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# Newspapers are being sold at low prices in India in the age of social media. How does news reach the marginalised?

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### Abstract

The increase in the cover price of an average Indian newspaper has not kept pace with inflation multiple times over the past two decades. At under Rs 1,000 for an average annual subscription, newspapers in India are cheaper than any other major newspaper market in the world. The difference between India and other countries is population density and labor costs in newspaper distribution. In India, newspapers are delivered door to door and at a very low cost. As many as 500 newspapers are delivered an hour, which would be a fraction of that given the suburban spread in the United States.

**Keywords:** Readership, smart phone, newspaper, door-to-door, population density

### Introduction

In India, newspaper prices are low or combined with discounts or complimentary supplements/editions thereby making price a non-issue for the reader and creating a loyal readership base that advertisers can target. This pricing model continues to pay rich dividends to the Indian newspaper industry. People are willing to pay for news through digital platforms if the content is unique and adds value to their knowledge. Few news consumers were prepared to pay for their news if the content was exclusive, according to experts. Here it needs to be understood that most of the websites provide free news content which makes it very competitive for news services charged by some companies. The credibility of e-newspapers has long been questioned, which was also a concern during discussions among focus group members. However they shared that some websites are there to verify news but awareness among news consumers is less.

The migration of news-paper to the web has made it into e-news, integrating news videos with existing text and graphics, making real-time access worldwide attainable. Online news viewed on computers and smartphone devices is fast replacing print newspapers and broadcasts as the main source of information. Moreover, online media attracts viewers for various reasons such as interactivity, personalization of news and uniformity.

Updating readers with the latest news and events is a major function of newspapers. An e-newspaper is a self-contained, reusable and continuously updated version of a print newspaper that collects and contains information digitally. Although a useful source for staying up to date with current events around the world, user acceptance is the most important determinant of continued intention when using any technology. Therefore, to adopt a technology, one must be motivated. Motivation is an internal drive that directs an individual's behavior toward achieving his needs and goals.

It suggests that a person stimulated by a given situation engages in a behavior with expected consequences. To cope with the current changing trends in technology, one needs to keep up with the up-to-minute changes globally.

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With more than 70 percent of readers reading newspapers through mobile devices in countries like the US, UK, Australia and Canada, according to experts, there is a huge scope for mobile growth. A similar trend is seen in India, as internet usage here is increasingly being shaped by mobile growth (citing from Google India Report, 2016).

Observations made during focus group discussions revealed that certain factors played an important role in the evolution of e-newspapers. During two focus group discussions, current trends and future prospects of e-newspapers and print newspapers were discussed based on previous findings.

During the focus group discussion it was a significant finding one of the group members, Mr. Bhupendra Chaubey from CNN-IBN validated the results from survey and shared that currently most young audience do not read or watch long news stories, so in video formats also short bulletins of news stories are prepared and shared on the web.

Ms. Gargi Parsai, Senior Correspondent of The Hindu was the only media professional who admitted that the print media was facing a challenge due to the presence of e-newspapers. Former DG of IIMC Mr. K.G. Suresh confirmed the connection between increasing literacy in India and increasing readership of newspapers in India.

The editor of Sunstar, an English newspaper, considered the portability of e-newspapers as an important issue. He advocated that similar editions of print newspapers to e-papers add convenience to print newspaper readers.

It has been observed that increasing literacy levels, rising incomes and perceived credibility of the written word are some of the reasons for the growth of newspapers in India in the last two decades. 'Print media has generally done well among Indian readers. There are two main reasons for the importance of delivering the written and published word and print newspapers to the doorstep. The main reason why printed newspapers in their physical form started losing interest in developed countries was because people had to buy a copy from outside. Whereas in India it is usually delivered at the doorstep', Marketing Head, The Hindu.

The discussion suggests that the use of the printed word is not limited to the generation of older readers. Young Indian readers are also keen to experiment with multiple platforms. The perceived credibility of print newspapers may also contribute to increased newspaper circulation.

The decade since 1997 has posted an average growth rate of more than 7 percent which has translated into a 10 percent reduction in poverty. In 2008, the estimated inflation rate was recorded at 7.8 percent India's most valuable asset – the

well-educated and skilled workforce – accounts for the country's status as a major exporter of software services and software workers. Command over the English language played a role in this transformation, referring to WAN 2009 report, a senior professor from IIMC shared.

It was also discussed during the FGD that Indian print newspapers are bucking the global trend. Even international magazines like Newsweek have suffered. They all went online. Few people in the West read newspapers. And the number is decreasing in many Asian countries too but in India we are losing the global trend due to few reasons.

One, because newspapers have gone to multiple editions and now they are bringing out editions even from small districts. So in effect they have become a sort of community newspaper. Although not exactly community newspapers, experts say, a type of community newspaper in the sense that they have a lot of local news content without a front page or local supplement. In fact, as a result, a large local readership is attracted to the newspaper at the district level. There have been multiple editions of the newspaper. So that's one of the reasons why newspapers really moved from the cities to the grassroots.

Secondly, there is a growing population of what may be called literates or neo-literates. These new graduates are increasing day by day. For them, newspapers are a symbol of empowerment. It is believed that if someone is reading a newspaper, if someone is holding a newspaper in his hand; That means an educated person, he is considered to be an informed person. So, it gives them a kind of empowerment. Due to this the readership has increased.

A third aspect is that regional language media is also experiencing massive growth. With the growth of language media more and more people prefer to watch television news in their language, read news in their language. And listen to news in their language. This has led to the growth of regional language newspapers, print editions are growing because people want to read. It's not English anymore. In fact experts share that English is on the decline. So there is a growth in language journalism and it is a big contributor.

Although the number of mobile phones has increased, smartphones are still less. And secondly, internet penetration is low. It is growing, but it is still relatively low. Among the older generation who are fully immersed in new media, they will definitely want to read a print newspaper with their morning tea. So it's more of a habit.

(Internet) It is still expensive. On the other hand, the newspaper is quite cheap, you can read news from all over the world for five rupees. Where to download news from around the world or read newspapers online; People are not used to it. Even now, those with mobile phones, especially in rural areas or other parts, mostly use them for phone calls and social media rather than reading newspapers. But mostly they watch videos. So keeping this in mind, experts point to these as the factors that have contributed to the growth or rather the strength of newspapers that have bucked the global trend in India.

According to experts, initially, the whole idea (of e-newspapers) was that online presence was fashionable. There were many newspapers, which did not come that way. It was like announcing - 'Look we have an e-edition too'. So experts believed that it was more of a PR exercise when they would say that look (there is an e-version). It was for a reason; Secondly, it was for an international audience, for example, NRIs. They want to read. Now it will not be

possible for Indian newspapers; It is time to reach abroad (the news will be obsolete). So they uploaded it.

That was the initial idea. And at that time very few people saw it. So often it was the digital version of the newspaper. Rather the internet version of it was the e-paper which was just the transcript and they could go by it. But slowly when people started, many of them, especially in urban areas, have people who read newspapers online. So then they moved to (e-version).

Newspapers started putting a lot of emphasis on their digital (presence). So much so that today newspapers have large digital, teams that are there because there is a growing demand for digital content. Due to this growing demand, there is competition among news organizations, and if one is not available, others will take over.

They want to cash in on the growing demand for digital content and lots of newspapers including Hindi; English, however, migrated much earlier. Now, Hindi newspapers be it Webdunia or Naidunia, Jagran, Amar Ujala all have actually brought convergence teams, whether they have television (channels) or not because they have this cross-media ownership. So they have cross media sharing of content.

For example one would see that there is a DNA program in G so this is a convergence they are looking at. The same is happening in other channels and other media houses. It's actually meeting the growing demand and secondly more than the demand, from an academic perspective, the advertising pie is also shifting. This is a big reason why FMCG manufacturers and others feel that the younger generation is moving online. So they will be more visible online. There the print is somehow getting lost.

Now news agencies are offering combo packages. What is shared, will be the content in the newspaper and some of it will be shared in the online version. So, this type of packaging is offered. The whole concept is also from a marketing point of view. Having a presence and second presence on the World Wide Web becomes important. It's also important that adds to marketing, it increases brand visibility because today we have keywords where people search and then the whole idea is to go for search engine optimization, to go for as many keywords as possible. There are articles where one puts keywords so that the article comes to the top.

There is much emphasis; Newspapers are (emphasis) on their digital content pieces. Experts believed that it had become too integral to do so. Newspapers are no illusion as they are growing. They also know that sooner or later Western models are going to catch up. People are changing. But it will take some time in India. It is a slowly changing system. But far-sighted managements of newspapers then realized that they had to have a digital backup in the long run. And it is also bringing in a lot of global readers.

Last but not the least, it is also associated with India's rise as an emerging global power. There is a lot of global interest in India and Indian media does not want to lose that readership or viewership, be it NRI or otherwise.

According to e-newspaper experts, some cannot sustain themselves without big names. But cross-media exists to help them. There is an India Times website which has made a big push in marketing and they have also launched other companies, Network 18 has a Firstpost which has a huge readership. Every newspaper organization is bringing a lot of content and independent content. These online websites

will also be independent in the sense that they have their own input, updated with the latest news from agencies or their own sources. Therefore, it is independent plus the age of convergence. In fact, it's all happening simultaneously.

The whole idea is to grab as many eyeballs as possible and grab market share and the market share has gradually shifted from newspapers to television in a big way and then once online came so now it's a three-way thing. nevertheless, Websites are getting a lot of revenue from advertising through sources like Google Ads and blogs. Many are now floating YouTube channels. As a result many activities are happening online.

Experts share that the situation is quite fluid so far. Times of India, still one of the leading brands according to experts. But at the regional level there are giants like Malayala Manorama on one hand, while television channels have grown so much that every major channel including Zee, Network 18 is now moving to the regional domain. They have their own channels which are region specific, language specific. And then, of course they all vary in a big way on the web. ETV has Urdu; ETV Barat is there which is completely online. So experts see it that way, it means there are Urdu readers online. As discussed earlier there is this growing literacy, growing awareness, media literacy is growing. People are now looking for diverse content and news is also heavily marketed today because of social media. YouTube is being used extensively. So there are some channels that are sharing their television content online. Each news item is now being made into a clipping and placed separately on the web. They discuss that this is also happening in conservative organizations like Doordarshan News. So if there is a news, a particular clip of that news is taken and put (on the web), many readers get for that clip. Experts reveal that this is a very exciting time.

They discussed comparing satellite television launch times and print competition, but some of them compared it not to satellite times but to the dot com buzz. There was a time when many dotcoms came up and many flopped. Today's newspapers are being enjoyed by both sides, experts have revealed. On the one hand yes they have a greater visibility, thanks to online and secondly the revenue that is coming to independent online platforms is coming to them because they are providing food. Even Hindi newspapers, language newspapers are going digital in a big way. And journalists are also getting high salaries.

Academics among the members shared that nowadays placement teams also focus on digital skills. There is no debate about how much one camera can handle as people are now diversifying into mobile journalism (MoJo) in a big way. They said even print journalism students are being taught mobile journalism. They taught them online media because they were preparing for their industry. If students are limited to writing for print, they will not survive and sustain in the long run. Training them online and training them on MoJo.

Academics say the camera has become obsolete in the era of citizen journalism. They said that anyone who is trained, who knows how to operate a camera, can also be self-employed. Demand for social media content is high. So there is a lot of recruitment for people trained in that way. So surely e-newspapers come as a very effective solution to widen the advertising pie from print to online So, with the help of e-newspapers, people can cash in these types of packages that one gets the benefit.

Discussing the challenges of content monetization in India; They say it's not easy. Pay channels are very less like in India. Most of the channels are FTA (Free to Air). Because people are not ready to pay. But now DTH has come. So people are paying, the HD version has a growing popularity, where people want to see better (quality). As discussed earlier, as economic standards increase, as income increases, people also want quality.

So, with the change in the economy, the number of middle class is increasing. Which has increasing demand and based on mentioned information they will doubt people in coming days (demanding more) because we are no longer a poor country like we used to be. Citizens are growing and people are willing to pay.

This is something they haven't reached yet. The mentality must be changed. Some things that have not yet been seen for sure; People like to get newspaper for two or three rupees. They won't be comfortable with a twenty rupee newspaper because it's something they don't think should be paid for. But it will happen gradually. Citing an example, they said, earlier people used to bargain with the cable provider for one fifty or two hundred rupees. Today channel specialization has arrived.

People can have an active channel that teaches them how to dance and another channel that teaches them how to cook and so on. So people are ready to pay another thirty bucks or maybe fifty bucks a month for that channel. But still the income level remains there. They are ready to pay but not that much. The way OTT is growing is a possible future, they have Netflix and Amazon and more. From this they conclude that this means there is a market for it.

The market is emerging that the young urban middle class is definitely going for these products in a big way. So it will slowly sink down. None of us thought of SUVs in rural areas as they are there now. So, it is only a matter of time before people are willing to pay. At the same time in rural areas, the highest growth in DTH is in DD Free Dish. If the free dish is increasing it means yes people want but more dishes are being taken. So low income people are now going towards DISH. So once they grow economically then they will accept to move to more providers like Airtel, Tata or Videocon. They said, as a nation we are now growing in terms of DTH which is growing exponentially. Day by day the number of cable houses is decreasing.

Most of them disagree when it comes to printing newspapers facing an identity crisis. They shared that people go to television for entertainment. Television news is certainly there but print newspapers are reinventing themselves and reinventing themselves and going grassroots. So the headlines are not about what's happening in the capital, but what's happening in the local area. Such is the headline in the local newspaper.

Newspapers are also slowly realizing that people are no longer interested in reading the news they saw on television yesterday. So they realize they have to go into investigative journalism or they have to bring stories that aren't on television or the web. So they have to go deeper. There was a time when readers used to spend two hours reading newspapers. But nowadays most of the news is either online or on television.

So newspaper reading is limited to stories that people cannot find on net or television. Citing example they shared if a building collapses in Greater Noida and they have already seen it. So there is no need to see them the next day. But if

there is any element or aspect of a murder news, which is not covered in the electronic media, it will be read. So this means that the demand for ground reporting has increased. Demand for more investigative stories has increased. Perhaps mere stale reporting of events will not do. Newspapers have to come up with lots of stories, lots of new ideas.

While discussing the shift in focus from reading full newspaper stories to only updates or headlines among young readers, they said that earlier the emphasis was on knowledge, today the entire focus is on information. So, today information is abundant but knowledge is scarce. Mr. K.G. Suresh quotes, especially for journalists: 'We are writing without reading and talking without hearing'. Most of the focus is on visual content. There are people who are reading and reading books on Kindle or other similar devices. As a result it is completely gone that does not read. But the e-version of the book is being developed and the focus is more on content.

Socialization is slow. Academics share that a library rarely has me. But then there's the book that makes waves. It implies that people are reading. But the readership has decreased. No doubt about it. More focus is on visual content. Social media is taking up a lot of young people's time, whether it's Facebook or Instagram or Twitter, and it's also leading to a lot of problems. Reading never leads to these problems.

The discussion also included a view of technological advancements in India's problems such as poverty, illiteracy and the digital divide. Group members believed that these aspects went hand in hand. They shared that some people made fun of Rajiv Gandhi when he talked about computers. People did not take the matter seriously when Pramod Mahajan spoke on mobile phone. But today it is a reality. They said, it is not right to talk about technology until poverty is eradicated. Technology and science will advance. This digital divide would remain but they believed solutions would be found.

Says it's helping a lot these days; Even rural areas are being transacted digitally. Today literacy is increasing there. People are switching over to technology and technology is helping. This has led to e-governance, e-mandi, farmers are able to sell their produce online. People can apply online for death certificate, marriage certificate or birth certificate or anything else. There used to be a tedious procedure, which is no more, one just has to apply online and get it. Technological changes are always welcome. However, we should always remember that there is a digital divide and there are people who are unable to do so.

They said there was a chance for them to leave as well. We know there are some people who cannot use technology. You need to keep the offline modes alive until complete conversion. People cannot suddenly be told that everything is digital because many people will be affected in the process. Offline mode should be maintained until a certain level of equality is achieved because otherwise some people will be deprived. So that opportunity has to be there but people have to be brought in.

### Conclusion

Talking about the future of print newspapers based on the findings that they have shattered that they innovate and they are innovative, they are creative, they have not seen any threat until then. I have never seen them die so quickly.

However, citing caution, they said print newspapers must accept the reality that such a day will slowly come. Digitization is happening at a rapid pace. India is a huge country with huge disparities. It will take time but it will catch on. So it is wise to take advantage of the time gap and be fully prepared for the digital age. They advised against thinking like the British by quoting the old saying that 'The sun will never set on the British Empire' And caution against the delusion that the sun never sets on printed newspapers. They believed that print newspaper companies should also be ready for that evening. The Future Is Definitely Digital (Platform).

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