

Building trust in media content: An analysis

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Abstract:

In recent years, there has been a significant shift in the way audiences consume news, with a growing reliance on social media platforms and digital outlets. Social media not only disseminates news but also shapes public discourse, often bypassing traditional journalistic standards. In response, mainstream media organizations have increasingly transitioned from traditional formats to digital platforms to remain relevant and accessible. However, despite this transformation, mainstream media faces growing challenges from social media outlets, many of which do not adhere to established journalistic ethics and values. This shift has raised serious concerns about the reliability and trustworthiness of news content. The widespread influence of social media has led to the rapid spread of fake news, misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, undermining public trust in both social and traditional media. Additionally, some mainstream media outlets have altered their reporting in reaction to social media pressure, further complicating the public's ability to access credible information. This study explores the comparative trust levels between mainstream media and social media among audiences. Findings indicate that a majority of audiences not only obtain news from social media but also place substantial trust in it, regardless of content credibility. The study

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concludes that in order to ensure the dissemination of accurate and ethical news, social media platforms must be effectively monitored, regulated, and held to journalistic standards.

Keywords: *Mainstream media, social media, trust, audience, digital platform, media content*

Introduction:

Mainstream media are the traditional or established broadcasting or publishing outlets. This term is used to refer collectively to the various large news media that influence many people. The term is used to contrast with alternative or social media. Social media are the new media platforms. According to American Psychological Association (APA), social media are forms of digital communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages and other content. Social media use is not inherently beneficial or harmful. Social media platforms offer powerful opportunities for socialization and connection, but may also have some negative effects, including mis- and disinformation, hate speech, and cyberbullying.

There is a growing public confusion about what constitutes mainstream media. A major question is whether traditional media—such as television, radio and newspapers—still qualifies as mainstream, given its declining audience, or of social, with its millions of users and followers, has taken over the role. Social media platforms are increasingly influencing public opinion, and, in many ways, limiting the reach and impact of traditional mainstream media.

Leading media editors and senior journalists are also working on social media after resigning from the traditional media. So, social media is also being more attractive and powerful platform than traditional media. Chomsky (1997) defines mainstream media as an elite media. There is another sector of the media, the elite media, sometimes called the agenda-setting media because they are

the ones with the big resources, they set the framework in which everyone else operates (Chomsky, 1997).

When mainstream media posts any news, flood of negative comments flows on the virtual world. This type of attack has created a type of censorship to media. That's why mainstream media are unable to write freely on the social issues. So, this article has made a comparative study about social media and mainstream media contents. Three national mainstream media and three popular social media platforms have been chosen for the analysis. One news story has been selected from each media and the responses on it from audience studied. Content and responses have been analyzed. It has been analyzed from different perspectives like how many comments are positive and negative, level of trust, reasons of comments and its impact on further media contents. It has prepared a guideline for mainstream media and emerging social media platforms. Findings, conclusions and recommendations have provided fruitful feedback to mainstream media and social media for further journey. It is a research based investigative article where arguments, evidences and logical discussions have taken place.

This research is based on the Cognitive Theory of Trust. Claire Hill and Erin O'Hara O'Connor have defined the theory of cognitive trust. According to them, social gains can be realized by enacting regulatory measures that provide incentives for either trust-enhancing or trust-decreasing behaviors. Mainstream media and social media must gain trust among audience through their trustworthy contents. But their contents are sometimes fake, misinformation, disinformation and hate speech. So, this study has analyzed deeply about the trustworthiness of contents created by the media. This article is mainly based on qualitative research method. Some samples have been collected for quantitative analysis. Data has been collected through sample survey. This is the primary data. Then secondary data has also been used in the research. This article has mainly followed these methods-- sample survey: library

research. This article has covered the selected media outlets and its selected contents. Three mainstream media and three social media have been chosen for the analysis. One news content has been studied from each media for its analysis. Mainly news content and response of the audience are the focus area of this article. Most of the arguments and discussions are based on secondary data.

Literature review

The use of social media is increasing day by day. According to Statcounter, a website which counts the users of social media regularly, 89.8 percent people are using Facebook in Nepal now. Nepal Social Media Users Survey 2021 completed by Centre for Media Research Nepal has found that 93.5 percent users of respondents in the research have account on Facebook whereas 91 percent have Twitter account. Instagram is the third popular social media platform among Nepalis with 78.9 percent having an account on it, and 70.4 percent have account on YouTube. Those having account on LinkedIn were 54.7 percent and 49.5 percent have account on TikTok.

Survey report mentions that mobile phone is the most used device to access social media. 97 percent people are using mobile phones. For 25.5 percent of them, mobile phone is the only device that they use to access social media, whereas others also use other devices along with mobile to access social media. 73 percent access social media from desktop or laptop computer and around 14.5 percent also use tablet to access social media. Two percent use only desktop or laptop computers to access social media (Acharya, 2022).

According to report, 39 percent spend between three to six hours daily on social media. About 5.7 percent use it less than one hour a day whereas 13.1 percent said they are on social media for more than six hours a day. Almost 2 in 5 users use social media outside office hours, during morning and/or evening and/or night whereas 3.7 percent only use social media during office hours. Survey finds that

more than two-third of the respondents post about social issues on social media whereas 29.6 percent say they post anything they find okay to post. 26.9 percent post political issues and those posting interesting things is almost one-fourth. Then it is followed by issues related to own's profession (23.9%), sports (19.2%), entertainment (18.4%), issues of own community (16.4%), media (16.2%) and economy (12.4%).

A few post about science and technology, and environment. Other topics mentioned include philosophy, art, literature and books, gender and feminism, movies, management and sanitation. Some users use the platform only to read others' posts (Acharya, 2022). Spending leisure time and receiving information and news are the top two reasons for using social media for Nepali users. More than 92% of users use social media for those two reasons. 90.5 percent of Nepalis use social media to network with friends, while 87.9 percent use social media to express their feelings and opinions. Nearly similar number of people, 87.1 percent, use to understand public opinions. Almost 87 percent use social media for interesting gossips and 81 percent use it for professional works. More than 78 percent said that they use it to ask questions (Acharya, 2022).

Acharya (2025) concludes that majority of social media users (83.1%) believe that social media is a strong medium of communication. Only 7.7 percent of users believe that social media is not a strong medium of communication. A huge majority of users (88.3%) believe that the impact of social media is growing in Nepali society. More than 65.5 percent of Nepali social media users think many users are using social media in wrong ways. Majority of Nepali social media users (86.8%) said they are concerned about the fake news, misinformation, and disinformation in online. Most of the respondents, 91.8 percent of them, have seen misinformation in online. Facebook is the platform where most Nepali users see misinformation as 79.8 percent of respondents who saw misinformation said they saw it on the social networking site (Acharya, 2022). Survey has pointed

out that 23.3 percent of those saw misinformation only on Facebook and not on other platforms. YouTube, the video streaming site, was the platform where 48.1 percent saw misinformation, whereas 36.3 percent saw misinformation on Twitter and 30.3 percent saw it on websites (Acharya, 2022).

According to the survey report, more than two-third (75.9%) social media users in Nepal believe that misinformation is already a problem to our society and politics. Most social media users put media as the most responsible agency to tackle misinformation in online. About 49 percent of all respondents keep media on most responsible side whereas the 47 percent take government on most responsible side. About 44 percent considered users as responsible and equal number of respondents considered social media platforms as responsible. 42.1 percent of the respondents believe fact-checkers are responsible to tackle misinformation in online (Acharya, 2022). Social media is gradually minimizing the mainstream media. The impact of mainstream media is declining globally in this age of digital technology. It is not the obstruction of technologies but the mainstream media themselves that detach them from common people. They obstruct the role of the "Fourth Estate" in a society (Sharma, 2025).

Sharma (2025) writes that mainstream media did not change them based on changing context in society. They have ignored the role of representing the voice of common people and they have not prepared to deal with the aggressive posture of social and online media. The misuse of social and online media has increased exponentially. Misuse of social and online media poses a threat to the peace, order, and harmony of society. So the initiative of the government aiming to make social and online media socially responsible is certainly a positive effort. Relevant legal provisions to regulate social and online media are inevitable (Sharma, 2025). In this way, there are many researches about use of social media but there is no research about the trustworthy content in mainstream and social media. There is no comparative study about the contents

of mainstream and social media. So, this research is important for the analysis of trust level of audience on the media contents. Most of the public are depending on social media for getting information but they are misguided by the contents in them. It is justifiable to make analysis about the trustworthiness of media contents on social media platforms.

Objectives

The objectives of this article are as follows;

- To find out the response of audience towards mainstream media and social media.
- To explore the trust level of audience towards mainstream media and social media contents.
- To analyze the media trends and crowding influence in media.

Finding and analysis

After reviewing the literature about mainstream and social media, it has been clear that there is no comparative study about mainstream and social media contents from the perspective of cognitive theory of trust. The cognitive theory of trust emphasizes that trust is a belief in another's reliability, competence, and dependability, formed through conscious deliberation, assessment of characteristics, and past experiences, rather than solely emotion or instinct.

It focuses on rational evaluation, where trust is built on objective evidence and a calculated willingness to be vulnerable, allowing for the coexistence of trust and distrust and a nuanced understanding of human interaction in various contexts, from personal relationships to interactions with technology. Hill and O'Connor (2006) are the main writers to explain the cognitive theory of trust. They have analyzed the theory as fundamental and worthy of more serious exploration: To what extent do legal rules, cases, and law enforcement efforts enhance or detract from the trust present in relationships? How can a better understanding of trust help us devise tools to improve human social and economic interactions?

Other writers have also analyzed this theory from different aspects. Castelfranchi & Falcone (2011) define trust both as a mental state and as a social attitude and relation. They analyze the more complex forms of social trust, based on a theory of mind and in particular on morality, reputation and disposition, and authority. So, trust is an important issue for personal and social relation. It is significant in professional matters too. Media needs more trust from the consumers. Media can exist only by its trustworthy contents. We can't ignore false news and information in the media. We need factual news wherever it is disseminated. Many Nepali rely on social media as their primary source of information, with platforms like Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube becoming popular choices (Acharya, 2025). There is also widespread convergence of traditional media and social media where traditional media utilizes social media to reach audience.

Acharya (2025) analyses that traditional mediums such as radio, television, and newspapers are still used for information consumption, but social media has become the primary medium for disseminating, receiving and discoursing information. In Nepal, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube dominate as the most widely used social media platforms. In the last five years, with the increasing pace of social media, the mainstream media has faced an existential threat in Nepal. In every national event or accident, social media now leads in all spheres like disseminating information, discussion, depiction, speedy flow, and presentation. There is also a trend among media professionals to leave mainstream media and open up or work in social and online media (Sharma, 2025).

Sharma (2025) concludes that one reality of the ground and media practice is that trust, scope, influence, and impact of mainstream media are at a very low pace and also in a decreasing way. It is the mainstream media themselves who forget their basic foundation, norms, and structural basis. They have just become the propaganda machines of the elite groups. The media owner just watched for the illegal benefits, even though sometimes they sabotage others to

gain something or otherwise threaten them to write against their personal and institutional lives.

Nepal Media Survey 2024 shows that 62 percent audience get news through Facebook, 44.4 percent through YouTube, 23.6 percent radio, 21.3 percent television, 11.8 percent online and 5.3 percent newspaper or magazine. This survey explores the decreasing popularity of traditional media and increasing of social media. Acharya & Chapagain (2025) writes that the younger, better educated are leading this digital shift. For example, 83.3% of respondents with higher education consume news digitally, compared to just 13.1% of illiterate respondents. So young generation is spending time with social media. They rely on social media for information. That's why social media contents must be trustworthy to guide the youths in right way.

The declining relevance of traditional media in some regions stems from their limited ability to adapt to the fast-paced, on-demand consumption habits that digital platforms readily fulfill. This shift underscores the growing importance of technological access and user-centric content in shaping media preferences (Acharya & Chapagain, 2025). The Nepal Media Survey 2024 shows a media landscape in which traditional and digital media coexist. While trust in media remains relatively strong, significant gaps in representation and accessibility persist across regions, age groups, and educational levels. Although Facebook is not a media platform in itself, the tendency to perceive posts on Facebook as 'news', or view content shared by traditional media on the site as originating from Facebook likely contributes to this perception (Acharya & Chapagain, 2025). According to that report only 17.2 percent completely trust on mainstream media.

Journalists are conscious of their responsibility towards society and do post factual information on social media however they sometimes make mix-ups of news and opinion. Some journalists post sensational information to increase their viewership but that

has decreased their credibility (Paudel, 2022). Social media has emerged as a powerful medium, surpassing traditional media in terms of influence and reach. Social media increasingly plays a stronger role in agenda-setting, while traditional media's ability to shape opinions and facilitate debates is diminishing. With its fast-paced dissemination, affordability, and visible impact, social media has overtaken traditional media in setting the agenda (Dahal, 2023).

Dahal(2023) concludes that unrestricted production of content on social media poses risks, as it lacks an editing process. Traditional media, now relying on social media faces intensified competition. To remain relevant and avoid weakening, news media must invest in content research and adapt to changing usage patterns. Eveleth & others (2024) discuss that users increasingly turn to social media as a source for news and other information, greater understanding is needed about the factors that affect their perceptions of the social media sites, where they seek information.

Content analysis from the selected media

After analyzing the secondary data, analysis of media contents has been completed through primary data collected from sample survey. Setopati online, Onlinekhabaronline and ekantipur online have been selected for the study from the mainstream media. One news has been analyzed from each media. These media have been selected on the basis of nature, strength and its readership. Setopati is the latest emerging and popular digital media which presents contents digitally and exercise the new media in Nepal.

Onlinekhabar is the popular and leading online portal of Nepal which is following the traditional way of online and new trends of digital platforms too. *Kantipur* is the big media house and regularly exercising print, radio, television, online and social media pages for long time. A video news has been selected for the study about former president Bidya Devi Bhandari from Setopati online in which she has commented about the economy of Nepal. She has expressed

her views that the economy of Nepal is not standing by legs, rather standing by head.

This news has been posted in Setopation 21 August, 2025. This was viewed by 2 lakh 98 thousand audience, shared by 2 hundred 98 and commented by 2 thousand 1 hundred in two days. After the observation of 2 thousand 1 hundred comments, it was found that 98 percent comments are negative. Some of the comments are very rude, vulgar and hateful. Another news was selected about the movement of teachers against education bill from Onlinekhabar. News was posted on 22 August, 2025. There were 57 comments in two days. Among them, only three comments were positive, 54 comments were negative.

Then a news about Hariprasad Kandel, leader of Rastriya Swatantra Party who was arrested from Chitwan in the fake certificate case, was chosen from eKantipur online. This news was posted on 22 August, 2025. There were 1 hundred 35 comments in two days. Among them, 65 percent comments were against Kantipur Media Group, 20 percent were in favor of the news and 15 percent were neutral who were suggesting more for the incident and news coverage.

Then popular social media pages were studied. Routine of Nepal Banda, Meme Nepal Facebook pages and Herne Katha YouTube channel were selected for the study. Two Facebook pages were chosen on the basis of followers and popularity and Herne Katha YouTube channel on the basis of its journalistic content for long time. Routine of Nepal Banda is a popular social media page. It has 4.6 million followers and 3.9 million likes. There is a news about Miss Nepal Finale. News was posted on 23 August, 2025. There are 7 hundred 39 comments within 14 hours. Most of the comments are ridiculous and negative towards contestants of the competition. 97 percent comments are negative.

Another news was studied in another popular social media page Meme Nepal. It has 1.6 million followers and 1.2 million likes. It has posted a news on 23 August, 2025 about meeting of Prime Minister

KP Sharma Oli with mother and sister of Bipin Joshi, who is contactless in Israel for a long time. There were 36 comments within 13 hours.98 percent comments were negative. Comments were related to criticizing prime minister.Then a video documentary was studied posted in Herne Katha, a YouTube channelwith 1.6 million subscribers. There was posted a video report titled *The Lost Years* about PrakashBhujel, a person from Bhojpur district, Nepal, reunited with his family after 35 years. This video was posted on 24 August, 2024. It has 12 millionviews and 56 thousand comments. Most of the comments are positive on it.99 percent comments are positive and inspiring the documentary presenter, BidhyaChapagain. Commentators are appreciatingChapagain for her hard work, creative mind and artistic presentation. This content shows that there are not only negative comments in the social media page. It depends on content too. If social media page posts good stories, there is of coursegood response too.

The response of audience on the contents of mainstream media is presented in this figure.

Figure 1: Response of audience on thecontent of mainstream media.

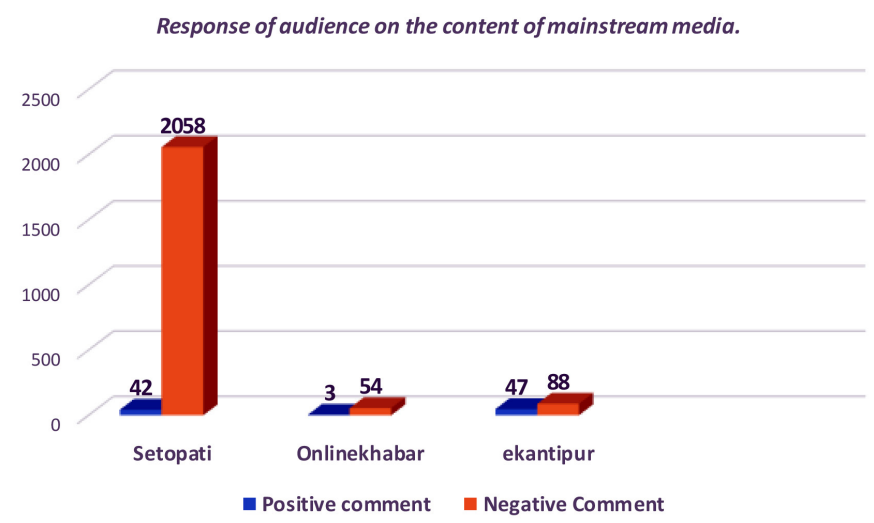


Figure 2 : Percentage of positive and negative responses of audience on the content of mainstream media.

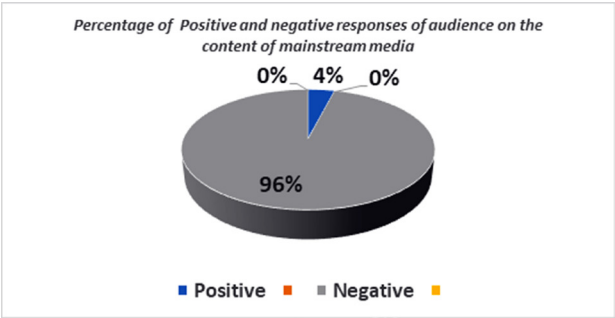


Figure 3: Response of audience on the content of social media.

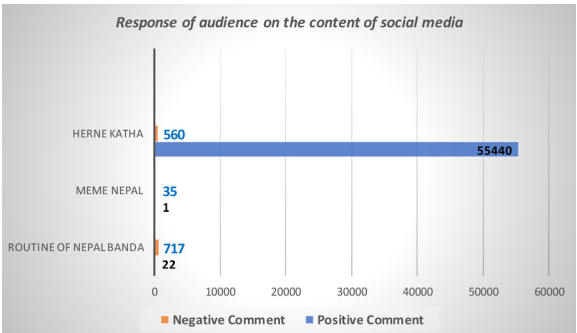
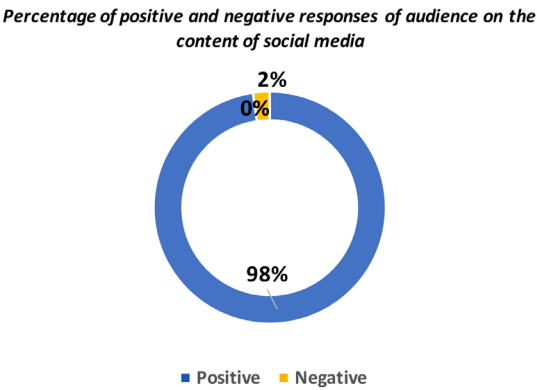


Figure 4: Percentage of positive and negative responses of audience on the content of social media.



These figures show that flow of public is in social media. They get information from social media. Majority of the comments are negative in any news except the content of Herne Katha. It doesn't matter whether the content is in mainstream media or social media, the response is negative on the content. Public are biased towards news content. They don't focus on the matter but run after the comment. So, negative mindset is developing among consumers of social media. It seems that they are enjoying the negative comments. We shouldn't forget another side of public mindset. They are positive about constructive and creative news content. Most of the mainstream and social media post the general news about regular political event, current affairs and entertainment. Audience need investigative, creative and constructive content from the media. Social and humanitarian issues are getting positive comments. Political issues seem to be most hateful content for the audience. Current affairs are also found in any social media pages. So mainstream media and professional social media must invest in constructive content production for good response of the audience.

Conclusion

In the digital age, most audiences rely heavily on digital platforms for news and information. However, trust remains a significant issue, as not all content on social media is factual. Many posts spread fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. In contrast, mainstream media remains a more authentic and reliable source of factual news stories. Despite this, the audience has largely shifted to digital and social media platforms. Therefore, mainstream media must adapt to the digital environment and actively work to regain public trust in the context of news dissemination. Digital platforms, which tend to dominate among urban and younger audiences, often contribute to a more positive perception of media responsiveness to public concerns. In contrast, traditional mainstream media, more commonly used by older and rural populations, may not foster the same level of engagement or trust. Nepal's traditional press needs

to strike a balance between covering national issues and producing relevant, local, and socially meaningful content to build lasting trust with its audience. Media content must be constructive, creative, and research-based. Audiences now expect higher effort and quality in content creation, and meeting these expectations can significantly improve public trust. Media trends should align with public interests to remain relevant and credible. Additionally, social media content must be regulated and monitored by the government to ensure the distribution of trustworthy information. Misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech must be controlled through strict laws and their effective implementation. This will serve the public's right to authentic news. Ultimately, trust is the most powerful asset of the media. Earning and maintaining public trust is fundamental to the responsible dissemination of information.

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