded that the political leanings of newspapers influenced the coverage they gave to the issue in terms of tone and page or story prominence. According to them, people's perception of reality, their society, and the world at large to some extent is influenced by what the mass media present as news and how they frame this using words and images. The decision of what to include as news and how to present this to audiences does not come about randomly but out of careful selection processes by media practitioners including journalists and editors. These selection and decision processes are influenced by the organizational policies of media houses and the personal beliefs and convictions of the individual media practitioners. They further said that the process by which news organizations judge events as newsworthy and others as not is known as media gatekeeping.

As the information gatekeepers of society, it is expected of the media to be circumspect in their judgment of news-worthiness, making it a point to educate and inform audiences correctly on happenings around the globe, especially those issues that directly impact the lives of their target audiences. The gatekeeping role of the media is, therefore, important because what the media select as news and how they frame this contributes greatly to what the public considers as news and how it thinks about issues. According to them, Media gatekeeping and framing studies are essential in understanding the processes of news production and dissemination and these communication concepts are even more pertinent in societies where people depend on the traditional media (such as newspapers) for information as this informs whom they hold responsible for happenings on the national scene and to where or whom they turn for answers.

Ayesha Sadaf (2011)¹⁴ conducted a study, titled, 'Comparative content analysis of the coverage in English & Urdu dailies of Pakistan on the Issue of Judicial Restoration'. According to her, media is the important element of society and every part of the specific society rely on media for information seeking. Media actively performs its functions ranging from providing information to entertainment, but surveillance is one of its crucial roles. She further states that by informing general public, media has to play a vital function not only to inform but also to make consensus amongst public on certain issues. This is also the formation of public opinion and perception through media, thus media is providing information at one end and making public opinion and perception on the other hand by providing the complete information on any story. This study is important in respect of the issue of media bias as it concludes that media promote or highlight some issues and put some issues in the background in a deliberate manner. She analyzed the content of four leading dailies of Pakistan, namely, The News, Dawn, Daily Jang and Daily Express for a period of 22 days and concluded that the newspapers were slanted in favor of the restoration of judiciary in Pakistan.

Endersby (2011)¹⁵ examined media bias in Great Britain and studied the relationship between real or perceived bias in the media by consumers' ideological preferences in his study titled, 'Fair and Balanced? News Media Bias and Influence on Voters.' He argued that media bias was evident in Great Britain due to the openness of the press in favoring one political party or another. Despite if bias in the news was real or perceived, he revealed that political slant in news content still had a significant effect on voting behavior. He found that a strong relationship exists between party preference and the type of newspapers read most often. According to him, among labor party identifiers, 56 percent read pro-Labour newspapers, and 77 percent of Tories read Conservative papers. Similarly, those in favor of Conservative newspapers casted 76.9 percent of their votes for the Tories; readers of Labour papers gave 80.4 percent of their votes for Labour.

Anthony DiMaggio (2009)¹⁶ explained in his book, 'Mass Media, Mass Propaganda: Understanding the news in the War on Terror' that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the media seems important than at any other time in history. While it is important to understand the emerging systems of reporting which challenge private or capitalist ownership of the press, it is also imperative to understand the extent of corporate

¹³ Tetteh, D. & King, J.M. (2011). Newspaper coverage of the U.S. healthcare reform debate. *Business Research Yearbook*, 18. , pp. 503-510.

¹⁴ Ayesha Sadaf (2011), Comparative Content Analysis Of The Coverage In English & Urdu Dailies Of Pakistan On The Issue Of Judicial Restoration; *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Vol. 1 No. 10; August 2011*

¹⁵ Endersby, James W., Fair and Balanced? News Media Bias and Influence on Voters (August 1, 2011). Available at SSRN: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1920620> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1920620>

¹⁶ Anthony DiMaggio (2009), Mass Media, Mass Propaganda: Understanding the news in the 'War on Terror', UK: Lexington Books, pp 1, 2, 7, 8.

power when it comes to dominating this vital medium of communication. Although investors and owners may complain about declining levels of profitability, media corporations today appear more powerful than at any time in world history, and they exercise a tremendous amount of influence and power over public opinion in the markets in which they operate. To underestimate the power of such institutions would be a great disservice to any serious study of media politics and mass communication. He asks a very relevant question that, what specifically is the influence that media has, if any, on the public in terms of influencing, shaping or manipulating opinion? While answering this question he agrees that media helps determine what local, national and international “problems” receive the most attention and which will be deemphasized or neglected.

Objectives of the study:

The present study has the following objectives:

1. To get the readers’ viewpoint of the media bias as perceived by them in leading English dailies;
2. To get the readers’ viewpoint of the ways to manage media bias.

III. Research methodology:

The research methodology involved the descriptive survey technique of data collection. “A descriptive survey attempts to describe or document current conditions or attitudes—that is, to explain what exists at the moment.”¹⁷ During the course of study a structured questionnaire was developed to collect the data. The total number of respondents was 400 as one hundred readers of each newspaper were included in the survey. There were 266 males and 134 females in the sample.

The respondents were asked to rate their newspaper on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 meant lowest and 10 meant highest) in context of its credibility. They were also asked to suggest ways so that the media bias can be reduced. The survey was carried out in the four districts of *Haryana*, namely, *Panchkula*, *Ambala*, *Kurukshetra* and *Karnal*. The survey was conducted in the months of May-June, 2018. The researcher, at the initial stage, contacted the newspaper hawkers to get the addresses of the readers. Having got the addresses, the sample was selected. Since, it was a tedious task to conduct a survey in four districts, the researcher trained 08 students of journalism to help him in conducting the survey.

Data presentation and results:

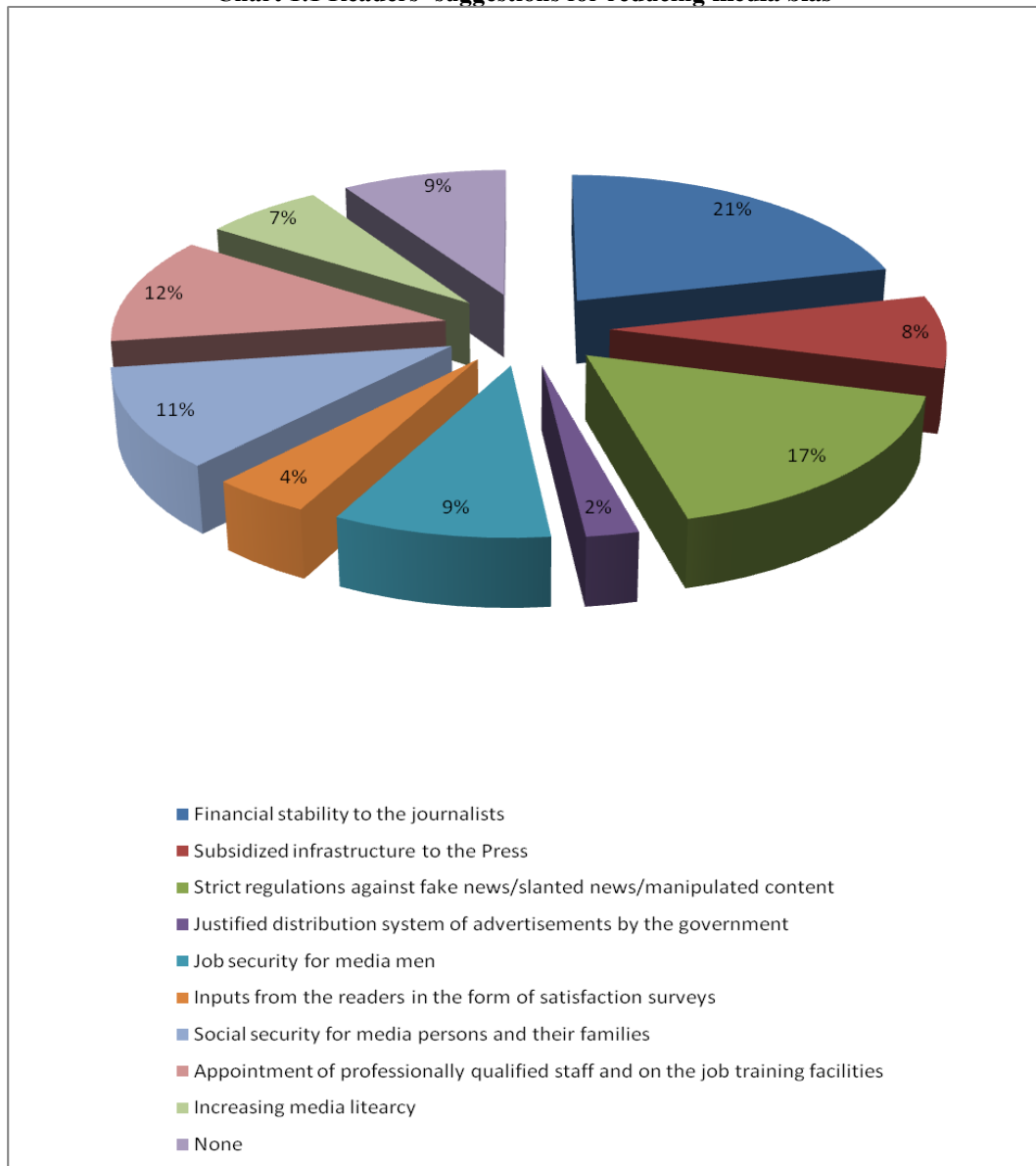
Table 1.1 Readers’ ranking of newspapers on the basis of credibility

Point	The Indian Express	Hindustan Times	The Times of India	The Tribune	Total
1	37	17	13	9	76
2	-	3	-	23	26
3	31	-	-	-	31
4	4	-	34	-	38
5	22	67	31	41	161
6	-	13	-	1	14
7	-	-	-	1	1
8	6	-	22	25	53
9	-	-	-	-	0
10	100	100	100	100	400

The table above presents the rankings attained by the newspapers on the basis of credibility. The respondents were asked to rate their newspaper on a scale of 1 to 10 (where 1 meant lowest and 10 meant highest) in context of its credibility. Among all the newspapers, The Indian Express got the number one ranking by maximum number of respondents (37), while Hindustan Times (17), The Times of India (13) and The Tribune (09) came at the second, third and fourth spots respectively. If we closely examine the table above, it reveals that out of 400 respondents, only 76 felt that their newspaper deserves number one ranking as far as its credibility is concerned.

¹⁷ Wimmer, R. D., & Dominick, J. R. (2014). *Mass media research: An introduction* (p. 185).

Chart 1.1 Readers' suggestions for reducing media bias



The inputs given by the respondents established the fact that media is perceived to be biased in general. However, they were also asked to give their valuable suggestions so that the media bias can be reduced. The respondents suggested a number of ways. The chart above depicts the suggestions offered by the respondents. The respondents believe that bias occurs owing to the fact that the journalists are not financially stable and sometimes such kinds of pressures are enough to force them to adopt a biased approach towards a certain issue, individual or happening. The majority of the respondents (85) which forms 21% of the total sample suggested that the journalists should be given more financial stability so as to reduce the bias. Similarly, 9% respondents suggested that providing more job security to media men would definitely help them in working in a more sincere, fair and objective manner.

The respondents also believe that there is a great need for making strict laws and regulations in this direction. A total of 17% respondents suggested that strict regulations against the fake news, slanted news and manipulated content are the need of the hour. Such provisions would definitely have an impact upon the biased approach of media.

The respondents (44) also suggested that more social security should be provided to the media persons and their families so that they can work more freely. It was also suggested by the respondents (47) that the media organizations must hire professionally qualified staff and they should be provided with on the job training facilities. It would help them a lot. If the staff is well qualified and professionally trained it would look towards things in an objective and fair manner, thus resulting in objective and fair reporting.

An important suggestion that was given by 8% respondents was that the government should provide

subsidized infrastructure to the media houses. Often it is seen that as huge investments are involved, the media houses turn into business houses and the reader or viewer is considered as an market, first to get returns and then to earn profit. Such mindset of the media houses often force them to go off the track and offer what is saleable and not that what is true and fair. It was also suggested by 09 respondents that the government should adopt a justified and fair distribution pattern of advertisements. The newspapers, in order to get more and more advertisements, try to please the advertisers. Such practices are pretty harmful to the fairness and objectivity of the press.

Some of the respondents also believed that the readers, too, can play a role in reducing the media bias. A total of 17 respondents suggested that the media houses should try to get proper feedback from their readers in the form of satisfaction surveys. Often the reader is seen as a passive recipient and no active role is offered to him. Getting inputs from the readers would definitely help the media houses to analyze their content and improve their publication strategies. Last but not the least, 26 respondents suggested that special steps should be taken to increase the level of media literacy so that the readers can see through the things. It would make the media all the more alert to have strong vigil on whatever they are serving to the readers.

IV. Conclusion:

It's true that Journalism is undergoing a transformational phase, perhaps the most fundamental since the rise of the penny press during the mid nineteenth century. In the twilight of the twentieth century and the dawn of the twenty-first, there emerged a new form of journalism whose distinguishing qualities include ubiquitous news, global information access, instantaneous reporting, interactivity, multimedia content, and extreme content customization. In a certain manner it represents a potentially better form of journalism since it reengaged an increasingly distrusting and alienated audience. At the same time, it presents many threats to the most cherished values and standards of journalism. The authenticity of content, source verification, accuracy, and truth are all suspect and the reasons for the transformation of journalism are neither simple nor one-dimensional. It's often mentioned that economic, regulatory, and cultural forces, driven by technological change are behind this perceived change in the field of journalism.

The news media plays an important role in society. It sets the stage for political news, manages their agenda, sources, and controls the information. It functions as a window to the outside world, and possesses the ability to shape public knowledge, attitudes, and their behavior. It is no surprise then that the media is one of the most criticized institutions nowadays. Yet media remains the dominant source of news. This dominant and powerful role as public informants that the news media plays justifies a lot of the hype associated with the media bias debate. Here it is important to clarify that the term 'media bias' implies a pervasive or widespread bias contravening the standards of journalism, rather than the perspective of an individual journalist or article.

Media bias is present all over the world. There are a number of national and international watchdog groups that report on bias in the media. There are certain limitations to the media neutrality including the inability of journalists to report all available stories and facts, government influence, the pressures of the market forces such as advertisers etc. There are certain other factors that are held responsible for media bias such as ownership of the media organizations, concentration of media ownership, the selection of staff, the preferences of an intended audience etc. Thus, although the reasons can be different but bias prevails in the media. However, still there is hope! By adopting certain practices we can reduce the bias in media as the present study suggests.

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