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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Study of the Relationship Between Perceived News Quality and Audience Trust: A Case Study of War News Coverage of the Iran–U.S.–Israel Conflict on IRIB Channel 1

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Introduction:

In recent decades, the proliferation of social networks, the multiplication of news sources, and the widespread dissemination of fake news have transformed "trust" into a fundamental challenge for media institutions worldwide. The global decline in public trust in the media carries strategic consequences for official broadcasters and threatens the very foundation of their social capital (Fisher, 2018). In Iran, despite the central position of television within the national communication system, previous studies present a contradictory and fragmented picture of audience trust in state

media (Khosrowshahi, 2013). This inconsistency underscores the urgent need for a scientific reassessment of the mechanisms underlying trust in official news.

Research on media trust has evolved considerably in response to technological and paradigmatic shifts. In the traditional media era, trust was measured primarily as an institutional variable, assessed through classical criteria of objectivity, accuracy, and impartiality. With the advent of the internet and online platforms, new competitive factors-such as speed, interactivity, and ease of access-emerged, gradually widening the trust gap in favor of emerging digital media. Despite extensive scholarly attention, three persistent challenges remain: the absence of a unified definition of trust in news, the disconnect between normative ideals and media realities, and ongoing disagreements regarding the most influential components of media trust.

The central problem addressed by the present study is the lack of a coherent theoretical framework capable of explaining media trust based on objective, content-related criteria of news writing. Previous research has predominantly examined trust at the institutional level, with comparatively less attention devoted to the professional and content-oriented dimensions of news production. To address this gap, the present study focuses on three classical professional criteria of journalistic writing-accuracy, clarity, and comprehensiveness-and seeks to analyze audience trust in the news of Section 21 of Channel 1 of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) (Ward, 2018).

The study population comprises government employees in Ardabil Province, a strategically significant border region. This group was selected not only because they are consumers of media messages, but also because they play an intermediary role in transmitting official news to the broader society. Their position within the administrative system and their influence on the perception and implementation of government policies render them an ideal population for investigating news trust. Section 21 of IRIB Channel 1, as the most official and most-watched news bulletin in the country, serves as the primary focus of trust measurement. Accordingly, this study integrates social capital perspectives and media credibility theories to present a local, practical model for analyzing trust in Iran's national media—a model intended to assist communication policymakers in designing trust-building content and enhancing the quality of news production.

Method:

This study was conducted within a positivist paradigm, employing a quantitative approach and a descriptive survey design. The statistical population consisted of government employees in Ardabil Province who both used social networks and viewed the 21:00 news section of IRIB Channel 1. The literature review spanned the years 1959 to 2022, from which 13 relevant sources were extracted.

Data were collected using a researcher-made questionnaire comprising three main constructs-accuracy, clarity, and comprehensiveness- and 15 reflective items measured on a five-point Likert scale. Face validity was confirmed through expert consultation. Reliability, assessed via Cronbach's alpha, yielded a coefficient of 0.715, indicating acceptable internal consistency.

The total population was approximately 8,200 employees. Based on the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) table, the minimum required sample was 367; however, to enhance accuracy and reduce sampling error, a sample of 600 participants was selected using stratified random sampling with proportional allocation. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 and Excel. Normality, sample

adequacy, and internal correlations were examined, followed by Pearson correlation and multiple regression analyses.

Findings:

The results revealed that age and education have a positive and significant relationship with trust in national media news. Among the news writing criteria, accuracy and comprehensiveness exhibited the strongest positive correlations with audience trust, while clarity showed a weaker but still significant relationship. The average daily consumption of national media content ranged between 3 and 5 hours, confirming the established position of television in employees' news consumption patterns.

Comparison with previous domestic studies (Sarukhani, 2009; Sabouri Khosrowshahi, 2013; Sadat, 2013) indicated consistency with national trends. Younger employees demonstrated lower levels of trust, reflecting a gradual shift toward alternative news sources-a finding consistent with international research (Fisher, 2018; Arlett, 2018; Prochazaca et al., 2019; Carson et al., 2022; Stewart, 2022; Moran, 2022).

Conclusions:

This study measured the level of trust among government employees in Ardabil Province in the news of Section 21 of IRIB Channel 1 during the Israeli-Iranian war of 2025–2026. The findings indicated that trust was at a relative and moderate level, with accuracy and comprehensiveness emerging as the strongest predictors of trust, while clarity exerted a weaker influence. These results are consistent with both domestic (Torbati, 2011; Hashemizhahi, 2012; Al-Sadat, 2013) and international (Tredwell, 2022; Carson, 2022; Stewart, 2022; Moran, 2022) studies, confirming that content-related accuracy and completeness exert greater influence on audience trust than formal or presentational aspects.

Statistical tests revealed significant differences in trust based on education, age, and income, while gender and marital status showed no significant effects. The lower trust observed among younger, more educated employees serves as a critical alert for media policymakers to adopt more interactive approaches and move beyond traditional information formats.

The study demonstrates that trust in national media news among government employees is a multidimensional construct shaped by accuracy, comprehensiveness, and clarity, and is strongly influenced by technological and social developments. It fills a gap in Iranian research literature by operationalizing classical journalistic criteria within a contemporary framework and offers empirical evidence for theory-driven media policymaking.

Suggestions:

Given that this research is based on analytical generalization, statistical generalization to all government employees in Iran is not claimed. However, given the relatively homogeneous organizational structure of executive agencies, the findings may be testable in similar contexts, though additional empirical studies are needed.

Future research should replicate this study at the national or regional level. Comparative analyses among border provinces-such as East Azerbaijan, West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, and Khuzestan-could reveal cultural and media-specific differences in trust patterns. International comparisons with Turkey and the Republic of Azerbaijan would further situate Iran's media trust index within a broader regional context.

At the implementation level, it is recommended that provincial executive directors, in cooperation with universities, design and implement media literacy training programs for government employees. Pre-test and post-test evaluations would help measure the effectiveness of such programs in enhancing critical understanding and reducing the cognitive gap between employees and information institutions.

At the policy level, media decision-makers should ground their strategies in empirical evidence and existing scientific research. This approach would prevent repetitive policies, costly trial-and-error, and decisions lacking expert support, while simultaneously leveraging domestic research capacity to preserve and enhance Iran's cultural capital in the media system.

The above recommendations can be summarized in three complementary levels:

1. Scientific-methodological level: Development of analytical models based on structural equation modeling (SEM).
2. Implementation level: Media literacy training among government employees and scientific application of news writing criteria.
3. Policy level: Evidence-based decision-making grounded in real data and longitudinal analyses.

Finally, it is proposed that the IRIB Research Center, in collaboration with leading universities, implement a biennial national project entitled "Monitoring Iranians' Media Trust." Such a project would provide both a foundation for communication policy decisions and a systematic tool for evaluating the performance of news departments. This initiative would establish a vital link between science policy and media policy, ultimately fostering more sustainable public trust in the national media.

Data Availability Statement

Data available on request from the authors.

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Ethical considerations

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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