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Shifting News Habits: A Content Analysis of Digital News Consumption in India and Beyond

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***Abstract:** Digital news consumption in India is growing rapidly, making the country one of the world's largest online news markets. This research critically examines evolving patterns of digital news consumption in India, exploring how Indian audiences are adapting to the digital news environment, why these shifts are significant for the sustainability of journalism, and how India's experience aligns with or diverges from global trends. The study employs a qualitative content analysis methodology, systematically interpreting secondary data derived from two recent, comprehensive survey-based reports on digital news: the 'Monetizing Digital News: Digital News Publishing in India (2024)' and the 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025'. Thematic coding and cross-comparative analysis reveal core behavioural trends among Indian audiences. These include a significant shift toward mobile-first engagement, substantial platform fragmentation, widespread adoption of short-form text and video formats, and continued trust in legacy media institutions. The study employs an analytical framework to gain a deeper understanding of both structural and behavioural changes. It organises findings by factors such as platform dependency, engagement formats, trust and credibility, consumption diversification, and how the industry generates revenue. When compared with global data, the research shows that Indian audiences are similar to international trends in their use of short-form content and influencer-driven consumption. However, they trust traditional media houses more than digital news aggregators. Focusing on India's rapidly evolving digital news landscape, this study fills crucial knowledge gaps by examining how the large demographic scale, swift technological adoption, and convergence between traditional and new media platforms impact the sector. It highlights how audience behaviour and industry challenges influence trends in trust, platform dependency, and financial sustainability. This study will be beneficial to academics, policymakers, and media practitioners seeking to address structural vulnerabilities, enhance journalistic credibility, and foster innovative revenue models amid ongoing media fragmentation and regulatory instability.*

***Keywords:** Digital News Consumption; Audience Behaviour; Media Fragmentation; Platform Dependency; Trust and Misinformation*

Nomenclature:
DNPA: Digital News Publishers Association

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I. INTRODUCTION

In this digital era, the concept of media consumption is changing rapidly. And this digital transformation of media consumption has profoundly altered the way people consume information worldwide. In India, this transformation has occurred rapidly, driven by increased internet access, the widespread use of smartphones, and the growing influence of social media platforms and news aggregators.

The way Indians consume news is changing fast, and the scale of that change is striking. The country's diverse demographic nature and long-standing traditions in print and television journalism make the current transition towards digital news consumption particularly disruptive. India has the world's second-largest population of mobile broadband users, estimated at approximately 825 million. On average, each user consumes more than 17 gigabytes of data every month [1]. By 2025, internet users in India are expected to surpass 900 million, with a substantial portion of these new users coming from non-urban areas. At the same time, the use of non-traditional internet-enabled devices has also expanded, with 58% of users nationwide accessing the internet through these devices [2]. Together, these changes have redefined how audiences approach news, reshaping the rhythm and the space of news consumption.

India is home to over 456 million digital news consumers, making the country one of the largest online news markets globally. What makes this audience especially significant is its diversity, stretching across both urban cities and rural regions [3].

The shift in news consumption patterns is not limited to India; it is a global phenomenon. All around the world, people are steadily shifting away from traditional media, such as print and television, and relying more on digital platforms for news. The reasons go way beyond technological innovations, but are driven by behavioural, cultural, and economic factors. The demand for news content in video and concise formats is rising rapidly. At the same time, audiences are demonstrating a decline in trust in institutional journalism and are leaning towards independent creators and alternative media sources [4]. In India, these global trends are further complicated by regulatory challenges, monetisation barriers, and a complex information environment shaped by both established media brands and emerging digital news platforms.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES & QUESTIONS

A. Research Objectives

i. To identify and analyse major trends in digital news consumption among Indian audiences based on recent secondary data.

ii. To compare digital news consumption patterns in India with global trends to determine significant similarities and differences.

B. Research Questions

i. What are the dominant patterns of digital news consumption among Indian audiences as reported in recent survey-based studies and reports?

ii. How do the digital news consumption trends in India compare with global patterns?

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

The introduction of digital media in mass communication has redefined how people engage with information. What was once shaped by newspapers, radio, and television is now driven by online networks that organise, filter, and circulate content at unprecedented speed. Researchers from all around the world are exploring and documenting various aspects of this transition from traditional media to digital platforms. This transformation is not only technological, but also a structural and behavioural change in audience engagement. Structurally, audience engagement has shifted from one-way, non-interactive communication to two-way, interactive digital communication. Digital media now allows consumers to control the flow of information and personalise content. Audiences have transformed from being passive receivers of information to proactive participants. The global increase in smartphone adoption and affordable internet access has fueled the proliferation of digital media. As digital media is becoming increasingly dominant, traditional media are adapting to survive [5].

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly accelerated the digitalisation of media consumption. It has heightened dependence on digital media for information across diverse demographics, from younger audiences to previously less digitally active populations. During the pandemic period, daily internet use and smartphone ownership among older adults went up significantly. They began to rely on digital technology for communication, especially to avail services like streaming, shopping and health-related needs. This surge in digital reliance shows how the pandemic pushed older adults into the digital world [6].

Globally, news consumption is shifting to digital-first practices. Platforms like TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram are emerging as the primary source of news, due to the proliferation of smartphones and the growing popularity of short-form, video-based, entertaining, and easily consumable content. The popularity of these platforms is increasingly growing among young adults. Social media influencers and alternative media figures have a significant influence on shaping news experience, especially for young people. This confirms the global trend of digital and social media-centric news consumption [7]. Digital platforms are increasingly gaining popularity as leading news sources due to their convenient, accessible, and interactive features. In comparison to traditional media, these platforms offer greater flexibility, immediacy, and user participation, which has led many people, particularly younger generations, to shift from conventional news sources for their daily information requirements [8].

The changes in the news ecosystem highlight both innovation and disruption. With technological progress and changing audience behaviour, persistent challenges arise, including trust in journalism. This erosion of trust deepens due to the waves of misinformation sweeping across digital platforms, which challenges the reliability of information on these platforms. Algorithmic curation and platform-specific mechanisms further influence the content users see, filtering and sorting news feeds based on individual preferences. This often reinforces pre-existing beliefs [9]. These processes contribute to platform fragmentation, creating echo chambers and filter bubbles. As a result, the news landscape becomes more divided and public discussion grows more polarised, raising concerns regarding information diversity and democratic user engagement.

Trust in the news media varies considerably across regions. Audiences of Nordic countries rely more on paid and institutional journalism, whereas people in the United States and parts of Europe are increasingly sceptical about conventional media outlets [10]. Online news business models also differ in different countries. For example, Nordic countries, especially Norway and Sweden, sustain higher rates of paid news subscriptions. While other regions experience slow or stagnant growth in paid news adoption [11]. Factors such as platform displacement, video-centric consumption, declining trust, and uneven subscription growth collectively define the global context relevant to understanding India's digital news landscape.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employs a qualitative content analysis approach. The analysis is descriptive in nature and entirely based on secondary data. Two comprehensive and current survey reports, 'Monetising Digital News: Digital News Publishing in India (2024)' and 'Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025', served as the primary sources of data. The primary aim of the paper is to identify key patterns and trends in digital news consumption habits in India and to compare them in the global landscape.

B. Data Sources

i. 'Monetizing digital news: Digital news publishing in India (2024)', published by the Digital News Publishers Association (DNPA). The report documents the Indian digital news ecosystem, consumption patterns, monetisation challenges, and the impact of regulatory environments on digital news publishers.

ii. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism published the Reuters

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Institute Digital News Report 2025. This report provides an overview of the digital news consumption across multiple countries, including India. The 2025 report includes survey-based data from 48 markets and gives insights into global and country-specific audience behaviour. Although the India-specific dataset reflects only English-speaking, internet-accessible users, it enables comparative analysis with global averages and country-specific trends.

C. Analytical Framework

The study adopted a content analysis framework to identify recurring themes and draw comparisons across specific thematic dimensions. Each report was carefully examined, coded, and categorised under core themes aligned with the research objectives and questions. The key themes included:

- Platform preferences and usage patterns
- Trust and credibility concerns
- Modes of engagement (such as text, video, and social media)
- Trends in news avoidance and the spread of misinformation
- Monetisation challenges and industry issues
- Differences in audience behaviour between India and global contexts

The analysis focused on qualitative interpretation of numerical data, narrative insights, graphs, and reported trends rather than statistical testing. Patterns from India were first extracted and categorised, followed by a comparative reading of global trends (primarily from the Reuters report).

D. Scope and Limitations

This study relies exclusively on two secondary data sets, each with specific limitations. Both reports are grounded in self-reported survey data. The Reuters report focuses solely on English-speaking, digitally active consumers, particularly in India. This demographic is predominantly urban, well-educated, and financially advantaged, thereby excluding a significant portion of India's regional and rural news audience. Consequently, online news consumption is likely overrepresented, while traditional, offline consumption is underrepresented. The findings should therefore be interpreted as representative of the online population rather than the entire country.

The DNPA 2024 report primarily reflects the perspectives of media industry stakeholders and advertisers in India, resulting in a publisher-centric viewpoint with limited attention to the experiences of smaller or independent news outlets. Despite these constraints, both reports offer substantial, current datasets appropriate for analysing behavioural patterns in digital news consumption. As no primary data was collected, the analysis remains confined to the scope, definitions, and methodologies established by these reports, without the possibility of independent verification or supplementary findings.

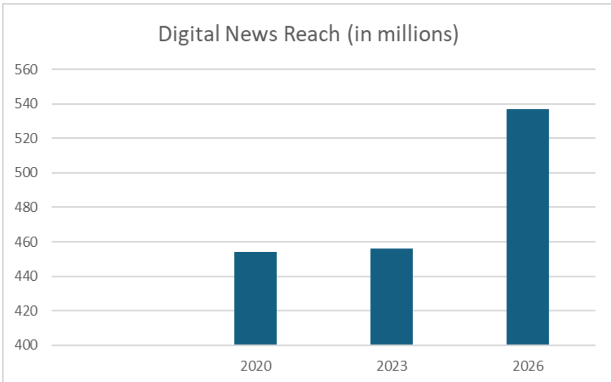
V. FINDINGS & ANALYSIS

This section summarises the findings of the content analysis of the two reports, the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2025* and the '*Monetizing Digital News: Digital news publishing in India'*. It has been systematically organised around the key themes aligned with the research questions and objectives.

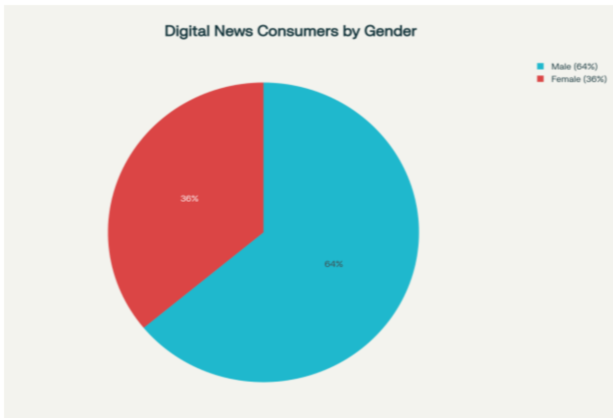
A. Patterns of Digital News Consumption in India

Digital news reaches 456 million people in India in 2023, accounting for 87% of the country's total online audience. This growth has been relatively stable over the past few years. Projections indicate that the number of digital news consumers will increase to 537 million by 2026 (Figure 1). Notably, 83% of these users consume digital news daily, and 43% engage with it multiple times throughout the day.

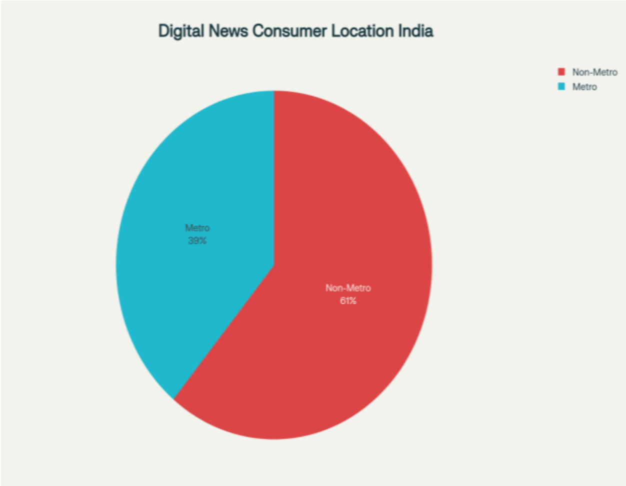
This trend encompasses a wide range of demographic groups, demonstrating the broad adoption of digital news. Approximately 75% of users are aged 18 years or older. 64% of the consumers are male (Figure 2). Only 39% of consumers reside in metropolitan areas, while 61% are from non-metro cities (Figure 3). This distribution highlights the increasing penetration and significance of online news in non-urban regions.



[Fig.1: Growth of Digital News Consumers in India (2020–2026)]



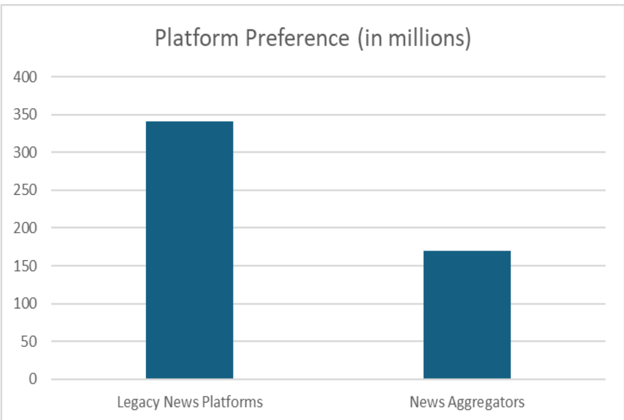
[Fig.2: Gender Distribution of Digital News Consumers in India]



[Fig.3: Location-wise Distribution of Digital News Consumers in India]

i. Platform Preferences

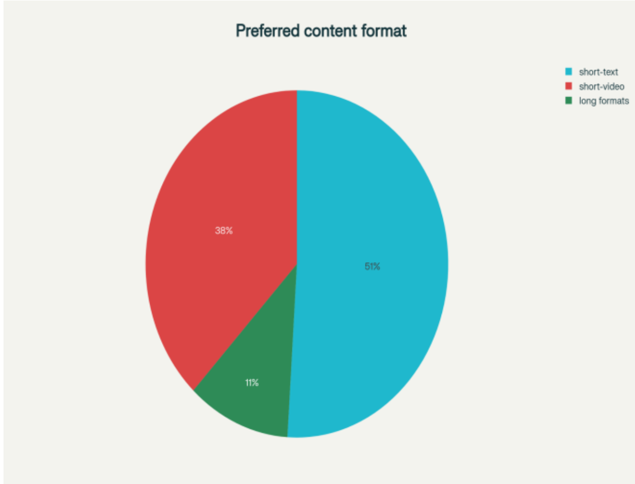
The smartphone is the most preferred device for online news consumption among Indian users, accounting for 86% of the total online audience. Most users do not rely on a single publisher app or website; 42% regularly engage with three or more news sources, and 83% access news via the web rather than dedicated apps (10%). Social media platforms, including YouTube (55%), WhatsApp (46%), and Instagram (37%), are widely used for news consumption. Content creators and young influencers are particularly popular among English-speaking audiences. Legacy news platforms, such as NDTV, The Times of India, and the India TV Group, maintain the highest viewership, with a total of 341 million users. In contrast, news aggregators such as DailyHunt and InShorts attract approximately 170 million users (Figure 4).



[Fig.4: Platform Preferences of Digital News Users in India]

ii. Engagement Format

Short text (51%) and short video (38%) formats are the most popular for online news consumption, indicating a shift toward rapid, easily digestible, and visually engaging content (Figure 5). This preference is particularly pronounced among younger users, who favour video-based news on mobile devices. The data underscores ongoing diversification in content formats.



[Fig.5: Preferred Content Formats for Online News Consumption]

B. Trust, Misinformation, and Credibility

Trust is a critical factor in the digital news landscape. The DNPA report indicates that 91% of survey respondents have encountered fake news, and 37% found it difficult to recognise such content. Digital platforms affiliated with legacy media brands are perceived as the most trustworthy, while social media platforms are considered the least reliable sources of information. The Reuters Digital News Report 2025 identifies Meta-owned WhatsApp as the leading source of fake news and misinformation, with 53% of Indian respondents citing it as the biggest threat to their trust in news. This figure represents the highest level of concern across all surveyed markets.

The Reuters report states that global trust in news has remained low but stable at 40% over the past three years, following a decade of decline. However, significant national differences exist. Finland reports the highest level of trust in news at 63%, while many Eastern European countries report significantly lower levels of trust. Influencers and politicians are each identified by 47% of respondents as primary sources of misinformation. Concern about distinguishing truth from misinformation is highest in Africa and the United States, with 73% of respondents in both regions expressing this concern. Indian consumers report similar challenges, indicating widespread difficulty in identifying reliable information in the digital news environment.

Although many audiences feel that news media are falling short, impartiality, accuracy, transparency, and original reporting are the key practices that news audiences across nations expect from journalists and news media. Indian digital news publishers adhere to professional standards, including fact-checking, compliance with industry guidelines, and establishing complaint mechanisms, to ensure quality and credibility.

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Table I: Key Comparative Metrics of Trust, Credibility and Misinformation in News: India vs Global

Metric	India	Global	Source(s)
Exposure to fake news	91% exposed; 62% in a month	58% exposed	DNPA 2024, Reuters 2025
Difficulty in identifying fake news	37%	Not directly reported	DNPA 2024
Overall trust in news	High trust in legacy brands	Stable at 40%	DNPA 2024, Reuters 2025
Perceived most significant sources of misinformation	Social media platforms have low trust	Online influencers 47%, politicians 47%	DNPA 2024, Reuters 2025

C. Platform Fragmentation and Rise of Alternative Ecosystems

India's digital news landscape is highly fragmented. Indian audiences are increasingly accessing information from multiple sources, including news aggregators, traditional media websites, news apps and especially from social media and messaging apps. 74% of news consumers continue to use legacy news organisation websites, while 37% access news from aggregators such as DailyHunt and InShorts. A smaller but expanding segment prefers platforms like Quint and Scroll, as well as content from YouTube-based news influencers, including Ravish Kumar and Dhruv Rathee. Globally, Facebook (36%) and YouTube (30%) remain the most widely used social media platforms for news, while Instagram and TikTok (16%) are gaining in popularity. However, TikTok is currently banned in India.

D. Monetisation and Structural Challenges

The Indian digital news industry experiences significant financial challenges. Only 56% of surveyed online news businesses are profitable. The sector remains heavily dependent on advertising revenue. The DNPA report states that in 2023, total digital news revenue in India was INR 2,556 crore, with 92% of the revenue generated from advertisements. News subscriptions, mainly driven by exclusive content and premium features, contributed only INR 212 crore. Only 5.7% of the total digital media revenue was generated by the online news industry.

e.Globally, digital news subscriptions have stabilised, particularly in high-income countries. Only 18% of audiences in major markets pay for news. For example, only 20% of users in the United States subscribe to digital news, whereas Norway (42%) and Sweden (31%) demonstrate higher adoption rates. Advertising is still the dominant revenue stream. Digital channels account for 72.7% of worldwide ad investment, with online spend exceeding US$790 billion in 2024. However, it is dominated by major tech giants (e.g., Google, Facebook), leaving news publishers with shrinking ad shares. Additionally, platform algorithms and emerging AI tools are reshaping content visibility and monetisation, further pressuring traditional news business models to innovate amid a fragmented media landscape.

E. Global Comparisons: India and the World

The following table provides a side-by-side comparison between India's digital news consumption and global trends, focusing on audience behaviour, platform preferences, content formats, trust, and monetisation. Worldwide, a clear shift in mobile-led news consumption and a growing demand for video-based news is evident. India follows similar trends; however, certain variations emerge due to factors such as the regulatory environment, economic conditions, and platform availability.

Table II: India vs. Global Digital News Consumption Trends

Section	Theme	India	Global
Convergences / Similarities	Shift to digital news	Rapid transition from traditional media to digital platforms for news consumption	Accelerating shift from institutional journalism towards consumption via social media and digital platforms across countries
	Content formats	Increasing preference for visual and mobile-first content; short videos and bite-sized text	Visual and mobile-first content preferred; short videos and text popular
	Youth engagement	The highest engagement among young users is mainly on social platforms	Young users globally show the highest engagement via social and video platforms
	Trust and misinformation	Primary concern over fake news; struggle to identify misinformation	Fake news and trust issues are major concerns worldwide
	News formats	Short videos, short text, and bite-sized news favoured	Same preference globally, especially among younger demographics
Divergences / Differences	Platform traction	TikTok is banned; Instagram moderates news traction	TikTok and Instagram have greater traction for news use
	Trust levels	Strong trust in legacy news brands	More scepticism globally, notably in the U.S. and Europe
	AI in the news	AI is primarily used for content creation and personalisation, particularly in emerging but not user-facing news sources.	AI is increasingly becoming a user-facing source, especially among youth under 25
	Monetisation models	Dominantly ad-revenue (92%); subscription low (~5.7% of digital ad spend)	Subscription models are stronger in markets like Norway and the U.S.
	Platform dependency	Growing fragmentation; mixed platform consumption	Increasing fragmentation with diverse alternative ecosystems

VI. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that India's digital news ecosystem exhibits both continuities and significant changes. Some aspects of digital news consumption trends, such as fragmented consumption, platform dependency, and uncertainties regarding trust, are similar between India and most other countries worldwide.

The results indicate a complicated relationship among traditional organisations, new

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digital news sources, and fragmented audience participation. These connections highlight the divergence in digital news consumption in India, where local customs and global advancements coexist.

A rapid growth in the digitalisation of news consumption in India is evident, particularly among non-urban populations. This shift is primarily fueled by the widespread use of smartphones and the availability of affordable internet access. India now engages 87% of its online population in digital news. The demographic profile of these audiences is notable for its diversity, with increased access and engagement across age groups, genders, and languages. The significant presence of non-metro city users (61%) challenges the perception that urban populations primarily use digital platforms. Rural India leads in digital news consumption, with 90 million more internet users than urban areas and an annual growth rate of 10%, compared to 5% in cities [12].

Trust and credibility are significant concerns in the digital news consumption landscape. In contrast to the global decline in trust in institutional journalism, particularly in North America and parts of Europe, Indian audiences continue to value traditional legacy media platforms while also consuming news from aggregators and YouTube-based influencers. Globally, the decline of trust is exacerbated by the growing influence of influencers and politicians, who are often perceived as disseminating misinformation. However, younger audiences are increasingly turning to alternative news sources on digital platforms over traditional media, showing a clear preference. This paradox resonates with the media dependency theory, which proposes that audiences rely on specific media platforms for stability in uncertain informational environments, amplifying both the power and the risk of misinformation. India stands at the centre of the global crisis known as “information disorder”. WhatsApp, in particular, has emerged as the most cited source of misinformation. The regulatory and ethical challenges posed by algorithmic curation, AI-driven summaries, and synthetic content add new layers of complexity to it. Despite all these challenges, Indian audiences continue to look to trusted legacy brands for accuracy and reassurance.

News consumption no longer follows a single path. Indian consumers, like global audiences, engage with multiple platforms to stay informed. The rise of platform fragmentation is making the news ecosystem more complex. They are also showing a growing preference for short text, short video, and influencer-led news. Uses and gratifications theory explains this behaviour, as audiences seek media that provide convenience, accessibility, video engagement, and relatability.

Monetisation emerges as the most critical structural challenge in the Indian digital news industry. Despite a vast market size, the industry is heavily dependent on advertising, accounting for 92% of revenue, while subscription earnings remain marginal. The Indian digital news remains highly reliant on third-party platforms for reach, particularly on aggregators and social media. According to the DNPA (2024) report, only half of digital news businesses in India are profitable, which limits the scope for innovation and independence. This vulnerability is echoed globally, but it is more prominent in India. Globally, digital news subscription revenue has stabilised at around 18%-20%, but only in a few richer countries. However, the scenario is more challenging for publishers. Large technology companies dominate the majority of the digital advertising market. Alongside this, the digital publishers are experiencing a decline in direct website traffic due to platform algorithms and the growing influence of AI-based content aggregation.

All the evidence shows that India’s digital news landscape is standing at a turning point. It shares similarities with global patterns in content preference and engagement. On the other hand, it diverges when it comes to trust in media organisations. The future of digital news in India is heavily dependent on platform dynamics, organisational reforms, innovative revenue models, and strategies that strengthen credibility amid increasing fragmentation.

VII. CONCLUSION

India has emerged as one of the world’s largest digital news markets. The study reveals both convergence and divergence from global patterns. Audience behaviour aligns with international trends, including a preference for mobile-first access, video and short-form formats, platform fragmentation, and an increased reliance on social media. However, India diverges from the rest of the world in certain key aspects. Indian audiences’ trust in legacy media is relatively high, even in an environment of widespread misinformation and fake news. Regulatory constraints, such as the TikTok ban, further shape the landscape in unique ways.

The most pressing concern in the digital news sector is financial sustainability. Despite having millions of readers and viewers, the subscription numbers remain low, raising concerns about the sustainability of independent journalism. Comparative evidence suggests that workable solutions require more than technological adaptation. It will depend more on how audiences value news and how policies support sustainable journalism.

Hybridity is a defining feature of India's current digital news trajectory. To remain sustainable, the sector will need innovation in content delivery, revenue models, and audience engagement strategies. Collaboration, creative subscription models, responsible use of AI, and more open relationships between publishers and platforms could be the keys to building resilience.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

After aggregating input from all authors, I must verify the accuracy of the following information as the article's author.

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- **Funding Support:** This article has not been funded by any organizations or agencies. This independence ensures that the research is conducted with objectivity and without any external influence.
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- **Data Access Statement and Material Availability:** The adequate resources of this article are publicly accessible.
- **Author's Contributions:** The authorship of this article is contributed equally to all participating individuals.

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