Ethical Dilemmas of Solo Journalists while engaging in Mobile Journalism:

An exploratory engagement in the peripheries of India's North East

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Abstract

News production and its dissemination via social media platforms like YouTube has become popular among people in developing countries like India. The alternative news media has presented a significant challenge to the traditional news media with its different news, viewpoints, and analyses. For the remote regions of India's northeast, where traditional media outlets do not provide sufficient attention, sharing news on social media is essential. Solo

Journalists (SoJo) who engage in Mobile Journalism (MoJo) primarily rely on smartphones as their primary journalistic tools in the area. However, they face at least three critical ethical dilemmas: i) How do they assess the integrity of the information they report? (ii) How do they address any potential negative effects of their reporting, whether at the local, regional, or national level, stemming from their interpretation of the events? Finally, (iii) how do they uphold their accountability for news reporting? These questions have influenced the regional perspective on MoJo. The inquiry into the individuals responsible for these social media news portals/networks, their operational methods, and the corresponding social challenges they encounter daily also remains unfathomed. Moreover, it is critical to investigate the connection between MoJo and social media, as well as the impact it has on the general populace's perception of the world. In Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts in West Bengal, which strategically connect 'mainland' India with the North Eastern states nestled between Nepal, China, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, this study explores how MoJo and social media are transforming indigenous perspectives and their understanding of news media. This study investigates the socio-technical aspects of mobile journalism, with a particular emphasis on YouTube news channels and the daily news content produced by SoJos as social actors. The research findings indicate that social media news portals function as unique pseudo-professional newsgroups, as determined by thematic analysis of news content and message data, including comment threads. The majority of SoJos engage in what can only be referred to as peddling in news, transforming social media platforms into a 'Mandi'—a 'peddlers market' of sorts—muddling the efforts of genuine, professional, and devoted journalists. The researcher however, argues that in today's highly interconnected society, the idea of disconnecting from technology is no longer a feasible option. Thus, the emphasis should be on humanising the technological aspect of digitising humanity. This involves equipping SoJos with journalistic

training and expertise. By doing so, they can responsibly utilise their newfound power for the betterment of society----------, while upholding the highest standards of journalistic practices.

Statement of the Problem

One can access the internet in one's hand through a device often fit to be held inside a pocket. These devices, known as smartphones, have also made content creation extremely easy. So much so that any individual can shoot a video, edit it using his or her voiceover, upload it online, and claim to be a journalist, without ever needing an elaborate infrastructural setup. How such a 'journalist' using a smartphone reports news and how the vast populace consumes it through social media forms a critical clue towards understanding the rapidly transforming news-media ecosystem (Abdallah et al., 2023). According to Martyn (2009), a mobile journalist is essentially a 'Solo Journalist' or a SoJo in the form of a lone multimedia reporter who almost exclusively focuses on 'hyper-local' news.

Legacy news media organisations have adopted the concept of Solo Journalists (SoJo) to maintain profitability at a time when audiences are becoming more fragmented and falling and infrastructure costs are rising (Ahrens, 2006; Strupp, 2008; Martyn, 2009). NDTV was India's first news media house to go all-in on smartphone newsgathering. Packer (2017) writes about how NDTV switched to a MoJo model almost overnight. Nearly all its reporters began shooting and editing news videos using smartphones, resulting in NDTV laying off camera operators and video editors in large numbers (Packer, 2017).

Following Adani Group's takeover of NDTV, a number of prominent journalists, including the Magsaysay Award-winning senior executive producer Ravish Kumar, abruptly transitioned into a SoJo role when he announced the launch of his YouTube channel, *Ravish Kumar Official*

(FPJ, 2022). Ravish Kumar, a prominent legacy journalist in India, today stands out as a SoJo who reports, produces, and uploads videos and webcasts exclusively through his YouTube channel *'Ravish Kumar Official'*, which has so far attracted 11.3 million subscribers (as of June 17, 2024), making him one of the most influential SoJos in India.

Ravish Kumar's transformation from one of the most influential legacy journalists to one of the most influential SoJos engaged in mobile journalism has inspired every small-town journalist and citizen wielding a smartphone, to report the daily happenings around them and webcast them through their own YouTube channel or other social media portals. It also highlights MoJo's efficacy as an effective alternative to legacy media, which remains in the domain of media conglomerates. Further, with one individual attracting more than 11.3 million subscribers within two years of the creation of his YouTube channel and 1,426,426,013 (1.4 billion) views with merely 685 videos (as of July 19, 2024), the bare minimum of equipment and infrastructural investment points to the increasing attraction of audiences to MoJo platforms. Kumar's transformation into a SoJo has also given legitimacy to the MoJo and the SoJos. However, there have been many other prominent legacy journalists, some of whom have been Kumar's colleagues, such as Sohit Misra, Faye D'Souza, Sanket Upadhyay, etc., who have become prominent SoJos in their own right (Mittal, 2024).

According to Bettag (2000, p. 106), the rise of SoJos in MoJo stems from the recognition of news content as a potential source of profit, despite its previous lack of revenue generation. There was pressure to maintain profitability in the face of dwindling and fractured audiences, who suffered from increasingly shorter attention spans. The ongoing pressure to maintain financial viability in the media industry, amidst technological innovation and economic reorientation, has resulted in a mandate to achieve greater output with limited resources. This

has necessitated the production of a wide range of diverse content with a reduced workforce and minimal infrastructure costs.

Given the complex dilemmas surrounding 'MoJo' and 'SoJo' journalism (Martyn, 2009; Abdallah et al., 2023; Hollands, 2003; Meeks, 2006), how multimedia publishing has transformed news production by such SoJos, particularly in small towns, cities, and villages in India, warrants active investigation. It is critical to access the media ecosystem in fringe and peripheral regions like the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, surrounded by four countries. The region continues to be embroiled in its own often violent sub-nationalist movement demanding the establishment of a separate state of Gorkhaland within the framework of India's federal structure, but separation from West Bengal presents an interesting dilemma. Indeed, rugged, mountainous, and far-flung, and covered by picturesque hills and mountains and dotted by world-famous tea gardens yet mired in mass poverty, massive unemployment, rampant migration, and environmental degradation (Roy 2022; 2012), the region forms a unique case study for geographically isolated fringe regions that are critical to the continued territorial integrity of the nation yet extremely neglected and thus marginalized. How the populace scattered in the towns, and the far-flung tea gardens, cinchona plantations, and villages disconnected and disjointed are brought together in the general racial consciousness of 'Gorkhaness' (Roy, 2012) by MoJo in the absence of a larger legacy media remains unfathomed.

This research thus examines the intricate relationship between smartphone news technology and social players by specifically studying YouTube news channels in the region and the daily news material produced by the SoJos. Thus, SoJos in the context of this research involves social actors, who take upon themselves the mantle of journalists in the absence of legacy journalists or opportunities to become one. Unlike the citizen journalists of the past, these private individuals view mobile journalism as a profession rather than a form of social service (Miller,

2019). Thus, while the citizen journalists were essentially part-timers, the SoJos are full-timers. Interestingly, while the stringers, a category of news reporters attached to different media organisations, are paid on a per news report basis (Roy, 2023; Bhargav & Downey, 2024); the SoJos are 'owners of their own destinies' gathering advertisements for their own YouTube channels and also being paid by Google Inc. through the revenue sharing model. SoJos are also distinct from YouTubers, given that they entirely or in the majority devote themselves to reporting or analysing current happenings thus dealing primarily in news instead of engaging in mundane video blogging. YouTubers almost entirely rely on video blogs (vblogs) devoted to niche themes such as food, travel, education, religion, etc.

This research also investigates the effect of MoJo on news producers and the work surrounding news reportage—whether what we are witnessing in mobile journalism is the 'deskilling' of what was once a profession built on intuition, personal experience, and impromptu improvisations—or, as Martyn (2009) puts it, where reporters devoted a substantial portion of their lives to honestly and comprehensively cover an event, thus, delivering the news with proper context. Concomitantly, is MoJo also paving the way for more intricate, complex storytelling and improved journalism? Indeed, the researcher argues that there is a need to reconceptualise and redefine news and the news-making process based on the ramifications of MoJo and SoJo in the present news media ecosystem. Rofl Lie, as described by Quinn (2004, p. 199), poignantly states that journalists today must recognise that they are not simply working for a newspaper but rather working in the field of news.

Methodology

The researcher used a thematic analysis method to examine specific news articles and comment threads, aiming to understand how SoJos interpret news. Triangulating through focus group discussions and in-depth interviews of the SoJos and accompanying them in the beats, the researcher sought to unravel the professional, social, economic, and ethical dilemmas faced by them daily. Furthermore, based on their life histories and worldviews, the researcher sought to fathom how they perceived and reported the happenings around them.

News reports were selected through systematic random sampling between 2015 and 2023 from the top four YouTube channels maintained by SoJos from the region. Given the extraordinary rise in the number of YouTube channels from the region, the period between 2015 and 2023 was selected. This was established through a preliminary survey undertaken to establish the number of YouTube channels being operated in the region. 12 SoJos were then chosen through the lottery system and engaged in in-depth interviews, and 35 were chosen through the lottery system and engaged in focus group discussions in two phases, comprising 17 and 18 SoJos, respectively.

The researcher conducted a preliminary survey, which revealed a significant growth in YouTube channels between 2015 and 2023. There were 120 YouTube channels that consistently operated, with at least one video uploaded daily. However, the total number of YouTube channels created by enthusiasts and individuals claiming to be SoJos has been exceptionally high. The study excluded them due to the daily video upload requirement. The researcher's survey uncovered 63 YouTube channels with over 2000 subscribers and a monthly viewership of 1 million hours. These YouTube channels were also monetized through the Google Adsense Revenue Sharing Model.

The *Himalayan Beacon*, with 29,000 subscribers and 29,555,522 views, was the first to use YouTube as its primary platform, having joined on September 26th, 2013. However, the

Himalayan Beacon stopped its operation within a couple of years. In 2017, with the Gorkhaland Agitation again flaring in the Darjeeling Hills, YouTube channels began taking centre stage. This phenomenon is also observed by analysing the quantity and frequency of videos produced by these YouTube channels between the years 2017 and 2023. During this period, YouTube channels directly inserted local advertisements into their video uploads. This indicated a monetization system that involved both direct and indirect marketing, based on a revenue-sharing agreement with Google. Significant growth occurred in both the quantity and frequency of uploaded videos. As a result, YouTube became more important than cable television as the main platform for both channels.

Theoretical Framework

Creators of content, right from the days of the cave painters in Altamira and India's Bhimbhetka, have sought ways to ensure information portability. That is, to take the content to the audience instead of the audience to the content (Martyn, 2009). This process has taken thousands of years, traversing the arduous and divergent paths of cave paintings, cuneiform, hieroglyphics, papyrus scrolls, parchment, paper, moveable types, photography, radio, television, and film. However, it was not until 1966, with the advent of the personal computer and the era of 'Multimedia', that singer Bob Goldstein first coined the term (Vaughan, 1994). Vaughan (1994) concisely defined multimedia as the transmission of graphic art, text, sound, video, and animation through computer technology. Multimedia reporting and publishing in multiple modalities through smartphones ultimately made the portability of information transmission possible (Pavlik, 2001, p. 4; Quinn, 2004, p. 110), with SoJos serving as the avant-garde of MoJo.

This study employs theories such as Gerbner's 'Critical Incident' analysis (Zelizer, 1992, p. 67), technological determinism, and Habermas' concept of the public sphere. Additionally, it employs the political economy of communication to understand what is driving the increasing use of these technologies, which not only makes it possible but also permits a single individual to report in multiple modalities to an expanding global audience.

SoJos' MoJo experiment in the twin districts - The context

Pravin (name changed) is a 32-year-old graduate who gave up his job as a voluntary teacher to begin his own YouTube channel. In an in-depth interview with the researcher, Pravin shared his fascination for journalists and journalism. However, due to his lack of training, he was unable to secure a job as a journalist, and, as he emphasised, the opportunities were limited. However, he seized the opportunity to become a journalist when he started watching YouTube videos and discovered that he could create one himself for free. Furthermore, he already owned a high-quality Oppo F25 Pro 5 G, which boasted a better camera than a standard DSLR. He slowly began conducting interviews with politicians and common people, discussing the most mundane affairs, such as the non-removal of garbage from the streets, the broken lamp posts, and the congestion of the streets. He then edited the videos on his mobile phone using a free app and uploaded them to his YouTube channel. As his subscriber base grew, he gained the courage to interview prominent politicians and pose critical questions. Today, his channel has 25 thousand subscribers and close to 5 million views per month.

The story behind Keshav (name changed) was different given the fact that he belonged to a remote village in Pedong, Kalimpong and as he revealed in the interview with this researcher, "there was no option but to take up the mantle that of a journalist." "The roads leading to our

village are practically non-existent. The sick need to be carried either on one's back or on a stretcher made of *'Malley bas'* (thick bamboo) to carry the sick through steep slopes for at least 8 to 10 kilometres unless we reach the nearest motorable road from whence the sick could be transported to the hospital. My first reporting thus was more out of anger and frustration than out of choice. I cursed a lot in that video (laughs). The YouTube channel was also hastily created and not much thought was given to it. But as I continued sharing videos I learnt. I was told by one of the subscribers that I could get paid by Google through advertisements if I crossed the threshold. It was a great motivating factor".

Ramiz (name changed), a resident of Darjeeling, was fascinated by the fact that there were people who had become millionaires by simply being YouTubers. "I was a serious YouTube viewer. I never liked television much as I never had the patience to stay for hours at end to watch the same show. I have the habit of flipping through the YouTube channels. But I was fascinated by the fact that people were travelling all over the world and making YouTube videos. I later learnt that they were able to travel because they had lakhs of subscribers who watched their videos and YouTube [Google] paid them in US Dollars. That was how they were able to travel. There was an incident when a female YouTuber went to Sikkim, and ended up stirring up a controversy. I was not interested in the controversy but the fact that she became an overnight social media sensation and that too because she had simply come from Nepal and was making her vlog and uploading it on her YouTube channel. It was simply amazing! What was even more interesting was I already had everything I needed, a smartphone and a lot of crazy ideas (laughs). Since I am disabled I cannot ride a bike or have one (laughs). I decided to report simple things – connect people and give them a voice." Ramiz was not wrong, YouTubers have indeed become millionaires (Etimes, 2024).

In the survey conducted by the researcher, it was found that the SoJos who owned a YouTube channel and claimed to report news far outnumbered legitimate legacy journalists such as those affiliated with print media and local cable television channels. Almost all the local cable television channels, such as *DCCN* (Darjeeling Combine Cable Network), *DTV* (Darjeeling Television), *KTV* (Kalimpong Television), *Namaste Kurseong*, etc., had also started their YouTube channels, focusing predominantly on webcasting and then broadcasting through cable television. There were further instances, of senior journalists like Pramod Giri, the former President of Siliguri Press Club and earlier associated with Hindustan Times, taking up the route taken by Ravish Kumar and starting his own dedicated YouTube channel *named Himal World*. The only distinction is that while he himself reports from the field, he also employs many mobile journalists who report for *Himal World*, and thus, unlike Ravish Kumar Official, his is not a solo act. *SKLIVE*, a similar enterprise, primarily focuses on webcasting through their YouTube channel, employing multiple mobile journalists to report from the region. Recently, they have also expanded their reach to cable.

What is interesting is that, with the rise of mobile journalism and SoJos, press guilds and clubs like the Darjeeling Press Guild, Kalimpong Press Club, and Siliguri Press Club, among others, now include members who are SoJos. The Digital Media Association (DMA), based in Siliguri and Kolkata, is primarily an association of SoJos engaged in mobile journalism, with members from across West Bengal who have adopted YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media portals to webcast their news reports.

Addressing Critical Dilemmas

One must now ask whether SoJos such as Pravin, Keshav, and Ramiz are empowering the periphery or further marginalising it. This study aims to unravel critical research questions about how SoJo perceives the happenings around them and how they report them. Further, how

do they mitigate the negative impact of their reporting, if any, at the local, regional, or national level resulting from their interpretation of the event? Ultimately, how do they uphold their accountability for news reporting?

One critical drawback of technological determinism is the belief that the mere existence of a new technology will automatically cause change. Journalists have long struggled with technological transformations (Martyn, 2009). TV journalists quickly learned about military control over who reported what during the Kargil war, and which television crews received preferential treatment. It was the first era of 'embedded journalists' in India's media history. Satellite television then transformed the Kargil war into a 'Tele War' fought as much over the 'airwaves' as in the 'mountains' (Thussu, 2002).

David Halberstam, a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter known for his coverage of the Vietnam War in *The New York Times* made a particularly clear assertion about technical determinism. Halberstam as cited by Zelizer (1992, p. 70) expresses a prevalent critique of modern, fast-paced technologies, which, while enabling rapid information delivery, limit journalists' time for critical thinking, contemplation, assessment, formation, creation, and contextualization of news, instead of simply transmitting what their video camera captures. Zelizer (1992) describes it as a technology that surpassed the reporter's ability to remain composed. Embedded news crews, who were more 'delighted' to be part of the action and had the opportunity to film and broadcast live, frequently 'gave up' the critical aspect of reporting, primarily becoming "mouthpieces" of military commanders during the Kargil War. This means that the very act of reporting itself, as Gerbner argues (cf. Zelizer, 1992), became the critical incident factor. In other words, the act of reporting the Kargil War itself became the 'critical incident' while what the report was about, such as the discourses surrounding the war, became coincidental or even supplementary.

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During the 2017 Gorkhaland Agitation, which took a violent turn and resulted in a 104-day general strike in the hill tracts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts (Roy, 2023), the SoJos primarily relied on the ability to capture and upload videos as a crucial practice. It became their 'critical incident'. Before uploading the videos, the SoJos rarely exercised critical thinking or thoroughly gathered the facts. The videos uploaded reveal mostly videos of the unedited speeches of Bimal Gurung, the President of Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), the dominant political party then in the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, or raw footage of the violence and the continuous protests. There was a notable absence of critical analysis from the SoJos, which included prominent or senior journalists who had transitioned to solo or mobile roles, with the exception of a few like Pramod Giri. Giri brought with him a critical approach to news gathering and news analysis. His weekly program, *'Charcha Chautari'* (Discussion Courtyard), combined 'Google Meet' with live streaming on YouTube.

In *Charcha Chautri*, he invites several political leaders and social activists from diverse backgrounds to engage in a debate. This hour-long programme, the first of its kind to go live on YouTube from the region, has sparked a new paradigm in the field of MoJo. However, it is important to note that this initiative is not the result of an amateur SoJo, but rather of a veteran professional journalist who has taken on the role of a mobile journalist.

Interestingly, on the other hand, a majority of SoJos, primarily adopted the names of neighbourhoods, for instance in Siliguri city, such as 'Panighatta' and 'Shiv Mandir', or used words like 'Practical', 'Global', and 'Hitkari' (Well Being), and added terms like 'Times', 'Media', 'Khabar' (News), and 'News Media' to create the impression of being established and reputable media organisations. Simultaneously, they often demanded payment for their "reporting services" after covering an event, which further complicated the already complex situation surrounding MoJo. These SoJos blatantly coerce the 'party', whose event they cover, to pay for

the 'expenses' such as 'transportation costs, food' etc., as was witnessed by the researcher during the book release of a doctoral research scholar from the University of North Bengal. While this indicates highly unethical and even criminal tendencies among these select groups of SoJos, these SoJos also attempt to 'stage' certain events in an attempt to viralize their 'reports.' Dismaying tendencies also emerged when some members of the general public made what appeared to be legitimate demands and paid the SoJos. They believed that by paying a small amount, they could achieve social media fame, an opportunity that traditional media would never provide. Thus, journalistic endeavours veered off course, as a money-swindling scheme appeared to be in the offing. However, it was primarily retrospective of amateur social actors, mostly uneducated youths, feeling falsely 'empowered' by smartphone technology.

According to Winston (2007), 'technicist hyperbole' contains characteristics that are inherently 'disempowering'. Having and using technology inhibits free will, leading to the automation of the process by the technology's operators. Martyn (2009, p. 5) supports this argument. It finds critical resonance in this research when it asks that mere possession and the use of smartphones and pointing and shooting at something do not make that person a photographer, nor does asking a few questions and recording them on a smartphone transform that person into a journalist. The technological determinist approach to SoJos arguing that 'if we can do it, we must do it' as Keshav and a majority of SoJos had told this researcher, thus does not stand, and even if it may, it has broader social repercussions.

During the focus group discussion, it was discovered that several experienced journalists who transitioned into mobile journalism were reluctant to identify themselves as solo journalists or mobile journalists. They claimed that, in their view, a journalist is just a journalist. They do not work as broadcast, print, or web journalists. They are journalists who employ many mediums. However, younger amateur mobile journalists believed that they were operating as SoJos. They

worked individually and even referred to themselves as a 'one man army', taking on multiple roles such as reporting, editing, broadcasting, selling advertisement space, and managing their YouTube channel. "I am solely responsible for everything, Solo!" A significant number of SoJos also believed that they derived their power from technology and attributed their efficiency to various technological advancements, such as smartphones, mobile telephony, high-speed internet, and improved connectivity.

Cumulatively, it prompts the crucial question of accountability and objectivity - ultimately, the influence on news content is shaped by the active process of 'social moulding'. A traditional journalist from legacy media would need to report on events, establish communication with the news desk, disseminate the news, consistently provide updates, and rely on the news being broadcast. However, mobile journalism going instantly 'live' has raised the issue of the complete disregard of the gatekeeping process, leading to a major obstacle to the quality of journalistic efforts. Some prominent mobile journalists and SoJos may contend that they would only engage in such practices because they possess the ability to regulate themselves. However, this may not apply to the majority of YouTube channels owned and operated by SoJos, which prioritise the timeliness of information over its quality, sometimes labelling it 'Breaking News'. Consequently, the timing of the news's upload takes on greater significance than its essential nature.

One of the critical questions that this research also dwells on is what effect technology, has on journalism, particularly in the marginalised and fringe locales in the northeast of India, where physical remoteness has long been the critical cause behind the lopsided development in the region. The region's vulnerability also stems from its strategic location, as it is surrounded by Nepal, China, Bhutan, and Bangladesh on all four sides. Additionally, there is a sub-nationalist aspiration within the region for the creation of separate states called Gorkhaland and

Kamatapur, which moulds and shapes the worldview of the predominant number of SoJos in the region.

During the interviews, many SoJos pointed out that raising 'awareness' about the demand for Gorkhaland was one of their main objectives. Numerous Facebook pages and numerous self-proclaimed 'news portals' demonstrate this. *The Darjeeling Chronicle's* motto states, "news site that proudly supports Gorkhaland State" (thedarjeelingchronicle.com). It points to the fact that smartphones and the recurring Gorkhaland agitations fuel YouTube's news channels and dictate the course of what news event to select, how to cover it, and what angle to use to report the event.

The thematic analysis of 50 randomly selected news reports from Darjeeling Hills in 2022 (1st January to 31st December) revealed that the terms 'Gorkhaland' and 'Gorkha Jati' (Gorkha Race) appeared 230 times, without a single exception, even in non-political news reports. This suggests that amateur SoJos were socially influenced to become Gorkhaland activists rather than journalists. While this was not the case, at least in its entirety, with legacy journalists such as those belonging to print, television, or radio, it was the case with the SoJos based in the hills.

The critical question thus gains greater importance: What impact does smartphone technology exert on journalism that serves the public interest? Undoubtedly, the increased acceptability of SoJos has made reporting hard facts quicker and simpler. These individuals provide multimedia breaking news information on YouTube channels, resulting in a greater reach. Nevertheless, according to Alter (1991), the advanced technology of the time just accelerates the dissemination of factual data without enhancing its quality. It is crucial to inquire whether modern MoJo represents a higher standard of journalism, or if it can be considered journalism at all. Similarly, it is important to question whether SoJos are superior journalists, or if they can truly be classified as journalists at all.

The abundance of news reporting from the interiors, such as the distant tea gardens and cinchona plantations, which would have never found a place in a newspaper, today finds frequent space on YouTube news. Almost all YouTube channels in the twin district featured nearly one to two daily news reports from the interiors. These reports ranged from the frequent closure of the tea factories, bad roads, political meetings, etc. However, beyond the mere video footage of the tea garden, workers gathered at the gates of the tea factory, and the political leaders addressing them. There was not much critical analysis of why and how things were turning for the worse in the interior. It pointed towards the perplexing dilemma of the interiors connected with the metropolis. And yet their voice still not being heard, and the truth behind their predicaments still not fathomed, transforming these news into 'comic' illustrations, where many in the comment threads argued why 'these' people (tea garden labourers) still have not left the interiors and joined 'civilisation'.

During a focus group discussion, the researcher asked the SoJos, who had never worked for any media houses, some basic questions: a) How would you define news? b) What is a reporter's responsibility? Should reporters express their opinion or let their emotions influence their reporting? The answers to the question 'a' ranged from "anything unique" to "has the potential to go viral". The answers to the question 'b' ranged from "reporters mainly showcase an event or people involved" to "helping them reach out to the people". While this is true in some context, it points towards SoJos' eagerness to act as public relations personnel or help people improve their image for a specific 'fee'. The answer to question 'c' ranged from "why we should not share what we feel" to "we must speak our mind". It pointed to SoJos' confusion between opinions and news reporting. Legacy journalists often have a strong feeling that MoJo and SoJos are more likely to be used as instruments for public relations instead of serving as a significant channel for critical analysis. Martyn (2009, p. 7) accurately highlights the infrequent

occurrence of SoJos taking the time to "pause, reflect, and provide additional dimensions of context to the story."

Nevertheless, any accusations that traditional journalists may make against the SoJos can also be applied to them themselves, as McLean (2005, p. 339) recalls a situation where an understaffed television station assigned individual video reporters to 'orchestrated' events. Instead of gathering and transmitting important analysis and information, these solo video reporters were discovered to be more concerned with camera angles and technical aspects than engaging in critical reporting. The SoJo who operated *'Practical Khabar* (Practical News)'* went at length advising the participants of a gathering to which the researcher was a witness, how to stand, walk, smile, and what to say. While these instances may not be universally applicable to all SoJos, they have proven to be valid for the majority of them. The majority of the SoJos contacted in this study, whose reports and news articles were analysed, indicated a need for greater involvement in critical journalism. They were highly intrigued by the advanced features of smartphone technology and ultimately ended up providing public relations updates instead. They were primarily focused on making their reports viral and did not possess a deep understanding of the subject matter they were covering.

'Mandi'—a 'peddlers market' of News

Allan and Zelizer (2004, p. 5) highlights the frequent occurrence of journalists facing inquiries about whether they are aligned with their cause or opposed to it. At this juncture, individual journalists ascertain their function, recognising that their momentary or passing choice can have significant ramifications for how their audiences comprehend the essence of the phenomenon at hand and its impact on the people.

Further Sites (2007), a pioneer in multimedia journalism, believes that the incorporation of several modes of communication in the process of reporting is advantageous. The photo will often make up for a poor article, and the video will make up for a poor audio, bringing news surfers back to the online portal. Furthermore, in situations where fatigue due to tiredness was common, multimedia play a crucial role, compensating for those days and enabling the completion of more tasks within a limited timeframe (Martyn, 2009; p. 9).

However, for a SoJo adapting all aspects of multimodality poses a challenge, as it necessitates proficiency in news writing, especially for online news readers, videography to capture movement or action, and facial photography. Therefore, it is rare to find an individual who excels in all facets of convergent media without extensive training or experience—the majority of citizens who operate as solo journalists with smartphones lack these skills.

Consequently, the challenge of integrating local content into a global context often results in the promotion of subpar local content. A majority of news content on *Himal World, SK Live*, *DTV*, and *DCCN Himali Channel* included unedited full-length feeds of press conferences and statements made by political leaders, social activists at the offices of the Darjeeling Press Guild or Siliguri Press Club. In this instance, the SoJo did not bother to edit or attempt to contextualise the press conference. These feeds often have unedited videos edited to the extent of merely adding the logo to the video, pointing towards the inefficacy of the SoJos in convergent journalism.

SK Live, The Himal World, DCCN Himali Channel, and *DTV* have not maintained a dedicated news portal. Although *The Himal World* recently launched a news portal. It however, lacks the regular maintenance as the YouTube channel and the Facebook Page is its primary focus. It also highlights the fact that MoJo and SoJos, particularly in Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts, have been lagging behind in leveraging the power of convergent journalism. This is

exemplified by their failure to maintain news portals, embed YouTube videos, audio podcasts, high-resolution image galleries, or create e-magazines or e-newspapers that replicate traditional magazines and newspapers.

During the focus group discussion with the researcher, the SoJos revealed that since it was an individual attempt for many of them, they needed more time to move beyond YouTube. They also needed to gain expertise in designing websites, maintaining them, and updating them daily. However, despite the importance of convergent journalism and convergent reporting, the SoJos primarily focus on mobile journalism by uploading videos to YouTube. They, therefore, seek to go hyper-local, with an eye toward reaching the global diaspora.

In this context, one could argue that MoJo redefines the very meaning of news. As Marymount (2007, p. 19) suggests, news is more than just news; it is hyper-local news. During the 2007 Gorkhaland Agitation spearheaded by the newly formed Gorkha Janmukti Morcha under the leadership of Bimal Gurung, the first news about the agitation was published in the then-fledgling *Beacon Online* (later known as *The Himalayan Beacon*) and *Darjeeling Times*, both of which were one of the first experiments by SoJos engaged in mobile journalism. Many Nepali-speaking Gorkhas from the region, having moved for livelihood across the world and eager to learn about what was happening back home, not only fuelled the hyper-local nature of MoJo in the region but also supported and even demanded it.

Both *The Himalayan Beacon* and *Darjeeling Times* saw their audience traffic surpass the circulation of *Himalaya Darpan*, the lone daily Nepali newspaper in Siliguri, by a couple of million page views, prompting *Himalaya Darpan* to offer a free online e-paper. While a large number of workers manned *Himalaya Darpan*, spread across many towns and cities in the districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong and the state of Sikkim, SoJos manned *The Himalayan Beacon* and *Darjeeling Times*, almost doing everything single-handedly.

The 'experiment' of *The Himalayan Beacon* and *Darjeeling Times* ushered in a 24-hour news era, where they updated stories hourly, operating at an individual level and with minimal infrastructure. *The Himalayan Beacon* even hosted itself on the free version of WordPress, while the SoJo straddled a narrow line between itself and bloggers. Today, *SK Live* maintains a live 'broadcast' on YouTube, mimicking the live television experience.

Arguably, here, news can then be considered a hyper-local domain that aligns with Habermas' concept of the public sphere. If one accepts Fraser's (2007, p. 7) argument that the public sphere is a space where public opinion is generated through communication and that this public opinion can be mobilised as a political force, then the actions of *The Himalayan Beacon* and *Darjeeling Times*, which shaped the public opinion of the Gorkha diaspora through hyper-local news and empowered the global Gorkha diaspora, as well as the influence of the national citizenry on holding politicians and government officials accountable, can be considered examples of public sphere journalism. *The Himalayan Beacon, Darjeeling Times, The Himal World, SK Live, Siliguri Times, DCCN Himali*, and *DTV* today play an active role in monitoring power in a democracy by bringing attention to ideas, issues, and the actions of political parties and important government and private sector officials. Although they may not possess the same level of critical analysis as established newspapers or other legacy media, they still subject these entities to public scrutiny.

Habermas (2007) accurately characterises the inherent contradiction of profit-driven media firms that simultaneously provide a public service by meeting the need for education and information while ensuring sufficient profits. He also acknowledges that journalistic competence is costly. In addition, Rosen (2000) argues that media audiences, including readers, listeners, and viewers, are not only consumers but also citizens. Citizens require trustworthy sources of information to actively engage in democratic processes. The ongoing hyper-local

'experiment' in Kalimpong and Darjeeling Districts, which frequently eliminate traditional mechanisms for ensuring news quality, implies the abandonment of gatekeeping responsibilities.

This study demonstrates that individuals working as solo journalists (SoJos) must undergo training and be educated about the ethical standards and practices of journalism, both at the organisational and personal levels. Those who choose to share stories 'live' should understand which ones the editor can share without hesitation and which ones need careful examination. Unreliable and below-average news reporting can result in a decrease in trustworthiness for readers and the journalist. This was evident in Siliguri when a journalist, in his enthusiasm to broadcast 'breaking news' that he considered exclusive, inadvertently revealed the face of a deceased and the identity of a rape victim, including her name, her family members, and the village she was from (SK Live, 2023). Similarly, the report from *SK Live* included an extramarital affair and the ensuing drama, with complete identification of the individuals involved and their faces shown on YouTube (SK Live, 2024).

There is a debate regarding the vitality of 'civic journalism' or 'citizen journalism'. Martyn (2009) contends that involving retired individuals from various fields, such as law, engineering, police, bureaucracy, etc., greatly enhanced the impact of the 'Letters to the Editor' section and the opinion sections in the newspaper. However, this hasn't been the case with mobile journalism, as these "retirees" have yet to assume the role of SoJos. Instead, younger generations who are either between colleges or searching for a 'better' job have temporarily assumed the role of SoJos. Almost all of the SoJos who were interviewed and participated in the focus group discussion expressed their intention to transition to another profession if they secured a 'better' job or "did not make it as a YouTube millionaire". The diverse skills that

defined the 'citizen' journalists earlier no longer define the youths today who, though 'gadget savvy', do not have the skillset nor are they motivated as the former 'citizen' reporters were.

Moreover, according to Snedeker (2006), local or neighbourhood journalists in the past had multiple roles, serving as both journalists and representatives of news organisations. They were also responsible for promoting the newspaper by encouraging people they interacted with to advertise their products or services through it. It was not entirely unprofessional and did not raise significant ethical concerns (Snedeker, 2006). Interviews with SoJos operating within the Siliguri subdivision, however, revealed that in major cases, they often sought 'payment' after covering a particular event. They argued that there were 'charges' involved towards 'transportation' and 'food'. It is highly unethical, as SoJos often covered mundane and non-news-related events, such as the marriage ceremonies of wealthy businessmen, giving them 'full coverage'. It also has the inherent danger of the SoJos being manipulated during elections, as witnessed during the pre-election days of January-February 2024 in the run-up to the Lok Sabha Parliamentary Election in Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts. One of the prominent politicians interviewed by the researcher revealed that almost everyone with a smartphone sought to interview him and ask for some favours or money for reporting in a 'good light'. He revealed that they, the SoJos, were easier to manage than legacy journalists.

Thus, many SoJos and mobile journalists open a YouTube channel and apparently engage in an unrepentant mix of unscrupulous reporting by putting their 'smartphones' for hire and then returning to their YouTube channels and engaging in what can only be referred to as peddling in news, transforming social media platforms into a *'Mandi'* - 'a 'peddlers' market' of sorts, muddling the efforts of genuine, professional, and devoted journalists both from legacy and other portal driven legitimate mobile journalists. Snedeker (2006) contends that these methods contravene a key principle of journalism, which is to uphold a strict separation between the

reporting and business aspects. However, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2001, p. 62) suggest that such "walls" are, at best, unrealistic ideals. However, Kovach and Rosentiel (2001) emphasise that revealing the actual permeability of the firewall can be extremely disheartening, leading to a significant decline in credibility for the majority of SoJos practicing mobile journalism, whether consciously or unknowingly. The situation is dangerous because, as Bettag (2006, p. 37) points out, "Credibility is highly valuable in today's world due [primarily] to its scarcity."

Conclusions

The convergence of multimedia technologies and online publishing, along with the decline in revenues of traditional news media companies, has led to a shift in the online media landscape. Initially, advertisers were cautious about investing in online platforms, but this phase has passed. This transition has been instrumental in sustaining the news media industry. As a result, social media platforms like Facebook and YouTube have experienced significant growth and have introduced revenue-sharing models that have turned YouTubers into millionaires (Etimes, 2024). This success has inspired many solo journalists and YouTubers to pursue similar ambitions.

In addition, the emergence of Google and other search engines, along with the use of cookies to 'remember' one's preferences and track one's previous searches, has resulted in the development of a viewer-centric algorithm. Marshal McLuhan's global village (McLuhan & Powers, 1992) meets the needs and interests of every YouTube user and internet surfer through this algorithm, which creates a personalised digital environment shrinking the world not into a village but the very human existence into 'ethereal' cyber-cloud. Furthermore, the increasing social mobility and fragmentation of communities as physical units brought about by globalisation allow for the effective promotion of specialised markets on a worldwide scale, thereby blurring the boundaries between local and global, a phenomenon commonly referred

to as 'glocal.' Thus, according to Deuze (2007, p. 8), instead of relying on traditional sources like national newspapers or evening newscasts, we now choose to seek information and news online that specifically caters to our unique interests. We confine our investigations to familiar territory and find ourselves repeatedly consuming the same content daily, perpetually engaging in an endless cycle of participating in the same repetitive discussions. However, this is what sustains SoJo's production of repetitive news content, as they consistently interview the same individuals, cover similar events, and 'charge' the organisers for their coverage, all while claiming to make the content 'viral'. They also promote these contents as the latest regional news on their YouTube channel, which may not be true.

SoJos must build traditions and ethical frameworks on which the SoJos could operate. The Digital Media Association (DMA) has emerged as a promising development, aiming to formalize the operations of SoJos using social media platforms. This association, centred in Siliguri and Kolkata in West Bengal, is working towards registration of the SoJos, at least at their associational level, and connecting with the more prominent journalistic fraternity and academia, to help interact and train SoJos, at least on the basics of ethics in journalism and primary journalistic modalities. Though this is a positive development, it is currently still unclear whether SoJos should be a source of concern or enthusiasm for observers.

This researcher leans towards the latter viewpoint, albeit with a noticeable apprehension that SoJos should employ smartphone technologies to give voice to the periphery, but must ensure their gatekeeping responsibilities remain unaffected. Thus much as technologies such as smartphones, high-speed broadband internet, and the shrinking digital divide have transformed the media ecosystem in India and such peripheral and marginalised regions as Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts; however, given the strategic locations of the region and the region's simmering sub-nationalist aspirations in the form of Gorkhaland and Kamtapur, Solo

Journalists takes up the burden of navigating and analysing rapidly shifting political equations, corruption, rising unemployment, and the incessant mobility of the youths in search of a job.

Sceptics do abound. Bettag (2006, p. 38) has argued that mobile journalism has transformed critical and towering journalists as institutions into mere 'content providers' (Bettag, 2000, p. 106). On the other hand, Pavlik (2001) expresses concern over 'a one-person' [SoJo] crew, focusing more on the broadcast quality of video than journalism quality. This research paper discusses ample case studies that critically justify such concerns. There are only a handful of SoJos who, through their engagement with pioneering 'experiments' in mobile journalism such as *The Himalayan Beacon* and *Darjeeling Times*, may have been hardened and professionalised by reporting the Gorkhaland Agitation from 2007 to 2012 and, to an extent, having journalism training and education. However, today's bunch of SoJos, as Zelizer (1992, p. 75) puts it, engage in "spontaneous and unplanned... reporting in real-time", thus ending up becoming an uncritical camera operator than reporters (c.f. Martyn, 2007).

There are also deep concerns regarding combining traditionally separate specialisations, viz., newsgathering and editing jobs. It becomes troublesome at many levels. First, how much should a SoJo focus on the gatekeeping aspect when it comes to acceptance and refusal of invitations to cover news, for instance, choosing whether it is news one's audience wants to watch? Clearly, with 'payment' and 'charges' involved, this decision takes a back seat. Secondly, to what extent should a SoJo broadcast an event? Often, this is done live and in its entirety. Thus, as a YouTube viewer asked, the question becomes paramount - "Just how many political meetings, unending political speeches, extra-marital affairs in neighbourhoods, the opening of malls, shops, petty thefts, and motor accidents can one watch again and again?" However, since people living far away still spend a large chunk of their YouTube screen time watching these videos and discussing them, they will continue to remain in high demand.

Nevertheless, it can be contended that pioneering young journalists working independently may play a crucial role in shaping a digitalized future. These journalists have the potential to bridge the gap between marginalised, peripheral, and hidden communities and the urban centre. Moreover, they can bring attention to matters that are considered mundane and of minimal national significance, elevating them to a global and national perspective. This transformation not only turns the world into a global village but also condenses it into the compact size of handheld smartphones. That is also true, as creative projects such as Sites (2007) *Hot Zone* at Yahoo established that there are critical reservations regarding ethics and labour practices. Nevertheless, the birth of a new multimodal medium will prove more beneficial in the long run.

The initial phases of *The Himalayan Beacon* profoundly impacted the future of Mobile Journalism in the region. *The Himalayan Beacon* became a proverbial textbook and an online documentation and archival site. It quickly became a 'traditional mainstream' media with a national and international reach. During its existence, eminent national and international newspapers and magazines such as *Vice* and *Outlook* and authors working on books sought permission to republish content, quote, or seek authorisation to 'reuse' a photo. It made many news media houses from the region go online and begin their online presence. Thus, pioneering MoJo experiments such as *The Himalayan Beacon, Darjeeling Times* and *Darjeeling Chronicle* amplified print media and did not displace them. Arguably, thence, the internet today is no longer the 'new' media; it is the 'traditional media of the present' and seamlessly transcends the boundaries of mediality. Thus, the web plays a critical role in not diverting online audiences from a phenomenon but helping them contextualise it by digging deep into the available resources. Concomitantly, for a SoJo, there are many more resources for digging and authenticating a story than his or her predecessor from the legacy news media ever had, and, so do the news surfers.

In today's highly interconnected society, the idea of disconnecting from technology thus, is no longer a feasible option. The researcher contends that the focus should be on humanising the technological aspect of digitising humanity. This involves equipping individuals with journalistic training and expertise. By doing so, they can responsibly utilise their newfound power for the betterment of society and the world, while upholding the highest standards of journalistic practices.

End Note

Names of some of the respondents have been changed on their request. Some respondents were concerned that the critical nature of this research could hamper their operations.

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