

Media credibility of 2019 Sri Lanka presidential election

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Abstract: This study analyzes students' Media credibility of Sri Lanka presidential election 2019. To gain a fair assessment of students' perception of media credibility during afore-mentioned event, the study used a quantitative instrument and examined students' general trust in media plausibility (before the elections) and with the same approach investigated the students' perception of trust in media credibility during and after the elections. An online survey was conducted among students of University of Sri Jayewardenepura asking them to rate their perception of trust in Sri Lankan news media channels. A total of 100 students participated in the survey. Media channels listed in the questionnaire included newspapers, radio, national television news broadcast, online news media outlets and social media. Study had three objectives and those were, to study the media credibility during the Sri Lanka presidential election, to study the media credibility after the presidential election and to study the student's perception of news media credibility during the election period. Research questions of this study were, would presidential election campaign bring about changes in the credibility perception of Sri Lankan news media channels? What way students' perception of news media credibility changes during the presidential election? And After the presidential elections, does the students' perception of news media credibility alter and in which direction? The findings showed that covering of presidential election campaign held in Sri Lanka, brought about permanent changes in students' perception of news media credibility

Keywords: media credibility, news, presidential election, Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

Mass media is omnipresent in everyday life, especially nowadays when there are so many dissemination outlets out there. Due to advanced technology, mass media have penetrated almost every corner of the world. Homes are getting more and more equipped with different media appliances. Decays ago, journalism in the traditional news media hadn't gained a competitor in the news offer yet, so the audience had a relatively narrow choice where to inform itself, or for that matter which source or medium to trust. Concern over media credibility escalated when yellow journalism and war propaganda contributed to a disillusioned audience that perceived journalists to be ethically ill-equipped to accurately portray reality and enhance legitimacy [1]. This affects all major media news outlets.

If people can't be able to rely on the credibility of the content published on media channels in everyday situations, would they be in moments of great importance? This study examines the perception of trust in media credibility during such moment. To quote Simon Sinek on the importance of elections, "Leadership is not about the next election, it's about the next generation." Speaking of next generation, what represents of next generations are better to students? This study investigates their attitude towards Sri Lankan media credibility during times important for both past and next generations' well-being.

Political elections are among the very important events in democratic societies and countries. Sri Lanka as a multiparty democratic country has to conduct the Presidential elections in every six years. The election is a formal decision-making process by which a population chooses an individual to hold public office. The 2019 Sri Lankan presidential election was the 8th presidential election, which was held on 16 November 2019. This was the first Presidential election in Sri Lanka where no sitting president, prime minister or opposition leader was contesting for President. Thirty five (35) nominations were received from by the Elections Department on 8 December 2019. Thirty three (33) candidates were from minor political parties or as independent candidates, and two were from the main political alliances. Media in Sri Lanka consists of several different types of communications media: television, radio, newspapers, magazines, and websites. State and private media operators provide services in the main languages Sinhala, Tamil and English. The Government owns two major TV stations, radio networks operated by the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC), and newspapers in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. After the growth of Sri Lankan economy, many satellite TV channels were also introduced.

We cannot escape from media. In times of high media dependency, and in times of great importance for one nation's prosperity, it is crucial to be able to rely on sources we can trust. Today, sources and mediums

are aplenty, which makes it far more difficult to choose a medium to trust, since they're often found in mutual contradiction, and even though it's been examined and discussed that today's media credibility is in vast downside all over the world, this researcher believes it is important for the population's and an overall well-being of one country to rely on its own country's media channels, expressly in moments of national importance and changes, such as parliamentary and presidential elections. This study examined the perception of media credibility in Sri Lanka during the time of presidential election, by following the divergence before and during the election campaign. An almost uncountable number of studies has been written on the matter of media credibility, but very few were focused, firstly on the case of Sri Lanka, secondly on students as a target group, and finally there were no studies investigating media credibility during election campaign, let alone during aforementioned one to be found, making this study the latest on the particular researched matter. Being the latest in its area, it takes a look of a current condition of media credibility perception, giving other researchers an opportunity to use these findings to extend the body of knowledge by examining the same matter using other measures, target groups or approaches, or move on with these findings and examine how and in which direction the changes in trust of Sri Lankan media credibility during election campaigns shape the population's voting body.

Study had three objectives and those were, to study the media credibility during the Sri Lanka presidential election, to study the media credibility after the presidential election and to study the student's perception of news media credibility during the election period. Research questions of this study were, would presidential election campaign bring about changes in the credibility perception of Sri Lankan news media channels? What way students' perception of news media credibility changes during the presidential election? And After the presidential elections, does the students' perception of news media credibility alter and in which direction?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

An important aspect of determining media's role in framing politics is the type of media that whether it is commercial or public TV news or tabloids versus quality newspapers, framing of politics will be different. But it is also important to know that in a country whatever the type of media is, media content is always in support of national interests

Whenever reporters publish something about the election, they should care about a lot of sides. In their speeches, politicians may inflame people's emotions with violent language and attacks on their opponents. Professional journalists do not censor what is said. Comments should be reported accurately. But it is especially important to balance inflammatory language with the opposing view by those who are being attacked [2]. During an election, there should be more journalism that gives a voice to what the ordinary people want and what they are saying. The political candidates should ideally respond to the voters' voice. And then the voters can decide. All this is done through the media. The people need voters'-voice reporting for the election to be free and fair [2].

According to Ross Howard (1946), there is three important subjects to reporting during the election period.

I. The political parties and candidates

Most candidates who share the same ideas about how to serve the people, and are loyal to a particular leader, will belong to one political party. If elected by a majority of all the voters in the country, the party leader becomes the government leader or president. Or the party that wins the most votes and members becomes the government, and its leader becomes the prime minister or government leader. There can be several or even a large number of political parties trying to win the election. Some parties will not have candidates in every part of the country. But the media should provide voters with some information about every party. Some candidates will not belong to any party, but they still want to be elected to serve the people. These are called Independent Candidates.

II. The issues

Each political party will have its views about what is most important, what the party promises to do and why voters should elect that party. These views are called the party policies or party platform or party manifesto. There may also be issues that the people believe are important but that some politicians do not. Or there could be statements some political candidates make that create controversy. A professional media will report these issues and ask the political parties to respond.

III. The voting process

Information about the election rules and processes are necessary to assist people in participating. This information includes defining how voters can register; the length of the campaign; who will count the votes; how much money parties can spend on their campaigns; rules on advertising and media coverage;

and who will impose penalties on parties or the media who violate the rules. The media must watch the process to see how well or if the rules are followed without corruption or favoritisms to any one party or abuse of any group of voters. But before we consider how to tell the people about the election campaign, we have to confirm our skills as professional journalists.

Credibility is a "judgment made by a perceiver (e.g. a message recipient) concerning the believability of a communicator. Past studies have claimed that credibility of a medium is strongly linked to the daily use of the medium. Media credibility is the news medium's trustworthiness [3]. It is distinct from source credibility, which focuses on the individual or group as communicator or to the message itself [3]. Media credibility does not focus on the characteristics of the senders of the message like speakers or news presenters. It does not look into the individual's expertise or trustworthiness. Media credibility, if measured as one conceptual dimension, is "most consistently operationalized as believability" [3]. Relying to this, the study will measure students' perception of trust in news media credibility before and during presidential election campaign, not measuring the factors affecting the understanding of the construct 'credibility', as it is coming from the presumption credibility is believability. Scientific research on media credibility was advanced sixty years ago and initial studies were tied with persuasion research [4].

Studies on credibility were primarily focused on the believability of the source, the medium, or the message itself. Two types of media credibility have traditionally been studied: Source credibility and Medium credibility. Source credibility considers the trustworthiness of the individual who constructs the message [5], while news medium credibility evaluates the overall credibility of a larger entity, such as a local television news station, newspaper [6], or, of course, an online news company." Credibility of the news media or sources is important to audience members [7].

Source credibility studies examined how characteristics of the communicator "influence the processing of the message" [8]. Under this stream of research, the attributes of a source were examined in terms of its impact on the message or content. The message may be processed based on reliability and expertise of the sender/source [5]. Source credibility is the amount of believability attributed to a source of information by the receivers. Source is not the only factor to be considered in assessing credibility [5]. The impact of a message may depend on the credibility of the medium transmitting the information. For example, an advertisement may be given more reliance if it appeared in a reputable magazine than in a tabloid. Research has shown that age affects how audiences rate credibility. Bucy (2003) discovered that college students found television news and online news more credible than older media consumers. Older participants, however, found online news to be more credible than television news, whereas college students found television news to be more credible [3].

Medium credibility studies, concentrated more on the channel used to deliver the information rather than on the individual or group sending the message. Whereas the seminal work on credibility concentrated on dimensions of source credibility, more contemporary literature highlighted variations in the perceived credibility attributed to different media channels. With modern times, came a vast technological growth, therefore, in terms of media, many media channels appeared as a competition to those which could and already has been analyzed through dimensions of source credibility.

The seminal work of Hovland and Weiss on source credibility was criticized as not being based on a strong theoretical framework. Hovland and Weiss argued that the dimensions of source credibility were expertise and trustworthiness. When measured as a single perceptual dimension, media credibility is operationally defined as believability [3]. Despite media's accessibility and utilization as sources of information, people do not scrupulously trust and believe everything they get from the mass media. Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (2004) reported that since the mid-1980s Americans have become increasingly skeptical of the information they get from mass media [9].

In the 1930s mass communication started measuring credibility for the purpose of knowing which medium was most trustworthy: newspaper, television or radio. The studies were primarily done to attract advertisers to invest their dollars to the perceived most trusted news source. Research at that time was based on the hypodermic-needle model of communications where mass media were perceived to be highly credible and whatever they said were most likely accepted by the audiences. Initial studies showed that newspapers were the most trusted medium. Later, radio was tagged as the most credible, but in the 1950's, television assumed the position as the most trusted medium [4]. It could be gleaned that each medium has its own unique attributes that affect the viewers' or readers' processing of the news. It has been said the television is the medium that most involves its audiences [10].

Gaziano & McGrath's (1986) created a 12 item scale that represented a credibility dimension. It included the perceived fairness, accuracy, bias, trustworthiness, respect for people's privacy and their interest, factuality, separation of facts from opinion, and journalistic training [6]. Their scale was refined by Meyer

(1988), who indicated that two factors, believability and community concern, best reflected dimensions of credibility of a medium as organization [6]. However, the credibility dimensions vary from study to study depending upon the context [6]. Hence, in context of perceiving trust, this research, using Bucy's theory that media credibility is the news medium's trustworthiness and most consistently operationalized as believability, answers the questions about the changes in students' news media credibility before and during presidential election campaign. As Kohring and Matthes note, news media are expert systems in modern societies that have their own organizational structure, specialist language, and logic of action [12]. Not being able to control the effectiveness of these systems by themselves, individuals have to invest a certain amount of trust in news media, risking that news media will not betray their expectations. The societal function of news media consists of selecting and conveying information about the events in modern societies, thus enabling the public to fulfill their need for orientation in their social environments. In this process, journalists cannot provide all information about any possible issue, but have to inform the public selectively, which makes relying on news reporting itself a risky action [12]. Following this reasoning, this study hence didn't focus on source credibility nor on analyzing the factors that affected students' perception of news media credibility before and during the presidential election campaign, but the state of perception of trust in media credibility during election campaign.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A survey had been constructed and posted online, on a Facebook group of Students of University of Sri Jayewardenepura. Students, as a target group was chosen as agents of assessment of credibility as they are, among other groups, showed to be familiar with all the news media sources given, meaning there was a presumption they wouldn't be biased only because of their lack of choice of news media channels. A convenience sample of 100 students participated in an online survey. The survey consisted of four parts. Each part of the survey was clearly labeled to move participants through the study, and introductions and directions were provided.

The first part measured media preferences asking the participants to identify which medium they go to for particular news content (the categories were national news, international news, breaking news and politics) and media were local newspapers, radio, national television news broadcast, online news media outlets and social media for every question. Part two, measured media exposure frequency, with which news channel were consumed. Respondents were asked how often they receive news content. Parts 3 and 4 consisted of belief statements on a three-point Likert scale ranging from disagree (1), to undecided (2) and agree (3) used for each statement. Statements were related to trust matter. The question that differed from others in both parts was the one asking participants to rate their perception of trust in news media generally (Part 3) and during the election campaign (Part 4), on a semantic scale from 1 to 10. While the first three parts of the survey asked the questions mattering the general attitude, Part 4 consisted on questions related to participants' attitude during the election campaign. Finally, despite the limitations of this study especially on its methodology using a convenience sample of students, it is believed to have contributed new findings to the body of knowledge, having in mind this particular topic hasn't been explored yet, let alone using this approach. There is still a need for further study of the degree of influence of constructs on the credibility of mediated news.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Part 1 measured students' general medium preferences by asking them which medium they approach to for various types of news (categories were national news, international news, politics and breaking news). For national news, 48% stated they go for news to online news media outlets, national TV broadcast had 28.1% and 15% chose social media, while the remaining numbers went to newspapers and cable television broadcast (3.8%).



Figure 1: Preferences of News Media Choice

For international news, online news media outlets were rated highest again, but now in a lower number (39.3%), national TV news broadcast had 11.1% and local newspapers 10.1%. To the question where they go to about news about politics, most students chose online new media outlets again (38.8%), then social media (19.4 %), newspapers had 17.4%, national television news broadcast 14.5%. In all four questions of Part 1 majority of the participants answered they find news on online new media outlets, hence data from Part 1 showed that students mostly reach for news on online news media outlets.

Part 4 measured the perception of credibility in Sri Lankan news media channels during the presidential election campaign. In the first question, the participants were asked which medium they addressed to find information related to presidential elections. Highest percentage of the participants chose online news media outlets as their source of news nonrelated to elections (43.2%), while local newspapers comprised 5.8 %, national television news broadcast 17.9% and social media 23.3%. To learn about the election nonrelated news, majority chose online news media outlets.

RQ01. Would presidential election campaign bring about changes in the credibility perception of Sri Lankan news media channels?

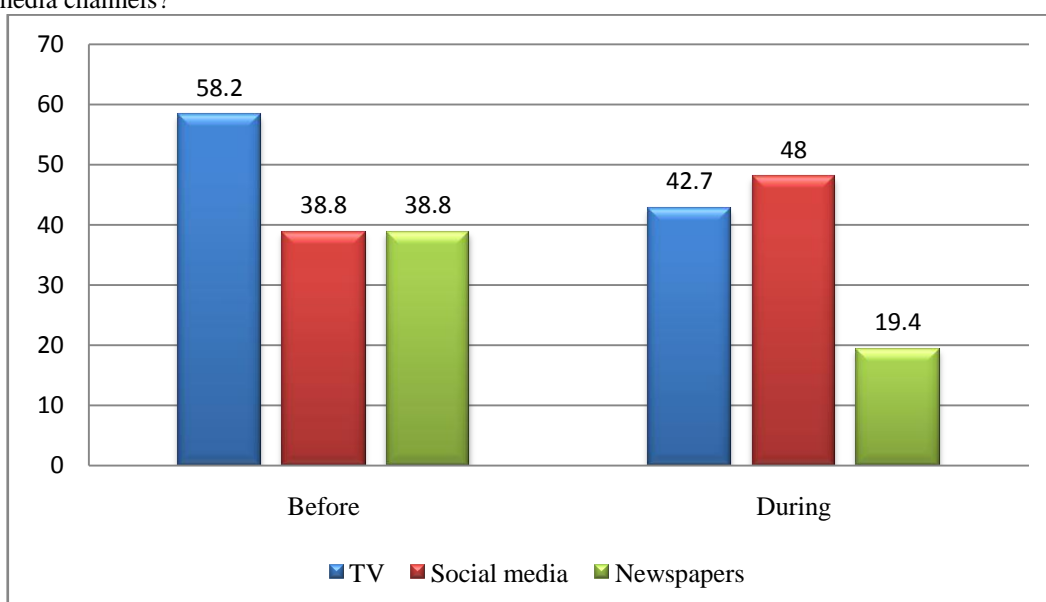


Figure 21: Changes in the credibility perception of Sri Lankan news media channels

As the figure 2 shows, there is an obvious change in credibility of news media channels. The condition of the credibility before the presidential election campaign points higher score when measuring the matter of trust, while the second, measuring credibility during the campaign scores lower. With the exception of social media, all analyzed media were in decline during the campaign. Trust in TV dropped from 58.2 % to 42.7%; newspapers dropped from 38.8% to 19%. Generally speaking, perception of news media credibility during presidential elections declined for around 30%.

When we combine aforementioned findings, the ones from Figure 2, showing changes in belief statements referring to trust issues and a calculation that perception of news media credibility during presidential elections declined for around 30% with the ones depicted was 6.7%, dropped to 4.1%, proving students perceive news media credibility during elections as lower, therefore, it's in decline

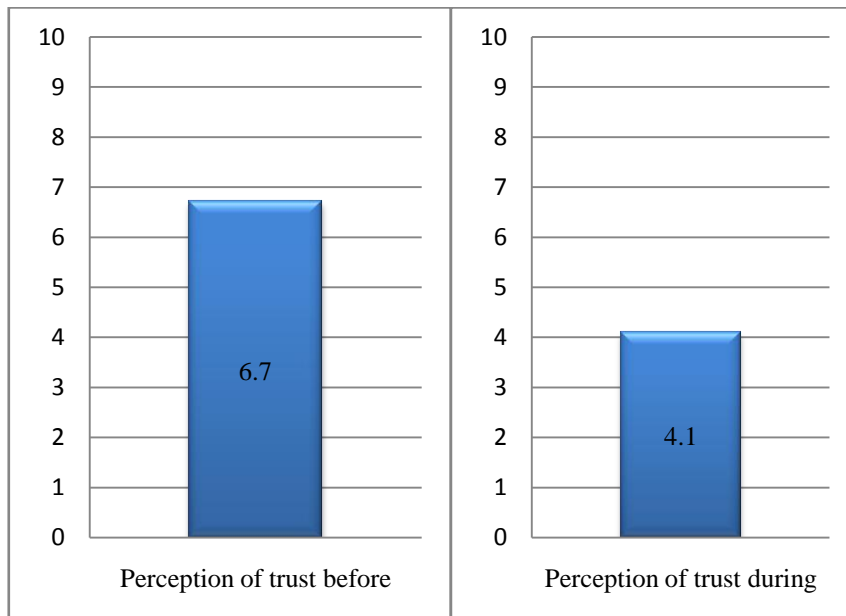


Figure 3: Perception of credibility in news media during election

RQ02. What way students' perception of news media credibility changes during the presidential election campaign?

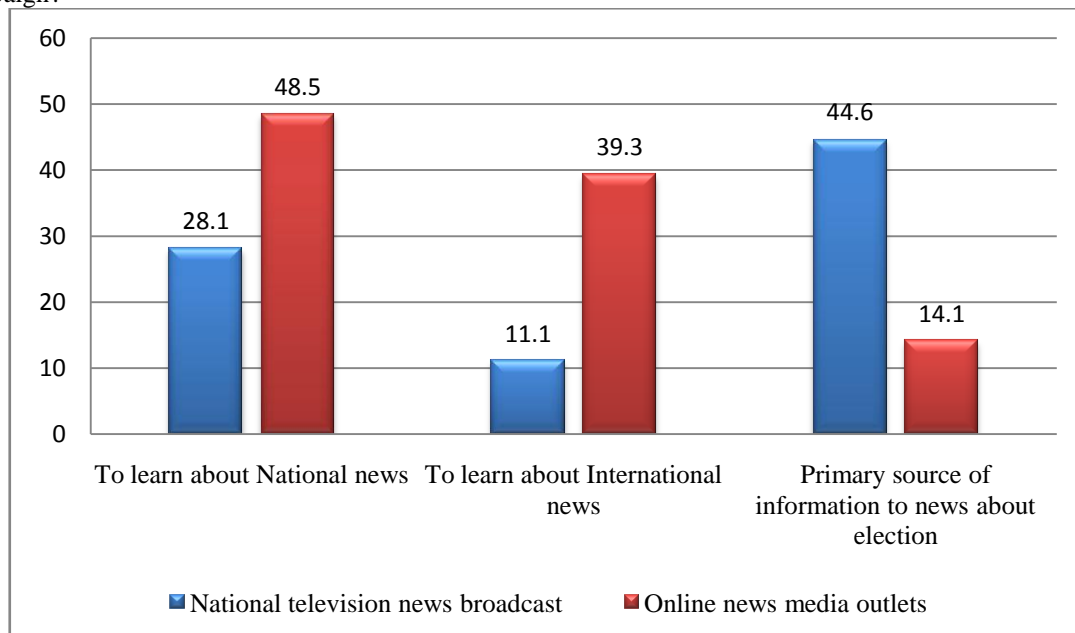


Figure 4: Shifting in preference of news medium choice

While before the presidential elections campaign students mostly choose online news media outlets as a first source of information, during the presidential campaign they reach for news on national television news broadcast.

Even though results from Parts 1 and 2 showed that students generally choose online news media outlets as most preferred and most frequently used medium in times during presidential election campaign, students choose national television news broadcast as their primary source of information, giving an increase of national television news broadcast's credibility, proving during presidential election campaign, students' perception changes through a change in choice of preferred source, hence.

RQ3. After the presidential elections, does the students' perception of news media credibility alter and in which direction?

When asked whether their sensation of distrust in news media channels' credibility has changed even after the elections, the majority of students stated there was no change to previous attitude. Thirty-three participants chose option Undecided (16%), the percentage of those who disagreed with the statement was 24%, while the highest percentage of respondents agreed with the statement (60%).

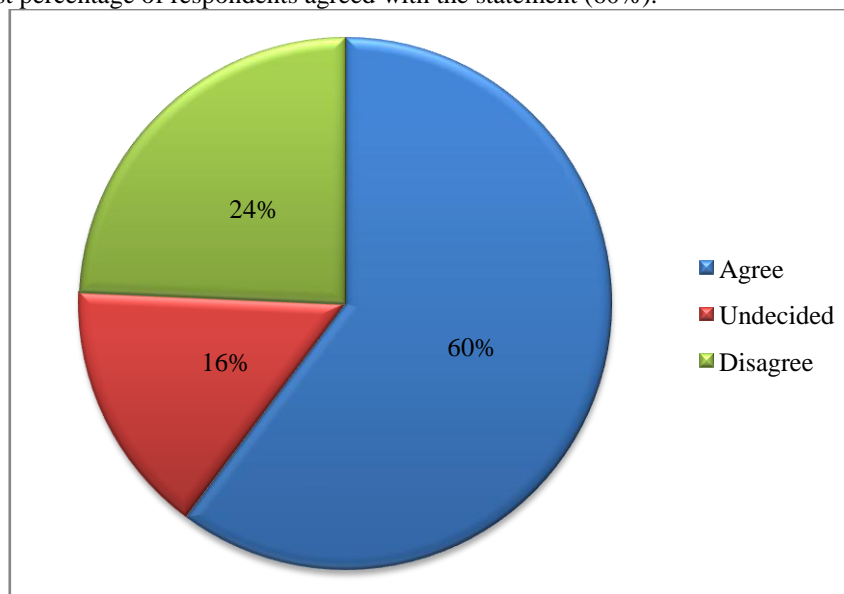


Figure 5: Perception of credibility in news media after election

V. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to examine students' perception of trust in news media credibility during 2019 Sri Lankan presidential election and investigate whether presidential elections change the general perception of trust in Sri Lankan news media permanently by comparing the differences in students' attitude towards news media trustworthiness before and during the campaign. The study used quantitative methodology approach-a convenience sample survey for data collecting and descriptive statistics for data analysis.

The study found that students actively use online news media outlets as most preferred and frequently used medium, but not the most credible one. When it comes to the most credible news media channel, the study found that for the students it was national television, as in general, so as during election campaign and breaking news period. Students most of all trust the news they watch on online and national television news broadcasts. The study also found that to learn about news about elections, students reach for news on national television news broadcast, as well as when receiving conflicting versions of the same story from the different mass media, students are mostly inclined to believe news on national television news broadcast, while to learn about news related to topics unrelated to elections, students grasp their information on online news media outlets.

In all four questions of Part 1 majority of the participants answered they find news on online news media outlets, hence data from Part 1 showed that students mostly reach for news on online news media outlets. Results show that students read news daily only on online news media outlets and social media (Facebook, Twitter). Results show that students read news daily only on online news media outlets and social media. When receiving conflicting versions of the same story from the different mass media, students are mostly inclined to believe news on national television news broadcast. To learn about news about elections, students reach for news on national television news broadcast, while to learn about news related to topics unrelated to

elections, students grasp their information on online news media outlets. The study found presidential elections brought about permanent changes in students' general perception of news media credibility as well that students feel that after the presidential election campaign, their trust hasn't been recovered, leaving their perception of new media credibility in decline.

Credibility has brought in the nature of media messages, touching on believability. In a society where media are controlled by the government, the political parties or by the financial interests, people realize the direction of the news, but many still find them useful to obtain news or information. In a tight environment where there is a need for information, audience members direct their attention to extract information from an environment of skepticism.

The results of the research showed that during the presidential election campaign, Sri Lankan news media credibility is in decline permanently, leaving people disappointed in the lack of fully reliable information during events of both social and national importance. Nonetheless, the media shouldn't take the whole blame for the decline of its credibility. In times when everything is politicized and there are many hierarchies governing in every vocation, the media as well are now owned by conglomerates whose primary goal is not to serve the public but to sell the scandal and feed the sensationalism. Unfortunately, that news has a massive audience and it always will.

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