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Trust in Conflict: Public Relations Professionals, Journalists, and Social Media in the Contemporary Indian Media Ecosystem

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Abstract:
Trust is the currency for three relationships that now shape India's news landscape — between public relations (PR) professionals and journalists, between news institutions and the platforms that audiences increasingly rely on and between the state and press that it regulates and relies on. The paper explores how these relationships have been affected in the present Indian media landscape. Using a documentary, secondary-data design, it triangulates the Reuters Institute Digital News Reports (2025, 2026), the RSF World Press Freedom Index (2025, 2026), Edelman Trust Barometer releases, DataReportal and Comscore platform estimates, PRCAI's SPRINT 2026 study, and India's regulatory instruments. Trust in news among surveyed Indians fell from 43 to 39 per cent between 2025 and 2026, while 58 per cent use YouTube and 56 per cent use WhatsApp for news and 52 per cent avoid news; legacy print brands retain the highest brand trust. India's press freedom rank slipped from 151 to 157, even as the PR industry grew 11 per cent to ₹3,230 crore and increasingly reports that paid content passed off as earned media weakens audience trust. The paper proposes a three-arena model of trust in conflict and recommends disclosure norms, newsroom protocols, creator accountability, and rights-respecting regulation.

Keywords: Trust; public relations; journalism; social media; media ecosystem; press freedom; misinformation; India.

1. Introduction

Few words are invoked as often, and defined as loosely, as trust in discussions of Indian media. Editors speak of the readers' trust, communication consultants of stakeholder trust, regulators of public confidence in the information citizens receive, and platforms of "trust and safety". Each is describing the same scarce resource from a different seat. The things that make it possible for an audience to take action on a report without examining it, for a journalist to accept a source without auditing it, and for a client to pay for a reputation without seeing it are all based on trust. In the absence of trust, all of these transactions slow down, become more expensive, and are more likely to be a battle.

There has been a tremendous transformation in India's information environment. As per DataReportal, there were 806 million internet users and 491 million social media user identities in January 2025 (Kemp, 2025), while according to FICCI–EY, in its estimate of the social media user base, it is estimated to be at

500 million in 2025, with 78 per cent using social media platforms solely on mobile devices (Storyboard18, 2026). 52 per cent of those who responded to the Reuters Institute's Digital News Report 2026 say they sometimes or often avoid the news; 58 per cent use YouTube for news and 56 per cent use WhatsApp. News is no longer something audiences seek; it's something that arrives at them via feeds, forwards, creators, and more, increasingly, via AI-powered chatbots.

This paper suggests that it is preferable to think of the impact on trust as a battle being waged in three arenas: The first is professional – PR people and journalists rely on one another for information and access, but distrust one another's motives. The second is infrastructural: both news organisations and PR firms are today communicating with audiences via platforms and creators with non-editorial and/or non-corporate motives. The third is regulatory, as the state, via the Information Technology (IT) Rules, the Digital Personal Data Protection (DPDP) regime and the courts, is reshaping the parameters of all other players. When one fails to trust another, it trickles down to the others, and eventually to the audience, who all rely on these three.

The analysis is organised around three research questions. RQ1: What are the changes in the habits of news consumption and trust among the audience in India from 2025 to 2026, and what are the implications for the credibility of journalists and PR professionals? RQ2: What are the impacts of structural conditions (such as the level of press freedom and the economic situation of the PR industry) on the PR–journalist relationship? RQ3: What do the recent regulatory changes mean for trust in the three arenas?

The paper brings together the latest indicators (for the most part from 2025 and 2026) into a single comparative picture, provides a three-arena model that links literatures that are typically treated separately, and draws out recommendations for practitioners, newsrooms, platforms, and regulators. The framework is developed in Section 2, the method in Section 3, the evidence in Section 4, the discussion in Section 5, the implications in Section 6, the limitations in Section 7, and the conclusions in Section 8.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Trust as a relational construct

In organisational research, the most popular definition of trust is the willingness to be vulnerable to another party, the expectation that the party will act in a way important to the trustor, and despite the lack of monitoring or control over the party (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995). According to the authors, three antecedents of perceived trustworthiness exist: ability (competence in the area of trust), benevolence (goodwill toward the trustee), and integrity (conformity with principles the trustor considers acceptable). The model comes in handy here, as it can be applied symmetrically: audiences evaluate journalists, PR practitioners, and creators on the same three dimensions, and journalists and PR practitioners do the same with each other.

There is a second lexicon of public relations scholarship. There's a second vocabulary to public relations scholarship. Hon and Grunig (1999) suggested that trust, control, mutuality, commitment, and satisfaction be used to measure organisation–public relationships, and that trust consists of three parts: integrity, dependability, and competence. This framing is a focus on the outcome – the trust. This framing focuses on the product – the trust. It is also, however, an input: journalists not believing the source, nor audiences the message. Trust is thus a process at each link in the chain from organisation through practitioner to journalist and thus to audience.

2.2 The PR–journalist relationship: dependence without affection

The traditional story of the relationship is that of a subscribed dependency. Gandy (1982) termed PR material an "information subsidy": it is something whose production is borne by the source and reduces the cost of news production for newsrooms that are resource-constrained. Grunig and Hunt's (1984) public relations models differentiate public relations practice that seeks publicity from that which seeks mutual understanding; the extent to which a practitioner is truthful with the journalists depends on the model used. Empirical research in a number of countries reveals that journalists are aware of the extent to which they depend on PR materials, and that they consider practitioners to have poor intentions and ethics. The comparative survey results in Malaysia also revealed that PR practitioners were more optimistic than journalists on the symbiotic relationship and the value of the information they provide (Kaur & Shaari, 2006): both sides overestimate the contribution of each other.

The Indian literature is less voluminous, but uniform. Through an interview study of 13 corporate communication managers and 10 journalists in Chennai, Varghese and Abdul Rahman (2014) report on a culture where corporate media relations were limited to denial and low visibility, which has now shifted to greater proactive communication. The other half of the picture is given by the practitioner commentary. Cherian (2010), who served on the Press Council of India sub-committee investigating paid news, suggested that there was a close relationship between journalists and PR practitioners, that PR practitioners have become gatekeepers to journalists' information, and that the relationship should be professional and objective. Kohli-Khandekar (2011) noted that many media firms do not write the "dos and don'ts" of source relations in writing and that sometimes well-written press releases are passed on as news with editors simply taking a pass. An institutional form of the problem came with the paid-news inquiry by the Press Council of India (2010), when payment becomes the deciding factor about what is news and what isn't, and the line between the two blurs; the audience cannot tell which is news and which is PR.

2.3 Platforms, creators, and information disorder

A second body of literature is the one relating to the context in which both professions work today. Wardle and Derakhshan (2017) coined the term information disorder to describe misinformation (false but not harmful), disinformation (false and harmful), and malinformation (true and harmful). The concept of "fake news" is even more complicated because Tandoc et al. (2018) identified at least six phenomena it can be applied to, ranging from satire to propaganda. As authoritative institutions such as the press have eroded, disinformation has emerged as a new order, with attention-grabbing platforms incentivizing content regardless of origin, says Bennett and Livingston (2018). For India, Banaji et al. (2019) noted that WhatsApp's closed, encrypted groups are used to spread rumours which are accepted on the basis of trust in the sender rather than the source, due to the family and community connections.

For the present purpose, these dynamics are important for the reason that they alter the audience's trust in who. If the message comes from a known contact or a favourite creator, it's more important that the creator is credible than that the newsroom or PR agency is. Creators, meanwhile, are in a liminal space: they can be a source of critique, but their commercial arrangements with brands are often not made public, putting them in the shoes of PR and journalism.

2.4 State and the press

Hallin and Mancini (2004) theorized that the level of political parallelism in media systems and the amount of state intervention into them influence professional norms and the public's confidence in them and in the

quality of their service. The press in India is constitutionally guaranteed under Article 19(1)(a) and is formally free, but has been influenced by concentrated ownership, state advertising, and the emerging field of digital regulation.

2.5 Model: Trust in conflict

The paper suggests that trust in the Indian media is a contested concept in three interconnected arenas (Figure 1). Arena A (professional) is for professionals in PR and journalists. Arena B (infrastructural) includes news institutions and PR agencies vs. platforms, creators, and AI intermediaries. Arena C (regulatory) is about the state, courts, and legal instruments. This is the common goal of the audience's trust. Table 1 uses the dimensions described in Mayer et al. (1995) to describe each of the arenas and indicates the observable indicators used in the empirical sections.

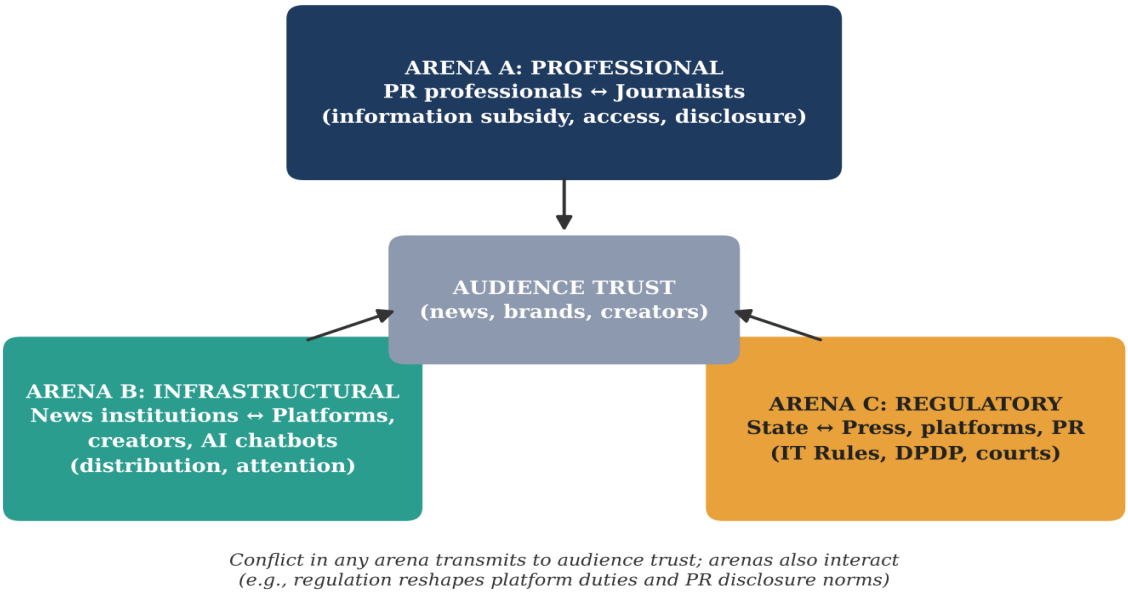


Figure 1. A three-arena model of trust in conflict in the Indian media ecosystem (author's conceptual model).

Table 1. Trust dimensions across the three arenas and indicators used

Dimension	Arena A: PR–journalist	Arena B: News–platform/creator/AI	Arena C: State–press/platform
Ability	Verification capacity of newsrooms; quality and accuracy of PR material	Capacity to make news discoverable and to detect synthetic content	Procedural competence of regulators and courts
Integrity	Disclosure of sponsorship; separation of paid and earned content	Labelling of creator and AI content; provenance	Consistency of rules with constitutional guarantees

Dimension	Arena A: PR–journalist	Arena B: News–platform/creator/AI	Arena C: State–press/platform
Benevolence	Whether sources serve the journalist's and public's needs, not only the client's	Whether platform incentives align with audience interest	Whether rules protect journalistic and public-interest uses of data
Indicators used	PRCAI SPRINT 2026 survey items; practitioner and scholarly accounts	Reuters DNR platform and trust data; DataReportal; Comscore	RSF Index; IT Rules 2021 and 2026 amendment; DPDP Act and Rules; court rulings

Source: Author's adaptation of Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) and Hon and Grunig (1999).

3. Methodology

The study employs a documentary, secondary-data design appropriate for a question that has multiple institutional levels at which it can be addressed, and for which no one survey is available. Does not report new primary data. Rather, it compiles, aligns, and interprets published indicators from sources that reveal their methods, and it clearly spells out where they vary.

The criteria used to choose sources were: published between 2024 and October 2026, an identifiable institutional author, the method or sample was disclosed, and the sources directly applied to one of the three arenas. The regulatory arena is covered by the last two European Court rulings reported in law-firm and press summaries, Kunal Kamra v. Union of India in 2024 and IT Rules 2021 and 2026 amendment, the DPDP Act and Rules. The regulatory arena is covered by the last two European Court rulings reported in the press and law firm summaries, the IT Rules 2021 and 2026 amendment, the DPDP Act and Rules, and Kunal Kamra v. Union of India in 2024.

The analysis was carried out in three phases. Indicators were first compiled by arena, and then, if both editions are available, compared between years. Second, it was decided to code regulatory instruments according to the changes they impose on each actor, namely obligations, liabilities, and safeguards. Thirdly, the findings were analyzed within the framework outlined in section 2. Descriptive statements are reported as they are stated by the source, and interpretive statements are indicated as the author's interpretation.

Four cautions apply. The Digital News Report India sample (2,044 respondents surveyed online in Hindi and English in 2025) is not nationally representative, but is primarily comprised of English-speaking news users online. Levels are not comparable, as the Digital News Report asks about respondents' trust in news most of the time, whereas Edelman asks respondents to rate their trust on a nine-point scale with a top-four box definition of trust across institutions. Comparisons of platform counts and sizes of the PR industry also vary between sources and methods. It is therefore important to note that the paper is not about reading relative levels across series; it is about reading trends within each series. This is a study utilizing published data only and does not require human subjects.

4. Evidence: The Indian Media Ecosystem in 2025–2026

4.1 Audiences, platforms, and trust (Arena B and the audience)

Use of the platforms is substantial and is increasing. Table 2 shows two estimates of leading platform audiences. YouTube is used by around 500 million Indians (DataReportal), Instagram 481 million (DataReportal), Facebook 403 million (DataReportal), and Snapchat 213 million (DataReportal), while X has only around 22 million (DataReportal, via iTiger News, 2025). Comscore's measure of unique visitors in June 2025 gives lower, but similarly ordered, numbers: YouTube 456 million, WhatsApp 430 million, Instagram 337 million, and Facebook 332 million (Comscore, 2025, as reported by Marketing Mind). FICCI–EY adds that Indians spent 880 billion hours on social platforms in 2025, up 10 per cent (Storyboard18, 2026). News events are now experienced largely on commercial video and messaging platforms.

Table 2. Platform audiences in India: two estimates (millions)

Platform	DataReportal-based (Reuters factbox)	Comscore unique visitors, June 2025	Notes
YouTube	500	456	Largest news video network
WhatsApp	Not reported	430	Closed-group news sharing
Instagram	481	337	Reels-led discovery
Facebook	403	332	Older and regional audiences
Snapchat	213	Not reported	Youth-skewed
X (formerly Twitter)	About 22	Not reported	Small, elite-heavy audience

Sources: Reuters factbox via iTiger News (2025); Comscore (2025), reported by Marketing Mind (2025). Estimates differ in method and are not directly comparable.

Trust in news has weakened over the same period. The Digital News Report 2026 records a four-percentage-point decline in India, to 39 per cent trusting most news most of the time, from 43 per cent a year earlier. The global average is 37 per cent, the lowest in the series since 2015 (Reuters Institute, 2026, as reported by Newslaundry, 2026). Fifty-two per cent of Indian respondents say they sometimes or often avoid the news. Television is still used for news by 44 per cent, but YouTube (58 per cent) and WhatsApp (56 per cent, up 10 points since 2021) now lead. In the 2025 edition, 18 per cent of Indian respondents reported using AI chatbots such as ChatGPT and Gemini for news weekly, with 44 per cent comfortable with AI-generated news, which ThePrint (2025) reported as among the highest levels worldwide. Table 3 and Figure 2 summarise the series.

Table 3. Trust and news-access indicators for India, Digital News Report 2025 and 2026

Indicator	2025	2026	Direction
Trust most news most of the time (India)	43%	39%	Down 4 pts
Trust most news most of the time (global average)	40%	37%	Down 3 pts
Use YouTube for news (India)	55%	58%	Up 3 pts
Use WhatsApp for news (India)	n.r.	56%	Up 10 pts since 2021
Use television for news (India)	n.r.	44%	n/a
Sometimes/often avoid news (India)	n.r.	52%	n/a
Weekly use of AI chatbots for news (India)	18%	n.r.	n/a
Comfort with AI-generated news (India)	44%	n.r.	n/a

Sources: Newman et al. (2025); Reuters Institute (2026), as reported by ThePrint (2025), Newslaundry (2026) and The Wire (2026). n.r. = not reported in the sources consulted. Sample: online, mainly English-speaking users.

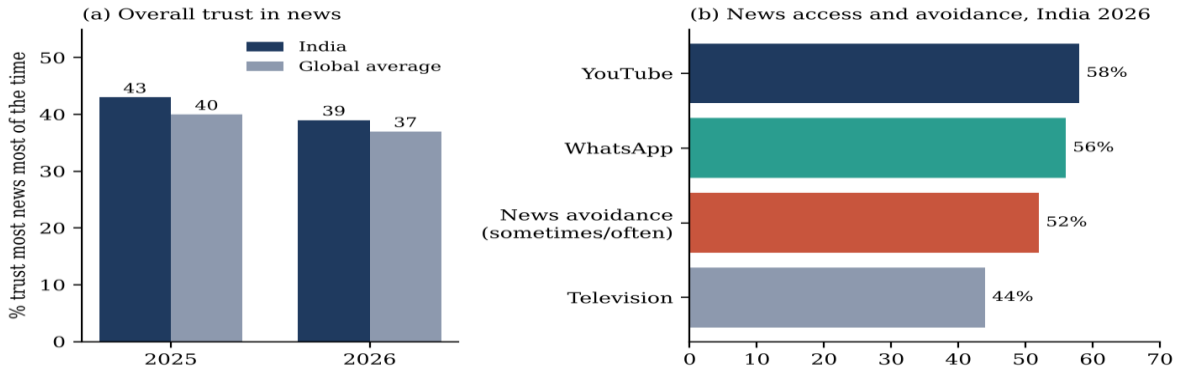


Figure 2. (a) Overall trust in news, India and global average, 2025–2026; (b) news access and avoidance, India 2026. Source: Reuters Institute Digital News Reports 2025 and 2026.

The brand-level trust is more conservative. The Times of India reached 69 per cent; the Hindustan Times, 67 per cent; The Economic Times, 65 per cent; The Hindu and The Indian Express, 63-64 per cent; and digital natives scored lower, at 51 per cent for The Wire and 48 per cent for Scroll.in (Reuters Institute, 2026, as reported by Newslaundry, 2026). The institutional strengths of legacy print and public broadcasters are strengthened, then, as audiences move to platforms (Figure 3). India's score falls in line with the broader picture from Edelman — that despite a high level of trust, it is eroding — as the nation was placed third in the 2025 Trust Index, behind only China and Indonesia, with trust in business, government and media all dropping and trust in NGOs remaining unchanged (Outlook Business, 2025). 76 per cent of Indians trusted the media in the 2024 edition (The Core, 2024), and Edelman's 2026 India report indicates that there continues to be a trust divide between high- and low-income groups (Edelman,

2026). The difference between Edelman and Reuters Institute does not indicate a contradiction, but rather measurement and sample differences.

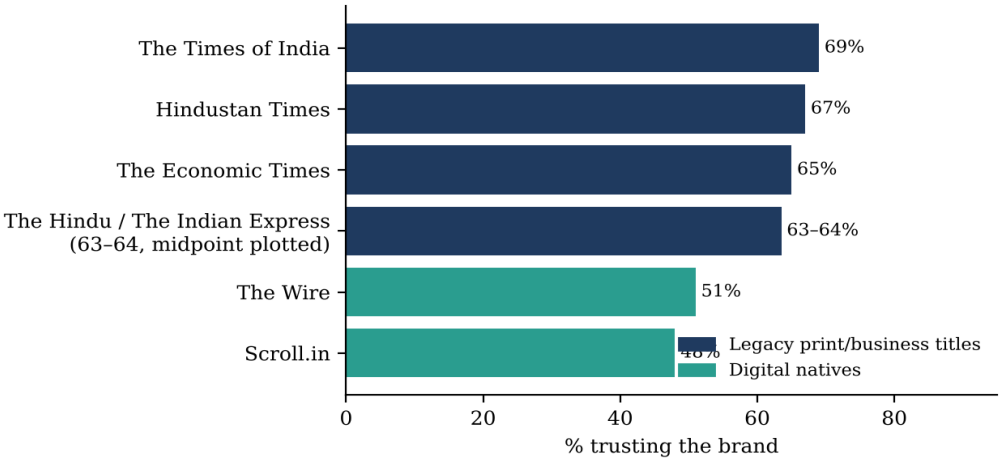


Figure 3. Brand trust among Indian respondents, Digital News Report 2026. Source: Reuters Institute (2026), as reported by Newslaundry (2026).

One additional finding is relevant to the "creator question". The Digital News Report 2026 observes that in countries where press freedom is under pressure, news creators often serve as a source of opposition and scrutiny; in India, the two most-mentioned creators are Dhruv Rathee and Ravish Kumar, both known for criticising the government (Reuters Institute, 2026, as reported by Newslaundry, 2026). Creators thus carry out a part of the journalistic duty, without the institutional functions of editing, corrections and disclosure.

4.2 Press freedom and structural conditions (Arenas A and C)

RSF's index offers a view of the structural conditions in which both professions work. India ranked 161st in 2023, 159th in 2024, and 151st in 2025, a recovery that RSF described as deceptive because the overall score rose only marginally (RSF, 2025). In 2026 India fell six places to 157th of 180, with a score of 31.96, down from 32.96, in the "very serious" category (Indian Printer & Publisher, 2026). Its indicator ranks in 2026 were political 160th (score 21.16), economic 144th (32.63), legal 141st (39.59), social 157th (33.65), and security 158th (32.77). Almost all of India's neighbours ranked higher: Nepal 87th, Sri Lanka 134th, Bhutan 150th, Bangladesh 152nd, and Pakistan 153rd (IASbaba, 2026). Table 4 and Figure 4 summarise the position.

Table 4. India in the RSF World Press Freedom Index, 2023–2026

Year	Rank (of 180)	Overall score	Remark
2023	161	n.r.	Starting point of recent recovery
2024	159	31.28	Score reported by Free Press Journal (2024)
2025	151	32.96	Rank improved; RSF called progress deceptive

Year	Rank (of 180)	Overall score	Remark
2026	157	31.96	Down six places; "very serious" category

Sources: RSF (2025, 2026); Free Press Journal (2024); Indian Printer & Publisher (2026). n.r. = not reported in the sources consulted.

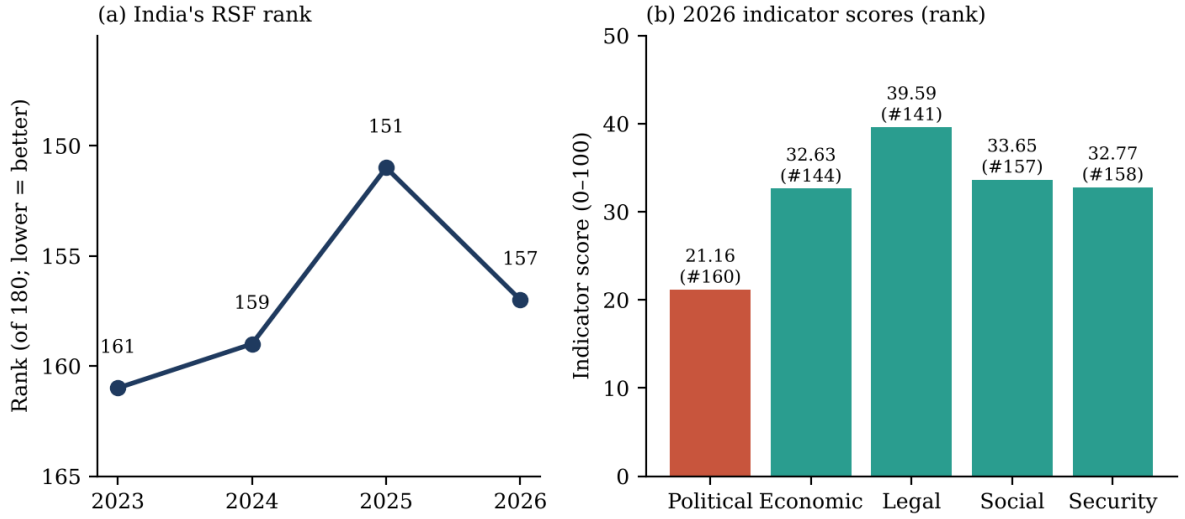


Figure 4. (a) India's RSF World Press Freedom Index rank, 2023–2026; (b) India's 2026 indicator scores and ranks. Source: RSF (2025, 2026) as reported by Indian Printer & Publisher (2026).

These figures are important for the PR-journalist relationship as it refers to the bargaining leverage of journalists. The political indicator scores the lowest and the economic indicator that reflects the financial sustainability of independent media scores at number 144th place in the ranking. Such a newsroom relies more heavily on subsidies for information and on advertising from corporate and government customers. This is interpreted as the structural context of paid news issues reported by the Press Council of India (2010).

4.3 The PR profession's account of itself (Arena A)

The PR industry is in growth mode and nervous PRCAI's SPRINT 2026 study, conducted with Ipsos and based on 143 survey responses collected from January to March 2026 together with an analysis of 90 agency annual reports for FY25, estimates that the industry grew 11 per cent in FY26 to ₹3,230 crore, or 12.6 per cent of the Asia-Pacific market, and projects ₹4,500 crore by 2030, with growth moderating to 8 per cent in FY27 (PRmoment India, 2026). The different estimates from previous studies on PRCAI have been placed at ₹490 crore in FY08, ₹1,120 crore in FY16 (PRCAI & Feedback Business Consulting, 2016; The Hans India, 2016) and ₹1,600 crore in 2019 (PRmoment India, 2019), however, due to the variations of the definition and survey methodologies across the editions, these figures show an order of magnitude and are not necessarily indicative of the precise future trajectory of growth (Figure 5a).

The distribution of clients is changing in a manner that is relevant to the concept of trust (Figure 5b). The shares of the top three segments of the government, startups and private corporates, all showed an increase, with the government's share increasing from 4 per cent to 11 per cent between 2022 and 2026; the share of startups grew from 6 to 22 per cent during the same period; and the share of private corporates decreased

from 48 to 42 per cent. There are 12 firms that occupy approximately 70 per cent of the market and mid-sized firms are growing the fastest at 16 per cent (PRmoment India, 2026). Fewer regulations affect coverage of the press, which means more PR work is done for the same number of governments, so journalists should be alert to this.

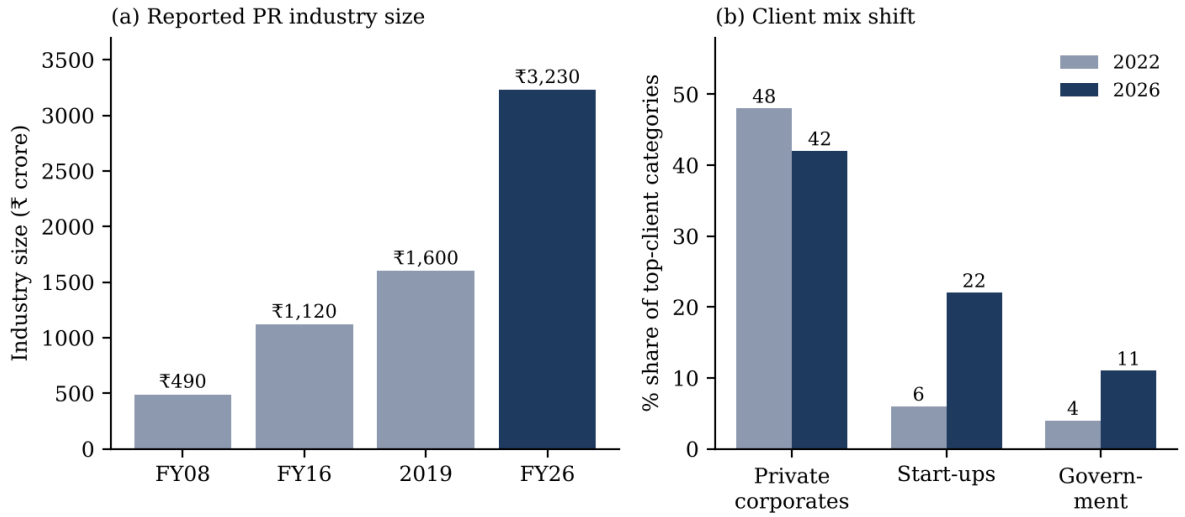


Figure 5. (a) Reported size of India's PR industry; (b) share of top-client categories, 2022 and 2026. Sources: The Hans India (2016); PRmoment India (2019, 2026). Definitions vary across editions.

The survey also documents the profession's self-diagnosis regarding the trust problem (Table 5). Sixty-six per cent of respondents said placing paid content as earned undermines audience trust and 98 per cent want more verification and regulation of influencers' content – with their share of industry revenue rising from 8 to 16 per cent. The number of incidents of fake news reported by corporate communicators grew from 28 per cent in 2024-25 to 46 per cent in 2025-26 and 80 per cent identified AI-generated misinformation and deepfakes as a key reputational risk. Meanwhile, 83 per cent say that earned media is becoming more relevant because the large language models prioritise credible third-party content over paid media, making earned a new reason to pursue credible coverage. Measurement is still frail: 92 per cent say they want a standardised measurement system, but only 46 per cent have a dedicated budget for measuring.

Table 5. Selected PRCAI SPRINT 2026 indicators relevant to trust

Indicator	Value	Comparison
Industry size, FY26 (₹ crore)	3,230	+11% on FY25
Government share of top client categories	11%	4% in 2022
Start-up share of top client categories	22%	6% in 2022
Influencer share of industry revenue	16%	8% earlier; 22% projected
Agree paid content positioned as earned weakens trust	66%	n/a

Indicator	Value	Comparison
Demand more verification/regulation of influencer content	98%	n/a
Corporate communicators reporting fake-news incidents	46%	28% in 2024–25
Flag AI misinformation/deepfakes as top reputational risk	80%	n/a
Expect AI-governance frameworks to become mandatory	85%	n/a
AI investment as share of revenue	7%	2% three years ago; 10% projected
Agree PR needs a standardised measurement system	92%	46% have a separate budget

Source: PRmoment India (2026), reporting PRCAI SPRINT 2026 (Ipsos; 143 responses, January–March 2026).

There are two caveats to note. The survey is directed at PR decision-makers, and, therefore, is a self-report on one aspect of the relationship only; a survey of Indian journalists could not be found for this time. But the figures do reflect the profession's worry with paid-as-earned content, which differs from any evidence of the volume of such content. Both gaps are returned to in Section 7.

5. Discussion: Three Arenas of Trust in Conflict

5.1 Arena A: Interdependence under suspicion

The findings suggest that PR in India continues to be interdependent, but cautious, with Journalism. Meanwhile, on the supply side, PR is moving towards greater strategic positioning: 46 per cent of communicators believe PR has a direct impact on business results, and over 40 per cent say CEOs are asking communications advisors for strategic advice (PRmoment India, 2026). On the demand side, newsrooms under economic pressure (as captured by the RSF economic indicator) have good reason to accept information subsidies. Historically, it has been shown to live in harmony with mutual suspicion (Kaur & Shaari, 2006).

If we look at the Mayer et al. (1995) dimensions, then integrity is the weakest. The question for journalists is: is PR for the client or for the public? The question for the PR practitioner is: will journalists ever present PR material fairly? That paid-as-earned positioning undermines trust is acknowledged by the profession itself, so integrity issues are now coming from within the profession. But the lack of any written guidance on how to treat sources, as Kohli-Khandekar (2011) noted, in many newsrooms in India further exacerbates the issue: if neither side has a codified standard for acceptable hospitality or for what constitutes an embargo or for sponsored content, each encounter is negotiated on a case by case basis, and perceived infractions are interpreted as bad faith.

Another evolution is the introduction of generative AI in the relationship, on both ends. According to PR firms, they are using AI most in areas like research (77 per cent), written content (73 per cent) and meeting notes (66 per cent); and the investments in AI have increased from 2 per cent to 7 per cent of revenue (PRmoment India, 2026). There are some innovative unevenly being piloted at newsrooms like Scroll.in's text-to-video tool and The Hindu's AI character for election video news (Reuters Institute, 2026, as cited

by Newslaundry, 2026). If both pitch and story are partly AI generated, it is more difficult to determine the ability dimension of trust (who has checked this?); the case for disclosure of the use of AI is stronger.

5.2 Arena B: Platforms, creators, and the migration of attention

The numbers on the audience side are most interesting in Arena B. This trend of shifting news use to YouTube and WhatsApp, along with the drop in trust in media and news, and the high rate of news avoidance, indicates a decline in the role of institutional intermediation. There are two points that need to be emphasized. First, the platforms where audiences are now seeking news are not accountable for the accuracy of that news – and trust in these platforms is thus shifted to individuals and groups. In particular, WhatsApp works on relationships, not brands (Banaji et al., 2019), which makes the credibility of a message equal to the credibility of the sender of that message. Second, legacy brands are still relatively trusted (Figure 3), suggesting that audience has not given up on the concept of institutional credibility, but rather on the distribution advantage of institutions. The distribution aspect is what was highlighted and reiterated during the launch of the Digital News Report 2026 (Commonwealth Journalists Association, 2026).

The upshot for PR practitioners is twofold. Audiences can also be connected via influencers and regional media – PR moment India reported that regional PR has grown from 10 to 19 per cent of the industry's revenue – and is expected to be the primary source of growth (PRmoment India, 2026) as Tier-2 cities are the main growth engine (65 per cent of corporate communicators name Tier-2 cities as their primary growth engine, PRmoment India, 2026). But these are the routes with greater disclosure risk as the 98 per cent demand for influencer verification shows. If a message is placed by a practitioner without disclosure, then the practitioner is “putting paid articles as independent articles” in newspapers, as the Press Council of India (2010) condemned.

5.3 Arena C: Regulation as a trust variable

It has been quite a busy regulatory period. Table 6 provides an overview of the main instruments and cases referred to in the paper. There are three salient features.

Table 6. Selected regulatory and judicial developments and their trust implications

Date	Instrument or event	Implication for trust (author's reading)
1978	Press Council Act: Norms of Journalistic Conduct	Self-regulatory standard for print; extended by reference to digital news publishers under the IT Rules
Nov 2019	PIB Fact Check Unit set up	Government as fact-checker of its own claims; independence concern
2021	IT Rules 2021 (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code)	Due-diligence duties for platforms; code of ethics for digital news publishers
Aug 2023	Digital Personal Data Protection Act enacted	Privacy rights; no dedicated journalistic exemption, raising newsroom compliance concerns

Date	Instrument or event	Implication for trust (author's reading)
Mar 2024	PIB Fact Check Unit notified under IT Rules (S.O. 1491(E)); notification stayed by the Supreme Court	Contested executive determination of what is false about government
Sep 2024	Bombay High Court strikes down the fact-check amendment (Kunal Kamra v. Union of India)	Courts affirm limits on executive control over truth claims
Nov 2025	DPDP Rules 2025 notified; phased implementation	Editors' bodies warn of chilling effect on reportage; many provisions apply from 2027
Feb 2026	IT Amendment Rules 2026 effective 20 Feb: labelling of synthetically generated information, shorter takedown windows	Raises provenance standards; critics cite takedown and free-speech risks
Oct 2026	News publishers (DNPA) petition the Supreme Court on the DPDP Act and Rules	Press seeks protection for journalistic data processing

Sources: The News Minute (2023); Internet Freedom Foundation (2024); LiveLaw (2024); SFLC.in (2025); Newslaundry (2025); Mondaq (2026a); Hogan Lovells (2026); Inc42 (2026). Dates follow the sources cited; implications are the author's reading.

First, the state too has tried to classify misinformation about itself as a category of regulation. In the 2023 amendment to the IT Rules, fact-checking by a government-notified unit was introduced as a process whereby if any content was found to be false relating to government business, the platform could lose its safe harbour protection if it does not act (The News Minute, 2023). In September 2024, the Bombay High Court, in a tie-breaker decision, ruled that it infringed upon Article 14 and Article 19 of the Constitution (Deccan Herald, 2024; LiveLaw, 2024). This is an obvious Arena C integrity question: can the party making the claims be trusted to adjudicate the check?

Second, the proposed 2026 change is going in a different direction. It is targeted squarely at deepfakes (Mondaq, 2026a; Hogan Lovells, 2026), as it defines synthetically generated information, requires labelling information and source information, and reduces the takedown time for some categories to three hours. This aligns with PR's concerns as well, as 80 per cent of the people surveyed rated deepfakes as a top reputational risk and 85 per cent predicted that AI governance will become a requirement (PRmoment India 2026). However, the Digital News Report (Reuters Institute, 2026, cited in Newslaundry, 2026) highlights critics' worries about shorter removal times, the wide scope of the SGI definition, which could cover benign or creative uses of AI, as well as the reach of executive takedown powers. The same instrument can, therefore, reinforce and challenge trust as it is implemented in terms of procedural safeguards.

Thirdly, the DPDP regime has given rise to a new battle between the media and the state. Editors' bodies and DIGIPUB have expressed concern that the Act and the 2025 Rules provide the State with significant

access and enforcement powers without providing a statutory exemption for journalists, which could result in indirect censorship (The Wire, 2025; Newslaundry, 2025).

The Editors Guild of India noted that the Secretary of MeitY had assured press bodies in July 2025 that journalistic work would not fall within the Act's purview, but that no official response followed (Editors Guild of India, 2025). In October 2026, a group of news publishers petitioned the Supreme Court on these provisions (Inc42, 2026). Whatever the outcome, the episode demonstrates that questions about the news-gathering process, and not only about published content, are now part of the trust debate.

5.4 Synthesis: how arenas build on each other.

The three arenas are interconnected. Based on the evidence read by the author, there are at least three ways that the disease is spread. The first is from economic pressure to professional integrity: reduced newsroom finances (Arena C – economic indicator) drive increased need for information subsidies and advertorial revenues (Arena A), which leads to lower audience trust. The second is the transition from platform to regulatory response: when audiences move to unaccountable platforms (Arena B), governments are compelled to regulate content, and the type of regulation adopted becomes the deciding factor between protection and constraint for the press (Arena C). The third relates to regulation of professional practice: labelling and provenance will alter the type of content PRs can place and how journalists will confirm it (Arena A).

6. Implications and Recommendations

6.1 PR professionals and agencies

The results from its own survey say it all. Agencies need to have written disclosure rules that clearly identify earned, owned and paid content, in all placements including all uses via creators, and include disclosure of AI-assisted drafting. The 84 per cent agreement on the use of share of voice as the most widely used measurement metric indicates that PRCAI may wish to consider developing trust-based metrics, in addition to share of voice. Agencies must be aware of the relationship with the client, including government clients, when pitching to journalists.

6.2 Newsrooms and journalists

Like Kohli-Khandekar (2011) suggested, newsrooms should also codify their source relations practices, such as hospitality, embargoes, press release attribution and labelling of sponsored content. They should describe the applications of AI in production and verification. But with a certain level of trust in the legacy brands, building out platform reach for them may necessitate creating partnerships with creators on the platform with explicit editorial and disclosure requirements.

6.3 Platforms and creators

Platforms should ensure that labels for sponsorship and labels for AI created content are consistent and clearly visible for creators and advertisers, and that appeals to have content removed are clear. Correction

practices and commercial relationships disclosure should be implemented in creators acting as news sources.

6.4 For regulators and courts

Narrowly drafted regulations, with clear procedure and without reliance on the parties whose rights are being adjudicated, are most likely to enhance trust. The fact-check units 2024 judgment is a good example of the constitutional constraints imposed on the executive's ability to decide what is true. A clear safeguard for journalistic processing, which is a key feature of the DPDP regime, would take away a significant newsroom uncertainty for press bodies in the first place. The three-hour windows would be apparent when public reporting is done on takedown volumes, appeals, and error rates for the SGI rules.

6.5 For research

The one most urgent need is matched evidence from journalists, a parallel survey based on the same measure of trust as the PRCAI instrument, and regional-language audience studies to correct for the English-speaking and online bias of the main evidence.

7. Limitations and directions for future research.

There are a number of restrictions in this paper. It is secondary and inferences are made based on the quality of sources. The India sample in the Digital News Report is not nationally representative and the levels of trust reported should not be seen as a reflection of the entire population. Levels cannot be compared across Edelman and Reuters Institute surveys, as they ask different questions. The PR evidence comes from one industry survey that was completed by 143 respondents from the profession's association. Earlier estimates of the size of the PR industry are based on different survey periods, the three-arena model is a theoretical construct rather than a statistically-tested one, and some regulatory dates are slightly different among secondary sources.

Further research could involve a matched survey of journalists and PR practitioners, a content analysis of the frequency of press releases and sponsored material appearing as editorial copy, an audit of creator disclosure across different languages and a longitudinal study to assess how the new labelling rules for 2026 and the DPDP regime impacts on behaviour as it comes into effect.

8. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to explore the dynamics of trust that is challenged between the PR professionals, journalists and social media in the modern Indian media landscape. This evidence that has been gathered from 2025 and 2026 sources leads to four conclusions.

One, the trust of the audience is on a knife's edge, but not broken. Indian trust of news dropped by 43-39 per cent in one year, news avoidance is at 52 per cent and attention has shifted to YouTube and WhatsApp. However, legacy print and public broadcasters have the highest brand trust, indicating that it's not just a credibility issue, but a distribution and relationship challenge.

Second, the dynamics of PR–journalist relationship are not only determined by individual actions but also by structural conditions. The press freedom ranking of #157 places it in the company of other countries with a low position on the index, where a weak political and/or economic indicator exists and where there is no codification of norms in source relations in many newsrooms, leading to high dependence on information subsidies and rational suspicion. A positive development for the PR profession, in this regard,

is its recognition that the loss of integrity can be addressed within the profession through paid-as-earned positioning.

Third, regulation is a trust variable, in itself. The state is not an outsider but a player in the relationship of trust and has been revealed by the striking down of the fact-check unit, the arrival of synthetic-media labelling and the debate over how the DPDP regime treats journalists. Clear rules that are easily understood and subject to independent review can be trusted; broad rules that give discretion over the definition of falsehood can be distrusted.

Fourth, there is an inter-dependency between the three arenas. Professional compromise as a result of the economic pressure, platform migration calls for regulation, and regulation alters professional practice. Focusing on any one of these areas will thus be insufficient, and the package outlined in Section 6 – disclosure standards for PR, protocols for newsrooms, labelling and appeals for platforms, and safeguards for journalism in law – will help ensure that they work together. The trust in conflict is not lasting, it will be re-established through the enactment of competence, integrity and good will before the audience that will make the decision who to believe on.

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