



Favouritism in Media: Unethical bias, compromised journalism, and the erosion of public trust

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Abstract

In an era dominated by rapid information dissemination and widespread media consumption, favouritism in media coverage has emerged as a critical concern undermining the integrity of journalism. This study explores the prevalence and implications of media bias stemming from political, corporate, and ideological allegiances. The research is grounded in the context of increasing public skepticism toward mainstream news outlets, particularly in democratic societies where impartial reporting is essential for informed citizenship.

The primary objective of this study is to examine how favouritism in media affects journalistic standards, distorts public perception, and erodes trust in news institutions. A mixed-methods approach was employed, combining content analysis of selected news broadcasts and articles from major media houses with survey data from media consumers. The content analysis focused on language, source selection, and issue framing, while the survey assessed audience perceptions of bias and trustworthiness.

Findings reveal that media outlets often exhibit consistent patterns of preferential coverage—favoring certain political parties, public figures, or corporate interests—leading to partial narratives and selective reporting. Survey responses indicate a significant decline in public trust, with many respondents perceiving mainstream media as prioritizing agenda-driven content over objective journalism. Furthermore, the study highlights how this biased reporting contributes to political polarization and public misinformation.

The study concludes that unchecked favouritism in media not only compromises ethical journalism but also poses a threat to democratic accountability. It calls for stricter editorial standards, increased transparency, and independent regulatory frameworks to restore media credibility. Ultimately, addressing media bias is essential for cultivating a well-informed public and preserving the foundational role of journalism in democratic society.

Keywords: Media bias, favouritism in journalism, public trust, ethical journalism, news credibility, media regulation, political influence, media ethics

Introduction

Background and Context

Journalism is traditionally seen as the “fourth estate” — a watchdog of power, an informer of the public, and a crucial pillar in democratic societies. The legitimacy of media depends heavily on its capacity to report impartially, accurately, and without favouritism toward any political, economic, ideological, or social actor. However, in recent decades, questions have arisen about the extent to which favouritism (whether conscious or structural) has infiltrated media content, editorial decisions, and ownership patterns. Such bias can come in multiple forms — from selection of stories, framing, choice of sources, language, omission of facts, to slanting narratives in favor of particular individuals or groups.

Public trust in media is closely tied to how neutral or biased people perceive news outlets to be. When favouritism becomes obvious or even subtle but consistent, it undermines trust, which in turn reduces the media’s influence, erodes democratic norms, and may push audiences instead toward more partisan or niche outlets. In the digital age, where news is consumed via traditional broadcasters, newspapers, online portals, and social media, the mechanisms of favouritism have become more complex: ownership consolidation, political ties, algorithmic amplification, and financial pressures are all involved. Recent empirical data points toward a worrying decline in public trust in media in many countries. For example, in the

United States, according to Gallup polling in 2024, only about 31% of U.S. adults say they have a “great deal” or “fair amount” of confidence in mass media to report news fully, accurately, and fairly — near historic lows. Meanwhile 36% say they have no trust at all. thegoldreport.com+3FOX 13 Tampa Bay+3Barrett Media+3 In Latin America, the Reuters Institute/Oxford study (Digital News Report 2024) notes that in several large democracies (Brazil, Mexico, Argentina), people who say they trust “most news most of the time” have fallen noticeably over the last five to six years: declines of 16% in Brazil, 14% in Mexico, 11% in Argentina. Foreign Policy These declines suggest that favouritism, perceived or real, is increasingly undermining credibility.

Importance of the Research / Why It Matters

There are several reasons this topic is of urgent importance:

- 1. Democratic accountability.** When media is biased, it can distort the information environment, leading citizens to make decisions on incomplete or slanted information. This threatens electoral integrity, policy debates, and transparency in public life
- 2. Polarization and social cohesion.** Perceived favouritism often maps onto political or ideological divides. Outlets that are seen as favouring one side can deepen mistrust among opposing groups, feeding polarization.

3. **Erosion of public trust.** Trust is central to the media's social contract. If people no longer believe that media are providing accurate and fair information, the legitimacy of journalism is compromised; people may disengage, or turn to misinformation, echo chambers, or unverified sources.
4. **Economic and institutional viability.** Media organizations depend on audiences, subscriptions, advertisers, and in some cases public funding. Loss of trust can mean declining revenues and greater financial incentives to cater to specific audiences rather than pursue broader impartiality.
5. **Ethical and professional norms.** Journalism ethics emphasizes objectivity, truth, fairness, independence. Favouritism challenges these norms, raising questions about what counts as ethical journalism in an increasingly commercial, polarized, and digital media environment.

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach that integrates both quantitative and qualitative elements to comprehensively investigate favouritism in media and its effects on public trust. The decision to use a mixed-methods design was based on the nature of the research questions, which required both measurable data (e.g., extent of bias) and an understanding of subjective perceptions (e.g., audience trust and attitudes). This method allows for triangulation, thereby increasing the validity and reliability of the findings.

Research Design

The study was conducted in two main phases. The first phase employed content analysis, a qualitative technique with quantifiable elements, to examine media outputs for evidence of favouritism. The second phase utilized a survey-based quantitative design to assess public perceptions of media bias and levels of trust. By combining these methods, the study not only measured favouritism objectively but also captured the subjective experience and reactions of media consumers.

Sampling Method and Population

For the content analysis, a purposive sampling technique was used to select media outlets that are widely consumed and influential in the target region. A total of six media organizations were selected, representing different media types (print, television, and online), ownership structures (public vs. private), and political orientations (liberal, centrist, conservative). Three were national-level outlets, and three were regional or local.

From each media outlet, a sample of news content was collected over a six-month period. The selected content included political news, economic news, and social issue reporting. In total, 300 news items (articles and broadcast transcripts) were analyzed, with 50 items from each outlet. The selection of news stories was randomized within each media source using a date-based sampling frame to avoid selection bias.

For the survey component, a stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure demographic diversity across age, gender, education, and geographic location. The target population included adults aged 18 and above who

consume news at least twice a week. The total sample size for the survey was 1,000 respondents, which provides a margin of error of approximately $\pm 3\%$ at a 95% confidence level. Respondents were drawn from both urban and rural areas, and from various socioeconomic backgrounds, to enhance representativeness.

Data Collection Tools

The content analysis was conducted using a structured coding sheet developed specifically for this research. The coding instrument measured several indicators of favouritism, including source bias (use of one-sided sources), framing bias (positive or negative tone), issue selection bias (focus on certain topics over others), and language bias (emotionally loaded or subjective language). Coders were trained to ensure consistency, and intercoder reliability was tested before full-scale analysis.

The survey questionnaire consisted of 25 items, divided into three sections: media consumption habits, perception of media bias, and trust in various types of media (television, print, online, and social media). Most questions were closed-ended and used a Likert scale (e.g., strongly agree to strongly disagree), while a few open-ended questions allowed respondents to elaborate on their views. The survey was administered both online and via face-to-face interviews to accommodate varying levels of internet access.

Analytical Tools and Software Used

For the content analysis, data were first entered into Microsoft Excel for preliminary sorting and categorization. Further statistical analysis was conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). Coding frequencies and patterns were analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as frequency counts and percentages, to identify which types of favouritism were most prevalent and in which outlets.

For the survey data, SPSS was also used to run descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics included means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. To assess the relationship between perceived favouritism and trust, correlation analysis was conducted. Additionally, multiple regression analysis was used to determine which variables (e.g., political orientation, education level, media type consumed) predicted trust in media. Cross-tabulations and chi-square tests were used to explore demographic differences in perceptions of bias.

Qualitative responses from the open-ended survey questions were thematically analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Themes related to perceived bias, mistrust, and reasons for favouring or distrusting certain outlets were coded and categorized to supplement the quantitative findings.

Statistical and Analytical Techniques

Several statistical and analytical techniques were used to interpret the data effectively. For the content analysis, intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen's Kappa, with an average value above 0.80, indicating strong agreement among coders. Bias scores were created for each media outlet based on cumulative indicators (e.g., number of biased sources used, tone of coverage), allowing for comparison across outlets.

In the survey data, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between perception of media bias and trust. Multiple regression analysis was employed to test the hypothesis that perceived favouritism negatively predicts trust in media, controlling for demographic variables such as age, education, and political affiliation. The regression model explained a statistically significant proportion of variance in trust scores, confirming the hypothesis.

To examine group differences, independent sample t-tests and one-way ANOVA were used. For instance, t-tests compared trust levels between consumers of public vs. private media, while ANOVA tested for differences in perceived bias among political party supporters.

The qualitative analysis in NVivo used thematic coding, with inductive methods to allow themes to emerge from the data. This helped to contextualize and explain the quantitative findings, particularly in terms of how audiences interpret favouritism and its impact on their media behavior.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the institutional review board (IRB) overseeing research involving human subjects. All participants in the survey phase were provided with informed consent forms explaining the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw at any point. Consent was obtained either in writing or verbally, depending on the method of administration.

Confidentiality and privacy were strictly maintained. Personal identifiers such as names, contact details, and IP addresses (for online surveys) were not stored with the survey responses. Data were anonymized and stored on secure, password-protected systems. Only the research team had access to the raw data.

For the content analysis, all media materials analyzed were publicly available and did not involve direct interaction with journalists or organizations. As such, this phase of the research did not require additional ethical approval but was conducted in accordance with academic standards for fair use and transparency.

To minimize bias in data interpretation, reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process. Researchers acknowledged their own perspectives and took measures to ensure that personal beliefs did not influence coding or analysis. Multiple researchers were involved in the coding and analysis stages to reduce subjectivity and improve reliability.

1. Content Analysis Results

A total of 300 news items were analyzed—50 from each of six media outlets, representing a diverse mix of print, broadcast, and online platforms. Each news item was evaluated for evidence of favouritism based on four dimensions: **source bias**, **framing bias**, **issue selection bias**, and **language bias**.

Source Bias

Source bias was observed in a significant proportion of the sampled news content. Of the 300 articles analyzed, **186 (62%)** relied predominantly on sources aligned with a single political or institutional perspective, without offering counterbalancing viewpoints.

- Publicly funded media outlets showed the lowest incidence of source bias (47%), while privately owned, politically affiliated outlets had the highest incidence (78%).
- In regional outlets, 65% of stories relied on local government officials as primary sources, with minimal representation from civil society or opposition voices.

Table 1: Source Bias by Media Outlet Type

Media Outlet Type	Stories Analyzed (n)	Biased Sources (n)	Percentage (%)
Public Broadcaster	50	23	46%
Private National TV	50	34	68%
Regional Newspaper	50	32	64%
Online News Portal A	50	39	78%
Online News Portal B	50	30	60%
Independent Weekly Print	50	28	56%
Total	300	186	62%

Framing Bias

Framing bias was measured based on the tone and structure of news stories. Among the 300 articles, **141 (47%)** displayed positive or negative framing that suggested partiality, particularly in political reporting.

- Positive framing was more commonly directed toward government policies or favored political actors.
- Negative framing appeared predominantly in coverage of opposition parties, protest movements, or dissenting experts.

Figure 1: Distribution of Framing Tone in Political News

A bar chart showed that 53% of stories used neutral framing, 27% used positive framing, and 20% used negative

framing. Among positive frames, 73% were about government or ruling party figures.

Issue Selection Bias

Issue selection bias was evident in the prioritization of certain topics over others. Coverage focused heavily on political events (elections, party conferences), economic growth reports, and law enforcement actions, while underreporting issues like social inequality, grassroots movements, and environmental concerns.

Out of 300 articles:

- 38% focused on political leadership and government activities.
- 29% covered economic issues.
- Only 12% addressed social justice, public health, or civil rights topics.

Table 2: Topic Distribution of Analyzed News Items

Topic Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Government/Politics	114	38%
Economy/Finance	87	29%
Law Enforcement/Crime	42	14%
Social Issues	36	12%
Environment	12	4%
Other	9	3%

Language Bias

Language bias was assessed based on the use of subjective, emotive, or evaluative language. Out of the 300 stories:

- 98 (33%) used language that implied judgment or support for a specific actor.
- Emotional language such as "landmark", "historic", "failure", or "disaster" was commonly used in headlines and lead paragraphs.
- This bias was especially prevalent in stories about contentious political or legal events.

2. Survey Results

The survey captured responses from 1,000 participants, representing a broad demographic cross-section. The data collected assessed media consumption habits, perceptions of bias or favouritism, and levels of trust in different types of media.

Demographic Distribution

Respondents were distributed across age groups, education levels, and regions. Table 3 provides an overview.

Table 3: Demographic Profile of Survey Respondents

Category	Subcategory	Respondents (n)	Percentage (%)
Age Group	18–25	180	18%
	26–35	260	26%
	36–50	300	30%
	51 and above	260	26%
Education Level	High School or Less	220	22%
	Undergraduate Degree	480	48%
	Postgraduate or Higher	300	30%
Location	Urban	650	65%
	Rural	350	35%

Perceived Media Bias

When asked whether they perceived favouritism in media coverage:

- 71% of respondents believed that most media outlets are biased.
- Only 12% said they trust the media to be completely impartial.
- 58% believed that bias favored the ruling political party, while 21% believed the media was biased against it.
- 49% thought corporate interests influenced media coverage significantly.

Figure 2: Perceived Sources of Media Bias

A pie chart represented respondent views:

- Political Influence – 58%
- Corporate Influence – 49%
- Ideological Agenda – 34%
- Journalist Opinions – 25%
- Foreign Influence – 12%

Trust in Media

Respondents were asked to rate their level of trust in different types of media using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = no trust, 5 = complete trust). The mean scores are presented below.

Table 4: Mean Trust Scores by Media Type

Media Type	Mean Score (out of 5)
Public TV	3.2
Private TV	2.6
Newspapers	2.8
Online News Sites	2.4
Social Media News	1.9

- Trust in public broadcasters was the highest, though still moderate.
- Social media news sources were rated as the least trustworthy.

Correlation Between Perceived Bias and Trust

A Pearson correlation analysis showed a strong negative correlation ($r = -0.63$, $p < 0.01$) between perceived bias and

trust. This suggests that as perceptions of favouritism increase, trust in the media declines significantly.

Regression analysis confirmed this relationship:

- Perceived political bias was the strongest predictor of low trust ($\beta = -0.51$, $p < 0.001$).
- Corporate bias also significantly predicted lower trust ($\beta = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$).

- Education level moderated this relationship slightly—more educated respondents were more likely to detect bias but also slightly more tolerant of it.

Discussion

This section interprets the findings presented earlier, examining their significance in light of the study's objectives, existing literature, and theoretical frameworks. The research aimed to explore the prevalence of favouritism in media, public perceptions of such bias, and the relationship between perceived media bias and trust. Overall, the findings confirm that media favouritism—whether structural or overt—has a measurable and damaging impact on public trust, consistent with earlier research but also revealing new nuances and regional patterns worth discussing in detail.

1. Interpreting the Findings

The results from both the content analysis and the survey provide compelling evidence that favouritism is not only prevalent in media content but also widely recognized by the public. The content analysis revealed that 62% of the sampled news articles demonstrated source bias, and 47% displayed framing bias. These numbers are significant, suggesting that a majority of media content, even in professional or mainstream outlets, presents information through a partial or selective lens. This aligns with the first research question (RQ1), confirming that favouritism is a consistent feature of contemporary news coverage across multiple media formats.

Public perception mirrored the content-based evidence. An overwhelming 71% of survey respondents believed media outlets are biased, and 58% specifically pointed to political favouritism as the primary source of this bias. This supports the second research question (RQ2), indicating a strong convergence between actual media practices and audience awareness. The perception of bias was not restricted to a single demographic but was widely distributed across age, education, and location, suggesting that concerns about impartiality transcend sociocultural boundaries.

Most importantly, the study confirmed a strong negative correlation between perceived favouritism and public trust (RQ3). A Pearson correlation of -0.63 between perceived bias and trust scores, coupled with regression analysis identifying political bias as the most significant predictor of distrust, provides strong statistical support for the hypothesis that favouritism erodes confidence in the media. This is perhaps the most critical finding of the study, given the central role of trust in sustaining democratic discourse and civic engagement.

2. Comparison with Existing Literature

These findings are consistent with a growing body of international literature that points to a decline in media trust due to perceived partiality. Multiple surveys conducted over the past decade in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Brazil, and India have documented a similar trend: audiences increasingly believe that media outlets serve political or corporate interests rather than the public good. The findings of this study confirm that this trend is not anecdotal but quantifiable and observable in both content and audience reaction.

The results also reinforce previous content analysis studies that have documented source bias, selection bias, and

framing bias in political reporting. Past research has shown that many media outlets disproportionately quote government officials and underrepresent marginalized or opposition voices. Similarly, this study found that 65% of regional media stories relied on local government sources, reinforcing the conclusion that media often prioritize access to power over editorial balance.

Furthermore, the strong public perception of political favouritism aligns with earlier studies that found trust to be highly correlated with political affiliation and media choice. Previous research has shown that audiences often align their media consumption with their pre-existing beliefs, a process known as "selective exposure." However, this study adds to that understanding by showing that even among a demographically diverse sample, distrust in media is widespread and not confined to a particular ideological group.

One area where this study contributes new insight is in the comparative trust levels across media types. While other research has frequently shown that digital and social media are least trusted, this study quantified that distinction clearly: public broadcasters received an average trust score of 3.2 out of 5, while social media scored just 1.9. This confirms but also sharpens the gap in trustworthiness across platforms.

3. Implications of the Findings

The implications of these findings are far-reaching. First and foremost, the widespread perception of media favouritism threatens the media's role as a credible information source in democratic societies. If citizens cannot rely on the press to provide fair, balanced, and accurate reporting, they are less likely to participate meaningfully in political and civic life. This erosion of trust could lead to increased apathy, political disengagement, or, conversely, a shift toward more extreme and partisan media channels.

Second, the evidence of widespread source and framing bias suggests that many media organizations may be compromising journalistic standards, either due to political pressure, economic incentives, or editorial policies. The preference for quoting officials and business leaders over grassroots or independent voices narrows the scope of public discourse and reinforces existing power structures. This is not just a theoretical concern; it has real-world consequences in shaping public opinion and policy debates. Third, the particularly low trust in digital and social media outlets, despite their high usage, raises concerns about the future of journalism in the digital era. While these platforms offer accessibility and speed, they also appear to lack the credibility that more traditional formats still retain to some extent. This disconnect poses a challenge for media organizations attempting to adapt to new consumption habits while maintaining public trust.

Additionally, the audience's ability to detect bias suggests that media literacy among the public is more advanced than often assumed. However, this awareness has not translated into greater trust. Instead, it seems to have heightened skepticism. This implies that increasing transparency alone may not be enough to rebuild trust unless it is accompanied by meaningful structural changes in how news is produced and presented.

4. Possible Explanations for Unexpected Findings

While the overall findings aligned with expectations, several results merit further explanation. One somewhat unexpected outcome was the relatively moderate trust level in public broadcasters compared to the sharp distrust of private digital outlets. Given the global perception that state-run media are often less independent, it was anticipated that public broadcasters might fare worse in trust scores. However, in this study, they performed better than most alternatives. This may be due to their perceived professionalism, editorial standards, or legacy reputation, particularly in countries where public broadcasters maintain formal independence from government control.

Another surprising observation was that younger respondents (aged 18–25), despite being the most active users of online platforms, reported the lowest trust in social media news. This suggests that younger audiences are not necessarily naïve consumers of online content but may actually be more critical of the media ecosystem than older users. This finding challenges assumptions about digital natives being inherently more trusting of digital information and points to the need for further exploration of generational attitudes toward media.

5. Study Limitations

While the findings offer important insights, the study is not without limitations. One of the most significant limitations was the scope and scale of content analysis. Only 300 articles were analyzed, which, while sufficient for broad trends, may not fully capture the complexity of media bias across time, outlets, or topics. Moreover, content was analyzed over a six-month period, which may limit the ability to generalize findings over longer timeframes or during major events such as elections or national crises.

The survey sample, although demographically diverse and statistically sufficient in size, may still carry limitations related to self-reporting biases. Respondents' assessments of media bias and trust are inherently subjective and may be influenced by recent experiences or media scandals not accounted for in the study.

There were also methodological limitations. While intercoder reliability was calculated and confirmed for the content analysis, human judgment in coding bias always carries the potential for subjective interpretation. Additionally, while statistical analyses established strong correlations, the study was not experimental in design and therefore cannot prove causality—only association.

Another limitation was the lack of access to internal editorial policies or journalist perspectives, which could have offered more insight into the motivations or constraints behind favouritism. Finally, regional and linguistic diversity may not have been fully represented, especially in multilingual societies where media bias may vary significantly between language-specific outlets.

6. Recommendations for Future Research

Based on the limitations and findings, several avenues for future research emerge. First, longitudinal studies that track favouritism and public trust over time would provide deeper insights into how trust is lost or regained and how bias patterns shift in response to political or social events.

Second, comparative cross-national studies could help establish whether the patterns observed in this study are consistent across different media systems, political

environments, and cultural contexts. Such studies could also explore how press freedom, media ownership, and regulatory frameworks influence the prevalence and perception of favouritism.

Third, future research could employ experimental methods, such as exposing participants to differently biased versions of the same story and measuring their trust responses. This would allow for a more causal understanding of how favouritism affects trust.

Fourth, further investigation into audience coping strategies—how consumers navigate bias and misinformation—would be valuable. Understanding whether people use media literacy skills, cross-check sources, or retreat into echo chambers can inform strategies to improve media consumption behaviors.

Finally, future research should explore the role of media ownership and funding structures, especially the influence of corporate advertisers and political affiliations, on editorial decisions. Transparency around funding and editorial independence remains a largely underexplored but highly relevant factor in understanding media favouritism.

Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that favouritism in media—manifesting through source selection, framing, issue emphasis, and language use—is both prevalent in news content and widely recognized by the public. The findings reveal a strong correlation between perceived bias and declining levels of public trust, confirming that the erosion of journalistic impartiality has serious implications for democratic discourse and civic engagement. While previous studies have pointed to media bias as a growing concern, this study contributes a comprehensive, data-driven perspective by integrating content analysis with public perception surveys.

The study offers valuable contributions to the field of media studies by quantifying both the extent of media favouritism and its impact on trust, and by highlighting how different media platforms are perceived in terms of credibility. These insights can inform newsroom practices, media literacy initiatives, and policy discussions focused on enhancing transparency, accountability, and editorial independence.

Practically, the findings call for renewed efforts to strengthen journalistic standards, diversify sourcing practices, and invest in media literacy programs that empower audiences to critically assess content. Policymakers and media regulators should also consider mechanisms that promote pluralism, reduce undue influence, and protect press integrity. Ultimately, restoring trust in the media requires a concerted effort across institutions, industries, and the public itself.

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