



Selected Papers of #AoIR2024:
The 25th Annual Conference of the
Association of Internet Researchers
Sheffield, UK / 30 Oct - 2 Nov 2024

PLATFORMIZATION INTERMEDIARIES: OPTIMIZING NEWS FOR PLATFORMS IN INDIA

Simran Agarwal
LabEx ICCA, Université Sorbonne Paris Nord

Introduction : Platformization Intermediaries

Previous research studying the platformization of news has focused on the dominance of search and social media platforms in news distribution. Scholars across disciplines have highlighted its consequences upon the news industry, particularly the contingency of news (Nieborg & Poell, 2018), dependence of news publishers on platforms (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021; Nielsen & Ganter, 2022), capture of news industry through platform funding (Fanta & Dachwitz, 2020; Myllylahti, 2021; Papaevangelou, 2023) and infrastructure (De-Lima-Santos et al., 2023; Nechushtai, 2018), and algorithmic reorganization of journalistic and public values (Caplan & boyd, 2018). In this scenario, digital news industries around the globe are attempting to retain control over distribution, and consequent revenue, and surmount the algorithmic uncertainties of non-transparent platform systems.

In India, complexities brought on by platformization have led to the rise and formalization of a previously veiled network of intermediaries that mediate between news businesses and large distribution platforms like Google, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. These intermediaries facilitate and broker interactions between news publishers and platforms through the provision of infrastructural tools and algorithmic expertise on news production, distribution, and monetization. This paper locates and conceptualizes them as 'platformization intermediaries'. They differ from cultural producers or complementors that operate within the platform ecosystem leveraging platform's infrastructure and end-user reach (Poell et al. 2019). Instead, *platformization intermediaries* drive the process of platformization itself, i.e. reshaping cultural economies and practices into platform optimized models. Therefore, they facilitate the translation of platform's algorithmic and economic priorities into the human and social practices of news making.

Suggested Citation (APA): Agarwal, S. (2024, October). *Platformization Intermediaries: Optimizing News for Platforms in India*. Paper presented at AoIR2024: The 25th Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Sheffield, UK: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

Building on exploratory interviews with news publishers of various sizes and languages, this paper maps the diversity of platformization intermediaries operating in the Indian news market. This includes sellers of production, organization, and machine learning (ML) tools, and platform expertise to news publishers. They constitute a meso-layer of intermediaries in the news value chain. Taking a critical political economic examination of their infrastructural products and services, and market position and dynamics, this study demonstrates that they enable and optimize the platformization of news in India. Further, interviews with a handful of these actors in India unpack the implications on news publishers and its public interest value.

Optimizing News for Platforms

Scholars of game and app studies literature investigates the rise of production platforms, particularly the case of Unity Game Engine, that sell production tools to game producers, and mimic the monopolization tendencies of distribution platforms (Foxman, 2019; Young et al., 2020). Another thrust of research, from the emerging field of content creators studies, locates the influence of cultural intermediaries in the form of talent managers (Cunningham & Craig, 2019; Lobato, 2016; Mehta, 2021) and algorithmic experts (Bishop, 2020) that consolidate creator interests against platforms and demystify their algorithmic systems. However, the rise of similar intermediaries in news industries, and the implications thereof, are relatively understudied.

'Science of Success' is the promise of Publishers Digital Lab (PDL), an Indian company specializing in selling artificial intelligence (AI) tools for content creation as well as algorithmic expertise to alter news pages to meet platform's requirements. Similarly, Piano.io offers news publishers end-to-end software for social media optimization, audience analytics, and ML tools for revenue management. Echobox & Izooto sell automated distribution and advertising tools to news publishers. Finally, Evolok augments revenue through ML tools that takeover the newsrooms distribution and revenue decisions. These companies, among others, facilitate the optimal platformization of news in the country.

Through their services and product, and unique market position and dynamics, they optimize platformization in a number of ways. First, they develop and sell a suite of infrastructural technologies that institutionalize news practices attuned to the logics of search and social media platforms. This includes software and AI & ML tools that introduce new, or reconfigure existing, news content management systems (CMS) to include search engine and social media optimization (SEO & SMO) keywords, automate news distribution based on platform visibility metrics, algorithmically recommend articles to platform users, and redesign revenue systems to generate profit within platform ecosystems. Second, they counsel publishers on creating news content that is better suited and optimized for a platformed environment. Based on their expertise of platform's algorithmic and technical changes, they advise news publishers on 'how' to create news for platform visibility or which platform formats to leverage for distribution. For example, creating news in popular genres, focusing on individualized 'creator' faces, using trending music in platform formats, and using images and keywords that circumvent platform moderation.

In order to gain market legitimacy, platformization intermediaries take on strategic roles of 'certified publisher partners' or 'certified marketing partners' of larger platforms. Elsewhere scholars view these partnerships as beneficial to the intermediaries that receive relevant integration APIs & SDKs for their interoperable tools (Helmond et al., 2019; van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021). Within news industry, they participate as experts or 'funding intermediaries' in initiatives like the Google News Initiatives and Meta Journalism Project that extend platforms' funding, technical infrastructure, and brand as valuable investment for newsroom innovation and success (Papaevangelou 2023; Agarwal, InPress).

Further, platformization intermediaries often emulate platformization tendencies of economic expansion, technological interoperability, and introduction of governance systems that reorganize cultural practices (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020; Poell et al., 2019). For instance, Piano gained market prominence through vertical integration of competing firms such as AT Internet (analytics), CeleraOne (paywalled content), and SocialFlow (social media distribution) (Piano, 2022). Piano localized into the Indian market through partnerships with local technological experts (Suventure, n.d.). Similarly, MoEngage, a US based firm runs its own partnership program that amasses interconnected infrastructural products providers under a single platform.

Reinforcing Dependence & Standardization of News

Therefore, platformization intermediaries play an important role in the complete integration of search and social media platforms into the digital news industry. In the ways discussed above, platformization intermediaries optimize news production practices for platformed distribution, platform's infrastructural extension into the newsroom, and the reorganization of news value in line with platform governance.

They reinforce publishers' dependence on platforms for production, distribution and monetization rather than alleviating their troubles. Notably, they expand existing hierarchies between large and small news players in the country, as the latter find it difficult to regularly invest in expensive technologies offered by platformization intermediaries. This hampers their adeptness and possibilities of success on platforms. Further, the mechanization and streamlining of platform qualifiers impinges on the already reduced editorial autonomy within newsrooms in India, and elsewhere. These sociotechnical systems are institutionalized over time and become intrinsic to news creation and distribution. Relatedly, platformization intermediaries reorganize the public interest value of news by encoding and automating production and distribution of profitable content rather than that in public interest.

This paper pivots scholarly focus to the emergence and influence of platformization intermediaries in news. It reflects on their role in furthering platformization through a combination of automation and infrastructural tools and strategic consultations that optimize the integration of platform business model, infrastructures, and values into the news industry in India. At the same time, they present an interesting site for research due to their potential to emulate platformization. Finally, this paper reveals how platformization intermediaries exacerbate news dependence on platforms, and risk standardization of news geared for platform ecosystem rather than produced in public interest.

Bibliography

1. Agarwal, S. (In Press). Rooting Platform Dependencies in the Digital News Economy: Google News Initiative in India. *International Journal of Communication*.
2. Athique, A., & Parthasarathi, V. (2020). Platform Economy and Platformization. In A. Athique & V. Parthasarathi (Eds.), *Platform Capitalism in India* (pp. 1–19). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44563-8_1
3. Bishop, S. (2020). Algorithmic Experts: Selling Algorithmic Lore on YouTube. *Social Media + Society*, 6(1), 205630511989732. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119897323>
4. Caplan, R., & Boyd, D. (2018). Isomorphism through algorithms: Institutional dependencies in the case of Facebook. *Big Data & Society*, 5(1), 205395171875725. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951718757253>
5. Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York university press.
6. De-Lima-Santos, M.-F., Munoriyarwa, A., Elegu, A. A., & Papaevangelou, C. (2023). Google News Initiative's Influence on Technological Media Innovation in Africa and the Middle East. *Media and Communication*, 11(2). <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i2.6400>
7. Fanta, A., & Dachwitz, I. (2020). *Google, the media patron. How the digital giant ensnares journalism*. [Preprint]. SocArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/3qbp9>
8. Foxman, M. (2019). United We Stand: Platforms, Tools and Innovation With the Unity Game Engine. *Social Media + Society*, 5(4), 205630511988017. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119880177>
9. Helmond, A., Nieborg, D. B., & van der Vlist, F. N. (2019). Facebook's evolution: Development of a platform-as-infrastructure. *Internet Histories*, 3(2), 123–146. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24701475.2019.1593667>
10. Lobato, R. (2016). The cultural logic of digital intermediaries: YouTube multichannel networks. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 22(4), 348–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856516641628>
11. Meese, J., & Hurcombe, E. (2021). Facebook, news media and platform dependency: The institutional impacts of news distribution on social platforms. *New Media & Society*, 23(8), 2367–2384. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444820926472>
12. Mehta, S. (2021). Indian intermediaries in new media: Mainstreaming the margins. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 27(1), 229–246. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856519896167>
13. Myllylahti, M. (2021). It's a Dalliance! A Glance to the First Decade of the Digital Reader Revenue Market and How the Google's and Facebook's Payments Are Starting to Shape It. *Digital Journalism*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2021.1965487>

14. Nechushtai, E. (2018). Could digital platforms capture the media through infrastructure? *Journalism*, 19(8), 1043–1058. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884917725163>
15. Nieborg, D. B., & Poell, T. (2018). The platformization of cultural production: Theorizing the contingent cultural commodity. *New Media & Society*, 20(11), 4275–4292. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769694>
16. Nielsen, R. K., & Ganter, S. A. (2022). *The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190908850.001.0001>
17. Papaevangelou, C. (2023). Funding Intermediaries: Google and Facebook’s Strategy to Capture Journalism. *Digital Journalism*, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2022.2155206>
18. Piano. (2022). Piano broadens global footprint and social media publishing capabilities. *Resources*. Accessed February 15, 2024. <https://piano.io/resources/piano-broadens-global-footprint-and-social-media-publishing-capabilities/>.
19. Poell, T., Nieborg, D., & Dijck, J. van. (2019). Platformization. *Internet Policy Review*, 8(4). <https://policyreview.info/concepts/platformization>
20. Suventure. (n.d.). Suventure and Piano Software Forge Strategic Partnership to Accelerate Digital Transformation in India’s Technology and Analytics Landscape. Accessed February 15, 2024. <https://suventure.in/suventure-and-piano-software-forge-strategic-partnership-to-accelerate-digital-transformation-in-indias-technology-and-analytics-landscape-news-updates/>
21. van der Vlist, F. N., & Helmond, A. (2021). How partners mediate platform power: Mapping business and data partnerships in the social media ecosystem. *Big Data & Society*, 8(1), 205395172110250. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517211025061>
22. Young, C. J., Nieborg, D. B., & Joseph, D. J. (2020). ‘BRINGING YOUR VISION TO LIFE’: PRODUCTION PLATFORMS AND INDUSTRY UNITY. *AoIR Selected Papers of Internet Research*. <https://doi.org/10.5210/spir.v2020i0.11367>