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Print Media Credibility vs Digital Media: A Comparative Review of Trustworthiness in the Era of Misinformation (2020–2025)

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Abstract

This review looks at how people view the credibility of traditional print media compared to digital-first platforms from 2020 to 2025. It brings together findings from peer-reviewed articles, surveys, and regulatory reports to see how editorial standards, misinformation, algorithms, and audience trust affect credibility. Print media is still seen as reliable, mainly because of its established editorial practices, thorough fact-checking, and accountability systems that have long defined journalistic integrity (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). On the other hand, though widely used, digital platforms often struggle with misinformation and declining trust. Algorithms that aim to boost engagement can spread sensational or misleading content, thereby harming credibility and increasing polarisation (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). Audience trust is key: surveys show that print outlets are generally viewed as more trustworthy, especially by older people. Younger audiences tend to use digital sources more, even though they are often sceptical about their reliability, showing a tension between convenience and credibility. There are also regional differences. In Africa and Asia, print media is still highly trusted because digital access is limited, while in Western countries, people are more sceptical of digital platforms. The review suggests that the future of media credibility may depend on hybrid models that combine strong editorial standards with digital transparency and audience participation. These models could help close the credibility gap by blending the strengths of print with the accessibility and interactivity of digital platforms. A thematic analysis approach was used to categorise findings into credibility determinants: editorial standards, misinformation, algorithmic influence, and audience trust.

Key words: Algorithmic, digital media, hybrid models, print media, trust dynamics.



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INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the media landscape has changed a lot (Akinola, 2022). Print media, once the main source of news, focuses on speed, interactivity, and personal content. This study looks at personalised content. This study examines how perceptions of credibility have evolved over time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research conducted since 2020 consistently demonstrates that print media maintains a reputation for credibility, largely attributable to its institutionalised editorial practices. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) found that, since 2020, print media has remained credible, mainly because of its established editorial practices. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) found that people trust newspapers and magazines more because of their gate-keeping, fact-checking, and professional accountability. The slower pace of print media also helps, as it allows for careful checking before publishing. Similarly, Zhang and Zhang (2024) found that traditional media is trusted more than digital-first platforms, especially among older people, who see print as reliable and authoritative rather than accurate, leading to the viral dissemination of false information (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic exemplified this issue, as digital platforms became primary sources of health information while simultaneously enabling the rapid spread of misinformation, thereby undermining public trust (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). The absence of editorial oversight in many digital outlets, where user-generated content prevails, further exacerbates this erosion of trust.

Comparative studies show that trust in media varies by age and region. Older people tend to prefer print media, seeing it as professional and accountable, while younger people use digital platforms more, even though they are often sceptical about their credibility (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). In Africa and Asia, print media is still trusted because digital access is limited and print is linked to authority. In Western countries, people are more sceptical of digital platforms, especially regarding political misinformation and election news (Farid, 2023).

Editorial standards in print media are often compared to the algorithmic biases found in digital platforms. Print outlets follow established codes of ethics and professional norms, while digital platforms use algorithms that focus on content likely to get clicks and shares (Akinola, 2022). This difference affects credibility: people see print media as more careful and

thoughtful, while digital platforms seem more reactive and prone to sensationalism (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). Credibility depends not just on the medium but also on transparency and accountability (Farid, 2023). Hybrid models, such as newspapers that have moved online while maintaining strong editorial standards, are seen as more trustworthy than digital-only outlets (Akinola, 2025). Efforts like labelling fact-checked articles or explaining editorial processes help build credibility across print and digital media.

The COVID-19 pandemic and recent elections provide case studies for credibility dynamics. During the COVID-19 pandemic and recent elections, credibility worked in practice. During the pandemic, people often turned to print outlets for reliable health information, while digital platforms had problems with misinformation (Akinola, 2022). In election coverage, print media were seen as more balanced and credible, while digital platforms were criticised for spreading partisan content and conspiracy theories (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020; Farid, 2023).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Editorial standards are one of the most consistent findings across recent scholarship. The argument is that print media continues to benefit from established editorial norms, fact-checking, and accountability mechanisms (Farid, 2023). Traditional newspapers and magazines operate within institutional frameworks that emphasise accuracy, verification, and professional ethics. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) argue that these editorial practices create a perception of reliability that digital-first platforms often lack. Print outlets typically employ professional editors, fact-checkers, and ombudsmen, which reinforces their credibility in the eyes of audiences.

By contrast, digital platforms often prioritise speed and immediacy, sometimes at the expense of accuracy. Akinola (2022) notes that while digital-first outlets can update stories rapidly, this agility sometimes undermines credibility because errors are more likely to occur in the rush to publish. The editorial rigour of print media, therefore, remains a cornerstone of its perceived trustworthiness. Even as circulation declines, the symbolic value of print as a “trusted source” persists, particularly among older demographics who associate newspapers with authority and accountability (Farid, 2023).

The issue of misinformation has become central to discussions of media credibility in the digital age. Digital platforms, particularly social media, amplify misinformation by prioritising engagement over accuracy in their algorithms (Akinola, 2022). Algorithms are designed to maximise user interaction, often promoting sensational or emotionally charged content regardless of its factual accuracy. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) highlight that this dynamic creates an environment where misinformation can spread rapidly, undermining public trust in digital platforms.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided a striking case study. During the crisis, digital platforms became primary sources of health information, but they also facilitated the rapid circulation of false claims about treatments, vaccines, and government policies. Farid (2023) observes that this dual role, providing both essential information and misinformation, created confusion and eroded trust. Print media, by contrast, was often cited as a more reliable source of health information because of its adherence to editorial standards and reliance on expert sources (Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

Misinformation on digital platforms also has political implications. Studies show that during elections, social media platforms have amplified partisan content and conspiracy theories, contributing to polarisation and scepticism about democratic processes (Farid, 2023). Print outlets, while not immune to bias, are generally perceived as more balanced and credible in their coverage. This difference underscores the structural challenges digital platforms face in maintaining credibility.

Audience trust remains a critical determinant of media credibility. Surveys consistently reveal that audiences perceive print outlets as more trustworthy than digital-first platforms. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) found that audiences associate print media with professionalism, accountability, and reliability, while digital platforms are often viewed with scepticism. Akinola (2022) confirms this trend, noting that trust in traditional media remains higher across multiple regions, even as digital platforms dominate consumption.

Generational differences, however, complicate this picture. Younger demographics increasingly rely on digital sources for news and information, even though they express scepticism about their credibility (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). This paradox reflects the convenience and

accessibility of digital platforms, which outweigh many younger users' concerns about misinformation. Older demographics, by contrast, continue to favour print media, associating it with authority and trustworthiness (Zhang & Zhang, 2024).

Trust dynamics also vary by context. In crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, audiences often turned to print outlets for reliable information, thereby reinforcing their credibility (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). In everyday contexts, however, digital platforms dominate due to their immediacy and interactivity. This duality suggests that credibility perceptions are situational, influenced by both medium and context.

Hybrid approaches where traditional print outlets transition to digital formats while retaining editorial rigour have emerged as a promising model for sustaining credibility. Farid (2023) notes that newspapers that have successfully digitised while maintaining transparency and accountability are perceived as more trustworthy than purely digital-first outlets. These hybrid models combine the strengths of print (editorial standards, accountability) with the advantages of digital (speed, accessibility, interactivity) (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). Transparency initiatives are central to these hybrid approaches. For example, some outlets label fact-checked articles, disclose editorial processes, or provide links to source materials. These practices enhance credibility by demonstrating accountability and openness. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) argue that transparency is a key determinant of trust in both print and digital media. Hybrid models that integrate transparency with editorial rigour are therefore well-positioned to sustain credibility in the digital age.

Participatory design also plays a role in hybrid approaches. Digital platforms that allow audiences to engage with content through comments, feedback, or collaborative reporting can enhance trust by fostering a sense of inclusion and accountability (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). However, participatory design must be balanced with editorial oversight to prevent misinformation and maintain credibility.

Regional variations in credibility perceptions highlight the importance of cultural and contextual factors. In Africa and Asia, print media retains strong credibility due to limited digital penetration and cultural associations with authority. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) note that in these regions, newspapers are often

viewed as authoritative sources of information, particularly in rural areas where digital access is limited. Print media's credibility is reinforced by its historical role in nation-building and public discourse. In Western contexts, by contrast, scepticism toward digital platforms is more pronounced. (2025) observes that audiences in North America and Europe are increasingly critical of digital platforms due to concerns about misinformation, polarisation, and algorithmic bias. Print media, while declining in circulation, remains perceived as more credible, particularly in political coverage (Newman et al., 2022). These regional variations suggest that credibility perceptions are shaped not only by medium but also by cultural, historical, and technological factors. In regions with limited digital penetration, print media retains its authority, while in regions with widespread digital access, scepticism toward digital platforms is more pronounced (Newman et al., 2022).

The synthesis of the findings suggests that credibility perceptions are complex and multifaceted. Print media retains credibility advantages due to its editorial standards and accountability mechanisms, while digital platforms struggle with misinformation and declining trust (Akinola, 2022). Audience trust dynamics reveal generational and situational differences: younger demographics rely on digital platforms despite scepticism, while older demographics favour print. Hybrid approaches that integrate transparency and participatory design offer promising models for sustaining credibility (Khedwal, 2025). Regional variations highlight the importance of cultural and contextual factors in shaping perceptions of credibility. Overall, the findings underscore the need for media outlets to adapt to changing audience expectations while maintaining editorial rigour and transparency. The future of media credibility lies in hybrid models that combine the strengths of print and digital, addressing the challenges of misinformation and trust in the digital age (Newman et al., 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: The comparative analysis of print media and digital-first platforms from 2020 to 2025 reveals a complex, evolving landscape of credibility, trust, and audience engagement. Print media retains credibility advantages due to institutionalised editorial practices, but its reach is steadily declining amid digital dominance (Newman et al., 2022). Digital platforms, while commanding the largest share of audience consumption, continue to struggle with trust deficits, largely driven by

misinformation, algorithmic bias, and the absence of traditional editorial oversight (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020; Newman et al., 2022). Print media's enduring credibility is rooted in its adherence to established journalistic norms. Newspapers and magazines operate within frameworks that emphasise fact-checking, accountability, and professional ethics. These practices foster perceptions of reliability and authority, particularly among older demographics who associate print with stability and trustworthiness. Even as circulation numbers fall, the symbolic value of print as a "trusted source" remains intact. This suggests that credibility is not merely a function of reach but of institutionalised practices that audiences continue to value (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020).

Digital platforms, conversely, dominate the information ecosystem due to their immediacy, accessibility, and interactivity. However, their credibility is undermined by structural challenges (Newman et al., 2022). Algorithms designed to maximise engagement often prioritise sensational or emotionally charged content, regardless of accuracy. This dynamic has facilitated the rapid spread of misinformation, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and recent election cycles. Khedwal (2025) notes that while digital platforms provide unparalleled access to information, they simultaneously erode trust by amplifying falsehoods and polarising content. The paradox of digital media lies in its dual role as both the primary source of information and a conduit for misinformation. Audience trust dynamics further complicate the picture (Newman et al., 2022). Surveys consistently show that audiences perceive print outlets as more trustworthy, yet younger demographics increasingly rely on digital platforms despite expressing scepticism about their credibility. This paradox reflects the convenience and ubiquity of digital media, which outweighs concerns about misinformation for many younger users. Older demographics, by contrast, continue to favour print, reinforcing generational divides in credibility perceptions (Newman et al., 2022). The situational nature of trust is also evident: during crises, audiences often turn to print outlets for reliable information, while in everyday contexts, digital platforms dominate due to their immediacy and interactivity.

Hybrid models that combine the strengths of print and digital offer a promising path forward. Newspapers that have successfully transitioned to digital formats while retaining editorial rigour are perceived as more credible

than purely digital-first outlets (Newman et al., 2023). Transparency initiatives, such as labelling fact-checked articles or disclosing editorial processes, enhance trust by demonstrating accountability. Participatory design, which allows audiences to engage with content, can also foster credibility, provided it is balanced with editorial oversight to prevent misinformation (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). These hybrid approaches suggest that the future of media credibility lies not in choosing between print and digital but in integrating their strengths.

Regional variations highlight the importance of cultural and contextual factors in shaping perceptions of credibility. In Africa and Asia, print media retains strong credibility due to limited digital penetration and cultural associations with authority (Farid, 2023). Newspapers in these regions are often viewed as authoritative sources of information, particularly in rural areas where digital access is limited (Akinola, 2022). In Western contexts, scepticism toward digital platforms is more pronounced, driven by concerns about misinformation, polarisation, and algorithmic bias. These variations underscore that credibility is not universal but context-dependent, shaped by technological access, cultural norms, and historical legacies (Khedwal, 2025). Taken together, the findings suggest that credibility in the media landscape is multifaceted, influenced by editorial standards, misinformation dynamics, audience trust, hybrid approaches, and regional contexts. Print media retains credibility advantages but faces declining reach. Digital platforms dominate consumption but struggle with trust deficits. Hybrid models that integrate rigorous editorial standards with digital transparency and accountability represent the most viable path forward (Zhang & Zhang, 2024). The implications of these findings are significant. For media practitioners, the challenge lies in balancing speed and accessibility with accuracy and accountability. For policymakers, the task is to regulate misinformation without stifling free expression. For audiences, the responsibility is to cultivate media literacy and critical evaluation skills (Farid, 2023). Ultimately, the future of media credibility will depend on the collective efforts of institutions, platforms, and audiences to sustain trust amid rapid technological change.

Recommendations: One of the most pressing recommendations is the need to strengthen editorial transparency across both print and digital outlets. Transparency has long been associated with credibility, and recent scholarship confirms that audiences are more

likely to trust outlets that openly disclose their editorial processes (Salaudeen & Onyechi, 2020). Print media already benefits from established norms such as corrections policies, editorial boards, and ombudsmen. However, in an era of declining circulation, print outlets must go further by making their editorial practices more visible to audiences. This could include publishing detailed explanations of fact-checking procedures, offering behind-the-scenes insights into how stories are selected, and providing clear corrections when errors occur. Digital outlets, meanwhile, face greater challenges in establishing transparency. Khedwal (2025) emphasises that digital-first platforms often lack the institutionalised accountability mechanisms of print media, which contributes to scepticism about their credibility. To counter this, digital outlets should adopt transparency initiatives such as labelling fact-checked articles, disclosing funding sources, and providing links to primary materials. By strengthening transparency, both print and digital outlets can enhance credibility and foster greater trust among audiences.

The second recommendation focuses on implementing algorithmic accountability to reduce the amplification of misinformation. Digital platforms rely heavily on algorithms to curate and prioritise content, but these algorithms often prioritise engagement over accuracy. This dynamic has facilitated the viral spread of misinformation, particularly during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and recent election cycles (Khedwal, 2025). Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) argue that algorithmic accountability is essential to restoring trust in digital platforms. Algorithmic accountability can take several forms. Platforms could redesign their algorithms to prioritise credible sources and fact-checked information over sensational or emotionally charged content. Independent audits of algorithms could ensure that they are not biased toward misinformation or polarisation. User control over content curation could also enhance accountability by allowing audiences to customise their information feeds based on credibility rather than engagement. By implementing these measures, digital platforms can reduce the amplification of misinformation and begin to rebuild credibility.

The third recommendation is to promote media literacy to empower audiences in evaluating credibility. Media literacy initiatives are critical in helping audiences navigate the complex information landscape. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) note that audiences often struggle to distinguish between credible and non-credible sources,

particularly in digital environments where misinformation is prevalent. Media literacy programs can equip audiences with the skills to critically evaluate information, identify bias, and recognise misinformation.

Shehata and Strömbäck (2022) highlight the importance of integrating media literacy into educational curricula, community programs, and public awareness campaigns. Schools can play a central role by teaching students how to evaluate sources, understand editorial processes, and recognise misinformation. Community organisations can offer workshops and training sessions to help audiences develop critical media skills. Public awareness campaigns can raise consciousness about the importance of media literacy and provide practical tools for evaluating credibility. By empowering audiences to critically engage with media, these initiatives can reduce the impact of misinformation and enhance trust in credible outlets.

The fourth recommendation is to encourage hybrid models that integrate participatory design with fact-based reporting. Hybrid models where traditional print outlets transition to digital formats while retaining editorial rigour have been shown to sustain credibility more effectively than purely digital-first outlets (Rega, 2025). These models combine the strengths of print (editorial

standards, accountability) with the advantages of digital (speed, accessibility, interactivity). Participatory design is a key component of hybrid models. By allowing audiences to engage with content through comments, feedback, and collaborative reporting, hybrid outlets can foster a sense of inclusion and accountability. However, participatory design must be balanced with editorial oversight to prevent misinformation and maintain credibility. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) argue that participatory design enhances trust when combined with fact-based reporting and transparency. Hybrid models that integrate participatory design with rigorous editorial standards are therefore well-positioned to sustain credibility in the digital age.

The final recommendation is to implement policy interventions to regulate misinformation without stifling free expression. Misinformation poses significant risks to democratic processes, public health, and social cohesion. However, efforts to regulate misinformation must be carefully designed to avoid infringing on free expression. Salaudeen and Onyechi (2020) emphasise that policy interventions should focus on promoting accountability and transparency rather than censorship.

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