

## Who is providing reliable information on Internet? A survey of Indian online news readers

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### Abstract

Internet users are growing rapidly around the world. The main concern regarding the online content is that who is providing reliable information on the Internet. To know the credibility of Internet information among Indian readers, an online survey was conducted, and 3183 respondents took part in the study. The questionnaires were distributed using social media platforms. Male news consumers were higher than female news consumers. The findings of the study show that most of the online readers believe that the websites of news organizations provide credible information. Interestingly female readers have more faith in Government websites, private companies and personal blogs as compared to males. Text content is the most favorite content for the online news consumers.

**Key Words:** *Online news, Internet reader, Social media ethics*

### Introduction

Today, with the development of Internet technology, communication system is changing rapidly. The Internet has become the major source of all kind of information. It is an important or very important source of information (Center for the Digital Future, 2014). Communication is now much easier and cheaper with the help of new Internet technology. Smartphones are playing a significant role in providing instant information. As per the research by US-based research firm eMarketer (2016), 47% of

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citizens globally will use the Internet through a laptop/desktop computer, tablet or mobile by the end of 2016. Heavy growth of smartphone users has been noticed in the India, as per the latest report by Counterpoint Research (2016), India has overtaken the US smartphone users and now become second-biggest smartphone market in the world. The previous researches have shown that people are using more computer-mediated communication and Internet (Fox et al., 2001; Horrigan, 2001; Nie&Erbring, 2000; Nie, Hillygus, &Erbring, 2002).

A national study by the WebWatch shows the reliability of online news providers is very significant concern for online consumers (Consumer Reports WebWatch, 2005). Many researchers have raised questions for the trustworthiness of online news (Brill, 2001; Ketterer, 1998; Lasica, 1998). The concern of reliability of news information is important as journalism is considered credible (France, 1999). If the credibility of a news organization is not good, people will not pay attention to them (Gaziano, 1988).

The beginning of New Communication Technology (NCT) provided opportunities and challenges for conventional media (Garrison, 1996). People use Internet for two purposes, first it is used as mediated interpersonal technologies, which are for relationship maintenance, problem solving, social bonding and persuasion. Second the Internet is used as mass communication, which is for informational and leisure purposes (Flanagin& Metzger, 2001).

According to Kerry Eggers (2008), a writer for the Portland Tribune:

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I don't like blogs at all, and I'll tell you why. I don't think they have the integrity of a newspaper or a website. Bloggers don't necessarily have the credentials that a real accredited journalist has - some of them do but some of them don't - so you don't know what you're getting. Anyone can sit at home with their computer and write and consider themselves an expert while they are out there in the world having people read their stuff. They lack accountability and credibility as well. But people think they can throw anything out there in a blog, and they aren't accountable.

The Internet has entered into people's daily lives as well as it attracted many people around the globe to use it. Many people read online newspapers because they highlight the breaking news of politics, crime, and accidents from all over the world within minutes of the occurrence. The Chicago Tribune became the first online newspaper after publishing its content on Internet in 1992 (Deuze, 1999). After 1992, the growth of online media around the world has been drastically growing.

The significant change has been seen in the journalism after the growth of World Wide Web. Most of the traditional media television, radio, and newspapers started converting their news content digitally and developed their websites. All the traditional newspapers of India have started their online and e-papers. As per Internet Live Stats, Internet users around the world are rapidly

growing and 40 percent of the world population has an Internet connection. In 2004, 14.1 percent people were using Internet around the world and the number of Internet users has increased nearly 26 percent in between 2004-2014.

India is fastest growing Internet market around the world, as per the report by Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (2015) 267 million people were using Internet on mobile in December 2014, which increased to 302 million in March 2015. The latest report title "Mobile Internet in India 2015" by the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and IMRB International shows that the mobile Internet users in India will increase from 306 million in December 2015 to 371 million by June 2016 and the mobile Internet users in rural India has increased drastically.

Online media distinguish themselves from newspapers, radio, and television. It allows readers to share the news easily and provide the links to related news articles and most of the news portal allows their readers to comment on the news items. Readers use news related web portals "to get information that is unavailable elsewhere, for convenience, and the ability to search for news on a particular topic" (Pew Research Center [PRC], 1998).

The mass media also started the use of Internet. All the traditional media have started their online version, such as newspapers, radio, and television. Most of the time online information spread easily without being monitored by any system for the credibility of information except the media.

### **Review of Literature**

Human beings use Internet for variety of things, many of them

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uses it to send information through the email and chat to keep in touch with friends and others around the world. Whereas many people play games on it; others use it to get information through search engines. A study by Burgess and Jones (2010) found that males read newspapers more often than females, while females prefer to read books for fun and magazines more than their counterparts.

According to the Pew Research Center (1998), "Internet audiences find the websites of various news organizations no more or less accurate than the information found in those organizations' traditional news outlets". Previous research has found evidence that people often use online news to supplement, not replace, their core news consumption (Althaus & Tewksbury, 2000).

Readers always want to study the credible sources, or publications to get the information (Kaufman, Stasson & Hart, 1999). Nowadays, most of the people without age bar around the world getting information from the Internet for various purposes. Unfortunately, all of the information is not credible which they get from the Internet (Wathen and Burkell, 2002). However, online news providers are considered credible by more than two-thirds of respondents; also online newspapers are judged as significantly more credible than their traditional counterparts (Johnson and Kaye, 1998).

Credibility is defined as "judgments made by a perceiver concerning the believability of a communicator" (Keefe, 1990). The differences in credibility of various type of information were

noticed on the Internet. Most of the respondents think reference, news, and entertainment information are more credible than commercial information, whereas reference information was perceived to be more credible than entertainment information (Flanagin, & Metzger, 2000). Many researchers have studied the readers' perceptions of the credibility of Internet information (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000; Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kiouisis, 2001).

According to the Pew Research Center (1999), "People use Internet most of the time as a source of information. Nearly half of all Internet users go to the Internet at least once every week to get information". Earlier research exhibited that Internet was used to information (Ferguson & Perse, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001; Mings, 1997; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000; Stempel, Hargrove, & Bernt, 2000).

The aim of this research is to explore the credible source of online information as well as the frequency of the Internet users for news reading and most popular content of news. The gap is a considerable issue for the betterment of the online media.

The aim of the study is to find out the source which is considered to be most reliable source of information on Internet. Furthermore to examine the characteristics and using habits of the online news consumers including age, gender, frequency of daily use. It also tries to study the most popular online content and most used gadget by news consumers.

### **Methodology**

The online survey method was adopted to know the source of reliable information on Internet and other habits of online readers in

India. Online survey is the most popular method to study the Internet users. We can systematically gather the data from the online readers by sending email or posting online questionnaire on social media and web pages. Online survey is the fastest method to get the data by the respondents which save the time of research (Llieva, Baron, & Healey, 2002), as well as to get data from distant locations (Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Garton et al., 2003; Taylor, 2000; Yun & Trumbo, 2000).

Responses of online surveys can be easily checked on the smartphone. It helps researchers to conduct preliminary analyses on collected data while waiting for the desired number of responses to accumulate (Llieva et al., 2002). Online survey is always low cost method of research in comparison to the other research methods (Bachmann & Elfrink, 1996; Couper, 2000; Llieva et al., 2002; Yun & Trumbo, 2000). It has many advantages over the other survey techniques. It is also convenient for respondents to take on their own time. It saves the time of a researcher also as it automatically generates the excel file and graphs.

For this research the questionnaire was created on the Google Forms, and a link of questionnaire emailed to various online news readers, posted on Facebook, and posted to the researcher's own website [www.pradeeptewari.com](http://www.pradeeptewari.com) for six month, from July 1 to December 31, 2014. Only close-ended questions were used in the questionnaire. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire was checked by the experts, one senior journalist of the reputed English newspaper The Tribune and two Mass Communication teachers.

After that the questionnaire was sent to 50 respondents via email to measure the reliability of questionnaire through the test-retest reliability method. The score of test-retest reliability was  $r \geq 0.78$ . The respondents for this research were only those who read the online newspapers in India and within the age groups of 15 years and above. The findings and conclusions have been drawn based on the survey results.

### Data Analysis

The previous studies had shown that the online news readers are growing rapidly. The questionnaires were distributed through the Internet, using e-recourses (e-mail, face book, twitter, and blog) without knowing the gender of respondents.

Table 1: Gender of online news consumers

Gender of news consumer	R (n=3183)	% of R
Male	2064	64.80%
Female	1119	35.20%

(R-Respondent)

The findings in Table 1 show that the males are reading online news more than the females. More than half of the 3183 respondents, 64.80% ( $n=2064$ ) respondents were males while only 1119 (35.2%) respondents were females.



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Table 2: Age of respondent

	R (n=3183)	% of R	% of male R(n=2064)	% of female R (n=1119)
15-20	694	21.80%	19.6%	25.8%
20-30	1329	41.80%	40.3%	44.7%
30-40	564	17.8%	19.7%	14%
40-50	354	11.7%	11.4%	10.5%
50-above	242	7.6%	9%	5%

(R-Respondent)

Findings in Table 2 show that most of the respondents 41.80% (n=1329) were from 20-30 age group and 40.3% were males and 44.7% were females. While 21.80% (n=694) were from 15-20 age group, in this group female respondents were 25.8% and male 19.6%. 17.8% (n=564) respondents were from 30-40 age category, in this category male respondents were 19.7% and female 14%, followed by 40-50 age category 11.7% (n=354) and 50-above age category 7.6%, in this category 5% respondents were females and 9% males.

Table 3: Credible source of information

	R (n=3183)	% of R	% of male R (n=2064)	% of female R (n=1119)
Companies website	190	6%	5.8%	7.2%
Government Website	996	31.20%	26%	29.2%
Social Media	670	21.26%	22.5%	18.5%
Media/News organizations	1920	60.3%	59.7%	54.7%
Personal Blogs	223	7%	7%	7.6%

(R-Respondent)

Table 3 shows websites of news organizations is the most credible

source of information for most respondents 60.3% ( $n=1920$ ), Information in the personal blogs and websites of companies were least credible source of information, 7% ( $n=223$ ) and 6% ( $n=190$ ) respectively. The second reliable source of information on Internet is Government websites, as research shows 31.20% ( $n=996$ ) respondents believes that Government websites are providing credible information. 21.26% ( $n=670$ ) of all respondents believes social media provide reliable information. Interestingly female readers have more faith on Government websites, private companies and personal blogs as compare to male.

Table 4: Gadgets used to get online news

	R ( $n=3183$ )	% of R	% of male R ( $n=2064$ )	% of female R ( $n=1119$ )
Laptop/PC	1390	43.70%	46%	45%
Tablet	172	5.4%	5.3%	6.7%
Smartphone	1941	62%	53%	67%
Smartphone & laptop pc	780	24.50%	24%	28.5%

As many as 62% ( $n=1941$ ) online news consumer were using Smartphone for the online news and females were far ahead from males in the use of Smartphone for the online news, 67% and 53% respectively. While 43.7% ( $n=1390$ ) respondents were using laptop and PC for the online news and 24.50% ( $n=780$ ) respondents were using Smartphone, laptop and PC. Tablets were less utilized gadget by the people for online news reading only 5.4% ( $n=172$ ).

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Table 5: Frequency of reading online news

Frequency of reading online news	R (n=3183)	% of R	% of male R (n=2064)	% of female R (n=1119)
Morning	738	23.2%	22.2%	19.8%
Morning and Evening	811	25.5%	26%	31.7%
Morning, Afternoon and Evening	302	9.5%	10.3%	8.7%
Morning, Afternoon, Evening and Night	216	6.8%	6.2%	4.7%
Many time	1114	35%	35.3%	35%

The findings shows the most of the people 35% ( $n=1114$ ) read online news many times in a day. Whereas 25.5% ( $n=811$ ) respondents said they read news on net only morning and evening, interestingly females were reading news in the morning and evening more than male readers 31.7% and 26% respectively. On the other hand, only 23.2% ( $n=738$ ) said they read online news only in the morning. Whereas in print media most of the people read newspaper in the morning. Only 9.5% ( $n=302$ ) respondent said they read news in the morning, afternoon and evening, in which females were 10.3% and males 9.5%. Only 6.8% ( $n=216$ ) respondents read news in the morning, afternoon, evening and night, in which 6.2% males and 4.7% were females.

Table 6: Most popular online news content

News content	R (n=3183)	% of R	% of male R (n=2064)	% of female R (n=1119)
Photo Gallery	1063	33.40	27.6	30.8
Video Gallery	445	14	10.3	13.2
News in Text	1909	60.30	57	45.6
Related News Reference links	764	24.30	23.7	20.1

(R-Respondent)

Findings in Table 6, show that the most popular content in online media among the readers was news as majority 60.3 percent ( $n=1909$ ) of the online news consumers liked to read the news. In which, 57 percent males and 45.5 percent females liked to read the news. On the other hand, 33.4 percent ( $n=1063$ ) respondents liked to watch the photo gallery, 30.8 percent females liked to watch news through the photos while males are only 27.6 percent. Whereas 24.3 percent ( $n=764$ ) liked the related news reference links, 23.7 percent males and 20.1 percent females liked it. Rest of the people 14 percent ( $n=445$ ) liked the video gallery in online newspapers. Females liked video news 13.2 percent more than males 10.3 percent.

**Discussion**

Internet users in India are growing rapidly, with the help of rapid growth in communication technology. Mobile phone technology is providing all the features on the phone which makes it Smartphone. Majority of Smartphone users in India are using Internet on their phones. As per the survey, most of the Internet users (62%) are using smart phone to get information. Prof. B.K. Kuthiala, VC of

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MakhanLalChaturvedi University, Bhopal explains the importance of Smartphone by saying “One can easily get the latest news of the world by pressing the thumb on their mobile”.

The information available online is easy to find through the search engines, but which online information sources are trustworthy is a big question. Now all the companies and government departments and celebrities are uploading their news on their own websites. Most of them have their own public relation departments and some of them hire them for an assignment. They publish their press notes on their websites or social media. As per the study majority of Indian reader 60.3% believes that online newspapers are providing reliable information. In readers’ opinion companies’ websites, social media and personnel blogs provide least credible information.

Government websites are still considered to be second most reliable source of online information among Internet users. Males are far ahead of females in using Internet for the information. In the present study, 64.80% respondents were males whereas 35.2% respondents were females. Interestingly, female readers have more faith on government websites, private companies and personal blogs as compared to males.

The news reading habit is changed as 35 percent respondents said they read online news many times in a day. Earlier, most of the people were reading news only in the morning or some in the evening. Nowadays all the newspapers have started their online newspapers and they are updating their websites regularly with

latest news and most of the time with breaking news. They are sending updates of latest news on emails, what's app, twitter and face book. Now all the social networking websites are easily accessed on the smart phones and they are available on low cost after the revolution in mobile technology.

People of all age groups are using Internet for their daily need on various gadgets available in the market. India is considered a youth nation around the world. Internet users are growing very fast in India. As per this study, majority of online readers were youth below the age of 30, maximum 41.80% ( $n=1329$ ) news consumers were from 20-30 age group and 21.80% ( $n=694$ ) from 15-20 age group.

### **Conclusion**

Social media are considered more credible source of information (Johnson & Kaye, 1998; Kiouisis, 2001). As per the survey by the Online News Association (2002), the U.S. Internet users say "Online news as credible as that of traditional media sources". Most of the U.S. Internet users (79%) say that most or all of the information published on the established news sites, like nytimes.com, is accurate (Center for the Digital Future, 2005).

In India Internet users are growing rapidly and most of the newspapers have started their online newspapers, which are completely accessible through the Internet. As per this study, news websites are the most reliable source of information for the Indian Internet users. Media industry should maintain the trust of readers and provide trustworthy news items. They should strengthen their online edition team, as online media is the future of media.

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There are many reasons for the growth of Internet users, most important factor is the explosion of mobile Internet usage in India. Now all the mobile companies are providing high speed Internet in affordable prices. The study revealed that only 35% readers are going online many times for getting latest news. It is noticed that many newspapers websites are not user friendly. Some sites are giving advertisement popups with all the news even on the clicks. Online readers avoid those sites which give popup ads. To attract more readers to read the news many times, media should upload all kind of news content and their websites should be opened easily on all the browsers even during slow speed Internet.

All the media houses should target the Smartphone users, as per the recent study, India will be the second in the world for using Smartphone in 2016. Mobile apps should be very light, it preferably, without the ads. The option of automatic refresh of apps should be included and media organizations should update their face book, twitter and other social media pages automatically.

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