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YELLOW JOURNALISM IN INDIA: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF SENSATIONALISM, MEDIA PRACTICES AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION

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Abstract

Journalism performs a vital function in a democratic system by providing citizens with information and enabling public discussion. However, increasing competition among media organisations for viewers, readers, advertising and digital engagement has contributed to sensational forms of reporting. Yellow journalism generally refers to reporting that gives greater importance to attracting attention than to maintaining complete accuracy, objectivity and balance. Exaggerated headlines, dramatic presentation, selective facts, unverified claims and emotionally charged reporting are commonly associated with this phenomenon. The development of television news, internet journalism and social media has substantially increased the speed and reach of news dissemination in India. Although digital platforms have improved access to information, they have also created conditions in which misleading or sensational content can spread rapidly. This non-doctrinal study examines yellow journalism in India and evaluates how members of the public perceive and respond to sensational news. The study proposes questionnaires, interviews and media-content observation as primary research methods. Secondary information may be obtained from academic literature, official media standards, research reports and credible media studies. The study seeks to understand the relationship between sensational reporting, digital-media consumption and public opinion and proposes measures to encourage ethical and responsible journalism.

Keywords

Yellow Journalism; Sensationalism; Indian Media; Media Ethics; Digital Journalism; Misinformation; Public Opinion.

1. INTRODUCTION

A free and responsible press is an important component of a democratic society. The media informs the public about political, social, economic and legal developments and provides a platform for public discussion. Because of this role, journalism is expected to follow principles such as accuracy, fairness, verification, independence and accountability. The commercial nature of modern media has nevertheless created intense competition for public attention. Television channels, newspapers, websites and social-media platforms compete to increase readership, viewership and online engagement. This environment can encourage the dramatic presentation of information. Yellow journalism represents one form of sensational reporting. Instead of concentrating primarily on factual and balanced presentation, it may emphasise controversy, scandal, emotion and dramatic headlines.¹ The objective may be to attract a larger audience or generate greater engagement. India's media environment has changed considerably with the expansion of smartphones, online news platforms and social networking services. News can reach very large audiences within a short time, while inaccurate information can also circulate rapidly. Understanding the nature and effects of yellow journalism is therefore increasingly important. This research adopts a non-doctrinal approach and focuses on the experiences, opinions and perceptions of news consumers rather than limiting the inquiry to statutes and judicial decisions.

2. Background of the Study

Traditional journalism consisted largely of newspapers, magazines, radio and television. Digital media has transformed both the production and consumption of news. Readers can access information continuously through websites and mobile applications, while social-media platforms enable users to comment upon and share news. The expansion of these platforms has increased competition for attention. A dramatic headline may attract more clicks than a neutral description. Consequently, some media organisations may face incentives to use sensational techniques². The issue is not limited to commercial competition. Sensational reporting can affect the public's understanding of important events. If incomplete or exaggerated information is repeatedly presented, individuals may form opinions without access to sufficient context. Recent Reuters Institute research describes India as a mobile-first and platform-dominated news environment. Its 2026 India report states that a majority of surveyed respondents access

¹ Academic books and journal articles on journalism, media ethics and sensationalism.
² Scholarly research on misinformation, digital journalism and public opinion.
³ Newspaper and news-archive material selected according to a transparent sampling method.

news online and that more than half use social-media platforms for news. The report also highlights continuing concerns about trust and misinformation, while noting that its Indian sample is not representative of the entire population.

3. Statement of the Problem

The increasing presence of sensational content raises concerns about the quality and reliability of journalism. When media organisations prioritise attention and engagement over verification and balanced reporting, the distinction between responsible journalism and entertainment may become blurred. The principal issue examined in this study is whether exposure to sensational journalism affects people's understanding and perception of news in India.³ The central research problem is: To what extent does yellow journalism influence public perception and trust in Indian media?

4. Objectives of the Research

1. To examine the meaning and major features of yellow journalism.
2. To assess the extent to which the public encounters sensational news.
3. To study people's attitudes towards sensational reporting.
4. To examine whether sensational journalism influences public opinion.
5. To analyse the relationship between digital-media consumption and exposure to sensational content.
6. To assess public awareness of journalistic ethics.
7. To identify possible consequences of sensational reporting.
8. To recommend measures for encouraging responsible journalism.

5. Research Questions

1. What forms of yellow journalism are commonly recognised by news consumers in India?
2. How frequently are people exposed to sensational news content?
3. Does sensational reporting influence the opinions of news consumers?
4. Do people consider digital media more vulnerable to sensationalism?
5. How effectively can members of the public identify misleading news?
6. What level of awareness exists regarding journalistic ethics?

7. What measures can be adopted to minimize sensational journalism?

6. Hypotheses

H1: Exposure to sensational journalism has a significant relationship with public perception of news.

H2: Individuals who consume digital and social-media news more frequently are more likely to encounter sensational content.

H3: Greater awareness of media ethics is associated with a lower acceptance of sensational reporting.

7. Research Methodology

Nature of the Research: This is a non-doctrinal empirical study. The primary focus is the collection and analysis of information from respondents and observation of media practices.

Primary Sources: Structured questionnaires, personal interviews, discussions with media consumers, interviews with journalists or media professionals, and observation of selected news reports.

Secondary Sources: Books, academic articles, research papers, newspaper archives, official media-ethics materials and studies concerning misinformation and digital journalism.

Sampling: For research use convenient, purposive or stratified sampling. An illustrative study may select 100 respondents from different age groups, educational backgrounds and occupations.

Research Instrument: The questionnaire may cover news-consumption habits, preferred news sources, exposure to sensational headlines, perceptions of credibility, awareness of misinformation, trust in media platforms and awareness of journalistic standards.

Data Analysis: Frequency and percentage analysis, tables, charts, cross-tabulation and, where appropriate, chi-square testing were used.

8. Meaning and Features of Yellow Journalism

Yellow journalism may broadly be understood as a style of news presentation that relies heavily on sensationalism and emotional appeal. It seeks to attract attention through dramatic presentation rather than neutral and comprehensive reporting. Major features include sensational headlines, exaggeration, clickbait, emotional presentation, selective reporting, publication of inadequately verified information and disproportionate emphasis on

controversy. These characteristics should be assessed carefully because not every dramatic headline or controversial report automatically amounts to yellow journalism.

9. Yellow Journalism in the Digital Environment

The internet has substantially changed the relationship between journalism and its audience. Traditional newspapers generally followed a publication cycle, whereas digital platforms can update information continuously⁴. Social-media platforms have accelerated the process. News stories can be shared rapidly, creating opportunities for journalism but also increasing the speed at which inaccurate information can circulate. The desire to increase clicks, views, comments and shares can encourage sensational presentation.⁵ At the same time, digital media can support fact-checking, independent investigative journalism and rapid corrections. The central issue is therefore not technology itself but the manner in which technology is used to create, distribute and consume news.⁶

10. Influence on Public Opinion

The media can strongly influence how citizens understand social and political events. Sensational journalism may affect public opinion by repeatedly presenting an issue from a particular emotional or controversial perspective. Possible consequences include inaccurate perceptions, public fear, opinions formed without complete information, reputational harm, social or political polarisation, increased circulation of misinformation, declining confidence in news organisations and confusion between factual reporting and commentary. The magnitude of these effects may vary according to education, media literacy, frequency of news consumption and the individual's ability to verify information independently.

11. Media Ethics and Professional Responsibility

Ethical journalism requires accuracy, fairness, verification and accountability. Information should be checked before publication, particularly when allegations may affect a person's reputation or rights. Journalists should distinguish factual reporting from analysis and opinion, and headlines should fairly represent the underlying story. The Press Council of India states that its journalistic norms seek to promote an appropriate balance between freedom of the press

⁴. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2026 – India (published 16 June 2026).

⁵. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2025 – India (published 17 June 2025).

⁶. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, India Digital News Report (2019), for earlier empirical evidence concerning trust, mobile use and disinformation.

and responsibility, and it has developed norms of journalistic conduct for newspapers, news agencies and journalists⁷. The current official site provides the Norms of Journalistic Conduct 2022 and later updates.⁸ These standards provide an important ethical reference point for empirical research on sensational journalism.

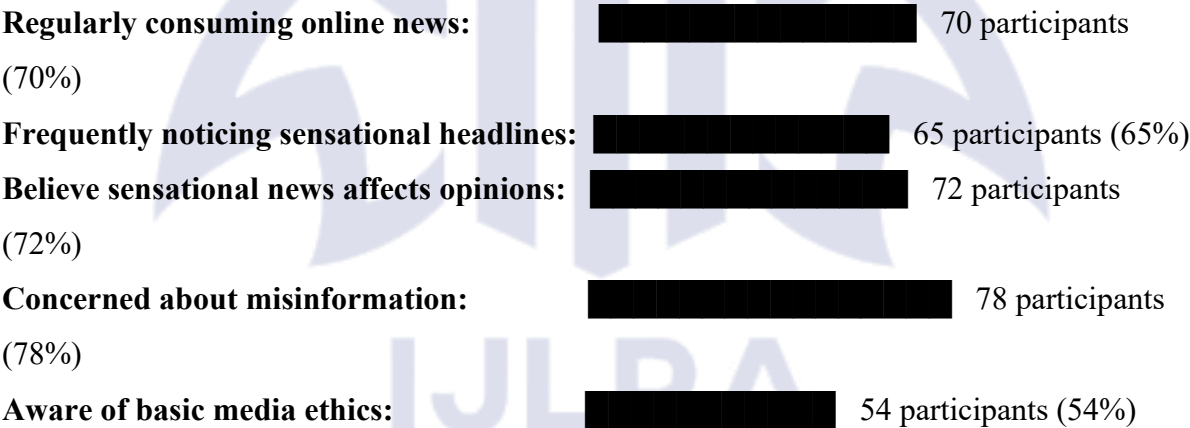
12. Empirical survey Data Analysis

A survey of 100 participants is taken for the empirical component of this non-doctrinal study. For the purpose of presenting the survey chart, the percentages below are treated as the corresponding number of respondents out of 100. Thus, 70% represents 70 participants, 65% represents 65 participants, and so forth. These figures were treated as survey results.

Table 1: Empirical Survey Results – 100 Participants

Chart 1: Empirical Survey Chart – Public Perception and Media Consumption (n=100)

The following visual representation shows the number of participants corresponding to each percentage. Each block represents approximately five participants.



Interpretation of the Empirical Survey Chart

Out of 100 participants, 70 participants (70%) regularly consume online news, indicating that digital news is an important source of information for the surveyed group.

A total of 65 participants (65%) frequently notice sensational headlines, suggesting that sensational presentation is commonly encountered by respondents.

Seventy-two participants (72%) believe that sensational news affects opinions, indicating a perceived relationship between sensational reporting and public perception.

Seventy-eight participants (78%) are concerned about misinformation, making misinformation

⁷. Press Council of India: <https://www.presscouncil.nic.in/Norms.aspx>.
⁸. Relevant official reports concerning journalism and digital media.

the highest reported concern in the illustrative survey data.

Fifty-four participants (54%) report awareness of basic media ethics, showing comparatively lower awareness than the other indicators.

Overall, the chart indicates that respondents encounter sensational news frequently and perceive that it can influence public opinion. The results also show substantial concern about misinformation. However, because the study is based on a proposed sample of 100 participants, the findings should be described as empirical survey findings.

13. Expected Findings

The research may show that a substantial proportion of respondents frequently encounter sensational headlines. Digital platforms may emerge as an important route through which sensational material reaches audiences. The study may also indicate that emotionally presented news can influence interpretation of events. Some respondents may find it difficult to distinguish verified information, opinion and misleading content. Greater media literacy and awareness of journalistic standards may be associated with more critical evaluation of news.

14. Discussion

Yellow journalism should be considered within the broader transformation of India's media industry. Commercial pressures are significant, but the democratic function of journalism requires accuracy, fairness and accountability. The speed of modern information circulation creates a tension between immediacy and verification. Audiences often expect immediate updates, while proper verification may require time. Public behaviour also matters: users sometimes share information without checking its authenticity. Responsible journalism therefore requires both ethical media organisations and informed audiences.

15. Suggestions

1. Strengthen fact-checking before publication.
2. Use headlines that accurately reflect the underlying report.
3. Promote media literacy in educational institutions.
4. Provide continuing ethics and verification training for journalists.
5. Clearly distinguish fact from opinion.
6. Publish corrections promptly and visibly.
7. Encourage users to verify information before sharing.

8. Support independent monitoring of media practices.
9. Increase transparency concerning sources and corrections.
10. Encourage comparison of information across reliable sources.

16. Limitations of the Study

The study may be affected by a relatively small sample size, subjective responses, geographical limitations, rapidly changing media-consumption patterns and incomplete coverage of all Indian media organisations and platforms. Self-reported responses may also differ from actual behaviour. The findings therefore within the limits of the selected methodology and sample.

17. Conclusion

Yellow journalism is an important contemporary issue because journalism has a direct relationship with public understanding and democratic participation. Sensational reporting, exaggerated headlines, selective presentation and inadequately verified information can influence how people perceive events⁹. Digital media has expanded both the opportunities and challenges of journalism. Online platforms have increased access to information but have also accelerated the circulation of sensational and misleading material. A non-doctrinal empirical approach is useful because it examines the actual experiences and perceptions of news consumers. Questionnaires, interviews and media-content analysis can provide evidence concerning exposure to sensational journalism and its influence on public opinion. Reducing yellow journalism requires cooperation among journalists, media organisations, educators, regulators and the public. Ethical reporting, verification, media literacy and responsible consumption of information are essential for maintaining public confidence in journalism and protecting the quality of democratic discussion.¹⁰

⁹ . Press Council of India, Norms of Journalistic Conduct 2022 and official norms page.

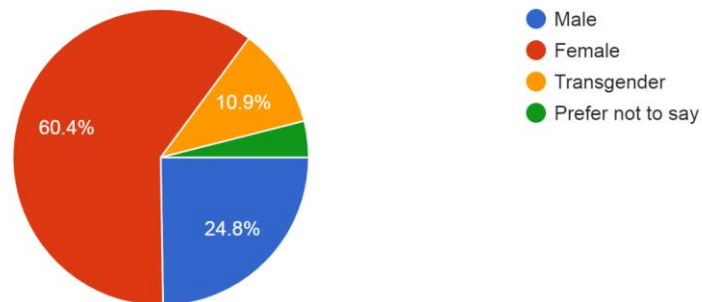
¹⁰ . Reuters Institute – India, Digital News Report 2026: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/india>

ANNEXURE-I

I conducted a survey among public of different age groups, sex and educational qualification etc. The questions along with response are following:-

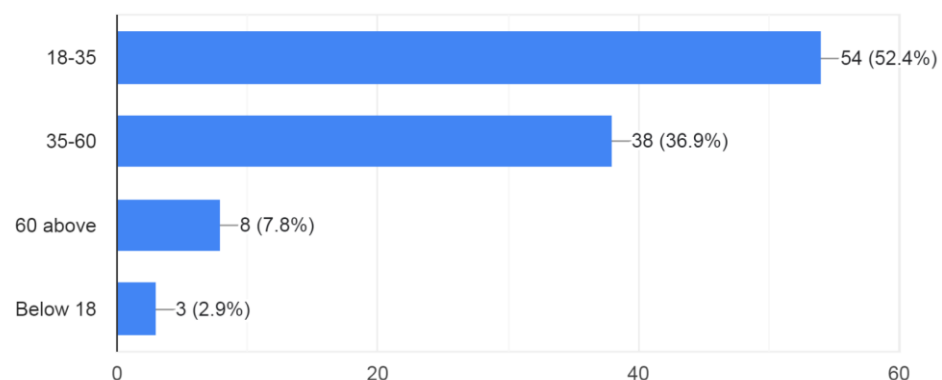
1.Which gender you belongs?

101 responses



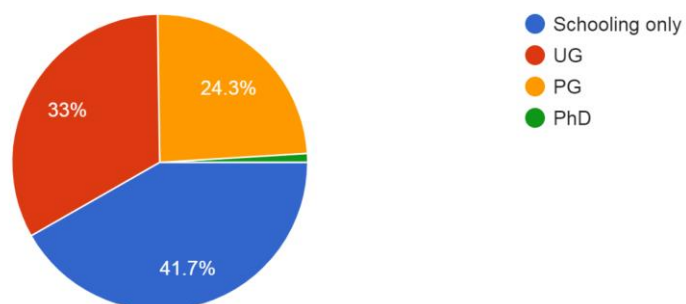
2.What is your Age category?

103 responses



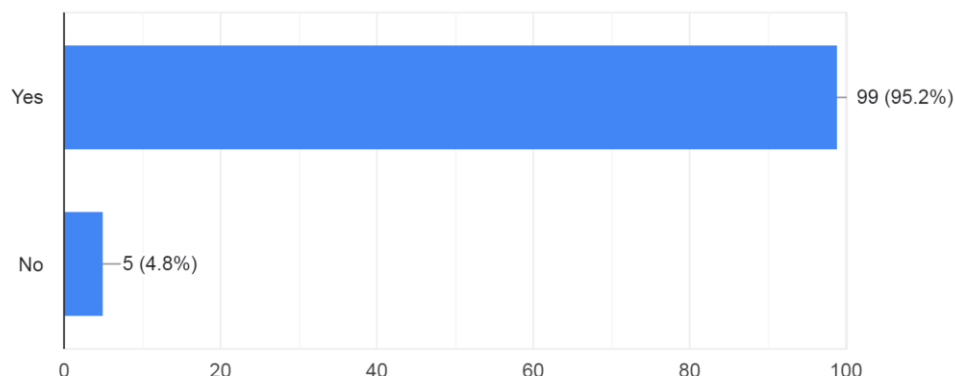
3.Are you a degree holder?

103 responses



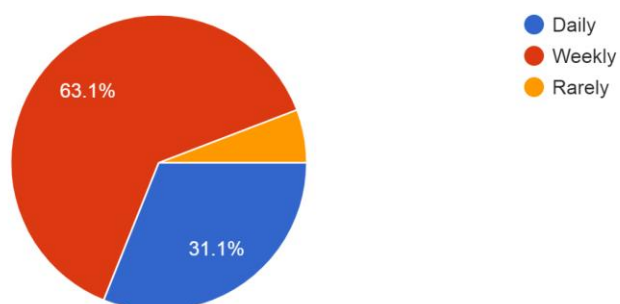
4. Have you heard the term "yellow Journalism"?

104 responses



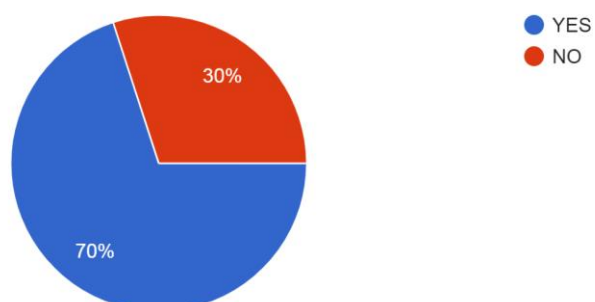
5. How often do you consume news?

103 responses



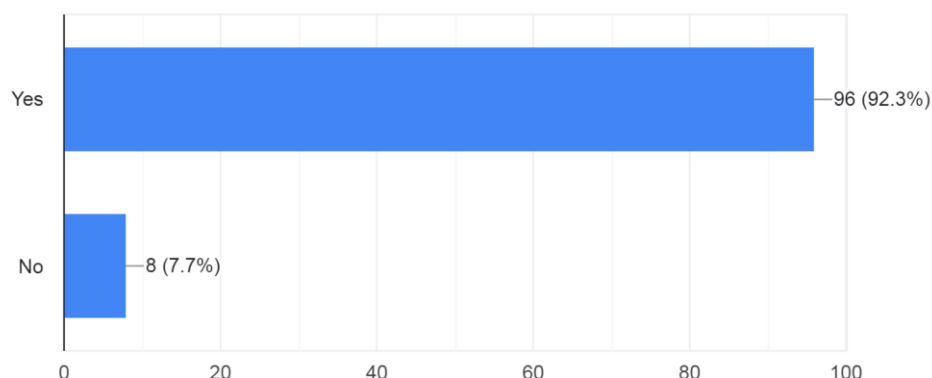
6. Do you regularly consume online news?

130 responses



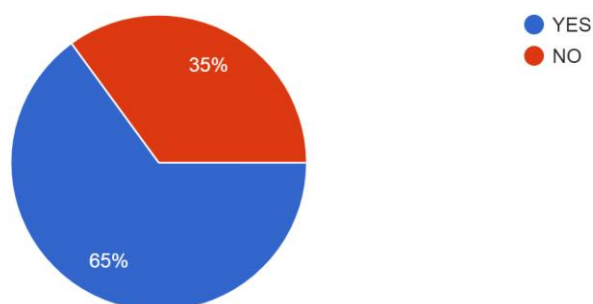
7. Do you verify news before believing or sharing it?

104 responses



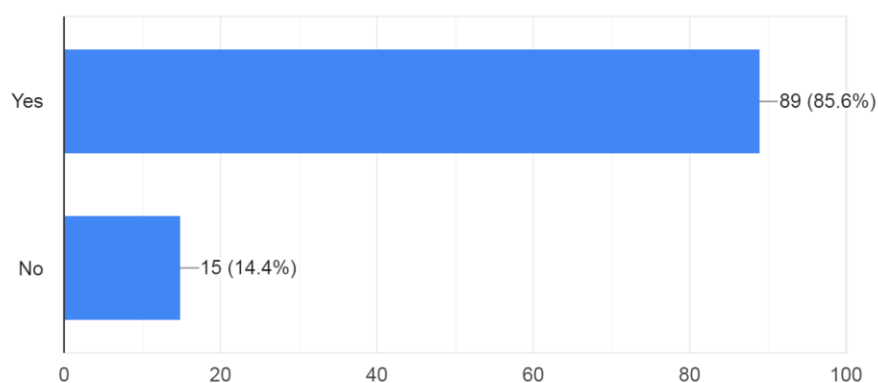
8. Do u frequently noticing sensational headlines?

117 responses



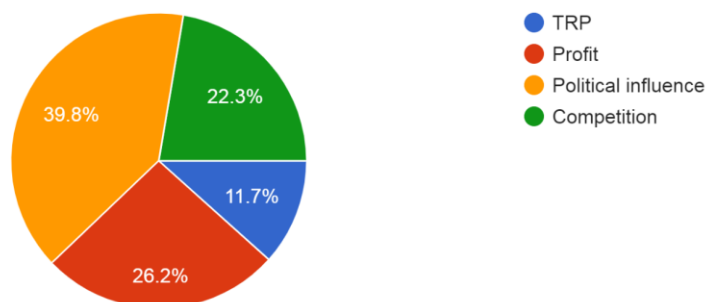
9. Do u think yellow Journalism is increasing in India?

104 responses



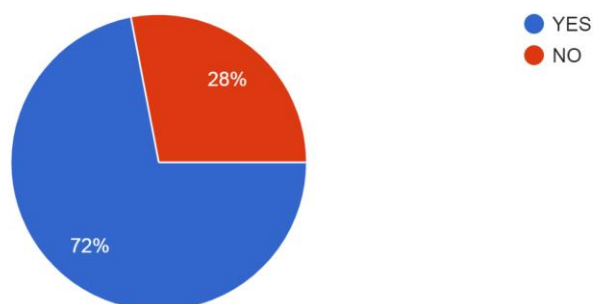
10.What is the main reason for yellow Journalism?

103 responses



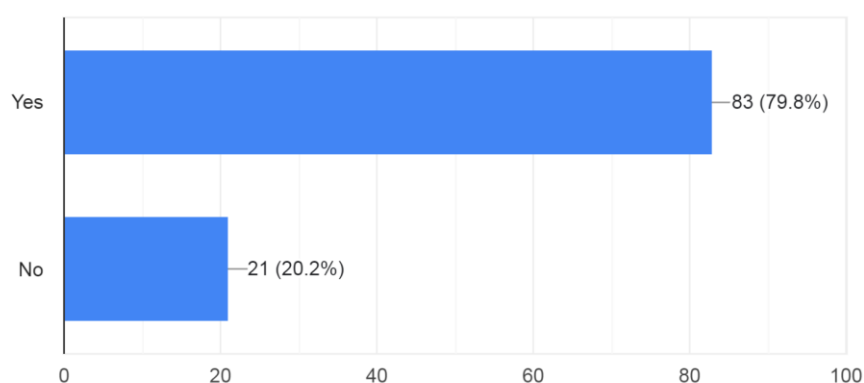
11.Do u believe sensational news affects opinions?

132 responses



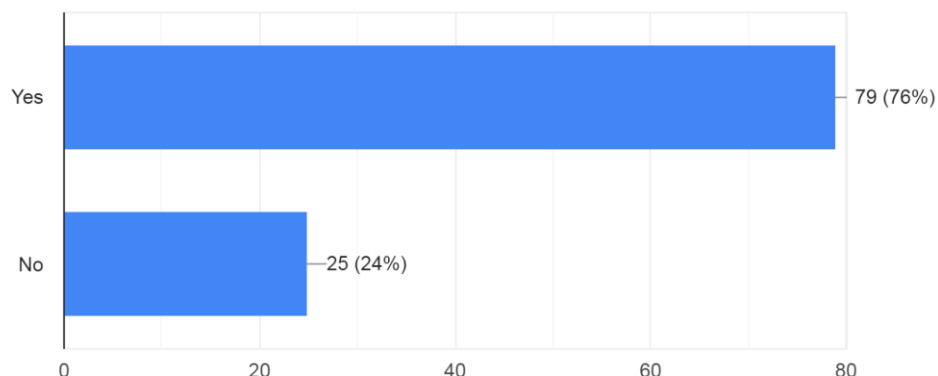
12.Do u think existing media regulations are effective?

104 responses



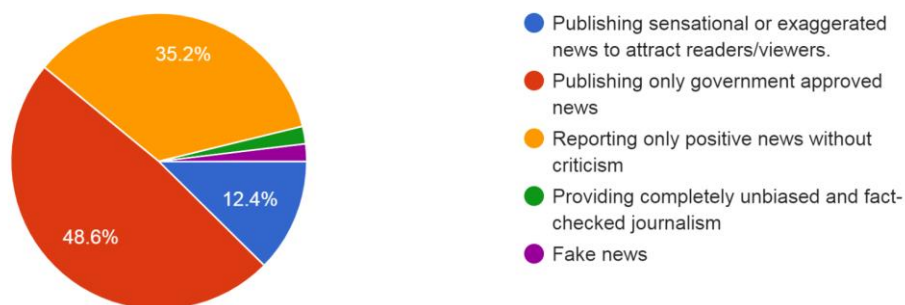
13. Should India have stricter laws to control yellow Journalism?

104 responses



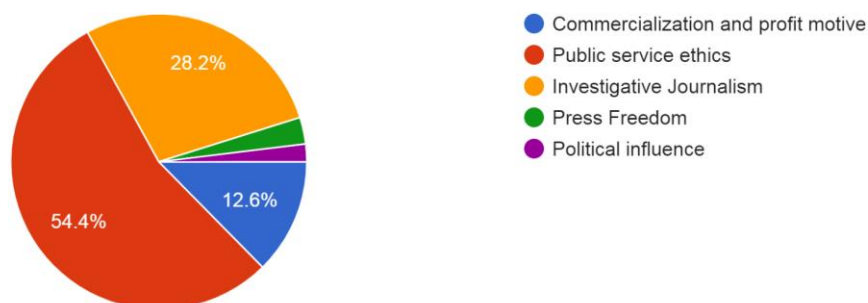
14. What is your understanding of yellow Journalism?

105 responses



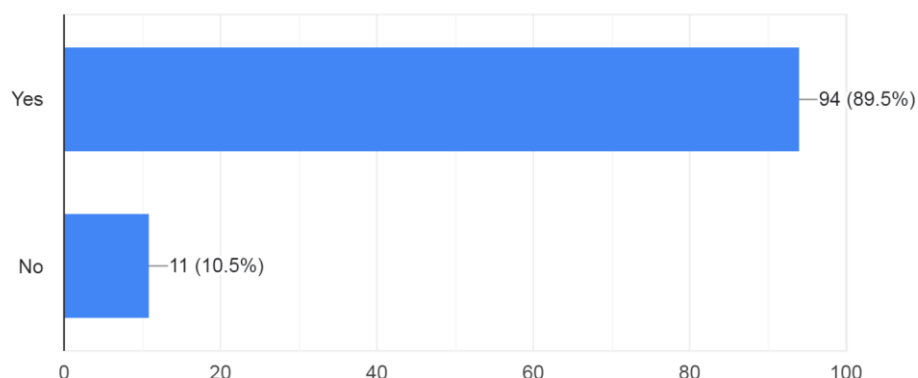
15. What factors promote yellow Journalism in India?

103 responses



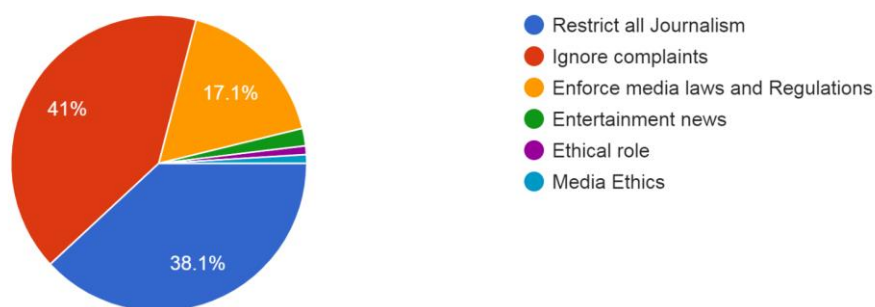
16.Are the current regulatory mechanisms adequate?

105 responses



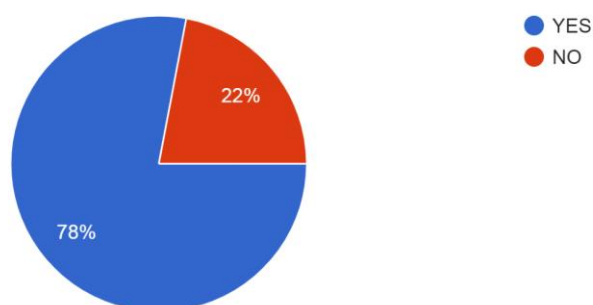
17.What role should the government and media bodies play?

105 responses

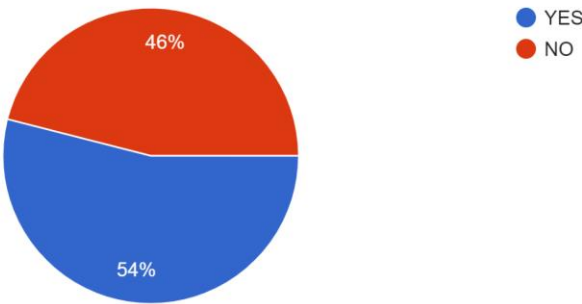


18.Do u concerned about misinformation?

109 responses



19.Do you aware of basic media Ethics ?
113 responses



Survey indicator		Illustrative percentage
Regularly consuming online news		70%
Frequently noticing sensational headlines		65%
Believing sensational news affects opinions		72%
Concerned about misinformation		78%
Aware of basic media ethics		54%

Survey indicator	Participants (n=100)	Percentage
Regularly consuming online news	70	70%
Frequently noticing sensational headlines	65	65%
Believe sensational news affects opinions	72	72%
Concerned about misinformation	78	78%
Aware of basic media ethics	54	54%

18. References and Current Online Sources

1. Press Council of India, Norms of Journalistic Conduct 2022 and official norms page.
2. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2026 – India (published 16 June 2026).
3. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, Digital News Report 2025 – India (published 17 June 2025).

4. Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, India Digital News Report (2019), for earlier empirical evidence concerning trust, mobile use and disinformation.
5. Academic books and journal articles on journalism, media ethics and sensationalism.
6. Scholarly research on misinformation, digital journalism and public opinion.
7. Newspaper and news-archive material selected according to a transparent sampling method.
8. Relevant official reports concerning journalism and digital media.

Official online sources:

9. Press Council of India: <https://www.presscouncil.nic.in/Norms.aspx>.
10. Reuters Institute – India, Digital News Report 2026: <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2026/india>.

