

## **Rural Youth Prefer Independent Content Creators and Local Content for News Consumption**

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### **Abstract**

*Digital media has led to changes in almost all spheres of communication including news consumption patterns among users especially youngsters. But the unequal penetration of mobile technologies may hinder the proliferation of information through digital media in some areas particularly in rural areas owing to lack of infrastructure. Hence, this study aims to understand the news consumption pattern of youngsters living in rural areas and the reasons for preferring digital media, if they are using the same for reading the news stories. Following a qualitative approach, the present study found that the youngsters in rural areas have shifted to digital platforms for consuming news rather than relying on newspapers and TV news. Ease of availability and accessibility are not the only reasons for watching news on digital platforms, but also the relatable content shown on digital platforms by independent content creators. Although the youngsters are watching news on digital platforms, they are aware of influence of algorithmic bias but they still find hope in digital platforms as they shared that most of the times, they are able to control it.*

**Keywords:** News, digital platforms, rural youth, India, social media

Digital media has led to changes in almost all spheres of communication. It has changed the way and the form, people get and seek information. Resultantly, news consumption patterns have also been affected. Earlier, news stories used to come through only

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### *Rural Youth Prefer Independent Content Creators ...*

newspapers and TV news channels but now digital media is providing updates in a very easy form on mobile phones. Digital News Report 2025 published by Reuters Institute found that the engagement with traditional media like TV and news websites for getting news is becoming less and less whereas the consumption of news through social media, video platforms and news aggregators is increasing (Newman, 2025). Further the report mentions that in countries like Thailand, Kenya, the Philippines and India, people say that they prefer to watch rather than read news. However, a study done on social media and political behaviour (CSDS, 2019) had found that Television followed by newspapers was the main source of political news instead of social media. Boczkowski, Matassi and Mitchelstein (2018) in their study conclude that youngsters are using every social media platform for a specific purpose, like they use Instagram for stylized self-presentation while WhatsApp as multifaceted communication channel. Arora (2024) says that India and China dominated the mobile phone market by making their devices and data packs hugely cheaper and user friendly which has enabled youngsters in these countries to participate in online political as well as social activities. Suggesting a way ahead in the age of information abundance, Madrid-Morales and Wasserman (2024) in their study say that media and information literacy should be made part of curricula to encourage critical media consumption. Introducing the concept of critical social literacy in relation to media literacy, Currie and Kelly (2022) say that youth needs to engage with digital media, keeping in mind the social realities as media exist and work among social realities. In the present times, it seems that youngsters who are growing up with mobile technologies are mostly reading news on digital platforms. But the unequal penetration of mobile technologies and internet may hinder the proliferation of information through digital media in some areas especially in rural areas owing to lack of infrastructure. Mobile media, combination of mobile phones and internet, have penetrated the most remote places all over the world. This penetration holds much relevance for the countries of the Global South, where common people to a large extent had lagged behind in using technological devices. But mobile media is one such technological device, which has reached the innermost regions in the Global South and in India too. In fact, mobile media has reached

numerous people who faced multiple marginalities, in terms of geographical distance from city centers, economic resources and even social inequalities owing to social systems like caste system. Hence, this study aims to understand the news consumption pattern of youngsters living in rural areas and the reasons for preferring digital media, if they are using the same for reading the news stories.

### **Research methodology**

A qualitative approach to research methodology was followed in the present study. Under this approach, in-depth interviews with 16 youngsters were conducted. Non-random sampling was used as the aim of the study was to understand the consumption of news pattern among youngsters. Students who were preparing for competitive examinations were taken as respondents in the study as only those respondents were included who were reading or consuming news regularly. Hence, a mix of purposive and snowball sampling was used in the study. A semi-structured interview schedule was used as a research tool. Thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes from the data collected through interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

### **Findings**

#### **Digital platforms as primary news source**

Majority of the respondents were consuming news on digital platforms instead of relying on newspapers and television news channels. Inaccessibility of newspapers and TV news channels was not the reason for not accessing news on newspapers and TV news channels as all the respondents had access to newspapers in some institutional or community library and TV news channels in their homes and on their mobile phones. Even under digital platforms, most of the them were accessing it on social media, especially YouTube. When asked about the reason for accessing news on social media, most of them said that news on social media is easily accessible, rather remains accessible all the time. For newspapers and TV news channels, one needs to take care of time but on social media, news is available all the time.

Among digital platforms, YouTube dominated among other digital platforms. Majority of the respondents would go to YouTube to access

### *Rural Youth Prefer Independent Content Creators ...*

news which not only gives them a chance to choose their preferable issues, but also speed and content as one of the respondents shared, "I watch news when I have time. I choose what, when, and how much to watch." Comparing the change in news consumption, one of the respondents said, "Now even elders do not watch news on TV, which earlier used to be an everyday activity at night in almost all homes. Now even my father listens and watches news on his mobile phone on YouTube."

Ease and comfort of availing news are not the only reasons for shift of news consumption from newspapers and TV to digital platforms but also the content as many of the respondents said that the content in mainstream media does not seem to be neutral rather seems biased all the time. For instance, one of the respondents said, "Most of the TV channels will take up one popular topic in the prime time and keep on discussing that as if there is nothing else happening in the world." While another shared, "Even the prime time discussion does not seem to be interesting as only some of the speakers with particular view-point will be given chance to put across their point, time and again while others will not be given chance to speak."

#### **Interest in hyper-local content**

When asked about the kind of news stories that respondents prefer to watch, majority of the respondents said that they prefer to know more about local and regional issues rather than national and international issues. Some of them specifically mentioned that even when some national or international concern is raised by media, they remain more interested in knowing the effect on them and their immediate issues and concerns. One of the respondents shared, "I watch YouTube channels which show content related to Punjab and nearby areas as I think these issues interest me more instead of understanding something which is happening at a far off place."

Another reason underlined by the respondents for preferring YouTube and local content is the use of language as majority of them preferred to watch content in their own language as one of the respondents shared, "I watch news in Punjabi language as I understand it better, rather availability of news in Punjabi has made me watch news earlier I had no interest in news."

### **Popularity of independent digital content creators**

Most of the respondents said that they prefer to watch news channels of independent digital creators over mainstream news channels as most of them find that repetitive and biased content is being shown in mainstream media. Majority of the respondents said these independent content creators focus on the issues which they relate to them while mainstream media mostly ignores their issues and concerns. Listing the issues, one of the respondents said, "We, youngsters, are interested to know more about employment scenario, agricultural issues which affect our crops, health services which are available in our areas and which needs to be upgraded. And all these issues are being addressed by independent content creators." Another shared, "Many of the independent content creators have worked in mainstream media before starting their own channels, but when they were in mainstream media, they were not talking of real-issues but on their own platforms, they talk of our issues and spread awareness."

Explaining what they did not like in mainstream media, one of them shared, "TV news seem repetitive, sensationalized, biased and loud with no real issues raised. So, it seems more of drama than facts on real-issues." Another added, "TV news anchors are just shouting. No facts, only noise." Another reason for preferring independent content creators is that respondents feel that these content creators are more accountable as they start losing viewers if they do not show relatable and true content whereas mainstream media seems very far from audience.

### **Awareness of algorithmic bias**

Majority of the respondents were aware of algorithmic influence while viewing digital platforms as they said they know that in digital media when they see one video, similar kind of videos would be shown to them by internet. One of the respondents said, "I know that once I start watching videos of the particular type, same kind of videos would be thrown by the internet. But I prefer them to one-sided news shown on TV." Yet another shared, "We all are aware of the algorithmic bias and sometimes, we are able to control while other times, we flow with the content shown to us but in that also, most of the times we get to know more and more about the topic that we need to know."

### *Rural Youth Prefer Independent Content Creators ...*

Most of the respondents said that they are able to control the bias as when they discuss issues with their friends, their friends will make them realize that they are watching only one type of content as one of the respondents said, " It is always better to discuss issues with your friends and family especially which we are seeing on digital media as many a times, we get over-involved in content shown in digital media but when we discuss with our friends, we are able to know the other side too."

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The present study found that the youngsters in rural areas have shifted to digital platforms for consuming news rather than relying on newspapers and TV news. Ease of availability and accessibility are not the only reasons for watching news on digital platforms, but also the relatable content shown on digital platforms by independent content creators is another major reason for this shift towards digital platforms.

Although the youngsters are watching news on digital platforms, they are aware at the same time that they might get influenced by algorithmic bias of the digital platforms but they still find hope in digital platforms as they shared that most of the times, they are able to control it. Hence, it was found that news consumption on digital platforms by youngsters does not only give opportunities to youngsters to choose but also to some extent raise few concerns. Spread of misinformation needs to be taken into consideration when the content of independent digital content creators is being watched as the concept of gatekeeping which was very actively followed in mainstream media might not be working effectively in case of independent digital content creators. Another point that can be looked at is that availability of content in regional and local languages, which remained one of the main reasons for watching local YouTube channels. Hence, more credible content in local languages needs to be provide to the youngsters. Further, it can be noted that availability of content on their issues and in their languages on YouTube channels has to some extent, made youngsters interested in news especially political issues. Therefore, digital literacy programmes can be run by governmental and non-governmental organisations to equip youngsters in better ways to handle digital content.

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