

EMERGING TRENDS IN DIGITAL JOURNALISM : A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF ONLINE NEWS START-UPS IN INDIA

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Abstract:

Digital journalism in India is rapidly transforming due to technological innovation, artificial intelligence (AI), platform dependency, and changing audience behaviour. This study examines emerging trends among national digital news start-ups using qualitative and quantitative content analysis. It analyses their content strategies, revenue models, distribution patterns, AI integration, audience engagement, and editorial positioning.

Findings show increasing use of AI tools for content production, summaries, translations, and data analysis to improve efficiency and reduce costs. However, this has led to content homogenisation and reduced differentiation among platforms. With declining advertisement revenue and lower search traffic, many start-ups are shifting toward subscription and membership-based models.

The study also highlights fragmented distribution across social media, newsletters, and messaging apps, along with growing information inequality as premium journalism moves behind paywalls. While AI offers innovation opportunities, sustainable growth depends on credibility, niche focus, and audience trust.

Keywords: Digital Journalism, Online News Start-ups, Artificial Intelligence in Media, Media Convergence, Audience Engagement

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Introduction:

The media ecosystem in India is changing dramatically as a result of the quick development of internet-based communication technologies, smartphone usage, and digital innovation. Unlike earlier times when print newspapers and broadcast television dominated, modern journalism is increasingly affected by digital-first platforms, algorithmic distribution systems, and audience-centered content techniques. The way Indian journalists create, disseminate, and consume their work is being altered by online news start-ups, which have emerged as important actors in this evolving ecosystem. Because of this, digital news startups are not just copying old media models, instead, they are launching new formats including data-driven articles, podcasts, newsletters, explainer videos, short-form journalism, and interactive elements built for online interaction.

1. Statement of the Problem

The rapid expansion of internet technologies and digital innovation has significantly transformed India's media ecosystem. Digital news start-ups have emerged as influential actors, introducing new content formats, algorithm-driven distribution systems, multilingual outreach, and AI-assisted journalism. However, despite their

growing presence, there is limited systematic academic research examining how these platforms structure their content, integrate technology, differentiate editorial strategies, and sustain revenue models.

Furthermore, the increasing reliance on data analytics, platform algorithms, automation, and subscription-based models raises important questions about content homogenisation, accessibility, editorial independence, and the future of journalistic standards in India. Therefore, this study seeks to critically examine the emerging trends shaping digital news start-ups in India.

2. *Significance of the study*

Despite the rapid proliferation of online news start-ups in India, there remains limited systematic academic analysis of how these platforms structure their content, utilize technology, and differentiate themselves within the broader media ecosystem. While existing research discusses digital journalism and media convergence, fewer studies focus specifically on content patterns within Indian online news start-ups.

This study seeks to address this gap by conducting a qualitative content analysis of selected online news start-ups in India. By examining editorial strategies, content formats, technological integration, and audience engagement practices, the research aims to identify key emerging trends shaping digital journalism in the Indian context.

3. *Limitations of the Study*

The study is subject to the following limitations:

1. The research is restricted to six selected digital news platforms which are

- The Quint
- The Print
- The Wire
- Dailyhunt
- Inshorts
- Khabar Lahariya

2. The analysis is based on content evaluation and does not include interviews with journalists, editors, or audiences.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a focused and structured understanding of emerging patterns in Indian digital journalism.

4. *Objectives of the Study*

The study aims to:

1. Examine emerging trends in digital journalism among selected online news start-ups in India.
2. Analyse content formats, editorial positioning, and storytelling techniques adopted by these platforms.
3. Evaluate the role of technology, AI tools, and automation in content production and distribution.
4. Assess revenue models including subscription-based and membership-driven approaches.

5. Study multilingual outreach, personalization, and audience engagement strategies.
6. Understand how digital-native platforms are redefining journalistic norms in India.

Literature Review:

The digital transformation of journalism has been widely recognized as one of the most consequential shifts in the history of news media, bringing with it new organizational forms, business models, and editorial norms (Rai, Jha & Uttam, 2026). Scholars and practitioners alike argue that the increasing integration of digital technologies has fundamentally restructured the processes through which news is produced, circulated, and consumed. This shift is characterized by the rise of digital-native news organizations commonly known as digital news start-ups which utilize mobile platforms, social media, automation tools, and algorithm-driven distribution strategies to engage audiences outside traditional mass media channels.

A seminal contribution to this field is the *Digital Journalism Start-Ups in India* report by Sen and Nielsen (2016), which systematically analysed Indian digital news start-ups to understand how they develop editorial priorities, distribution strategies, and funding models appropriate to the Indian digital media context. Sen and Nielsen found that while start-ups leverage mobile- first and social-first strategies, sustainable business models remains challenging to attain against the backdrop of declining traditional advertising and high dependence on platforms like Facebook and Google.

Correspondingly, academic research has examined how digital news start-ups reflect a broader trend toward entrepreneurial journalism, where journalistic innovation is intertwined with market logic and resource constraints. Prasad (2019) examined digital disruption in Indian journalism and shows that start-ups are experimenting with new revenue strategies, audience analytics, and technological tools, highlighting both opportunities and limitations of their digital first models.

Dahiya's *Digital First: Entrepreneurial Journalism in India* (2023) further contextualizes this transformation by exploring the structural features, strategic intent, and editorial policies of key digital start-ups across India. Dahiya's work elaborates how these organizations combine journalistic ambition with entrepreneurial practices to compete with large legacy media houses, yet also underscores persistent challenges related to revenue generation, audience monetization and organizational capacity in a crowded digital field.

Scholars have also noted the platformization of digital news. Algorithm-driven distribution and social media engagement have reshaped editorial workflows, with digital news start-ups relying on data analytics and audience metrics to inform content decisions. This reflects broader trends discussed in literature on digital journalism, where the shift from professional gatekeeping to networked, metrics-oriented news ecosystems affects what kinds of stories are produced and how they reach audiences (Briggs, 2015).

In addition to business model and technological considerations, a growing body of research highlights the structural obstacles to sustainable independent journalism. Studies on venture philanthropy and media innovation show that initiatives like the Google News Initiative and Meta Journalism Project attempt to infuse capital and capacity into local and start-up journalism, yet raising substantive funding remains a challenge for many organizations pursuing public-interest or non-profit journalism (Creech, 2024; Journalism Funders Forum, 2023). Such challenges are

compounded in the Indian context where philanthropic networks and grant funding are relatively nascent compared to Western media markets.

Further literature also highlights the political and economic pressures that influence digital news start-ups. Non-profit organizations such as The Wire and Khabar Lahariya strive to maintain editorial independence while navigating political pressures, legal risks, and resource scarcity, illustrating the delicate balance between journalistic autonomy and operational viability (Business Standard, 2015).

Collectively, the existing literature underscores that while digital journalism start-ups in India are innovative in form and strategy, they are confronted with enduring challenges related to monetization, audience loyalty, technological dependency, and competitive pressures from both global technology companies and established media institutions. Notwithstanding these constraints, digital start-ups represent a dynamic and evolving segment of India's media ecosystem, contributing to pluralism, niche reporting, and the redefinition of journalistic norms.

Despite this growing body of research, there remains a gap in systematic content-based comparative analysis across different types of digital start-ups in India. Much of the literature focuses on business models, organizational structures, or technological frameworks, with less emphasis on how editorial content itself is shaped and differentiated across models. The present research addresses this gap by conducting a content analysis of selected digital news start-ups to identify emerging trends and editorial strategies that define digital journalism in India today.

Research Methodology:

The study focuses on six selected digital news platforms in India representing diverse organizational and technological models:

1. **The Quint** – Profit-based digital news platform
2. **The Print** – Profit-based digital news platform
3. **The Wire** – Non-profit digital news platform
4. **Dailyhunt** – Technology-driven news aggregation platform
5. **Inshorts** – Technology-based short-format news application
6. **Khabar Lahariya** – Non-profit, rural and grassroots digital news platform

These platforms were selected to ensure representation of profit-based, non-profit, and technology-driven digital journalism models in India.

a. Research Design

The research follows a descriptive research design using quantitative content analysis. This design is appropriate as the study aims to identify patterns, frequency distribution, and thematic representation in the content published by selected digital news start-ups. The approach enables objective comparison across different digital platforms.

b. Unit of Analysis

An individual news article published on the selected digital news platform serves as the unit of analysis for this study. Each article is treated as a distinct textual unit that reflects the editorial choices.

c. Data Collection Procedure

News articles were collected directly from the official websites of the selected digital news start-ups. Each article

was examined through a structured coding framework designed to identify recurring themes, narrative patterns, editorial framing, and content presentation styles.

Results and Discussion:

This chapter presents the results of the qualitative content analysis conducted on six selected digital news start-ups in India. A total of 120 news articles (20 from each selected digital news platform) were systematically selected and analysed. Each article was carefully examined to understand its dominant themes, headline patterns, narrative structure, framing of issues, and editorial positioning.

1. Content and editorial narrative analysis of selected digital news start-ups:

Table 01

Platform	Nature of Headlines	Content and Narrative Analysis	Editorial Perspective
The Quint	Semi-emotional, engaging, and opinion-driven	Descriptive articles, social justice narratives, and political analysis	Issue-driven and evidence-based
The Print	Formal in tone with a strong emphasis on governance issues	In-depth analysis of public policy, governance, and political developments.	Data-driven and expert-centred in discourse
The Wire	Direct and accountability-focused in expression	Investigative reporting, political critique, and civil rights based journalism	Autonomous journalism with a strong watchdog role
Dailyhunt	Informative and neutral in tone	Concise and structured summary format	Technology-driven Neutral content distribution
Inshorts	Direct and attention-oriented	Brief summaries of political, economic, and current affairs news	Neutral and speed-driven digital journalism
Khabar Lahariya	Community-oriented with a field-based perspective	Grounded and people-centric storytelling incorporating voices of affected communities	Participatory journalism promoting local empowerment

The table indicate that while some platforms emphasise analytical and accountability journalism, others prioritise speed, aggregation, and accessibility in digital news dissemination.

2. A content analysis of union budget session 2026 across selected digital news platforms

i. The Qunit:

Figure 1 (Source: Internet)



The Quint's fact-checking initiative WebQoof plays a significant role in combating fake news by systematically identifying, verifying, and debunking misinformation circulating on digital platforms, particularly social media. In the case of the viral claim alleging that Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman stated there is no poverty in the country, WebQoof conducted a structured investigation by first identifying the trending claim, then analyzing the viral graphic for inconsistencies such as watermarks, and tracing the original source through reverse image search and source verification. The team cross-checked the statement with official government speeches, parliamentary records, budget presentations, credible news reports, and government channels, finding no evidence to support the claim. Based on this verification process, WebQoof concluded that the graphic had been digitally manipulated to misrepresent the facts. Through evidence-based reporting, transparent methodology, and the use of digital verification tools, WebQoof strengthens journalistic accountability, promotes media literacy, and helps prevent the spread of misinformation.

ii. *The Print:*

Figure 2 (Source: Internet)



At 11:55 on February 1st, The Print posted on social media, asking viewers to submit any queries they may have about the Union Budget 2026–2027. The post said that on their weekly show #ShekharSeSawaal, journalist Shekhar Gupta and Apoorva Mandhani would answer a few chosen queries. By giving viewers a forum to ask questions and acquire information about the Union Budget, the message sought to promote audience participation and public engagement. Additionally, a brief link to submit queries was included in the piece.

iii. *The Wire:*

Figure 3 (Source: Internet)



The Wire published a video titled “Will Budget 2026 Solve Your Problems?” on February 1, 2026, in which it analyzed the Union Budget and its economic impact. The discussion highlighted market reactions, including the decline in stock indices such as the Nifty and Sensex, and examined key budget priorities like capital expenditure and the focus on youth empowerment (Yuvashakti). The video critically explored themes such as revenue distribution between individual taxpayers and corporates, concerns about employment generation, infrastructure outcomes, and the broader implications of India’s growth model. Through analytical commentary and data-driven discussion, the program evaluated whether the budget effectively addressed public needs or primarily supported corporate and macroeconomic interests.

iv. *The Dailyhunt:*

Figure 4 (Source: Internet)



The coverage of the Union Budget 2026 by Dailyhunt demonstrates a visually driven and audience-centric approach to digital news dissemination. The platform presented the budget highlights through an infographic titled “What Gets

Cheaper, What Turns Costlier After Budget 2026,” simplifying complex fiscal announcements into easily digestible categories such as healthcare, education, electronics, financial transactions, and compliance penalties. By clearly dividing the information into “Cheaper” and “Costlier” segments, Dailyhunt framed the budget primarily from a consumer impact perspective rather than a macroeconomic or policy-analysis lens. The emphasis on smartphones, EV batteries, medicines, and taxation changes reflects a middle-class and market-oriented framing strategy aimed at maximizing reader engagement. The use of bold visuals, color contrast (green for relief, red for cost increase), and minimal textual explanation indicates a shift toward infographic-based, quick-consumption journalism typical of mobile-first news platforms. This coverage suggests that Dailyhunt prioritized accessibility, shareability, and simplified economic interpretation over detailed fiscal analysis, aligning with contemporary digital news consumption patterns.

v. *Inshorts*:

Figure 5 (Source: Internet)



The analysis of Inshorts coverage of the Union Budget 2026–27 indicates a concise, highlight-driven, and platform-optimised presentation style. Rather than offering in-depth policy analysis or critical commentary, Inshorts focused on delivering key announcements and sector-wise highlights in a swipe-based visual format. The headline framing “Swipe through the key highlights” reflects a mobile-first, engagement-oriented approach designed for quick consumption. The coverage emphasised major announcements made by the Finance Minister and sectoral impacts, without extensive contextual interpretation or ideological positioning. This suggests that Inshorts prioritises brevity, accessibility, and rapid information dissemination over analytical depth, aligning with its speed-driven and summary-based digital journalism model.

vi. *Khabar Lahariya:*

Figure 6 (Source: Internet)



The Khabar Lahariya’s coverage of the Union Budget 2026–27 reflects a grassroots and ground-reality-driven journalistic approach. Unlike summary-based or policy-centric reporting, Khabar Lahariya contextualised the budget announcement particularly the allocation for Saksham Anganwadi and POSHAN 2.0 within the lived realities of villagers in Prayagraj. The headline framing, “Budget Rises Again, Yet Ground Reality Reveals Decades of Delays,” indicates a critical and accountability-focused perspective. The narrative structure prioritises field reporting, highlighting infrastructural gaps, community concerns, and the discrepancy between policy announcements and implementation. By incorporating local voices and specific village-level details, the platform adopts a participatory and empowerment-oriented editorial stance. This suggests that Khabar Lahariya frames the Union Budget not merely as a financial document but as a social justice issue linked to governance effectiveness and rural development.

The content analysis of the Union Budget Session 2026 across selected digital news platforms reveals significant variations in editorial strategies, narrative depth, and audience engagement models. While The Quint emphasized

fact-checking and misinformation verification through its WebQoof initiative, reinforcing journalistic accountability, The Print adopted an audience- engagement approach by inviting public queries and facilitating expert-led discussion. The Wire provided analytical and critical commentary, examining the broader economic and structural implications of the budget. In contrast, Dailyhunt and Inshorts prioritised simplified, visually driven, and summary-based formats that focused on accessibility and quick information consumption rather than detailed policy analysis. Meanwhile, Khabar Lahariya distinguished itself through grassroots reporting, contextualising budget allocations within local realities and highlighting gaps between policy announcements and implementation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that digital news platforms interpret and present the Union Budget through diverse editorial lenses ranging from watchdog and analytical journalism to platform-based aggregation and community-centred storytelling reflecting the evolving and multi-layered nature of digital news ecosystems in India.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

1. Conclusion

This study examined emerging trends in Indian digital journalism through content analysis of selected digital news platforms representing investigative, policy-driven, aggregator-based, and community-oriented models. The findings reveal that digital journalism in India operates within a diverse and evolving ecosystem shaped by technology, editorial ideology, and financial structures.

The integration of artificial intelligence and digital automation has significantly influenced news production and dissemination. AI tools enhance efficiency in summarisation, translation, and content distribution, however, excessive reliance on algorithms may lead to content standardisation and reduced editorial independence. Additionally, declining advertisement revenues and shifting digital visibility have encouraged many platforms to adopt subscription and membership-based models. Although these approaches support financial sustainability, they also raise concerns about unequal access to high-quality investigative journalism.

2. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Strengthening Editorial Differentiation

Digital news platforms should develop clear niche specialisations to avoid content homogenisation caused by AI-driven automation and platform dependency.

2. Balanced Integration of Artificial Intelligence

AI tools should be used to enhance efficiency and data analysis while maintaining human editorial oversight to preserve journalistic integrity and originality.

3. Enhancing Media Literacy

Fact-checking initiatives and transparent verification processes should be strengthened to combat misinformation and build public trust.

4. Support for Grassroots and Regional Journalism

Policymakers and funding bodies should encourage rural and community-based journalism to promote pluralism and represent diverse voices within India's media landscape.

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