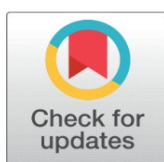


THE HYBRID ROLE OF FOUNDER-EDITORS IN REGIONAL DIGITAL MEDIA: A CASE FROM GORAKHPUR, INDIA

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ABSTRACT

The rise of hyperlocal digital news sites in India is symptomatic of a broader shift in the media landscape, in which digital technologies allow for the empowerment of minor actors against mainstream hegemony. Such platforms tend to be established and run by local journalists interested in offering community-based coverage in the wake of a lack of proper coverage by mainstream media (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021). In places such as Gorakhpur, hyperlocal shops have not only become sources of information but also sites of civic conversation, responsibility, and localized narrative.

Keywords: Hybrid, Founder-Editors, Digital, Gorakhpur

1. INTRODUCTION

The rise of hyperlocal digital news sites in India is symptomatic of a broader shift in the media landscape, in which digital technologies allow for the empowerment of minor actors against mainstream hegemony. Such platforms tend to be established and run by local journalists interested in offering community-based coverage in the wake of a lack of proper coverage by mainstream media (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021). In places such as Gorakhpur, hyperlocal shops have not only become sources of information but also sites of civic conversation, responsibility, and localized narrative.

Yet maintaining such platforms is more than journalistic practice—it involves overcoming financial, technological, and social hurdles. Founders commonly undertake a range of responsibilities from reporting and editing to advertising and platform management. This hybridity of roles—where one person wears the hats of editor, marketer, activist, and entrepreneur—is a characteristic of regional hyperlocal media, but one that is understudied in academic research (Carvajal, García-Avilés, & González, 2012; Nielsen, 2016).

Whereas entrepreneurial journalism research speaks to the convergence of editorial and business functions in Western environments (Briggs, 2012; Vos & Singer, 2016), there has been minimal research into how such dynamics play out in Indian vernacular media ecosystems. Gorakhpur is a particularly pertinent example: in this location, hyperlocal news websites exist with restricted budgets, ad-hoc advertising ecosystems, and extensive reliance on online platforms. Under these circumstances, founder-editors become the bane and boon of the system—sustaining outlets but also the ones getting burned out, having their professional boundaries blurred, and getting credibility questioned.

This paper takes a close look at the hybrid founder-editor role in Gorakhpur's hyperlocal digital environment. It queries: How do founder-editors negotiate journalistic, managerial, and entrepreneurial roles, and what are the consequences of such hybridity for regional digital media's sustainability and credibility?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The evolution of journalism in the digital era has changed professional boundaries and newsroom configurations globally at a considerable scale. Researchers have come to emphasize more and more the development of entrepreneurial journalism, where business roles are confronted by journalists along with editorial tasks, distorting traditional role boundaries (Briggs, 2012; Deuze & Witschge, 2018). This change has led to what some refer to as role hybridity, where a single person carries out the functions of editor, marketer, producer, and entrepreneur all at once. Entrepreneurial journalism has tended to be praised as stimulating innovation and flexibility (Siapera & Veglis, 2012), although critics point out that this hybridization could compromise journalistic autonomy and credibility (Vos & Singer, 2016).

In Western contexts, there is a trend of shrinking newsrooms and increasing demands for journalists to multitask (Nielsen, 2016; Anderson, 2017). Small online startups, for instance, typically depend on founder-editors who have to perform reporting, editing, fundraising, and technology all at once (Carvajal, García-Avilés, & González, 2012). In the Global South, however, these issues are compounded by structural inequalities, poor advertising markets, and more reliance on informal sources of revenue (Banerjee, 2020). In these contexts, hybridity is less an option than a survival mechanism.

The Indian media environment is a case in point. Scholars observe that hyperlocal news sites in India have emerged to address silences in mainstream reporting, particularly in regional and vernacular settings (Ali, 2019; Kumar, 2021). However, in contrast with larger city startups, regional media do not have institutional support, leaving entrepreneurs to perform multiple overlapping roles (Rao, 2019). These founder-editors not only create content, but they also finance it, broker advertising, operate social media sites, and act as community brokers between citizens and those in authority.

This hybridity also echoes in community journalism literature, highlighting the activist bent of local journalists. Radcliffe (2012) and Ali (2019) posit that hyperlocal sites tend to conflate the boundaries between journalism and civic involvement by playing the roles of both watchdogs and mobilizers of communities at the same time. For founder-editors, this second role is also heightened by the necessity of upholding credibility amidst economic pressures as well as political meddling.

Recent international discourses on precarity of media and platformization of the news offer further context. Research indicates that online platforms like Facebook and YouTube have become essential channels for small outlets, but they also exert algorithmic pressures that control visibility and income (Helberger, Pierson, & Poell, 2018; Napoli, 2019). For Indian regional founder-editors, such reliance exacerbates the burden to play multiple roles—content adapting for platforms, community management, and maintaining revenues.

Together, the literature highlights that role hybridity is becoming increasingly pivotal to comprehending the dynamics of hyperlocal and small-scale journalism. While Western context studies position hybridity in terms of entrepreneurial innovation, Indian vernacular experience illustrates a more insecure, survival-based form of hybridity driven by structural weakness, communal pressures, and platform dependency. By concentrating on Gorakhpur, the article takes these debates forward to demonstrate how founder-editors negotiate overlapping roles in ways both supporting and stressing regional digital journalism.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to examine the hybrid roles of founder-editors in hyperlocal digital media in Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh.

Sampling and Participants

Sixteen hyperlocal digital outlets were purposively selected to reflect diversity in platform type, scale, and audience orientation. The founders of these outlets were the primary respondents, given their central role in both editorial and managerial functions.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founder-editors between 2021 and 2023, each lasting 45–90 minutes. Field observations of newsroom practices and analysis of digital content (videos, posts, advertisements) were also used to contextualize findings.

Data Analysis

Interviews and observations were thematically analyzed, focusing on overlaps between editorial and entrepreneurial responsibilities, community mediation, and multi-tasking across journalistic and business roles.

Ethical Considerations

All participants were interviewed with informed consent. Pseudonyms are used in cases where anonymity was requested.

Limitations

As a regional case study, the findings are context-specific but provide insights into broader patterns of role hybridity in India's hyperlocal journalism.

3. FINDINGS

The gorakhpur field study showed that founder-editors of hyperlocal online news sites undertake extremely hybridized roles, combining journalistic, managerial, and entrepreneurial functions. Four overarching themes were identified:

3.1. BLENDED IDENTITIES: EDITORS AS REPORTERS AND TECHNICIANS

Founder-editors often merged editorial control with on-the-ground reporting and technical work. Many of them recorded videos themselves, edited video themselves, and uploaded content themselves. This conflation of roles was necessitated primarily by the lack of professional personnel and constrained resources.

As the founder of one Facebook-based outlet from Gorakhpur put it: "There is no reporter here separately. I carry the tripod, record the video, edit it myself, and upload it at night." A two-person YouTube channel functioned largely on the founder's multitasking, where a single person acted as anchor, cameraman, and editor at the same time.

3.2. REVENUE GENERATORS: FOUNDERS AS BUSINESS MANAGERS

In addition to editorial work, the majority of founders in Gorakhpur personally negotiated sponsorships and advertisements, which were often from local business owners and shopkeepers. Direct involvement was not only convenient but also required, as smaller advertisers were fond of directly working with the founder.

An indigenous video portal founder explained: "If I do not go to the market myself, nobody will provide ads. Shopkeepers like to deal with me directly and not through an agent." In a few instances, unusual arrangements were being made to keep operations going. One outlet, for example, advertised a private clinic in return for complimentary Wi-Fi connectivity, which was crucial for downloading daily news content.

3.3. COMMUNITY BROKERS: FOUNDERS AS CIVIC MEDIATORS

One hallmark of Gorakhpur's hyperlocal journalism was the founder-editor as community broker. Several referred to themselves as "voices of the people," with residents tending to seek them out even before approaching government officials. Their work was often seen as a means of civic intervention.

The owner of a WhatsApp-based news service described: "When colonia drains clog, individuals call me prior to calling the municipal department. They believe once I publish it online, the authorities will respond." In another instance,

a small online media platform followed up on multiple complaints about road safety. A week later, the municipality put up new signs, enhancing the platform's image as a community problem-solver instead of being merely a news platform.

3.4. ROLE MULTIPLICITY AND BURNOUT

Founder-editors were subjected to intense demands from multiplicity of roles, leading to long working hours and fusing of professional duties. They reported working 12 to 16 hours a day, balancing reporting, technical production, marketing, and financial management.

One founder of a Gorakhpur-based news site admitted: "I am editor, cameraman, marketer, and accountant rolled into one. Sometimes I wonder what my actual profession is anymore." In another instance, a founder was absent from covering a serious accident because he was busy balancing advertisement accounts, illustrating how multitasking might undermine journalistic priorities.

4. DISCUSSION

The results from Gorakhpur emphasize the radical hybridity of founder-editors in hyperlocal online news, one that speaks to international debates about entrepreneurial journalism but in addition encompasses distinct regional features.

4.1. ROLE HYBRIDITY AS A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Scholarship worldwide has chronicled the increasing pattern of journalists playing many roles, especially for small-size and digital-first media (Briggs, 2012; Deuze & Witschge, 2018). Within Western settings, this hybridity is typically positioned as entrepreneurial innovation, allowing journalists to try out new business models (Carvajal, García-Avilés, & González, 2012). In Gorakhpur, though, hybridity is less a chance and more a matter of survival, the product of limited finances, poor institutional support, and the lack of professional staff. Founders said they themselves managed reporting, editing, advertising, and community outreach because outsourcing or the hiring of additional staff was not economically viable.

4.2. EDITORIAL AUTONOMY AND COMMERCIAL PRESSURES

Combining editorial and business functions poses fundamental questions regarding journalistic autonomy. Vos and Singer (2016) warn that when journalists are also marketers, conflicts of interest become unavoidable. Evidence from Gorakhpur corroborates this fear: a few founder-editors had confessed to providing special coverage in return for sponsorships. Though such activities keep the operations running, they potentially weaken credibility, especially in politically charged environments.

4.3. COMMUNITY BROKERAGE AND CIVIC JOURNALISM

Another significant aspect was the founder-editor's civic mediator role. This resonates with scholarship on community journalism, highlighting the activist function of local journalists (Radcliffe, 2012; Ali, 2019). In Gorakhpur, citizens tended to view founder-editors as solvers of problems rather than objective journalists. This positioning increased community trust and participation but also compromised professional boundaries, bringing hyperlocal journalism closer to advocacy than traditional news.

4.4. PLATFORM DEPENDENCE AND WORKLOAD INTENSIFICATION

The dependence on online platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube increased the burden of founder-editors, who not only had to create content but also algorithm-optimize it and maintain audience interaction. Parallel trends have been observed all over the world, where modest outlets rely on platforms for exposure (Helberger, Pierson, & Poell, 2018; Napoli, 2019). In Gorakhpur, this reliance augmented the stress of multitasking, with founders experiencing burnout and a loss of their core identity as journalists.

Although role hybridity is not exclusive to Gorakhpur, local expression differs from that observed in the Global North. In the Global North, entrepreneurial journalism is repeatedly hailed as an active career choice; in Gorakhpur, hybridity is reactive, influenced by resource shortages and socio-political restrictions. Additionally, founder-editors' embeddedness within local communities generates a kind of journalism that is both entrepreneurial and activist yet intensely personal.

5. CONCLUSION

The Gorakhpur case depicts the focal role of founder-editors in maintaining hyperlocal online journalism under conditions of resource scarcity. Founders-editors possess a hybrid role combining editorial, entrepreneurial, technical, and community roles. Hybridity allows news outlets to endure despite economic precariousness and dwindling institutional support.

Concurrently, the research points to this model's weaknesses. With founder-editors playing all roles at once - reporter, marketer, and community broker - the lines are blurred between professional journalism and other duties. This has consequences in terms of burnout, erosion of editorial autonomy, and over-reliance on personal effort as opposed to collective newsroom frameworks.

Entrepreneurial journalism is globally presented as a site of innovation and possibility (Briggs, 2012; Deuze & Witschge, 2018). In Gorakhpur, though, hybridity is an adaptation of survival rather than choice. Whereas community brokerage builds trust and visibility, the stress of multi-tasking across a range of roles creates doubts about sustainability in the long term and credibility.

Subsequent studies would be able to look into comparative cases in other parts of India and the Global South, where comparable hybrid practices will emerge given variant socio-economic contexts. Policy programs and capacity-building initiatives, including digital entrepreneurship training, collaborative newsroom models, or funding mechanisms at the community level, can alleviate the stress on founder-editors and ensure editorial autonomy.

Finally, the history of Gorakhpur's founder-editors highlights both the strength and vulnerability of hyperlocal digital journalism. Their capacity to multitask is a badge of honor for flexibility but also indicates the necessity of infrastructure support to guarantee that such reporting not only endures but flourishes in the long term.

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