

# Global Media Journal, Indian Edition

Volume 11, Issue 1, June 2019

Manipal Academy of Higher Education, Manipal

## **Negotiating Platforms and Future: Online News Industry in India**

**By Amol Ranjan**

# Negotiating Platforms and Future: Online News Industry in India

By Amol Ranjan

The growth in internet infrastructure, increasing online news consumption through platforms, exponential rise in smartphone devices and greater investments in digital advertising have led to various digital journalism start-ups in India especially since 2014. We are witnessing a kind of re-organization of news industries with proliferation of digital-born new media outlets and its growing connection with technological platforms like Google, Facebook. On one hand, these technological platforms are encouraging new models of news distribution, news products and news monetization, but on the other, it has allowed for wide flow of misinformation or fake news leading to talks of regulation of online platforms and media. The objective of this paper is to understand the trajectories where the digital news industry in India is possibly headed, especially in the digital environment where more than 60% of India's population is still to get online.

## Methodology

Literature around digital transition of news industry, digital news startups and news flows in social networks in India were reviewed with the purpose of developing a broader understanding of news ecosystem in India. This also helped to frame semi-structured questions to journalists and editors various news publication in India. Interviews included people from variety of publications. This was done strategically to capture everyone's unique concerns.

## Literature Review

Reuters Institute for Study in Journalism (RISJ) published a report *Digital Journalism Startups in India* in 2016 where they found that these startups have been adapting unique editorial priorities, workflows, distribution strategies, and business models to navigate their way through digital media; and terms like search engine optimization, social media analytics have become part of everyday workflow of today's newsroom (Sen & Nielsen, 2016)<sup>1</sup>. Publishers from both the digital-only and legacy media organizations now have people who especially engage with the audience on social media and the platform influence their workflows and decisions.

RISJ in collaboration with The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) published a short report *Indian Newspapers' Digital Transition* in 2016 where they studied the digital transition of three

newspapers. The report talked about how social media strategy sometimes informed editorial decision in relation to when and where stories was published online and to what extent a

story deserved coverage. It was revealed that social media trends didn't completely set their agenda but there was an attempt to be part of conversations occurring on social media. The editors and journalists interviewed for the report said that studying social media reactions improved his news sense and how numbers and reactions on social media helped justify his choice of subject to the editor (Aneez, Parthasarathi, Chattapadhyay & Nielsen, 2016)<sup>ii</sup>.

Another report *Indian news media and the production of news in the age of social discovery* by RISJ in collaboration with CIS which studied six leading English-language Indian news organisations, two newspapers (Hindustan Times and The Indian Express), two television stations (NDTV and News18), and two digital-born organisations (Firstpost and The Quint) revealed that many of the original content for created for social media (native content) by their social media teams and editors come as a response to social media trends. This was more for digital-only and smaller newsrooms like The Quint whose social media team would regularly find out trends and do stories accordingly. (Aneez, Parthasarathi, Chattapadhyay & Nielsen, 2016)<sup>iii</sup>.

### **Re-organization of News**

Digital technologies have altered the ways of the news flows traditionally done by print and TV mediums. In the connected digital environment when there are so many outlets for people and publishers to put their voice especially social media, torrents of news/information on these platforms and other social media expressions become unavoidable for the news publishers. Many a times, user-generated content act as a major source of news or breaking news; e.g. tweets and posts of people in authority or power like ministers and famous sportsman etc often act as a press release which is further analyzed and is made into a piece of story for news publishers. Many of the digital-only news publishers-who work with small resources and often operate from big metropolitan cities-can't afford to have many field reporters hence most of their news contents are in the form of news analysis, opinions, and commentary either from their news room or from their contributors, in text or videos.

I asked Nandgopal Rajan<sup>iv</sup>, New Media Editor at Indian Express Online, about how he looked at growing digital-only news startups and how they fair against online initiatives of legacy media organizations like Indian Express. According to him although there are digital-only news media outlets that are doing good work, many of them are in the business to get traffic and more into the entertainment business and they differ from a kind journalistic discipline, news credibility, resource, and news volume which legacy news organization like Indian Express offers. He added "They (digital-only) have nothing to compete with us. I think it (the future) has to be lead by traditional players like us because somewhere the credibility is going to kick in....it's ( Indian news industry) a volume-driven market. You can make an impact but you don't know how long you can sustain that impact. In that sense, you need to go back to old fashion ways. I think

internet market is also driven by old world marketing setup. Unless you have a threshold figure, you can't survive. And that threshold figure is huge and it's also hard to make money." Despite the fact that still a lot of digital news publishers, mostly digital news start ups are still figuring their business models one should not forget that a lot of these start ups were a reactions against the old media set ups where it was believed that the journalism and freedom of expression was compromised by conflict on interests related to media ownerships where big businessmen and political units owned a lot of stake in the news media. Connected digital environment have created a scope for cheaper cost of publication for online consumption of news and as platforms are growing bigger in size and users, they strategically became an important partner in online journalism to reach readers and consumers for digital news publications, especially for digital only publishers. But the growing relationships between platforms and publishers have also raised numerous issues.

### **Negotiating a new player**

Dependency on social media platforms like Facebook is also a major concern among the publishers because some of the algorithm changes over the years by Facebook have negatively affected publishers' traffic to their websites. But the degree of its effect was different from the legacy news media as against the born-digital news media. The report *Indian Newspapers' Digital Transition* revealed that leading news publishers like Hindustan Times was less affected by the changing algorithms of Facebook compare to The Quint who is a mobile and social first news brand and depend heavily on social media platforms to reach its audience. Hindustan Times who is an already established brand hence they did get significant traffic other than search and social platforms. Technological platforms not only shape consumption patterns and but news products itself. The report *Indian news media and the production of news in the age of social discovery* mentions that although a lot of legacy media publications get significant direct traffic, most of the news brands (both legacy and digital-only) get a large share of traffic via search and social platforms. It also says there has been a significant increase in off-site consumption of news and the news publishers have gradually increased the number of native posts to platforms, especially on Facebook. Indian Express Online, was one of the first publishers to partner with Facebook to do Instant Articles in December 2015. Nandgopal Rajan said they also partnered with Facebook to do certain Live videos. He added that in addition to the content partnership and working with them on new news products like Instant Articles, they keep each other in the loop in their latest technological developments. Recently, Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages (AMP) has also become popular with Indian publishers. Many of them have expressed much satisfaction with the results given by AMP. Sanjay Nagpal, India Today's Head of Technology said "Even though our ad density on AMP pages is lower, we are seeing much better monetization due to faster load times and up to 200% higher viewability. This makes the proposition very attractive." (India Today – AMP, 2018) v.

Today, technological platforms are increasingly involved with digital news business in many aspects. In February-March 2017, a Hindi language news website-an initiative of a major news broadcaster TV Today- The Lallantop was live streaming ground reports from interiors of Uttar Pradesh on Facebook. They published Facebook Live reports with the help of I phone and 3G/4G connectivity. Over the period of the election, they covered most of the districts in UP. The Lallantop had two teams to cover 403 constituencies of 72 districts of Uttar Pradesh (UP). Saurabh Dwivedi, the editor of the website said that the Facebook had partnered with its news websites to do the live coverage in an objective to reach the Hindi speaking users in the state with its latest product Facebook Live, which they had launched in 2016. When Saurabh was asked about the nature of the partnership, he said<sup>vi</sup> “I can’t disclose too much. Facebook liked the idea of The Lallantop. They were excited about our experiment in the Hindi or vernacular media. They saw our stories, our brand pitch, our attitude and our preparation of the elections. They also realized that they wanted to do this with us with their brand and to reach the interiors of the rural heartland of India.” Another news website, The Quint also did few Facebook Live with Barkha Dutt while later in the year 2017; The Lallantop continued publishing Facebook Live reports in the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh assembly elections. Recently, as a part of the Facebook Journalism Project, Facebook [provided](#)<sup>vii</sup> newsrooms with product updates and best practices and held training for more than 250 journalists at Hindustan Times and the India Today Group. Facebook Journalism Project, started in January 2017 intends to get involved in news products and training assistance which could be utilized by publishers, journalists, and communities. The initiative includes plans to monetize news videos, promote local news, provide data insights for publishers, tackling fake news and promoting news literacy. Similarly, [Google News Initiative](#)<sup>viii</sup> (GNI) who has stepped into digital news industry to empower publishers and journalists all over the world<sup>ix</sup>. In India, GNI’s training network aims to support around 8000 journalists in English and six other Indian languages in the current year. Although Google and Facebook position themselves as a technological company but their domination over global infrastructure and their initiatives are making them a serious player in the digital news business. In the global network society, digital technologies have made data central to economic relations and these technological platforms are capable of extracting and controlling immense amount of data, which makes them a powerful force in organizing businesses like news industry.

I asked few people from the digital-only publication about their views on increasing involvement of technological platforms. Anuj Srivas<sup>x</sup>, the Business Editor from The Wire said “I don’t think we are at that stage to think about if Google and Facebook doing more harm. The worry is more for bigger publishers. We are a new brand and our brand is growing at a decent rate. Our business model is too flexible. We are not entirely focused on monetization at this point. Of course, we are concerned about the future, but at this point, it is where we have built on.” Tushar Banerjee<sup>xi</sup> the Product Head at The Quint summed up the current situation by saying “This is a lot like the typical ‘shopping mall’ behavior. You visit a shopping mall; you look, discover and

buy. Similarly, people are glued to social media platforms.” But despite conceding to the fact that currently their monopoly is unavoidable, he doesn’t see them as a threat and feels that news publishers and platforms are in the complementary position since news and news publishers add a lot of value to user’s experience of Facebook. “Facebook would have been a very amateur platform or a dating site or a social network minus news and minus seriousness. Since news is there, a lot of conversation is taking place” He added.

So at this time, there is a lot of acceptability for platforms like Google and Facebook from the side of news publishers despite the fact that the publishers end up sharing a big chunk of advertising revenue with these platforms. The publishers and journalists are aware that there is a lot that platforms offer to them, not only in terms of audience but also in terms of valuable news products and data insights. Google and Facebook are also aware India is their biggest and most growing digital market so they would want to enter into every possible opportunity to do their businesses including news business so they are forming various partnerships with news publishers. So there is a sense of mutual growth with certain amount of anxieties thrown at the helm of news publishers with platforms becoming a very active player in the news businesses in India. A danger lurking that the new partner in the form of technological platforms might create another kind of media monopolies in the data fueled economy.

### **Growth of the Vernacular and Videos**

Apart from concerns about technological platforms, I also asked journalists and editors about what they see as the biggest shift in the digital news industry. Nandgopal Rajan said “English language market is saturated. So your growth has to happen in Hindi and other regional languages.” Indian Express has launched its digital editions in Bengali, Tamil, and Malayalam languages since the start of 2017. (Ray, 2018)<sup>xii</sup> This is in addition to their websites in English, Hindi and Marathi languages. The Wire has also launched its Hindi and Urdu publications in addition to its English publication. Although India’s internet user base faces a great digital divide<sup>xiii</sup> but its growing very fast. A study conducted by Google in partnership with KPMG reported that the Indian language internet user base grew at an annual rate of 41% between 2011 and 2016 to reach 234 million users at the end of 2016. This impressive growth resulted in Indian language Internet users surpassing their English counterparts. The user base of local languages will continue to grow at 18% annually to reach 536 million in the next four years, compared to the English Internet user base growing at 3% to reach 199 million. The study also reported that cheaper mobile data charges, growth in smartphone users, increasing Indic languages support system across online ecosystem have been key drivers of this growth. (Modgil, 2017) <sup>xiv</sup>. Nandgopal Rajan also believes video will be a big part of digital publication’s strategy especially for people who are still to get online. He thinks a lot of consumption of news in India in the future would in the form of videos. “They might progress from video to text. I don’t think it’s going to be another way around.” Recent trends<sup>xv</sup> in digital video consumption also confirm the belief that digital video consumption in the vernacular market is proportionally

very high. News Publishers have also been actively pushing their online content on platforms. With Facebook encouraging native videos on its platforms since 2016, Youtube and Facebook have emerged as huge platforms for online news video consumption<sup>xvi</sup> ( Kalogeropoulos, 2017). Each of the digital media outlets we interviewed thought Facebook native videos are giving them its maximum growth in terms of reach and engagement although they are still waiting for monetary gains. Although digital outlets of TV broadcasters have an advantage since they can put their clips from their TV broadcasts but digital-only and print publications have been experimenting with various video formats in form of interviews, commentaries, current affairs discussion, news bulletin, explainer videos, short documentaries, long-form video reportage, live streaming of events and incidents etc and some of them have been very successful in it. I asked Anuj Srivas about this visible shift and he said “before digital journalism; there was this idea that print journalism had its strengths, TV journalism had its strengths; and there was never really an overlap.” The digital allows for the convergence between the print and the TV industry.

### **Regulation and Control**

Growing influence of online media on the public and torrents of mis-information on platforms has brought attempts to ‘regulate’ online media by the Govt, of India. In April 2018, they had formed a committee to frame and suggest a regulatory framework for online media/news portals along the lines applicable to print and electronic media in India but the Information and Broadcasting Ministry later disbanded the 10 member committee (which didn’t ever meet once) to set up a new committee under the Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology (Deep, 2018)<sup>xvii</sup>.

It is evident that Information and Technology Act, under Indian Penal Code, already have many laws, strict guidelines and stiff punishments for violating content norms on internet. In addition to this the state already has additional powers to shutdown Internet and telecom services by using either Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, 1973 (CrPC) to maintain public tranquility or Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services (Public Emergency or Public Safety) Rules, 2017. . Govt. of India already has a plan to set up Social Media Communication Hub where they could possibility track all chatters across platforms including messaging apps like Whatsapp In recent times, many Indian states have experienced internet shutdowns. The power has been most abused in the state of Jammu and Kashmir citing public unrest and political dissent (PTI, 2018) <sup>xviii</sup>. World over, despite the spread of hate speech, the medium of internet has seen as furthering and protecting the cause of democracy and individual liberty because of its participatory nature but online medium has also been used by state and corporate owned technological platforms as a means to exercise wide power and control over citizens by channeling surveillance and gathering data, restrict speech and voices of people or users, create media or platforms monopolies by controlling communication infrastructure. Today, online news media in India finds itself at very interesting place where its larger population are still

come online. Knowing fully that online soon will going to be one of the prime medium to consume information for most people in India, protecting freedom of speech and health of news and information ecosystem in India will of utmost concern for public.

## **Conclusion**

The latest development in the news ecosystem can not only be understood in the context of media convergence where digitization is blurring the lines between producers and consumers and the print and the broadcast industries but also in terms of diversity of news products and its audience on the digital medium. Amidst the ongoing re-organisation of news media, a lot of digital news presence are still owned and controlled by legacy media companies and its partners but digital environment aided by platforms has definitely added greater variety and experimentations in terms of how news has been imagined, presented, distributed and consumed by the audience. As digital permeates news and news industry in India, it not only raises issues of how news businesses are going to organize itself but also how news and its public would tackle questions of wider control and surveillance that comes with the infrastructure of technological platforms and communication infrastructure in general. The future of the news industry will be shaped by these debates and its struggles to finds its place in the current communication environment.

## **Acknowledgments**

I did the interviews when I was working with the Centre for Internet and Society as a Consultant in 2017. I would like to thank the Centre for Internet and Society, Sumandro Chattapadhyay, Anuj Srivas, Nandgopal Rajan, Tushar Banerjee, Saurabh Dwivedi and the reviewer of the draft facilitated by EPW for this article.

## **References**

<sup>i</sup> Sen, A, & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). Digital Journalism Start-Ups in India (rep.). University of Oxford and Reuters Institute of Journalism. Retrieved 2019, from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/digital-journalism-start-ups-india>

<sup>ii</sup> Aneez, Z., Chattapadhyay, S., Parthasarathi, V., & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). *Indian Newspapers' Digital Transition: Dainik Jagran , Hindustan Times , and Malayala Manorama* (rep). University of Oxford, Reuters Institute of Journalism and The Centre of Internet and Society . Retrieved 2019, from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/indian-newspapers-digital-transition>

iii Aneez, Z., Chattapadhyay, S., Parthasarathi, V., & Nielsen, R. K. (2016). *Indian Newspapers' Digital Transition: Dainik Jagran , Hindustan Times , and Malayala Manorama* (rep). University of Oxford, Reuters Institute of Journalism and The Centre of Internet and Society . Retrieved 2019, from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/our-research/indian-newspapers-digital-transition>

iv The Interview with Nandgopal Rajan, New Media Editor, *Indian Express Online*, was conducted on 17 May 2017.

v India Today. (2018). AMP. AMP Project. Retrieved January 12, 2019, from <https://www.ampproject.org/case-studies/indiatoday/>

vi The Interview with Saurabh Dwivedi, Editor, *The Lallantop*, was conducted on 25 April 2017.

vii <https://www.facebook.com/facebookmedia/blog/facebook-journalism-project-six-month-update/>

viii <https://newsinitiative.withgoogle.com>

x The Interview with Anuj Srivas, Business Editor, *The Wire*, was conducted on 1 June 2017.

xi The Interview with Tushar Banerjee, Product Head, The Quint, was conducted on 1 May 2017.

xii Ray, S. (2018). Indian Express Group launches Bengali news website ieBangla. *MediaNama*. Retrieved January 12, 2019, from <https://www.medianama.com/2018/04/223-indian-express-launches-iebangla/>

xiii According to a latest Indian Telecom Services Performance Indicator [Report](#), there was a total of 445.96 million internet subscribers (34.42 %) by the end of December 2017 in which 362.87 million were broadband internet subscribers. The report reflects a great digital divide between urban and rural India. The percentage of the urban population who had internet was 76.76% against 14.89% of the rural population.

xiv Modgil, S. (2017). No English Only Vinglish: 90% New Internet Users Coming Online In India Are Non-English Speakers. *Inc42 Media*. Retrieved January 12, 2019, from <https://inc42.com/buzz/internet-users-report-google/>

xv According to [Nokia MBiT Index](#), a report on mobile broadband performance in India, data traffic grew by 144 per cent in 2017. 4G usage reached 11 GB per user per month on average. Video content contributed up to 65 per cent of total mobile data traffic in which Hindi and regional languages comprised more than 90 per cent of popular videos watched online on Youtube India.

xvi Kalogeropoulos, A. (2017). Online News Video Consumption. *Digital Journalism*, 6/5: 651–65. DOI: 10.1080/21670811.2017.1320197

<sup>xvii</sup> Deep, A. (2018). I&B Ministry disbands online content regulation committee; MeitY to step in. *MediaNama*. Retrieved January 12, 2019, from <https://www.medianama.com/2018/07/223-i-meity-to-step-in/>

<sup>xviii</sup> PTI (2018). India Saw Highest Internet Shutdowns in 2017-18: UNESCO Report. *The Quint*. Retrieved January 12, 2019, from <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/india-saw-highest-internet-shutdowns-in-2017-2018-unesco-report>