

More of the shareable same

How Facebook induces conformity among Indian alternative journalism startups

The problem is because Facebook acts as a news aggregator or a news delivery system, we cannot make a difference by ourselves.
(Participant, Doolnews)

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he future of journalism is a topic of concern across the world. In India too, the decline in advertising revenues, the loss of trust in journalism and the prevalence of partisan, sensationalist reporting raise warning signals (Aneez et al., 2019). Owners of media conglomerates appease the government and other powerful actors through partisan reporting that avoids criticism of elites (Rao, 2018; Sonwalkar, 2019). Corporates and the political parties they favor heavily police reportage through outright censorship, threats of violence or indirectly by freezing advertising revenue (Ghoshal, 2019). Politicians pay for favorable coverage and avoid mediation by journalists, substantially undercutting journalists' cardinal democratic function of holding power accountable (Bisen, 2019; Rao & Malik, 2019; Rodrigues, 2019). The rising commodification of news media leads to a prioritization of entertainment and broad-based viewership over diversity and inclusivity (Rao & Mudgal, 2015). The circulation of misinformation via social media networks, coordinated by politicians further weaken public trust in the media (Chakrabarti et al., 2018). Alternative journalism startups offer a source of hope in this bleak situation, proposing to revitalize journalism, grounding it in the conventional, democratic tenets of journalism practice and espous-

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ing a commitment to inclusivity, diversity and holding the elite accountable. However, they rely on social media platforms like Facebook—which are implicated in accelerating the trust crisis—to reach an audience, interact with them and earn revenue. How does this reliance impact the realization of startups’ reformative proposals?

This paper responds to a conspicuous absence of enquiry on the topic by showing the disproportionate influence Facebook exercises over Indian journalism and how it induces conformity and isomorphism in the journalistic field by nudging journalists to incessantly produce more of the same “shareable” content. It focuses on the efforts of 7 alternative news startups in South India to diversify news coverage: *Azhimukham*, *Doolnews*, *The Cue*, *SouthLive*, *Asiaville*, *Marunadan Malayali* and *The Woke Journal*. In-depth interviews (n=11) and qualitative textual analysis of their mission statements indicate that these startups have a clear reformative agenda, criticizing and hoping to distinguish themselves from the mainstream media’s elite-controlled, partisan, sensationalist reporting that ignores issues affecting the marginalized. Key to these startups’ claims to be alternative is the dedicated, ground reporting of issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community, Dalits and Adivasis. However, as digital-only publications, they are ‘infrastructurally dependent’ on Facebook to circulate their content, reach an audience and convince them about the need for their diverse, inclusive and alternative journalism and to earn revenue (Nechushtai, 2018). This paper investigates the repercussions of this reliance on startups’ pursuit of diversity using the theoretical framework of platformization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018).

Platformization affords a critical inspection of the exercise of platform power through the elements of its infrastructure and business models, asking why platforms conduct user activity in certain ways. This allows us an entry point to what several interviewees, like the participant from *Doolnews* (quoted in the epigram), remarked: the reliance on Facebook complicates their execution and realization of alternative journalism as the platform holds the key to the audience. I show that Facebook exerts strong network effects because of the audience size, mechanisms for interaction and its widespread usage for incidental news consumption (Aneez et al., 2019). This gives the platform power to nudge content production subtly by making journalists’ access to the audience conditional on whether the algorithm recognizes their ‘relevance’ to the audience. The equation of ‘shares’ and other audience metrics to ‘relevance’, becomes a powerful mechanism through which the platform governs news and induces a thirst for popularity (van Dijck et al., 2018). This serves Facebook’s interest as user activity and spread of content accentuates their value to advertisers. By conducting

content through the inculcation of the sensibility of shareability, the platform ensures a steady supply of content that is ‘tailored according to the needs of the platform, down to the length, breadth and shape’, as a participant from *Cue* put it.

After demonstrating how platform power operates through the cultivation of infrastructural reliance and how startups’ production is channeled to fuel Facebook’s vested interests, I discuss the wider implications. The pressure to produce shareable content nudges startups towards Facebook staples such as trending topics, live videos and breaking news. The imperative to chase after trends and instantaneous news updates to gain shares and better visibility dilutes startups’ agenda-setting power and pursuit of diverse, inclusive coverage. In their manifestos, several startups had emphasized the persistent and in-depth coverage of a diversity of topics ignored by the mainstream media and placing them on the public agenda as integral to their mission. However, these commitments get put on the back-burner when breaking news, trending topics and videos are pursued (Poell & van Dijck, 2014). Moreover, as trending topics are determined on the basis of heavy user activity, marginal issues become niche, ‘nice-to-have’ pieces while sensationalist coverage of politics and entertainment become imperative to day-to-day survival and visibility. Their claims to altertnativeness are dampened as trending topics brings forth more of the same, leaving their content indistinguishable from the mainstream media’s profuse, monotonous coverage of breaking news (Caplan & boyd, 2018). Startups are roped in to serve the platform’s demand for a steady flow of easily-consumable, ambient (video) content that retains user activity, amping up Facebook’s value for advertisers without benefiting much themselves (Hermida, 2010). In this way, the values and interests that drive the design of Facebook’s algorithmic infrastructure induces isomorphism in the Indian journalism landscape, and constrains how organizational change in the news industry is catalyzed (Caplan & boyd, 2018).

Even though several startups adopted buffering strategies, continuing to cover marginalized issues at the risk of losing audience attention or revenue, they had to divert resources to incessantly produce fodder for the News Feed algorithm repurposing content from news wires or celebrity social media updates. Taking into account startups’ precarious financial situation and their lack of a pre-existing audience base and the consequent reliance on Facebook, it is clear that the platform exerts disproportionate power in this equation. This elaborate explication of platform power underlines Facebook’s influence over the direction in which change takes place in the Indian journalism field. The interventions that startups propose, especially their bid to remedy the lack of diversity in main-

stream news coverage, are extremely necessary in the current information landscape where media coverage serves majoritarian and elite interests and hampers the health of the democracy.

In the following sections, I provide a brief context of startups' reliance on platforms such as Facebook and outline the concerns this raises based on a literature review of platform studies research. I outline startups' reformative ambitions and the role they assigned to Facebook in their realization. Next, I discuss in detail how shareability is made to matter by the platform, how it compels startups to cover certain content types and formats and the implications on news diversity. Then, I show that startups struggle to realize their alternative ambition, which has repercussions on Indian journalism's trajectory. I conclude with a call for policy support and greater platform accountability to protect the health of the information landscape.

JOURNALISM STARTUPS AND PLATFORMS: A CO-DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP

Digital journalism startups erect a powerful challenge to the elite-controlled, sensationalist status quo in Indian journalism, proposing to revitalize journalism by grounding news practice in conventional journalistic values such as verification, objectivity and public commitment (Chadha & Koliska, 2016; Prasad, 2019). They vow to be impartial, hold the elite accountable and to retain public attention on issues affecting marginalized communities. Yet, as new entities with limited resources, they face an uphill battle competing against reputed mainstream media outlets. Startups have to earn the audience's trust from scratch, demonstrating the importance and legitimacy of the quality, alternative journalism that they offer, while legacy media can largely take that for granted.

Facebook and other platforms are crucial in this regard as they hold the key to the audience with 32% of Indians consuming news via search engines and 24% via social media platforms (Aneez et al., 2019). Facebook, which boasts 328 million monthly active users, is a crucial avenue for startups to reach their audience, get to 'know' them through analytics and to forge bonds of trust by interacting with them (Mathur, 2019). Platforms also impact startups' financial sustenance as 70 to 80% of India's digital advertising is routed through Facebook and Google (Nielsen, 2019). By circulating content and monetizing it through platforms, startups can potentially sidestep pressure from advertisers, media owners or editors to placate political and corporate elites. Yet, Facebook is no haven for criticizing influential politicians or businesses as instances of blocking, account suspension and shadow-banning are widely

reported by journalists (Patil, 2019; Soundararajan et al., 2019).

Indian journalism startups believe that social media platforms, if used effectively, can level the playing field allowing them to compete with mainstream news outlets for the audience's patronage (Robinson et al., 2015). By cultivating a large and consistently engaged following online they can attract venture capital, ads, donations or subscriptions (Girija, 2019). In practice, however, startups find that platform spaces are heavily striated. Rather than being neutral conduits for their content, platforms are strategic actors that favor certain kinds of content production and producers over others. Platform studies research attests to this view of platforms, maintaining that platforms structure and constitute our experience online, influencing the content that users get to see (Gillespie, 2015, 2018). Through elements of design and technical architecture like code, metrics, algorithms and interfaces, platforms guide user action and prescribe terms for participation (Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Stanfill, 2015). Journalists have to be responsive to these clues regarding the ideal use of the platform to be successful. For instance, De Vito (2017, p. 10) illustrates that in a platform like Facebook that maintains "friend relationships" as central, the 'sharer' of the news content becomes more important than the news source. This nudges journalists and news outlets to cultivate 'likeable' personas on Facebook (see also Cohen, 2019; Sterrett et al., 2019).

Platforms challenge journalists' autonomy, "unbundling" news production (van Dijck et al., 2018). Journalists' agenda-setting power or their ability to prioritize the importance of news stories (through their placement in the front page, for instance) is bypassed by platform algorithms that accord visibility to pieces of news content based on 'relevance'. Startups' reliance on platforms as a distribution channel often clashes with their proposals to focus on topics ignored by the mainstream media (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This is because platforms exhibit a strong affinity for –and reward with greater visibility and circulation– viral content like breaking news and entertainment content. The pursuit of shareable, activating content can lead journalists towards certain topics, emotional registers and content formats (Hurcombe et al., 2019).

At a macro level, the values underlying the creation of platforms' algorithmic systems have the capacity to guide change across the news industry (Caplan & boyd, 2018). The value systems that underlie platforms are geared towards profit-making, aiming to increase user interaction and thereby attracting advertisers. This conflicts with journalistic values, chiefly its public service commitment (van Dijck et al., 2018). Verification, objectivity or ethics recede to the background when journalists write content not just with an imag-

ined audience in mind, but also imagined algorithms that surface engaging content (Bucher, 2018; Carlson, 2018; Napoli, 2015). This cultivates a sensibility that privileges popularity over public interest (Anderson, 2013; Cherubini & Nielsen, 2016). In the case of alternative journalism startups, Facebook's nudging towards (sensational) modes of practice seems to be at odds with the transformation they seek to bring about in the field (Marres, 2018).

While journalists do offer pushback to these platform directives, there is a considerable power asymmetry between giant platform companies who have a large concentration of users (and data) and news outlets (Burgess & Hurcombe, 2019; Nielsen & Ganter, 2018). Very few publications risk not having a presence on platforms as they have become crucial for circulation, audience and revenue. Silicon Valley institutions, which are at a higher power structure relative to journalism, even have a say in which publishers survive, often privileging established, moneyed media because algorithms prioritize scale (Vos & Russell, 2019). Startups are under extreme pressure to play by platforms' rules as recognition and visibility among the audience and revenue are conditional on how they score on platform metrics.

The different levels at which platforms influence startups and their reformative intent can be mapped using the theoretical framework of platformization. It provides a holistic picture of platforms' influence examining "the penetration of economic, governmental and infrastructural extensions of social media platforms into the web and app ecosystems, fundamentally affecting the operation of cultural industries" (Nieborg & Poell, 2018, p. 4276). Platformization interrogates the politics of platforms by laying bare how cultural production such as newsmaking are made contingent on platforms' accumulative interests. The dependence on platforms' infrastructure, such as Instant Articles, metrics, analytics, APIs and so on, for news production, circulation, consumption and monetization renders them susceptible to platform control. Platforms channel and mold these activities to cement their market dominance, acting as a multisided market that mediates the needs of different sets of end users. They rope in news outlets to keep creating and sharing content with the promise of an engaged audience while also nudging this production to keep users on the platform longer and appeal to advertising interest.

While platformization has been valuable in studying alternative journalism practice in India and their efforts to promote diversity, I found it imperative to supplement this perspective with greater attention to context, news cultures, existing hierarchies and power relations that order the journalism field. For instance, I go beyond stating the obvious; that startups struggle

to compete with legacy media that have more financial backing, editorial resources and name recognition on Facebook too. I show the imbrication and interaction of societal status quo, dominant news culture and platform power in keeping alternative news startups stuck in a perpetual loop of precarity. Startups' lack of autonomous distribution channels (compared to legacy TV and print news especially), a political climate inimical to counter-majoritarian discourse and advertisers preferring commercially viable, non-problematic content act together, in collusion and conflict, to bring about this state of affairs.

METHODS

Seven Malayalam-language news startups that had an alternative orientation relative to the mainstream media were selected for this study. These operate in the South Indian state of Kerala. These are: *Azhimukham*, *Doolnews*, *The Cue*, *SouthLive*, *Asiaville*, *Marunadan Malayali* and *The Woke Journal*. *Marunadan Malayali* which dates back to 2007, is the longest surviving startup. *DoolNews*, *Azhimukham*, and *SouthLive* were formed in between 2009 and 2014. The other publications are much newer, having come up within the past two years or so. Startups that provided daily news (and not just entertainment or science, for example) were chosen based on their popularity and significance. Given that we are interested in their use of Facebook, I prioritized startups that had a considerable following in terms of 'page likes' and an active presence on Facebook.

The focus on startups within one Indian state has the benefit of bringing out the institutional power relations within which journalists function. Kerala¹ is a promising site for empirical study, being the Indian state with the highest literacy and per-capita news consumption rates (Jeffrey, 1997, 2009) and having witnessed mushrooming of digital journalism startups that seek to exploit the affordances of widespread mobile phone and internet penetration. However, the political, cultural and linguistic context and the trajectory of journalism in Kerala is distinct from other states (as would have been the case with any other Indian state). Therefore, the results might not be generalizable or representative of 'Indian journalism'. But, the attention to context-specific problems that confront journalism in the state and the existing power differentials that characterize the news landscape (especially the impact and stature of legacy media) offers a template that can be replicated in other regional contexts.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 11 founders, editors and multimedia producers were conducted between March and April 2020. Individuals who could speak representatively about the orga-

nization, daily conduct and larger goals were selected as key informants (Usher, 2017). They had extensive knowledge of the journalism field in Kerala, having been involved in various roles over their career and were familiar with the main players and the specialized language and conduct of journalistic practice (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The findings presented here are a part of my Master's thesis which involved additional methods such as the discursive analysis of these startups' mission statements which provided insight into these startups' reformative intent and positioning within the larger journalism landscape. Interviews proved to be an appropriate method of understanding how these transformative ambitions and organizational goals translated into practice. Specifically, for the purposes of this paper, interviews provided insight into the sense-making practices of these journalists as they translated these objectives into routine practice and in negotiation with platforms like Facebook, which have come to be an integral part of their day-to-day.

Snowball sampling was effective in identifying and reaching interviewees as the journalists were part of a professional network. Since the interview period coincided with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, recruitment was challenging with lockdown restrictions and journalists being hardpressed for time, leading to a smaller sample of interviewees than planned. The sample used in the end had a greater proportion of men to women (3:2). This is reflective of the larger trend as there are fewer women in higher positions (such as founders and chief editors) while overall, women outnumber men (Gender Inequality in Indian Media, 2019). The interviews were conducted in Malayalam and were audio-recorded. They were translated to English during transcription to aid analysis. The informed consent form gave participants the option to choose to keep their name and/or startup's identity anonymous, even though no one chose the latter option. In accordance, job titles and other identifiable information has been removed, keeping only the organization's name. Participants could also request certain portions of the interview conversation to be kept off the record – which were subsequently excluded from analysis and publication. The analysis of the data collected was carried out through open and axial coding techniques (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

Facebook as an ally of alternativ journalism

Startups' "About Us" pages articulate a reformative intent, proposing to revise Indian journalistic practice by strictly adhering to core tenets of journalism and using digital technologies to connect with their audience in novel ways. They set themselves apart from the mainstream media by pledging to hold the elites accountable and be impartial, describing themselves as 'fearless', 'honest', 'independent' and 'non-com-

promising'. Facebook and the advertising revenue from the platform are key as startups become less dependent on direct canvassing for advertisements and therefore, can be unbiased and speak truth to power. Startups can publish news without censorship as they need not placate advertisers' interests regarding the content that features their ads since Facebook functions as an intermediary that routes ads.

Facebook as a distribution channel and a revenue generation mechanism promises startups more autonomy in naming offenders and being more direct in their criticism. This was viewed as a welcome break from the heavy-handed editorial control and censorship that resulted from the oligopolistic ownership of mainstream media by a handful of corporations with close ties to political parties. The participant from *Marunadan* drew such a contrast:

When I was working in print media, PK Kunhalikutty [a minister at that time] was accused of sexual harassment. The media didn't reveal his name on the first day, referring to him as a 'prominent personality' [...] The comfort I feel in digital media is that there is no pressure from a media management above them. In Kerala, all the traditional media are owned by rich, established managements who have other businesses as well. So they will have vested interests in companies like Muthoot and that will lead to not addressing news that involves them or not naming an offender. Small scale media houses are not held down by such oligopolistic, capitalist corporate management pressure and can bravely name the offenders. (Participant, Marunadan Malayali)

According to him, legacy media's shielding of elite interests becomes untenable with Facebook affordances such as the live video that permits any layperson to break news and reveal the identity of "prominent personalities" or "reputed institutions". This emboldens news startups to be more fearless.

Further, Facebook offered an egalitarian space for startups to compete on level footing with mainstream media. As the participant from *Doolnews* noted, "It is a competition between links on social media. Do they have an attractive title, is it a relevant subject – then they get noticed first". By producing quality news content that is appealing to the audience, a startup could potentially outstrip legacy media outlets to become a trusted news source. By consistently delivering good content and adhering to progressive democratic politics and a commitment to the truth, startups can use Facebook to build an "intimate bond" with the audience, according to the participant from *Azhimukham*. Through sustained

interactions with the audience on Facebook, startups can shift the culture of news consumption, introducing more diversity. Startups can focus on the issues of ‘the people that the mainstream media discards’ such as Dalits, queer folk, rural populations and the poor with more autonomy, as one of the participants from *The Cue* put it. Thereby, they hope to usher in a new culture of consuming news, broadening the audience’s perspectives and awareness using new, more conversational and digital-native formats.

In sum, Facebook was seen as an ally to alternative journalism that renders mainstream news practice untenable. Facebook levels the playing field through the provision of a distribution channel, mechanisms for interacting with an audience and building their trust as well as avenues for generating revenue without being directly dependent on (and beholden to) politicians and businesses for advertisements. These would enable startups to shift the news culture to more inclusive, impartial registers.

THE PURSUIT OF SHAREABILITY

Several interviewees equated the number of shares they received for a particular piece of content, especially those that spoke their brand, as an indication of the trust they enjoy. Shares come to stand in for resonance: the audience’s approval of their quality journalism and startups’ ability to be responsive to the audience’s interests. This equation is engineered by Facebook’s packaging of audience’s interests and content preferences – through metrics and analytics – and inducing changes in their newsmaking through platform-recommended practices (c.f. Turow, 2005). Subjecting shareability to scrutiny is vital as it comes with the risk of replicating several mainstream ills startups purported to correct, thereby hindering trust-building.

Facebook engenders reliance by materializing the audience and making startups’ access to them conditional. The participant from *Azhimukham* detailed that their view of the audience is through individual messages sent by the audience, the demographic information provided by Facebook Analytics and the Facebook groups and profiles² where their content gets shared. While these infrastructural elements permit a glimpse of the audience, startups’ access to the audience is intermittent at best, as the participant from *Doolnews* described:

Because the Facebook algorithm keeps changing every 6 months, often publishers face sudden increase or decrease in traffic. Now, liking a page is not enough nor following the page, only users who interact with the page will get to see newer posts in their News Feed. So it might

take say 3 months for the posts to appear on the Feed of a consistent reader of ours. Only then will they wonder why they haven’t seen content from Doolnews, are they still around? Doolnews is updating regularly, but if they ignore 3 or 4 or 5 posts then Facebook will decide that that person does not want to follow Doolnews and discards it. (Participant, *Doolnews*)

As he identifies in the epigram, Facebook exerts strong network effects because of the audience size, mechanisms for interaction, tools that it offers and its widespread usage for incidental news consumption. Startups become dependent on Facebook which makes their access to the audience conditional on whether the algorithm recognizes their ‘relevance’ to the audience. Shares are *made to matter* as an indicator of relevance and as an audience activity that increases their reach and credibility. Therefore, startups invest in understanding what their audience is likely to enjoy and share. This is definitely in Facebook’s interest as user activity and spread of content accentuates their value to advertisers.

Audience data, made actionable as metrics, becomes a powerful mechanism through which the platform governs news and induces a thirst for popularity (van Dijck et al., 2018). Knowledge about the audience and the journalism they desire is packaged through their analytics suite and other tools that help improve ‘engagement’ (narrowly understood in terms of platform metrics). Through the industrial construction of the audience’s trust, popularity indicators are made desirable (Turow, 2005). Engagement metrics and virality (as audience’s approval) confer newsmaking practices legitimacy, which was evident from interviewees mentioning top-grossing content as proof that they enjoy the audience’s trust. However, it raises concerns: *what kind of journalism is fostered by the privileging of shareability and how does it impact startups’ emphasis on covering marginal issues?*

Marunadan Malayali’s journalism, similarly, gets ratified by their success on the platform. They do not *try* to make their posts go viral on social media, but they do so “naturally” as the participant explained:

I feel there are couple of things to this. Time is very important. Even if it is a very good story, if it has already appeared in other media – that is if we are late in reporting – it is not going to get much traffic. The thumb that we use in each post also matters. It will not be very effective if we say ‘Italy, 2,000 dead’ but if we say ‘Italy is collapsing’, it works much better. There should be a word magic in the titles. (Participant, *Marunadan Malayali*)

Marundan caters a journalism to the masses that satiates the appetite for instant, entertaining, share-worthy and voluminous news, which is desired and promoted by Facebook. They also respond to an appetite for polarizing political debates by creating multiple videos on controversial issues, each airing a partisan (and often extreme) viewpoint. That the audience expects and enjoys such content becomes a justification for their sensationalist, polarized content and lack of an editorial standpoint. Moreover, as they depend on revenue from platforms to retain their independence, they maintain that they have to tailor their journalism to the culture that works on these platforms to remain visible and viable. The popularity and financial success of *Marundan* also serves to exemplify the journalism that works best on the platform. Even startups that explicitly distanced their journalism from *Marundan's* adopt pages from their playbook for short-term success. The following sections examine how startups' production is nudged towards popular modes and the resulting impact on their transformative ambition and trust-building.

**BREAKING NEWS, CROWDTANGLE
AND AGENDA-SETTING**

Startups find it essential that they cover breaking news and other trending topics: easy, everyday ways to deliver on their commitment to be responsive to the audience's interests. However, the imperative of shareability seeps into news practice when the potential for further user activity on Facebook influences the selection of topics, the cadence of news and its presentation. This has repercussions on startups' agenda-setting power. *Azhimukham*, for instance, transformed from a magazine publishing a maximum of five pieces of long-form content a day to a daily news outlet that provides continuous updates because "news gets traction on social media". The rationale for selection was similarly based on the prioritization of "issues that can serve as the basis for daily debate and discussion".

SouthLive recognized that their target audience, young social media users, tend to share current information and engage in discussions on topics of societal debate. Therefore, they use lengthy titles that convey a position and the matter of the story, which makes it "easy for them to share it as their opinion on an issue":

People would take our content and use it to comment and debate and share on platforms. [...] What we tried to do was to bring in share-worthy elements in the title. Things that allow them to engage, to share and comment. Readers should be able to engage – it doesn't have to be with us – to engage with others on platforms. (Participant, *SouthLive*)

As brand awareness is seen as a precursor to trust building, gaining mileage through shares among a target audience takes precedence over ensuring that users read their article.

The imperative to get through to the audience also induces the adoption of the (live) video format among these startups. *The Woke Journal*, an outlet that explicitly criticizes social-media-optimized journalism in their manifesto is nudged to conform as they need reach to realize their journalism. When video becomes imperative to survival, startups with limited resources divert resources initially dedicated to long-form analytical content to news reading and interview formats reminiscent of TV news (See Figure 1³).

The shifts to live video and breaking news are actively fostered by Facebook. Beyond the promise of better viewership, in the words of the participant from *Doolnews*, Facebook "forces" startups to do videos by conducting training programs. Journalists are given inputs on producing videos cheaply, but he remarked that they are not seeing returns from it. Further, engagement data and the list of trending topics made available through *CrowdTangle*, a content discovery and analytics tool freely available to publishers, spur the publication of breaking news content. *CrowdTan-*

Figure 1

Screengrabs from *Doolnews Updates*, which sums up the Covid-19 briefing by the Chief Minister, *The Woke Journal's* use of live video to do a newspaper roundup program and *SouthLive's* celebrity interview



gle alerts startups about topics that witness high user activity on Facebook and other platforms. Startups respond by quickly churning out stories, translated from news wires or social media updates (Moyo et al., 2019). This erects a challenge to verification as getting to news before legacy outlets takes precedence over fact-checking.

The spur to chase after trends and instantaneous news updates to gain shares and thereby better visibility dilutes startups' agenda-setting power. In their manifestos, several startups had emphasized the persistent and in-depth coverage of a diversity of topics ignored by the mainstream media and placing them on the public agenda. However, these commitments could take a backseat when trending topics and videos are pursued (Poell & van Dijck, 2014). Moreover, as trending topics are determined based on heavy user activity, it could detract attention from marginal issues. Their claims to legitimacy, trust and distinction are dampened as trending topics brings forth more of the same, leaving their content indistinguishable from the profuse, monotonous coverage of breaking news (Caplan & boyd, 2018). In this sense, they serve the platform's demand for a steady flow of easily-consumable, ambient (video) content that retains user activity, accentuating Facebook's value for advertisers without benefiting much themselves (Hermida, 2010).

SHARING COMMODIFICATION

By mediating and exerting strong control over startups' access and relationship with the audience, Facebook challenges the realization of quality journalism, their claim to legitimacy and what distinguishes them from the mainstream. The primacy of the imperative to gain reach and engagement to be visible (and engage in trust-building after) induces a prioritization of shareability. This challenges startups' intent to place marginal issues on the public agenda, expand the capabilities of their audience to understand news in depth and be unbiased. These interventions are essential in Indian journalism because of the subservience of mainstream media practice to elite interests and profit motives. What explains this tension?

Startups, and journalism in general, become infrastructurally dependent on Facebook to reach their audience (Nechushtai, 2018). They rely on the News Feed, metrics and tools like CrowdTangle to work towards trust-building in various ways. We already discussed how the provision of infrastructural elements and the prioritization of shareability enforced through them, induces production that cements Facebook's competitive position (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The consolidation of Facebook's business interests goes beyond the promotion of user activity and the sub-

sequent accrual of ad interest (Marres, 2018). Startups' innovative ambitions and quest to build trust are locked in within the platform and is subservient to its accumulative interest through "sharing commodification" (Dwyer & Martin, 2017, p. 1086).

Facebook's architecture and the ecology of connected products like CrowdTangle foster a commendatory culture that emphasizes practices like sharing, their measurement and analysis (Dwyer & Martin, 2017). Facebook accrues value by producing and supplying data on news sharing that are of interest to journalists (to optimize their production) and advertisers (to know which publication will fetch the most ROI). This data is also fed back into Facebook to determine how news content is surfaced on the platform. By making their (financial) survival and circulation conditional, journalists are governed by motivating them to optimize their newsmaking to beget more shares. Simultaneously, Facebook gains power when their proprietary metrics come to represent public opinion (McGregor, 2019). The inculcation of the sensibility that sharing equals trust or success further cements Facebook's centrality and indispensability for journalism and effects a perpetual cycle of precarity.

When startups purport to earn their audience's trust and legitimacy as a credible news source as directed by Facebook's nudges, their progression towards trust and eventual independence is hindered by the platform. Through the conduct of content (punitive measures, design, the sensibility of shareability, promise of visibility and viability) the platform ensures a steady supply of content that is 'tailored according to the needs of the platform, down to the length, breadth and shape', a participant from *The Cue* put it. Startups who failed to be agile and 'think in social media terms' struggle to retain their dominance. *SouthLive*, for instance, lost out on their market position as the 5th most engaged publication with the pivot to video. As startups try to keep up with the latest platform-recommended practices, their commitment and claim to trust through quality journalism becomes a side-job. They remain in a *perpetual loop of precarity* as short-term survival takes precedence over their long-term ambition to gain trust through a distinct, quality journalism. As they constantly at risk of losing their nascent audience-base, they *have to* play by Facebook's demands. They fail to remain indistinguishable from legacy media and yellow news outlets.

Startups' journalism becomes a contingent commodity that has to shapeshift according to the platform's wishes, which challenges the professional practice (and privilege) of journalism – the thrust of these startups' claim to trust (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). This opens up the risk of journalistic values and gatekeeping being eclipsed by algorithmic values (DeVito, 2017;

van Dijck et al., 2018). Interviewees invoked both algorithmic and editorial criteria when they were asked about news judgement but in describing their routine work processes, shareable breaking news stories were low-hanging fruit that they could not miss. When shares and engagement determine the selection of content by startups and its curation by the News Feed algorithm, the trust and authority journalists accrue by selecting information in public interest is undermined. Moreover, the public service mission of journalism is compromised by the privileging of 'sharing' wherein what interests the public takes precedence over journalists' professional judgement over what the public should know.

While these observations on Facebook's molding concurs with previous research on platformization of journalism (van Dijck et al., 2018), the impact is dire on Indian startups who are already on unequal footing compared to the legacy media. When startups get roped in to publish more of the same their claim to be legitimate and trust-worthy actors are eroded, so are their aims to consistently showcase quality journalism distinct from the mainstream. The imperative to be visible on the platform replicated legacy media's sensationalist coverage of daily news without any in-depth analysis, catering to popularity rather than to improve the public's access and ability to make sense of the news.

Yet, it is not the case that startups complied by the diktats of metrics and platform pressures, the insistence on quality journalism also works as a pushback. Most startups viewed Facebook as a monopoly that was indifferent to journalism because of their direct interference in their work. However, even with the challenges outlined above, they normalized platforms as a necessary evil in the short-term to know the audience, engage in trust-building and earn revenue. By temporarily adhering to Facebook's rules, they could get their journalism across to the audience, win their trust and move to a subscription model.

STARTUPS PUSH BACK, YET...

So far, the paper has traced a rather pessimistic picture of Facebook suppressing alternative journalism startups' best efforts. This does not mean that startups took Facebook's incursions over their autonomy without protest. Nor were they unaware of Facebook's nudges towards content that has a popular appeal at the expense of elite criticism or more diverse coverage. The participant from *Asiaville* had a succinct take on this:

What journalists need to do is not to work for Facebook or other social media. We do have to do stories that are trending on social media but

we cannot work solely for that. That and giving space to articles that are trending are two different things. What I think is that trending topics are important to show our presence in a platform where there are billions of people. At the same time, just because they say something or if they change the algorithm, we cannot start orienting our work towards that, the only route in front of us is to say no. (Participant, *Asiaville*)

Asiaville and several other startups resorted to buffering strategies wherein they devoted part of their resources to the production of trending topics and other fodder for the News Feed while others work on flagship content that speaks to their brand. Startups can thereby continue to question elites, challenge abuse of power and cover issues that affect the queer community, Dalits or Adivasis. In fact, most startups maintained that diverse, inclusive coverage and elite criticism were core ideals that defined their alternative journalism project and would not be compromised just for success on Facebook. They would continue to do such pieces of content that require a lot of effort and money to produce even if it meant losing out on revenue from Instant Articles. Startups hope that if they stay true to their commitment to quality journalism and progressive ideals and the audience they build on Facebook, they will eventually be able to bypass mediation by platforms and move to a subscription model.

ISOMORPHISM IN THE JOURNALISM FIELD

Looking beyond whether startups continue to hold elites accountable or cover marginal issues, we should ask whether their journalism effects the intervention they propose to Malayalam journalism. While the platform's 'molding' applies to journalism in general, it has a disproportionate impact on Indian startups because of their financial precarity and their lack of an autonomous distribution channel. Most startups struggle financially and subsist on starting capital pooled in by founders, grants from IPSMF and canvassing for direct ads. Search and social media revenue, while not substantial, are still important. They are under pressure from investors and funding agencies to show returns, growth and performance, which are often measured using Facebook's metrics. Their precarious financial situation engenders dependence on Facebook's infrastructure in the short-term: to get revenue through Instant Articles, reach an audience, attract native advertising through readership numbers and social media engagement etc. To guarantee their survival, they have to be agile and adjust their production in ways desired by the platform. *Azhimukham*, for instance, forgoes revenue on some content so that they can continue to hold elites accountable. However, if they do *only* that, in addition to losing out all revenue from

Facebook, their content might not even be surfaced on their loyal audience's News Feeds. They turn to hybrid strategies and supplement their primary concern with platform-preferred modes to remain viable, covering celebrity social media updates and breaking news while trying their best to verify information, avoid clickbait and be sensitive.

Startups endlessly try to catch up to the mainstream media, not having yet found the 'equitable' space Facebook offers. Mainstream media are comparatively insulated from platform pressures as they have alternate modes of circulation, revenue from (TV and print) subscription and capacity to attract advertisements. By reallocating resources and repurposing existing production, legacy media can quickly meet the changing demands of the platform. For instance, the demand for video content could easily be fulfilled by using footage from TV news and redistributing or hiring new personnel, while startups like *SouthLive* and *Azhimukham* suffered a setback in their market position. A participant from *Asiaville* described startups' precarity compared to the relatively stable mainstream media: "The main challenge is that legacy media looks at steady growth in viewers and TRP, we have to look at it daily".

When startups' survival is made conditional by Facebook, it initiates a perpetual loop of precarity: to gain an audience and be financially sustainable, startups need to set themselves apart from the mainstream (flaws) and create a need for their quality journalism. Yet, they can engage in trust-building only if they are visible to the audience and safeguard their financial viability in the short-term. To do both, they resort to Facebook staples such as trending topics, live videos and breaking news, thereby replicating mainstream media practice. In this way, the values that drive the design of Facebook's algorithmic infrastructure induces isomorphism in the Malayali journalism landscape, and constrains how organizational change in the news industry is catalyzed (Caplan & Boyd, 2018). The lack of a distinct identity leaves the introduction of a subscription model unrealistic in the near future in a context where the audience is not used to paying for online news (Panchal & Chaudhary, 2016).

NOTES

¹ Kerala is a state in the south-west of the Indian subcontinent. Even though it is among the smallest Indian states in terms of area and population, it is quite significant especially in terms of the sociopolitical makeup and development indices. Bucking the trend among the rest of the India, Kerala boasts high levels of literacy and more number of women than men (1084:1000 as compared to the national average of 943:1000, according to the 2011 census). Politically, it is among the only states in India to have a Communist party in power – Communist Party of India (Marxist). It was the first state in the world to democratically elect a communist party into power in 1957 (Thomas, 2014). It currently is the only state in India

CONCLUSION

Existing research on Indian journalism startups that evaluate their efficacy to disrupt mainstream journalism practice (Prasad, 2019), should consider the entrenchment of status quo by extra-journalistic actors such as platforms. Startups' transformative impact is constrained by Facebook's structuring of possibilities and the interests of other actors, such as elites, that are refracted through it. Facebook's alignment with the mainstream media should be problematized as startups raise valid concerns regarding their biased coverage and lack of critical commentary. When legacy media content passes through Facebook's censorship and fake news mechanisms, they indicate subtly what forms of journalism are "standard" and viable on the platform. With the establishment of mainstream media staples as standard, elite criticism, in-depth analysis of political issues and coverage of marginal concerns take a backseat. Startups' struggles to gain recognition as legitimate actors, complicated by Facebook's structuring, are exacerbated by the striations and hierarchy within the journalism field.

The paper addresses the conspicuous absence of academic inquiry into the platformization of journalism in non-Western contexts and the path-dependencies that mark the process. Using empirical research, it has uncovered the imbrication of platform power with elite interference and asymmetries that mark the culture of journalism. There is a need for similar analyses in other regional news contexts within India and in other Global South contexts. The in-depth insights into Facebook's intervention in Indian journalism explodes the platform's claims to be a neutral intermediary. It is an interested actor that conducts journalism to further its interests in the context. This should bolster calls for more platform accountability as well as policy and financial support for journalism startups that pose much needed interventions to the Indian journalism field.

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where the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (the majority party at the National level) does not have an elected representative in neither the state nor the national legislatures.

² Strange as it may seem for a publication to check their follower's profile, there is an argument to be made about how Facebook affords it through the new 'Top Fan' badge, although we did not cover it in the interview. ("Top Fan Badge," n.d.)

³ The reporters in these screenshots were not among the interviewees. They were taken from these startups' public Facebook posts to provide an idea of generic formats.

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More of the shareable same: How Facebook induces conformity among Indian alternative journalism startups

Mais do mesmo ‘compartilhável’: como o Facebook induz à conformidade entre as empresas indianas de jornalismo alternativo

Plus de contenus partageables identiques : comment Facebook favorise le conformisme des startups indiennes de journalisme alternatif

En This paper shows the disproportionate influence Facebook exercises over Indian journalism and how it induces conformity and isomorphism in the journalistic field by nudging journalists to incessantly produce more of the same “shareable” content. It focuses on the efforts of 7 alternative news startups in South India to diversify news coverage, as gleaned through 11 in-depth interviews. These startups have a clear reformative agenda, criticizing and hoping to distinguish themselves from the mainstream media’s elite-controlled, partisan, sensationalist reporting that ignores issues affecting the marginalized. Key to these startups’ claims to be alternative is the dedicated, ground reporting of issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community, Dalits and Adivasis. As digital-only publications, they depend on Facebook to circulate their content, interact with the audience and earn revenue. Using the theoretical framework of platformization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), this paper demonstrates how this dependence keeps startups locked in a perpetual loop of precarity, trying to placate the algorithm with shareable content to stay visible, hoping to eventually get enough subscribers to make it on their own. The constant churning of shareable content detracts organizational resources and leaves their content undistinguishable from the mainstream, postponing the realization of independence to a later date.

Keywords: Facebook; Indian journalism; platformization; shareable content; journalism startups.

Pt Este artigo mostra como o Facebook exerce uma influência desproporcional sobre o jornalismo indiano, além de levar à conformidade e ao isomorfismo no campo jornalístico, incentivando os jornalistas a produzirem incessantemente o mesmo conteúdo “compartilhável”. Com dados coletados por meio de 11 entrevistas em profundidade, o estudo foca nos esforços de sete startups de notícias alternativas no sul da Índia para diversificar sua cobertura jornalística. Essas startups têm uma agenda noticiosa claramente reformista, criticando e tentando se diferenciar das coberturas sensacionalistas e partidárias da mídia mainstream controlada pela elite, que ignora as questões enfrentadas por pessoas marginalizadas. Notícias dedicadas aos desafios das comunidades LGBTQ+ e dos Dalits e Adivasis são elementos-chave para que essas startups reivindiquem para si o papel de mídia alternativa. Por serem publicações exclusivamente digitais, elas dependem do Facebook para divulgar seu conteúdo, interagir com a audiência e obter receita financeira. Com base no quadro teórico da “plataformização” (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), demonstrase que tal dependência mantém as startups em um ciclo perpétuo de precariedade, pautado pela busca de conteúdo compartilhável para usarem o algoritmo a seu favor e permanecerem visíveis, na esperança de atingir um número de assinantes o suficiente para se tornarem independentes. A utilização constante de notícias “compartilháveis” desvia os recursos organizacionais e faz com que seu conteúdo seja indistinguível daquele da mídia mainstream, adiando a conquista de sua independência.

Palavras-chave: Facebook; jornalismo indiano; plataformização; conteúdo compartilhável; jornalismo alternativo.

Fr. Cet article montre l'influence disproportionnée que Facebook exerce sur le journalisme indien et comment il conduit au conformisme et à l'isomorphisme dans le domaine journalistique en incitant les journalistes à produire sans cesse davantage de contenu "partageable". L'étude se concentre sur les efforts déployés par sept jeunes entreprises d'information alternatives du sud de l'Inde pour diversifier la couverture de l'actualité, recueillis au cours de 11 entretiens approfondis. Ces startups ont un agenda réformateur clair, critiquant et espérant se distinguer des médias traditionnels, contrôlés par l'élite, dont la couverture de l'actualité sensationnaliste et partisane ignore les problèmes affectant les personnes marginalisées. La clé de la nature alternative revendiquée par ces startups se caractérise par les reportages sur le terrain dédiés aux problèmes rencontrés par la communauté LGBTQ+, les Dalits et les Adivasis. En tant que publications exclusivement numériques, elles dépendent de Facebook pour diffuser leurs contenus, interagir avec le public et gagner de l'argent. En s'appuyant sur le cadre théorique de la plateformisation (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), cet article montre comment cette dépendance maintient les startups dans une boucle perpétuelle de précarité, en essayant d'apaiser l'algorithme avec du contenu partageable pour rester visible, dans l'espoir d'obtenir finalement suffisamment d'abonnés pour réussir à s'en sortir seuls. Le brassage constant de contenus partageables détourne les ressources de l'organisation et fait en sorte que leurs contenus ne se distinguent pas de ceux des médias mainstream, ce qui reporte la réalisation de leur indépendance à une date ultérieure.

Mots-clés : Facebook ; journalisme indien ; plateformisation ; contenu partageable ; startups journalistiques.

