

Exploring Digital News Experiences: Challenges and Opportunities in Indian Regional Languages Digital Journalism Start-Ups

Communication & Journalism Research
10 (1) pp 9-18
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ISSN 2348 – 5663

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Abstract

The digital technology opened various opportunities and challenges on each aspect of social life and the economy. It also revolutionised the way we interact and network with each other. The concept of digital journalism also came to prominence which redefined the way news is collected, created, distributed, and received. The liberated communication economy – where smartphones and data are available in low-priced helped the growth and increase in popularity of digital media content in India. After China, India is second in terms of the internet market in the world in terms of the number of users. Sen and Nielsen (2016) studied the growth of digital journalism in Indian regional language. Prasad (2019) studied editors and journalists of English language Indian news portals which focused on the concert with print media, ultimately offering not a disruption to the established order. The current paper aims to study the selected digital news portals of the Malayalam language. The current paper aims to understand the workflow, style of content creation, feedback system and economy of selected news portals. The theories of entrepreneurship mindset and digital media management are used to analyse the experiences of editors/founders of selected portals. The interviews of editors/founders are conducted, and it is correlated with the content analysis of portals and social media accounts. The outcome of the paper will help stakeholders and researchers to understand the regional digital independent media sphere of India.

Keywords

Design, Digital Media, Economy, Journalism, Online News Portals

Digital Journalism

The question of ‘journalism’ in digital journalism is there persistent from the beginning of online news. The nature of news, long features, multi-media, readership, and business models of digital journalism has much give and take from traditional mainstream media. In the inaugural issue of the Digital Journalism journal, editor Bob Franklin raised a serious question of “Who is a journalist?” and “What is Journalism?” in digital journalism (2013). He argues that digital journalism engages different types of journalistic organizations and individuals, embraces distinctive content formats, and styles, and involves

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contributors with divergent editorial ambitions, professional backgrounds, and educational experiences and achievements, who strive to reach diverse audiences. He further quoted the below observation of Peter Dahlgren who called digital journalism as “sprawling domain”. As per Dahlgren (2013) “Mainstream online media, alternative journalism sites, the blogosphere, social media, individual and group productions, including efforts by social movements and other activists and groups of every imaginable persuasion—political, religious, and lifestyle advocates, hobbyists and much more. All manner of “amateur”—as well as “para”—or “quasi journalism” are juxtaposing and blending. Facts and opinions, debates, gossip, nonsense, misinformation, the insightful, the deceptive, the poetic, are all mixed, scrambling the traditional boundaries between journalism and non-journalism” (160).

Digital journalism became popular when its democratic and independent forms starting up. When the digital platform of news creation and consumption became popular – the discussion on its model of business and economics also developed. Often, digital journalism is seen as an independent form of space where the agenda of mainstream media – which filtered – with editorial and advertorial interests. This became more accurate when independent websites booming and advocating for society. The aspirations of ‘alternative media’ of online or digital space (Natalie and Barassi, 2011) can be observable in such independent ventures. There are immense opportunities and an equal level of intense challenges for such spaces.

Within the given context, the current paper aims to study the selected digital news portals of the Malayalam language. The current paper aims to understand the workflow, style of content creation, feedback system and economy of selected news portals. The theories of entrepreneurship mindset and digital media management are used to analyse the experiences of editors/founders of selected portals.

Research Design

The current paper follows a qualitative method of research which mainly relied on personal unstructured interviews. By calling such digital journalism ventures as ‘start-up’ which is inspired by the works of Prasad (2019), the current paper tries to relate the opportunities in regional languages of India and digital spaces (Dhavalala, 2017).

The interviews of editors/founders of selected Malayalam independent web portals are conducted, and it is correlated with the content analysis of portals and social media accounts. The outcome of the paper aims to stakeholders and

researchers to understand the regional digital independent media sphere of India. For privacy and confidentiality, the names of editors, journalists have been kept closed as per request and research ethics. The inputs of interviews have used across the paper to correlate the theoretical understanding and content analysis.

Internet Penetration in India

The popularity of digital platforms and spaces in India is often credited to subterranean penetration of the internet. According to the 2018 Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) report, India has the second-highest internet users (Mandavia, 2019) with 483 million internet users. This figure is projected to grow to 666.4 million internet users in 2023. Despite the untapped potential, India already is the second-largest online market worldwide. Most of India's internet users are mobile phone internet users, who take advantage of cheap alternatives like Jio (Curwen, 2019) comparing to expensive high-end broadband that requires a personal computer or laptop and infrastructure. As of 2016, India had 320.57 million mobile phone internet users and forecasts estimate 492.68 million Indian mobile phone internet users by 2023.

When the internet became popular in the early 2000s, user-generated or oriented content in the form of citizen journalism and blogging saw growth. There were instances where the breaking news appeared on such platforms and later adopted by mainstream media. Over time, all major media houses opened their digital platforms to attract more readership and negate temporal facets of the news. During this period, the birth and growth of independent digital news portals – which is the focus of the paper – redefined equations of news distribution and consumption. The blurred and vague cyber media laws in India gave provision to the flourishing of such independent portals.

Growth of Digital Journalism

Initially, the media houses used online platforms for publishing their newspaper's digital version (e-paper). The possibility and opportunity in online or digital journalism were revealed by the newspaper as a competing strategy against broadcast journalism in terms of breaking news.

An early example of an "online-only" newspaper or magazine was (PLATO) news report, an internet newspaper created by Bruce Parrello in 1974 on the PLATO System at the University of Illinois. starting in 1987, the Brazilian newspaper Jornaldodia ran on the state-owned Embratel network, moving to the web within the nineties. By the late nineties, many U.S. newspapers were publishing online versions, however, they did not nevertheless supply a lot of interactivity.

In India, the Indian Express started its digital wing of news production in 1996. They introduced and regulated various subscription models.

“Malayalam Varika – the literary and social magazine of Indian Express uploaded PDF versions of the magazine with the subscription of INR 400 per year in 1998. The first year saw only 30 subscriptions – majorly from Malayalee readers from Middle East countries and Canada” (Shajan C Kumar – then design editor of Malayalam Varika, *personal Interview*, 2019).

Mainstream Media and Digital Platform

The entry and popularity of social media is a key element in analyzing the digital spaces of any media. Before, one could identify overlaps between digital (online) and printed (offline) news production and workflow, but now the game is between digital (website based) and social media.

The mainstream media which had experts in the writing and editing department were trained with new technologies. The role of the journalist was questioned and redefined in the process of digitization (Carlson, 2019). When most of them adapted to the new technologies – many took backend. The journalist was provided with a mobile kit to cover (taking pictures, recording audio, and video) of the news event. The trend of live streaming and social media updates became popular norms in digital media spaces of mainstream media.

“We often observe what mainstream follow – but when we follow the style and form of mainstream media in content reporting and presentation, we lose our identity and audience” (*Respondent 1, Senior Editor, Personal Interview, 2019*).

But most of the editors from the current study, agree that the web technology and stylesheet are inspired by mainstream media.

“The main reason for this is that most editors and technology head of independent Malayalam web portals were previously associated with mainstream media houses” (*Respondent 3, Sub Editor, Personal Interview, 2019*).

The adaptation measured by mainstream media on digital spaces can be studied and classified with the growth and development of web technology (Franklin and Carter, 2019; Spisak, 2019; Khanzode and Sarode, 2016). The development of news media and journalism trends based on web technology can be understood from the following table:

Web Technology	Platform	Media
Web 1.0	The Read-Only Web	Uploading PDF of newspaper and digital-ready news stories.
Web 2.0	The Social (Read-Write) Web	The prominence of user-generated and oriented news stories with social media.
Web 3.0	The Semantic (Read-Write-Execute) Web	The emergence of the gate watching rather than gatekeeping.
Web 4.0	The Mobile Web	The entry of mobile-ready news reports and multimedia journalism.
Web 5.0	The Intelligent / Emotional (Symbiotic) Web	The use of artificial intelligence and robotic writing.

Global Trends in Digital Journalism

While focusing through the tough times of the news industry it has been observed that lack of trust in social media is affecting adversely directly on the traditional media which is becoming unpopular and the industry is sinking. The major global reports state that most of the audience also are now not trusting the news which is being disseminated through various medium. The deadly risk is shifting towards the journalists of the western countries. The advertisements were the major source of revenue which is now itself becoming weaker and is becoming for this department also to sustain the newsrooms. In January 2019, Gannett, an American mass media holding company laid off may journalists across the US, Vice Media, an American-based Canadian digital media and broadcasting company slashed 10% of its workforce. since 2005, 245 titles had to stop their printing and were closed in the UK. As per the Business Insider report, until March 2019, 2400 people have lost their job due to the shift in news media consumption patterns. While trying to cope up with the situation many publishing agencies and content developers have started charging to produce the content. But the question arises here is that is the solution being adopted is worth working. The focus of growth is only

limited in few countries, like in people in Norway paying for online content has increased from 27 % to 34% and in the US, there has been seen an increasing demand for paid content (news) which has risen from 6% to 16% in March 2016. The New York Times, The Washington Post, Financial Times, The Guardian, etc. have emerged as the bigger players in the market and it has also been observed that the payers are only subscribing to the one title leaving no room for the smaller players to survive in this cut-throat competition of news consumption.

Start-up Models and Entrepreneurship

Max Weber and Schumpeter though they belong to sociology and economics respectively, have contributed to developing the theory to analyze entrepreneurship and its role in the development of capitalism in society. Both theorists concerning their ideas and theories have some consensus and some differences. Schumpeter paid attention to identifying pre-scientific vision; hence, he made the task rather easier and assumed entrepreneur merely a manager, circular flow development system. So far as Weber's ideas are concerned, it is a difficult task to make identification as his thoughts on entrepreneurship are often scattered in his all works (Swedberg, 2002).

There is some unresolved controversy in the meaning of entrepreneurship. There are some consensus about entrepreneurship which includes a part of the administration and its function in the decision-making process for regulating some types of organization. Some scholars refer to the term 175 for strategic or innovative decisions while others apply it for business organizations. The term can be clarified in the historical context. The genesis of the word is French which appeared long back particularly to denote "*to do something*".

During the early sixteen century, those who were engaged in leading military expeditions were labeled as entrepreneurs. After 1700, the word was frequently referred to by the French for government road, bridge, harbor and fortification contractors and later to the architects. By 1800, the word appeared in the academic discipline as it had been used by a considerable number of the French economists, who treated the word in a specific sense in the field of economics that has given special meaning to entrepreneur and entrepreneurship, with differences emerging mostly from the features of the sector of the economy. And those economists who were interested in the Government treated the entrepreneur as a contractor, agricultural specialist (farmer) and industrialist as a risk-taking capitalist (Seligman and Johnson, 1967). However, entrepreneur and entrepreneurship have been used in various contexts by scholars at various points of time.

It is clearly understood from global trends and theoretical views on entrepreneurship that the independent ventured in digital spaces India can be termed as startups as they are entering the space by taking a significant financial risk hoping for a profit. But in the case of Malayalam media digital media space, we found most of the digital journalism start-ups were started of low budget.

“We had just two laptops with an internet connection at my home when I started our venture with my two friends. We were focusing on film-related news and updates. Initially, we stated on Blogspot for free later we converted to .com domain for INR 2000 per year. Today, we are having a profit of more than INR 340000 per year.” (*Respondent 2, Founder and Editor, Personal Interview, 2019*).

The above said, venture now has 21 full-time employees such as reporters, sub-editors, video editors, cameraman, web developers, and publicists. While the average salary of an entry-level journalist in Kerala is around INR 22000 per month; the above-quoted founder pays from the range of INR 13000 to INR 43000 to its team members based on their work and experience.

“I have started by field reporting job after my graduation in journalism. After working for 3 years, I understood there is very little growth in the field. I am not interested in working inside the newsroom as editor (in Kerala news media hierarchy, editors are paid well than reporters and growth in the industry is also more in editorial jobs). This led me to start my digital venture which is based on mobile. Me, with my team eight-member team, covers various events in and around Cochin and upload on YouTube. We cover all major cultural and entertainment events – take interviews of guests, celebrity, and audience and try to provide information to viewers about the event. We get good viewership on YouTube and able to manage with the YouTube revenue” (*Respondent 4, Founder and Lead Journalist, Personal Interview, 2019*).

Workflow and Readership in Malayalam Digital Spaces

The workflow of the independent portals and platforms are quite different in terms of content collection and presentation. However, individual journalist aspires to establish his or her name in the industry. The major difference is in visual journalists. The use of mobile and its extended equipment make them different from other television channels in the field with big ENG cameras.

“Often, we feel like less privileged in terms of size. When we enter the press club or other public events, we were labelled as “new” media. There was a kind of discrimination between conventional media and new media” (*Respondent 5, Journalist, Personal Interview, 2019*).

“Things are different now. When I joined the web portal as a reporter from mainstream media, I wanted to do something outside of the frame. Here I enjoy freedom – there is less editorial and advertorial intervention. The media associations and press clubs are also taking motivates in regularize independent media houses. This is not in terms of paper regulations but the mindset” (*Respondent 6, Senior Journalist who is working with a social responsibility driven website, Personal Interview, 2019*).

The mindset among other journalists and mainstream media is also changing. There is more acceptability among the audience in recent times.

“Kerala, being the highest literate state in India, it is difficult to get genuine readership. There are less likely to revisit if our content is not unique or fresh. Earlier, most of the independent news portals relied on news from agencies and other mainstream news portals. But innovation in storytelling and interactivity in web spaces made the difference” (*Respondent 7, Editor and Web Traffic Analyst, Personal Interview, 2019*).

The storytelling is now moved towards more professional and objective oriented. There is a big give and take away between digital exclusive and mainstream media. The spaces are still different, but the lines are getting blurred.

“Earlier, the online news in Malayalam digital spaces were mainly considered as soft news-oriented. We used to get high clicks on health and family articles. We also used to get high reach when public exam results are announced. But now things are changed. There is major breaking news that appeared on such platforms and later picked up by

Communication & Journalism Research 10(1) 17

mainstream media. They also acknowledge it” (*Respondent 8, Journalist, Personal Interview, 2019*).

The advertising in the form of Google Ad revenue, event promotion, and local advertising is not that enough for making a profit. All the respondents in this study agreed on one point that the initial investment and capital profit are key to sustain. The web design and other media technology-related elements were never financial or professional constrain to the founders, editors, journalist, or designers. There are variously free or limited access platforms like Canva, Adobe Spark, Kimemaster, NCH Videopad which allows them to work on less budget. These not only provide them financial freedom but also help them in building customized products for them. Most of these new media and multimedia platforms are social media friendly and build for digital-only platforms. But all the roads of success are leading to one answer – the content – with quality which is the soul of any media house.

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