



Indian news media and the production of news in the age of social discovery

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Contents

About the Authors	5
Acknowledgements	6

Executive Summary	7
1. Introduction	9
2. Case Selection, Data, and Methods	11
3. Building Capacity for Social Media	13
4. Social Media and Distributed Discovery	15
5. From Distributed Discovery to Distributed Content	17
6. Making Content for Social Media	20
7. Measuring Performance and Feedback	22
8. Social Media as a Source	24
9. Conclusions	25

References	27
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Executive Summary

This report examines the social media strategies of a sample of 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).

The context is extensive mobile internet access across India and a large and growing number of social media users, which have led news organisations to invest in social media. The organisations we focus on are oriented towards a predominantly affluent and urban English-speaking elite, and thus not representative of the industry as a whole, but they do provide a starting point for understanding how Indian news media are handling the challenges and opportunities that come with the rise of social media platforms.

On the basis of interviews with senior editors and executives, as well as analysis of the Facebook and Twitter output of each organisation, we find that:

- Facebook is the most important social media platform for all the organisations covered here, in part because of its very large user base, but also because the company has collaborated actively with a number of Indian publishers.
- Twitter is seen as important for breaking news and for reaching elites, but has fewer users, drives less traffic, provides less support, and offers fewer opportunities for monetisation.
- News organisations take different strategic and operational approaches to social media.
 - **Strategically**, most of the organisations covered here primarily pursue an on-site strategy oriented towards driving social media referrals to their website (where content can be monetised through advertising), though the recently launched digital-born organisation The Quint has embraced a greater off-site component, and has built large audiences via social media.
 - **Operationally**, several organisations operate with a centralised social media team that creates, curates, and promotes content across social media, but some operate with decentralised teams where people across the newsroom are responsible for social media.
- Social media work in most organisations is primarily based on practical experience, combined with some use of third-party tools like Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics, and Chartbeat. The more systematic ‘science of sharing’ developed by organisations like BuzzFeed around measurement, testing, and data-driven decision-making is not present. When social media algorithms, products, and services occasionally change, leading to fluctuations in audience reach and engagement, media organisations experiment to try to deduce how to succeed in a constantly changing environment.
- Most organisations are not only actively posting large amounts of content on social media (some of it created specifically for a particular platform), but also selectively paying to promote both editorial content and sponsored content to increase reach. A clear majority of social posts are links to content on publishers’ websites, but all publishers have been increasing the amount of native content they post, especially to Facebook.
- At this stage, most of our interviewees see a clear opportunity for a win–win relationship between publishers and platforms in the short term in India, where publishers offer platforms content in return for potentially wide off-site audience reach and large amounts of referral traffic to their website. As most Indian media organisations do not charge for digital news, the friction that exists around payment and subscriptions in some other markets is absent.

But longer term, several interviewees identify forms of platform risk that they and other publishers need to manage carefully – primarily around editorial control (brand attribution, context, onwards journey), data (access to individual-level information about users), and monetisation (several interviewees underline the need to find ways of monetising off-site audiences more effectively and note that publishers and platforms compete for digital advertising), as well as the possible risk that users will come to expect seamless and total access to publishers' content via platform products and services. The prospect of building towards one billion social media followers is perhaps beguiling, but our interviewees underline that dumb scale in itself is a vanity game and not one that will work long term.

Introduction

The rise of social media and other digital intermediaries like search engines is reshaping the media environment and affects how news is published, distributed, and funded all over the world. In this report, we examine the growing importance of the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter in India and analyse how Indian news publishers have responded and developed their social media strategies in recent years.

India has emerged as one of the fastest-growing markets for US-based technology companies like Facebook, Google, and Twitter. India's Twitter users currently number at 26.7 million, and as of July 2017, Facebook reported that India overtook the United States to become the platform's largest audience by country with a userbase of 241 million active users. With entertainment and social media driving internet use in both rural and urban areas (IAMAI-Kantar IMRB, 2016), internet penetration is growing rapidly in India. There were an estimated 220 million internet users as of December 2016 (Ibid.) and internet access grew by 7% and 22% year-on-year in urban and rural areas respectively. High penetration of smartphones and mobile internet as a result of reduced data tariffs and major telecommunication companies' aggressive roll-out of 4G plans has promoted consumption of digital content significantly (KPMG-FICCI, 2017), pushing users towards an alternative screen for media consumption, which is historically and still dominated by television (Ibid.).

As more users, especially among the younger generation,¹ spend time on social networks, they also attract advertisers and marketers. Although advertising revenue from print and television continues to be far higher than that from digital advertising, the latter is growing at double the pace. It accounts for a revenue of 76.9 billion INR, which makes up 15% of the total advertising revenue and registered a growth of 28% from 2015 to 2016 (Ibid.). In contrast, the television and print industry registered growth rates of 8.5% and 7% respectively – well below the overall rate of growth in the advertising market as a whole. The slowdown is attributed to a lack of subscription revenue as well as advertising revenue. A significant percentage of digital advertising revenue is being spent on social media platforms. Almost all brands have a Facebook and Twitter presence and over 24% of the brands surveyed by EY India in 2016 reported that they spend more than 16% of their digital marketing budgets on social media (EY, 2016).

In this increasingly mobile and platform-dominated environment, news media organisations no longer control all the main channels of communication. Earlier this year, a study revealed that two-thirds of American adults get news from social media (Shearer & Gottfried, 2017). Search and social is becoming an increasingly important way to get news in many European countries; in some cases digital intermediaries are being more widely used than the websites and apps of news organisations themselves (Newman et al., 2017). One recent survey of 36 markets across the world found that two-thirds of respondents identified distributed forms of discovery like search and social as the main way in which they get news online (Newman et al., 2017).

While similar research is yet to be done on Indian audiences, it is clear that an increasing number of urban, english-speaking audience as well as a small but growing number of rural, regional language audience (IAMAI-Kantar IMRB, 2016) are getting their news online and are spending a significant amount of time on social media applications. At the same time, Indian publishers are

¹ Demographically, most internet users in India, both in urban and rural areas, are from younger generations – schoolchildren, college students, and young men. There continues to be a difference in access by male and female users, especially in rural areas where the male to female ratio is 3 to 1. We are also able to observe differences in patterns of use among urban and rural users (IAMAI-Kantar IMRB, 2016).

keenly aware of the shifts in user habits and advertising spending, and the influence that platforms like Google, Facebook, and Twitter yield in the digital space. A number of news organisations acknowledge that a large part of their traffic comes from Google Search, Facebook, and (to a lesser extent) Twitter. With the rise of messaging applications like WhatsApp, and potentially other services like Snapchat and products like smart speakers, the role of platform companies is likely to continue to grow in importance. Hence, news publishers – print, broadcast, and digital – are under pressure to experiment with new editorial, distribution, and business strategies and to work in conjunction with large technology companies like Facebook and Twitter to develop news for audiences in a changing media environment.

With the rise of distributed discovery, news organisations have had to come to terms with an environment where they have less control over how people find and access their news. Discovery is already distributed across direct entry, search, social media, and, for some, messaging apps. The next step is from distributed discovery to distributed content, as popular platforms increasingly offer formats for off-site consumption of news content, including YouTube Channels, Facebook Instant Articles, Twitter Moments, Snapchat Discover, and the like. News organisations all over the world have to make strategic and operational decisions about how they leverage distributed discovery and distributed content (with on-site or off-site strategies) and how they organise their work to ensure they maximise their editorial control, access to data, and opportunities to monetise their content (Cornia et al., 2016). Other studies have shown how, faced with the challenges and opportunities presented by platform companies, publishers have reacted in ways that are shaped by a fear of missing out, by the difficulties of evaluating the risk/reward ratio of engaging with different initiatives developed by platforms, and by a sense of a profound asymmetry as even the largest news media organisations find themselves dealing with far larger technology companies (Nielsen & Ganter, 2017).

Case Selection, Data, and Methods

In the following report, we examine how six major English-language news organisations in India, – two broadcasters, two newspapers, and two digital-born – are approaching social media platforms. The sample includes *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express*, NDTV, News18, Firstpost, and The Quint. The organisations we focus on are oriented towards a predominantly affluent and urban English-speaking elite, and thus not representative of the industry as a whole, but they do provide a starting point for understanding how Indian news media are handling the challenges and opportunities that come with the rise of social media platforms.

Table 1: Organisations and social media reach

Organisation	Readership/ Viewership	Total unique visitors in July 2017	Facebook followers	Twitter followers
Hindustan Times	4.5m	51m	5.7m	6.2m
The Indian Express	0.4m	60m	7.0m	10.3m
NDTV	5.7m	49m	7.2m	2.7m
News18	5.9m	27m	5.9m	3.8m
Firstpost	NA	18m	2.4m	1.9m
The Quint	NA	6m	5.8m	0.2m

Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012, Comscore, Facebook and Twitter pages as of October 31, 2017.

Although the sample includes print, broadcast, and digital native news organisations, it is not representative of the entire Indian news media landscape, which includes a large number of regional language news providers. The six organisations were chosen strategically based on their use of the social media platforms Facebook and Twitter in their newsrooms. All six organisations are news and information sites publishing breaking news, analysis, opinion, sports, and entertainment and lifestyle features. All six have active, verified accounts on Facebook and Twitter and have been consistently engaging with audiences on the same. They have all partnered directly with either Facebook or Twitter in the past year and have been open to experimenting with new features like Instant Articles and Facebook Live.

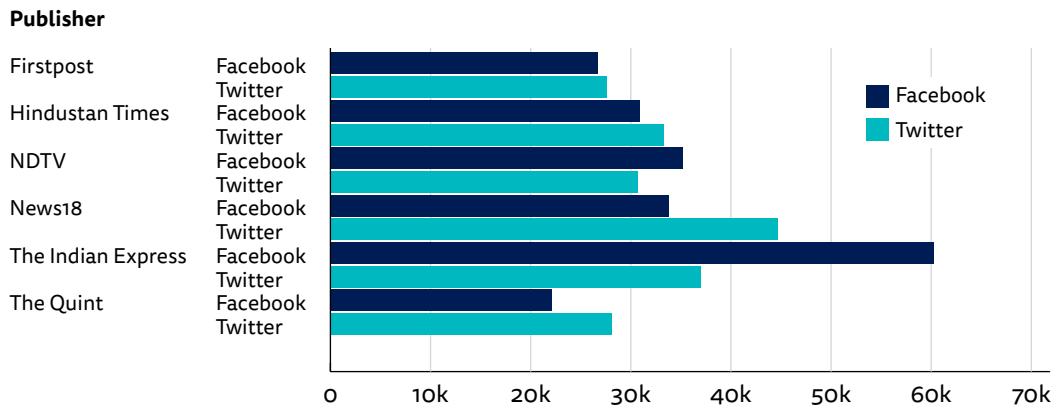
Our report is based on interviews with people working in editorial and management parts of the organisation, supplemented by data collected using CrowdTangle. Most interviewees were mid-level journalists who were either members of a social media team or designated as social media editors and whose work involved curating content that was posted onto Facebook and Twitter on a daily basis. We also interviewed people who held senior editorial and management positions in order to gain an understanding of the strategic and economic considerations that come into play while dealing with social intermediaries. We have conducted a total of 16 formal interviews, out of which five were conducted over the phone, during the months of September and October 2017. The interviews were semi-structured, lasting 30 minutes to an hour.

In addition to the interviews we also gathered data on social media outputs of all six organisations' primary social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter over the course of six months, from 1 April to 30 September 2016 (01-04-2017 to 30-09-2017).

Table 2: Facebook pages and Twitter handles included in study

Organisation	Facebook	Twitter
Firstpost	Firstpost	@firstpost
Hindustan Times	Hindustan Times	@htTweets
NDTV	NDTV	@ndtv
News18	News18	@CNNnews18
The Indian Express	Indian Express	@IndianExpress
The Quint	The Quint	@TheQuint

Figure 1: Facebook and Twitter post counts by publisher



The data also include metadata pertaining to each post and tweet. For each Facebook post, these include but are not limited to time of creation, type of content (link, photo, native video, live video, status, etc.), number of likes, comments, shares, and other reactions (such as love, wow, haha, sad, angry, and thankful), URL of post, URL of corresponding article and accompanying message. For tweets, these include but are not limited to time of creation, type of content, likes, retweets, URL of post, URL of corresponding article and message.

Given that editorial strategy with respect to social media is still at a nascent and experimental stage, the data enable us to understand the scale and nature of content being published on social media across these six organisations and provide added context with which to interpret interviews and vice versa. It is clear that while desktop traffic is still often direct or driven by search, mobile traffic is to a much larger extent driven by social, and many organisations have significant off-site reach via social channels.

We have limited our analyses of social media strategies to Facebook and Twitter because, although Indian news organisations are present on platforms like Instagram and Snapchat as well as messaging apps like WhatsApp, it is still too early to make an informed judgement about strategies relating to the same. It should be pointed out that Twitter and Facebook were treated very similarly early on, but from our conversations it is evident that newsrooms have evolved very different approaches to each platform. Facebook is emerging as a more effective tool for driving traffic to the website, while Twitter is seen as a space for breaking news notifications, story discovery, and identifying trends. While individual journalists may prefer Twitter to reach peers and elites, news organisations have started seeing Facebook as a much more important platform for audience growth and a more significant driver of referrals. Hence, major social media investment, at least for now, is geared towards Facebook, with its far larger user base and its greater investment in expanding in India and actively partnering with Indian media organisations.

Building Capacity for Social Media

The use of social media in newsrooms and the strategies adopted by news organisations are a combination of many factors. First, proprietors and editors, even among the ‘big players’, increasingly acknowledge the importance of social media intermediaries and have arrived at a way to think of them strategically, in terms of what content to post or how many times a day to post.² Second, social media platforms, Facebook in particular, are introducing features and monetisation options aimed at publishers and are partnering with news organisations to test and launch new features. Third, there is rapid internet growth, especially in rural areas, where a lower bandwidth means that it is easier for people to access news via social media,³ making it a key destination for news and information.

Social media use, while rising in importance, is still a relatively new entrant into the newsroom. Organisations are still catching up with the best way to optimise their workflow and talent towards building capacity for social media use. Out of the six organisations we spoke to four – *Hindustan Times*, *The Quint*, *News18*, and *NDTV* – centralised social media control to their dedicated social media teams. The size and core function of these teams and the level of skill and responsibility of the team members differed across the organisation. While *Firstpost* and *The Indian Express* have teams of social media editors, the responsibilities for curating social media content and access to social media accounts are distributed among the entire editorial team.

The responsibilities of social media teams and editors we spoke to can be broadly categorised into the following: 1) curating content that is posted from the newsroom, 2) monitoring the performance of stories on social media using Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics, and third-party tools, 3) monitoring comments and individual reader responses to stories on social media, which includes dealing with trolls, 4) overseeing content and campaigns created in partnership with Facebook and Twitter, and increasingly 5) creation of original content for social media, usually generated as a response to social media trends themselves.

The prioritisation of the above tasks varied across the six newsrooms. At *NDTV*, one of the core responsibilities of social media editors was to keep an eye out for breaking news. ‘We are always tracking national and international news agencies, international bodies, and persons of interest on Twitter, so if someone else breaks a big story or tweets something important we are often the first to know. We also track Twitter trends, so if “London” randomly starts trending in India, we know something has happened and alert the desk immediately,’ explains a senior social media editor at *NDTV*.

At the television channels, the social media team has the added responsibility of balancing both the television and website output. Acting as a bridge between the newsroom and the platform, the social media team works collaboratively with editors, reporters, and in some cases the marketing team.

The dynamic nature of social media means that building a skillset that covers all aspects of it can be a difficult task. Most social media editors themselves are not digital media experts but those who have made the effort to experiment with the medium and build skills on the job.

The social media team at *News18* consists of journalists as well as people from marketing and copywriting. ‘Because social media is so new and relatively disorganised, different organisations

² Interview with Subhash Rai, Digital Editor, *Hindustan Times* on 23 September 2017.

³ Interview with Nandgopal Rajan, Digital Editor, *The Indian Express* on 12 October 2017 via Skype.

have a different model,' explains Bodhisattva Sen Roy, Social Media Editor at News18. 'We have a team of nine that works with both TV and web, and at any given point we have about three to four people on shift. This is the model that has worked for us.'

Therefore, there is no formula for capacity building for social media at news organisations. Hiring social media editors can also be a daunting task as it is difficult to find experts in the field. According to Digital Editor Nandgopal Rajan, 'The best strategy has been to hire a fresher and train the person according to what we at the newsroom already know'.

The social media team usually consists of junior to mid-career people responsible for operations. At The Quint, the newsroom and social media team in particular is made up of young people. 'A good 40–50% of the newsroom is kids straight out of college,' explains Ritu Kapur, co-founder and CEO at The Quint. 'In digital, learning is happening every day and digital skills are changing every month. The young kids who come in teach us a lot.'

Although it seems as though social media editors and teams are going to be a fixture in future newsrooms, not everybody feels this way. One executive editor said that, moving forward, a decentralised approach where every journalist will eventually have to take responsibility for their own stories on social media would work best.

However, others feel that, given the volume of content being published and the fact that social media is a dynamic, reactive medium, there needs to be a person or team at the helm of things. Large newspapers like *The Indian Express* face a 'problem of plenty and need someone to funnel the content', according to Nandgopal Rajan. At smaller newsrooms like The Quint's that rely heavily on social media to reach their audience, the social media team's job involves creating original, social-first content for their social media accounts. 'Social media is not one-way traffic. We do a lot of stories that are curated from social media as well. We find out what the trends are and do stories accordingly,' says Sohini Guharoy, Head of Social Media at The Quint.

Social Media and Distributed Discovery

Though all news organisations use social media to reach their audience, the degree of reliance is different for each individual organisation. Legacy brands get a significant amount of direct traffic, though this is declining, and the majority of brands get a large share of traffic through search. For digitally native brand The Quint the situation is reversed: it initially got over 80% of its traffic via social media, but this figure has reduced to 20%,⁴ which is closer to that of other publishers in the sample. In The Quint's case, social media has worked as a tool to reach new audiences and build brand recognition that eventually translates to direct visits.

That referral traffic is one of the most important metrics by which performance on social media is measured implies that reaching audiences on social media and getting them to engage with your content is a priority. The former is a function of Facebook's newsfeed algorithm, while the latter is based on how attractive the post is to different users.

Therefore, senior editors and social media editors are keenly aware of the 'reach' (how many users actually see the post) and 'engagement' (how many users click on or react to the post) of each post, and social media strategy is geared towards increasing these two variables. However, due to the opacity and constantly changing workings of the algorithm, decisions on what content to post or when and how often to post are based on trial and error and the practical experience of editors. None of the surveyed newsrooms are using any form of user testing (A/B testing, reader surveys) or a BuzzFeed-like 'science of sharing' approach yet.

'With these mediums there is no rulebook, no checkboxes. There are basic good practices, and even those are not written in stone, so you need to continuously evolve your own strategy and see what works. We keep up by paying attention to trends, attending webinars, and following blogs like Niemen Labs,' recalls Geetika Rustagi, Social Media Editor at *Hindustan Times*.

The cumulative experience of the social media team or digital editors, combined with the information available through audience measurement tools like Facebook Insights, Twitter Analytics, Google Analytics, and CrowdTangle, have resulted in a rough set of guidelines or action plans that are followed on a day-to-day basis.

A good example of such an evolving strategy is the decision on frequency of posts on Facebook. As Geetika Rustagi points out, 'There was always a big debate around how much is too much when it comes to posts. Now we've decided to focus on those stories that actually get you traffic and not waste time on stories your audience will not be interested in.' Earlier, newsrooms would put all of their content on social media, but this has changed considerably and editors are making decisions on the frequency and time of posts. Choosing what post to put on which platform is more of a concern for bigger news organisations that produce a high volume of content – about 5,600 stories a day in the case of one legacy player. 'This is important, especially for Facebook, because we can't post a story multiple times as their algorithm can mark it as spam and downrank one of them,' explains Sohini Guharoy, who like others is constantly anticipating how the newsfeed algorithm will treat their content. Evidently, Twitter, where posts are published in a more linear way than Facebook, is less of a concern in most newsrooms. Sohini Guharoy added that the time of the post can also have a bearing on performance: 'The content and type of the story – whether it is an exclusive, a breaking news story, or a feature – determine what time it should be published on social media.'

⁴ Interview with Ritu Kapur, Founder and CEO, The Quint on 19 September 2017.

One way to improve the reach of posts is through paid 'boosts'. While boosting was a regular, strategic practice in three of the surveyed newsrooms, in others it was limited to branded or sponsored content, or left up to the decision of senior editors. Some newsrooms also received credit from Facebook, which allowed them to experiment with the feature. Posts are boosted for different reasons. First, it is a way to simply boost numbers and improve reach and engagement of a post. Stories that are already performing well are boosted to maximise engagement. 'We boost content based on how they are performing on Chartbeat and Google Analytics. I usually boost a story if it is doing well on Facebook and I think it has the potential to go viral,' informed one senior social media editor. Second, it is a way to push special, niche stories that would otherwise be lost in the noise of social media. 'These stories are original enterprise stories made by the multimedia lab. A lot of effort goes into these,' says one editor. Interviewees, however, had mixed reactions to pushing some posts more than others or boosting content on Facebook. Though some deemed it a necessary part of social media strategy and a way to showcase special stories that deserved an audience, at least two interviewees were 'uncomfortable' with the practice.⁵

All interviewees are conscious of frequent changes to the platform's algorithm, especially Facebook's, including as mentioned earlier, their recent push for video. 'Twitter is not very complex and the algorithm doesn't change a lot but Facebook's changes periodically. I have a Google alert set for the Facebook algorithm so whenever there is an update I can look into it,' informs Bodhisattva Sen Roy of News18. 'For example, if Facebook tweaks their algorithm to blacklist few words that seemed click-bait, your traffic can suddenly plummet. And you notice that changing the headline or the thumbnail can turn things around again,' says Sanshey Biswas, describing what it is like to work in anticipation of the changes made by Facebook.

"Facebook's algorithm becomes smarter, serving content that users like, so then if there is a clear move towards entertainment stories or crime stories, we have to make an effort to do those and put them on Facebook," mentioned one senior editor.

Some editors appreciate the opacity of the algorithm and the fact that it remains dynamic, arguing that if it was clear what was rewarded, newsrooms would optimize for that, leaving less editorial autonomy in story selection. 'Thankfully, we haven't figured out the formula because then we would all become really lazy,' remarked Ritu Kapur. In response to a question on how an editor can make sure a story does well on Facebook, Anant Goenka explains, "Facebook keeps changing its algorithm, as it should. So it is more of an art than a science and it should remain that way."

Newspapers and digitally native websites especially were tending more towards Facebook as a more efficient platform for distributed discovery. In the case of the two news organisations that revealed information on traffic to their websites, Twitter accounted for less than 5% of the total traffic from social media (the rest overwhelmingly coming from Facebook), with social media as a whole accounting for an average of 40 to 60% of total website traffic. Television channels News18 and NDTV still saw Twitter as the primary, or at least equally important, platform. The broadcast news format is one of breaking news, fast updates, and a round-the-clock flow of information, and this makes Twitter, which mirrors a similar flow of information, more attuned to television than Facebook. However, at News18, the team observed that the average time spent on an article was significantly higher for the audience that came to the website through Twitter than Facebook.

⁵ Interview with Manon Verchot, Head of Mobile and Video Team, *Hindustan Times*, 19 September 2017.

From Distributed Discovery to Distributed Content

As Facebook and Twitter have developed new products like Instant Articles (launched June 2015), Facebook Live (launched August 2015 and opened to all users April 2016), and Periscope (launched March 2015), which allow organisations to host news on these platforms, publishers across the globe have moved beyond leveraging distributed discovery to also working with distributed content (Cornia et. al, 2016; Bell et al., 2017).

The same is true of publishers in India. Though editorially there is an impetus to try to get people back onto the website, publishers are slowly warming up to the idea of putting content directly onto social media platforms. When Facebook rolled out Instant Articles in India in December 2015, *Hindustan Times*, *The Indian Express*, and *The Quint* (as well as *India Today* and *Aaj Tak*) were among the launch partners. The move towards distributed content comes with the obvious potential pitfall of directing traffic away from the website, thus negatively impacting revenue, but it also comes with advantages, including potentially wider audience reach and often a better user experience than is offered by news organisations' own websites and apps.

Facebook and Twitter are seen as potential revenue sources. Though this is currently 'loose change'⁶ compared with the value of content that is being created, senior editors and management are thinking of strategies with which to engage audiences within the platform, without worrying about bringing them back to the website.

For a legacy brand like *The Indian Express*, this means access to an entirely new section of the audience with content that it is not originally known for. 'We started creating a distinction between the content that would engage people on Facebook itself versus content that would bring traffic on to our website,' says Anant Goenka, Executive Director at *The Indian Express*, explaining the publisher's strategy, which treats social media users as an entirely different audience. This view is reflected by Jaideep Giridhar, Executive Editor at Firstpost: 'I would very much like Firstpost social media to have its own separate identity, and I'm fairly certain that is how newsrooms are going to behave in the near future, because they are two very different mediums,' he predicts. Social media offers a space to experiment with new content formats like memes and GIFs, which do not perform well on the website but sometimes lead to massive engagement on social media.

Given that internet access in India, though growing rapidly, is still inconsistent in some parts of the country, content posted directly on social media is often more accessible to many users. 'If you are on low bandwidth, you may not be able to open *Indianexpress.com* but you can read out Instant Articles on Facebook,' says Nandgopal Rajan, pointing out that, rather than driving traffic away from the website, distributed content enables it to reach a new segment of the audience.

Indian publishers still overwhelmingly focus on posting links to their own stories on social media (Parthasarathi and Mitra, 2017), but are increasingly embracing off-site formats native to specific platforms, especially Facebook. The advent of Facebook Video and Facebook Live marks a point where news publishers are building capacity specifically for creating content for the Facebook platform. The production of native and live video on Facebook has also increased significantly in the past year (see Figure 2). Some newsrooms have journalists and editors working towards creating content specifically for social media and are investing in equipment to enable their reporters and journalists to do vlogs. This is a clear example of how publishers, including major

⁶ Interview with Ritu Kapur, Founder and CEO, *The Quint* on 19 September 2017.

publishers with significant on-site traffic, respond quickly when major platforms develop new formats and opportunities for building off-site reach (and potentially revenue) (see, for example, Kalogeropoulos & Nielsen, 2017).

Table 3: Percentage of post types on Facebook by publisher

Type (group)	Name					
	Firstpost %	Hindustan Times %	The Indian Express %	NDTV %	News18 %	The Quint %
Link	86.07	92.24	93.31	76.77	89.58	82.48
Live Video	2.78	0.73	0.16	0.85	1.42	1.68
Native Video	3.78	5.60	5.44	8.18	4.67	12.33
Photo	7.37	1.43	1.09	14.21	4.33	3.52

% of total count of number of records broken down by name v. type

Table 4: Percentage of post types on Twitter by publisher

Type (group)	Name					
	Firstpost %	Hindustan Times %	NDTV %	News18 %	The Indian Express %	The Quint %
Link	86.22	82.28	72.04	58.31	92.15	87.74
Native Video	0.69	0.21	2.40	8.11	0.10	1.32
Photo	4.78	3.62	10.49	17.33	0.41	2.94
Tweet	8.21	13.65	15.01	16.15	7.24	3.76
Video	0.10	0.24	0.00	0.09	0.10	4.15
Vine	0.01		0.07	0.01		0.09

% of total number of records broken down by name v. type

Hindustan Times and *The Quint* have video teams that make social-first video, mostly using their smartphones and a suite of editing software. 'We have whiteboards, a whole bunch of selfie sticks, and smartphones that people can use in the newsroom. We encourage our reporters to just pick up the phone, make a video on something that's just come in, and share on social,' explains Rohit Khanna, Executive Editor at *The Quint*. Live videos have ranged from live blogs following breaking news to film reviews and interviews.

Using data for the time period between April 2017 and September 2017, we were able to observe the change in types of content published by all six news organisations. Following the launch of Facebook Live in India in early 2016, there is a transition from photos to video on Facebook, and by the third quarter of 2017, all publishers except Firstpost are publishing more videos than photos. Although the number of links published is growing, there has been more growth in native and live video. The data from Twitter show that there has been a drop in the number of tweets and a shift to photos and video by all six organisations. However, video posts are not as consistent when compared with links. For interviews, NDTV and News18 post a large number of videos on Twitter.

This increase is not simply a result of publishers independently making the decision to publish more videos. Facebook has been supplementing changes to its platform with a very

proactive strategy on the ground. Facebook has partnered with five out of six of the surveyed news organisations to provide incentives and technical support to produce live video on the platform. Its media partnerships team in India works with publishers to do basic training and troubleshooting, as well as to discuss short-term strategy and collaborate on campaigns.⁷ The platform has been partnering with news organisations to promote original video content by providing a minimum value guarantee from a minimum number of videos that are published directly on Facebook.

However, some interviewees felt it was still early days for distributed content. 'For some reason, advertisers are not looking at publishers on social media platforms yet. They're still working in a programmatic-type format. It's too early to say if social media can go from being a discoverability channel to actually being something else,' informs Ritu Kapur. Organisations are also worried about diluting resources and moving away from their areas of expertise: 'Facebook Live is a great tool but our core competence is not to get a camera to a place and do a story as fast as possible; it's analysing the story once it is done, and I think Facebook has a long way to go in making video searchable,' reiterates Anant Goenka.

The move from distributed discovery to distributed content presents challenges for a publisher's brand and, if its content starts showing up in undesirable contexts, its credibility. Unlike a website, where the masthead and logo continuously remind readers which publication they are reading, Facebook limits the extent to which publishers can push their brand. One piece of research from Europe found that less than half of those who saw news via Facebook and Twitter were able to recall the brand behind the stories they had read (Kalogeropoulos & Newman, 2017). 'All readers see when consuming an Instant Article is a little thumbnail with our logo next to the news item,' says one editor. 'There are fears that the brand is being lost in the Facebook maze, because people remember the platform, not the brand,' echoes another. This is especially interesting because social media platforms are also viewed as spaces in which to showcase content, build brand recognition, and gain new readers or viewers. In order to retain their brand identity and set themselves apart, organisations are diverting resources to creating immersive content that is exclusive to their website. These, like the *Hindustan Times* 'Class of 2018' series or News18's 'Kashmir Without Cliches' series, are typically special collaborations between reporters, designers, and artists.

⁷ Interview with Ritu Kapur, Founder and CEO, The Quint, Sohini Guharoy, Digital Media Editor, The Quint, Jaideep Giridhar, Executive Editor, Firstpost, Nandgopal Rajan, Digital Editor, *The Indian Express* between 19 September and 12 October 2017.

Making Content for Social Media

The question of what content to publish and how to package it has become an increasingly pertinent one for all news organisations. News organisations find themselves competing for attention, not just with other publishers of news and information, but with entertainment and social content created and shared by friends and family. According to Raksha Bihani, Senior Social Media Editor at NDTV, 'On social media you need to make a distinction on what people want to read and what people want to see', pointing out that consumption of information on social media is very different from that on the website.

One part of this strategy involves making original content geared towards social media audiences, while the other involves packaging news content in a way that appeals to audiences. The former could mean two things.

First, it could mean making original, exclusive content that is likely to appeal to the audience on social media. With the rise of distributed content, newsrooms are thinking more about creating original content for Facebook and Twitter. Some news organisations have invested in building separate teams to make content exclusive to social media, as is the case with The Quint's Neon team or the mobile video journalists at *Hindustan Times*.

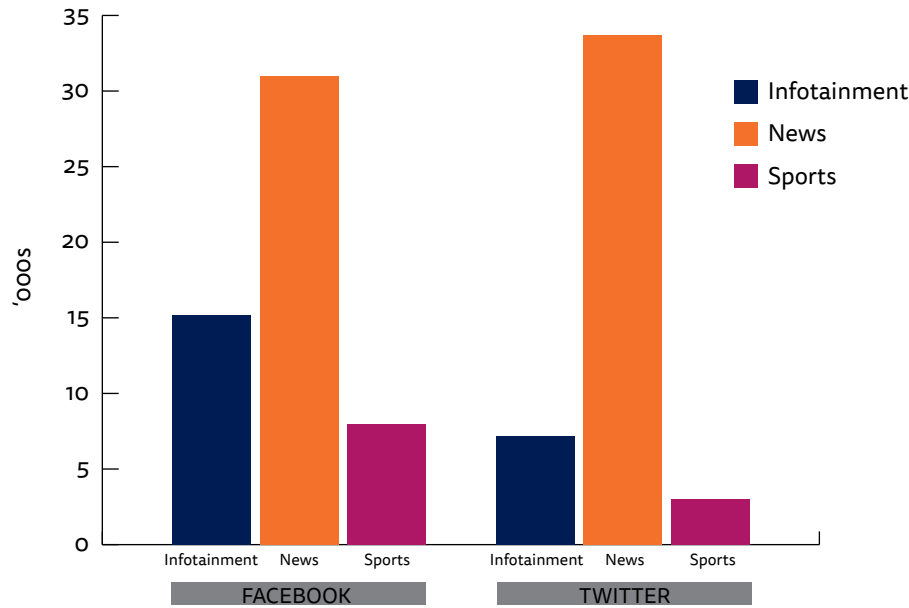
Second, it could also involve covering topics that are trending and are sure to attract readers or viewers. This is a strategic decision often tied to larger organisational goals. 'Our digital marketing team works closely with the editors and together they keep a close eye on CrowdTangle. The digital marketing team's job is to have a sense of where to invest; they know what stories work on which platform and they are empowered to make suggestions to the edit team,' informs Anant Goenka.

Editors retain a level of editorial autonomy with respect to what trends are worth following and to what degree but are aware that these stories are necessary. The common understanding was that shorter, lighter stories provide a 'burst in page views' but serious long-form pieces or immersive stories will accumulate engagement and views over a longer period of time. Editors are, however, careful to maintain a balance between news and information, infotainment, and sports in order to protect the organisation's brand and retain its readership.

According to Ritu Kapur, simply creating good content is not enough: 'It's equally important how you put that content in front of people. You need to have a good hero image and a headline which compels someone to stop and read.' While editors now find it easy to tell which stories will work on social media, packaging a strong or lengthy opinion piece for the social media audience remains a challenge.⁸

'Attention span for social media content is much lower and for the most part consumption of information happens on mobile. So we need to present news as short bursts of information that doesn't take long to consume. For instance, we may condense a series of articles about the Rohingya crisis into a set of cards presenting arguments for and against deporting Rohingya Muslims,' relates Jaideep Giridhar. Writing catchy headlines is therefore a key skill when it comes to packaging for social media. Most interviewees agreed that images, videos, GIFs, pull quotes, and cards or images with a few bullet points perform well on both Facebook and Twitter, and some newsrooms have made concerted efforts to create more 'social friendly' content. News18 has a Twitter account especially for GIFs, while NDTV Beeps is a popular format with readers.

⁸ Interview with Nandgopal Rajan, Digital Editor, *The Indian Express* on 12 October 2017 via Skype.

Figure 2: Balance of news categories on social media by platform

'We prepare a lot of cards in anticipation for news like poll results and match results. We believe that one can react to what is happening in the news in a number of ways. Not just writing a long article about it. We can immediately react by putting out a meme, especially if there is something that lends itself to a bit of humour,' explains Rohit Khanna, Executive Editor at The Quint.

Content strategy is also reflected in the difference in content posted on Twitter and Facebook. 'We've found that Twitter is for breaking news and event-based stories, while Facebook is for the softer, longer stories,' says Deepak Menon, Deputy Editor at News18. Facebook's Instant Articles, which makes it much easier to consume news on mobile, especially in areas with lower bandwidths, has also contributed to making Facebook a preferred destination for *reading* news.

Twitter is not seen as a place to 'read' the news but to consume news as a flow of shorter information bursts, in a 'Post-It' format.⁹ 'If you come to Twitter, you'll get a rough understanding of our stories from our Twitter feed itself. For certain things and a more in-depth understanding you might need to come back to the website, but we are not averse to giving you all the info on the Twitter handle itself,' says Bodhisattva Sen Roy, News18.

⁹ Interview with Nandgopal Rajan, Digital Editor, *The Indian Express* on 12 October 2017 via Skype.

Measuring Performance and Feedback

Given that distributed discovery is still the main priority for newsrooms, social media performance is often judged based on the percentage of traffic being directed from the platform to the website. 'Eventually the performance of a story is based on the numbers on two platforms – Google Analytics and ComScore – and eventually defined by profit and loss,' says Anant Goenka. His views are reflected by Divyanshu Dutta Roy and Nandgopal Rajan, who say that ultimately you need readers to come back to your site as that is where the revenue is made, reiterating the fact that Facebook and Twitter are still vehicles for bringing traffic back to the website, though this is changing in the case of the former.

The emphasis on direct traffic is less at a place like The Quint, where social media is as important a platform as the website. The organisation has developed an engagement metric that depicts a mix of social and direct traffic and pays attention to measures like shares and time spent on a single story. 'We base editorial decisions on how to package a story or image based on these figures. We're putting a lot of effort into our stories so there is no point doing something that we know won't work,' explains Sohini Guharoy. Different Indian news organisations thus position themselves differently in terms of whether they focus on an on-site strategy, where social media is used primarily to drive traffic to the website, or an off-site strategy, where social reach is a goal in itself. Established legacy media like *The Indian Express* give the clearest examples of on-site strategies, and the digital-born The Quint is the clearest example of an off-site strategy. In both cases, news organisations invest in social media, but they use them in somewhat different ways and for somewhat different purposes. This is similar to differences seen elsewhere (Nielsen & Ganter, 2017).

When it comes to distributed content, social media metrics like engagement, comments, or shares help editors understand how well a story is being received by the audience.

CrowdTangle, Facebook Insights, and Twitter Analytics are used by all surveyed newsrooms to study how audiences are reacting to their own and their competitors' content on social media, while some also look at Chartbeat, IO, and Taboola.

Editors are moving away from simplistic numbers such as likes and shares to more complicated measures like the engagement rate.¹⁰ 'Until recently it was about page likes and building a following. It's a nice number to have for vanity's sake but it's not something I lose sleep over,' reveals Geetika Rustagi. 'You can have a large user base but only 5% is interacting with your content, so it's important to engage with those users, so we should focus on them,' she adds.

For journalists, like Sanshey Biswas and Manon Verchant from the *Hindustan Times* mobile journalism team, feedback is an important way to see how the audience is responding to content. 'For us the amount of time people spend on a video is really important because it tells us at what point we lost the viewers' interest,' informs Sanshey Biswas. The team has also developed an internal measure to study how successful its videos are.

Social media can also be used to gauge how much attention a story is generating or judge the impact a story has on the conversation on Twitter and Facebook, but it may not be enough to judge the total impact of a story. Because news consumption on social media and on the website is very different, stories that generate high engagement on social media may not do very well on

¹⁰ The number of people that liked, shared, commented, or clicked on a post divided by the number of people who saw the post.

the website, and vice versa. As Divyanshu Dutta Roy of NDTV reminds us, social media can amplify certain voices and opinions and we have to take into consideration the large chunk of people who still don't have social media accounts.

Social Media as a Source

Apart from offering platforms for distribution, social media is used extensively by journalists as a source of news and a way to find out what news is trending or discover stories that may not yet be on their radar. 'It is very important for us as a news organisation to have a very sharp focus as to what is happening in the social media space, both in terms of news breaking and people putting out their views on certain subjects and the conversations that are happening around an event, because our viewers and readers are young and expressive and that's their medium,' says Ritu Kapur.

Twitter is also seen as a way to get primary information from sources. Those that manage the news desk keep a close eye on Twitter for breaking news stories and announcements. 'Almost every administration in India, from the PM's office to the traffic police of a city, has a verified Twitter account, so a lot of times we get breaking news and announcements directly from Twitter. We also find images on Twitter posted by both verified handles and locals who post from the scene of the event,' explains Raksha Bihani. Rohit Khanna has found that if you curate sensibly and sensitively with journalistic rigour, you can get great material from Twitter and also generate very interesting content from the audience.

Curation is key when it comes to developing stories based on what is trending on social media. 'Things that generate engagement on social media may not be the most up-to-date news,' says Divyanshu Dutta Roy of NDTV, reminding us that often random things from over a year ago start trending on social media for no reason. 'We do stories based on what is happening on social media but we never use social trends to set the news agenda,' informs Nandgopal Rajan.

Most social media teams are also responsible for creating original content based on social media trends. The social media team at The Quint consists of a smaller team that focuses exclusively on generating content based on what is going on in the social media environment. 'We do a lot of spin-offs from stuff that is happening on social media,' informs Sohini Guharoy, who manages the team.

However, as journalists and reporters pick up stories and sources from social media, the newsroom also becomes vulnerable to unreliable sources and fake news. Given there are lots of unsubstantiated claims floating around on social media, it has become very important for newsrooms to not be under the pressure of speed constantly and to stop and verify information taken from social media. 'The social media team goes through the person's profile to see if they are credible, and checks the image itself to make sure it isn't a stock photo.'

The Quint and Firstpost have already made pointed efforts to deal with the problem of fake news. Firstpost has several mechanisms in place to vet fake news. It has conducted workshops organised with the help of Google News Lab, where journalists were given tips and introduced to tools that could help them verify the credibility of a source or image.

Conclusion

The current environment, one of experiments with content and partnerships with technology platforms, marks the start of a long-term negotiation between platforms and publishers in India. The terms of this negotiation, according to one senior editor, are defined by mutual benefit. 'Right now, there is no trouble acknowledging that we need a platform like Facebook, but it has been easy to align our priorities with theirs,' he reveals. More publishers echo this sentiment, while some feel that there is scope and need for a greater collaboration between the two sides, especially given the current concern over fake news. 'Both sides have to yield. It is important for news organisations to take platforms seriously and critical that platforms start recognising what professional journalism involves,' says another senior editor.

The majority of the people we spoke with said Facebook was making more efforts than other platform companies to reach out to Indian news organisations and 'bridge the trust deficit between publishers and Silicon Valley'.¹¹ Facebook's Media Partnerships team has been more proactive about working directly with publishers. Though interviewees from News18 and NDTV mentioned collaborations with Twitter, the newspapers and digital publications felt Facebook was making more effort to engage with publishers and giving them more access from a strategy perspective. 'Facebook is definitely far more aggressive, and we have a symbiotic relationship where we are constantly seeing what we can get from each other,' says Ritu Kapur, adding that collaborations with Twitter may be in the pipeline as it builds on its video platforms. But there may be other issues that also need addressing, as Twitter has over time earned the reputation of a noisy, unfriendly space that is often dominated by a political agenda (Neyazi, 2017). Ritu Kapur felt that Twitter had become a 'nasty place', especially for journalists, though she added that the Twitter team in India is quick to act when it comes to abuse on its platforms. Coincidentally, during the time of the interviews, the Quint office was dealing with abuse on Facebook by people lashing back at a vlog by a Quint reporter.

Even as individual journalists and editors work towards building capacity and skills to cater to and develop an understanding of readers and viewers on social media, management and proprietors are being forced to revisit their perceptions of Facebook and Twitter. For the legacy media brands, social media platforms were considered simply as a supplement to their website, television channel, or newspaper, a platform for distributed discovering and brand building. For a newer, digitally native news organisation like The Quint, Facebook and Twitter have always been an important part of growth. 'For a young digital publisher, it is your primary distribution. There are a lot of pitfalls to Facebook and a lot of finger pointing that happens towards them, but had a new entrant like us not had Facebook to push our brand and content, we would have struggled,' says Ritu Kapur. The Quint's editorial team has therefore always been mindful that a large section of its audience accesses their news and reacts to it primarily through social media, and this has influenced its editorial strategy and workflow in a significant way. Like other digital-born Indian news organisations, such as Scroll and the Wire, social media has been key to how The Quint has built significant audience reach in a relatively short span of time (Sen & Nielsen, 2016).

With legacy news brands and relatively well-established websites like Firstpost, it is only in the past three years that their newsrooms have begun to create and curate content geared towards social media performance. Their efforts have been catalysed by the fact that publishers have the option of monetising content published on social media. Decisions on what content should be published on the website and what should be published directly on social media are subject to

¹¹ Ibid.

many considerations, relating the identity of the brand itself to the difference in audience and consumption habits on Facebook and Twitter, and to the functionality provided by each platform. 'In India a lot of people come online just for Facebook and our goal is to be where the readers are. In India it is all free anyway, unlike in markets where you have to pay 20 dollars a month to access a news website,' explains Nandgopal Rajan, observing that the opportunity cost of putting content directly on Facebook in India is not as much as in countries where people pay more for news. Thus it is not only digital-born news organisations that are working hard to develop social media strategies to more effectively leverage distributed discovery and distributed content. So too are many major legacy players, including both newspapers and broadcasters (Aneez et al., 2016). Just as social media exposure has helped a site like The Quint grow, it has also given legacy brands like *The Indian Express* an audience and a reach far beyond their core print readership.

At this stage, most of our interviewees see a clear opportunity for a win-win relationship between publishers and platforms in the short term in India, where publishers offer platforms content in return for potentially wide off-site audience reach and large amounts of referral traffic to their website. As most Indian media organisations do not charge for digital news, the friction that exists around payment and subscriptions in some other markets is largely absent. In our sample, we mostly see examples of active collaboration between publishers and platforms, and more widely in India at least co-existence. The kind of public confrontation that has characterised the relationship between some major publishers (such as Axel Springer and News Corp) and some platforms elsewhere (see, for example, Nielsen & Ganter, 2017) has so far not materialised in India.

But longer term, several interviewees identify forms of platform risk that they and other publishers need to manage carefully – primarily around editorial control (brand attribution, context, onwards journey), data (access to individual-level information about users), and monetisation (several interviewees underline the need to find ways of monetising off-site audiences more effectively and note that publishers and platforms do compete for digital advertising), as well as the possible risk that users will come to expect seamless and total access to publishers' content via platform products and services. This is a concern expressed by some commentators too, such as Nikhil Pahwa from MediaNama, who calls the embrace of Facebook and Twitter 'feeding the beast' and writes: 'We've seen this play out with Google: both YouTube and the (Android) Play Store are examples of platforms where, once publishers are in, they find it difficult to exit: they've helped build a mass audience for the platform, and now they're at the mercy of the changes in terms and conditions on the platforms.'¹² Publishers in turn will counter by saying that they need to go where their audience is, and that is increasingly on social media, especially Facebook. Right now, most see the opportunities offered by platforms as more important than the challenges that come with pursuing them. The next step is then to go from building reach and scale via social media and other platform products and services to actually being able to convert it to meaningful journalistic impact and to commercial value that can fund news production going forward. The prospect of building towards one billion social media followers is perhaps beguiling, but several of our interviewees underline that dumb scale in itself is a vanity game, and not one that will work long term.

¹² <https://www.medianama.com/2015/11/223-feeding-the-beast-five-indian-publishers-sign-up-for-facebooks-instant-articles>

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Selected RISJ Publications

Going Digital. A Roadmap for Organisational Transformation
Prof Lucy Kueng

Digital-born Media and News
Tom Nicholls and Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Bias, Bullshit and Lies: Audience Perspectives on Low Trust in the Media
Nic Newman and Richard Fletcher

Developing Digital News Projects in Private Sector Media
Dr Alessio Cornia, Dr Annika Sehl, Dr Rasmus Kleis Nielsen

Indian Newspapers' Digital Transition
Zeenab Aneez et al

Digital Journalism Start-Ups in India
Dr Rasmus Kleis Nielsen and Arijit Sen

Journalism and the NSA Revelations: Privacy, Security and the Press
Risto Kunelius (ED) et al

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Dr James Painter (ED)

Right to be Forgotten – Privacy and the Media in the Digital Age
George Brock

Journalism in an Age of Terror
John Lloyd

The Kidnapping of Journalists: reporting from high-risk conflict zones
Professor Robert G. Picard and Hannah Storm

Media, Revolution and Politics in Egypt
Abdalla Hassan

Front cover: A man watches a movie on his phone as he waits for the bank to open to exchange his old high-denomination banknotes in the early hours, in the old quarters of Delhi, India, November 16, 2016. REUTERS/Adnan Abidi

