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# Contextualizing Platform Dependence and Publisher Disentanglements in India

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## ABSTRACT

The growing dominance of search and social media platforms over online news industries has undermined their editorial independence and economic sustainability. However, platforms' dominance only partly explains the state of platform dependence. This paper underscores the importance of examining both *how* and *why* asymmetries between platforms and publishers were formed in the first place. It focuses on how underlying structural and contextual conditions inform platform dependence and publishers' negotiations in India. In particular, it draws attention to pre-existing institutional, market, and political conditions that have structured Indian news markets long before platforms' entry, yet continue to imprint the relationship between publishers and platforms. Drawing on Indian media studies literature and 32 semi-structured interviews, this paper presents findings on how historical commercialization of the press, low in-house technological development, inherent market asymmetries, and persistent state (in)actions have augmented news' dependence on platforms in India. Concurrently, I argue that these conditions have shaped Indian publishers' disentanglement strategies. Building on earlier studies, this paper identifies three distinct yet simultaneous strategies: *coexistence*, *collaboration*, and *non-contestation*. In doing so, it contextualizes platform dependence and publisher disentanglements by emphasizing the structural conditions that sustain these dynamics.

## KEYWORDS

Platform dependence;  
Indian news media;  
platformization of news;  
market asymmetries;  
state intervention;  
publisher strategies

## Introduction

News industries across the globe have been gradually encapsulated and reorganized by the technical affordances, financial imperatives, and governance instruments of digital platforms. This asymmetrical relationship between platforms and publishers is rooted in the externalization of control over news distribution, and further amplified by the pressures of making news suitable to platforms' transient formats, algorithmic logics, and monetization policies (Caplan and Boyd 2018; Caplan and Gillespie 2020). Simultaneously, the structural dominance and infrastructural expansion of platforms allow them to be seamlessly institutionalized within news processes and industrial networks (Nechushtai 2018; Nieborg and Poell 2018; Papaevangelou 2024). The

resulting contingency of news or platform dependence has been a subject of scholarly and industrial concern for the last decade.

Existing research from the burgeoning field of platform studies has focused largely on the implications of platform dependence on the sustainability and democratic values of news. Simultaneously, research from critical media studies has emphasized news publishers' negotiating power and survival strategies despite the structural stranglehold of platforms. However, there has been a lack of reflection on *how* and *why* the asymmetries between platforms and publishers were formed in the first place. That is to say, the structural and contextual conditions underpinning these relationships have not been adequately explored.

The central argument that this paper makes is that news dependence on platforms is not solely a result of platform dominance but a range of pre-existing conditions. Contextualizing platform dependence within the institutional, market, and political conditions that have long characterized news media in diverse geographies, sharpens our understanding of it. Moreover, it avoids reinforcing overly platform-deterministic explanations of the asymmetries between news publishers and platforms. Instead, it argues that path dependence, i.e. entrenched industrial practices, priorities, and relationships that persist despite the entry of new actors and logics, belies the notions that platform dependence is uniform, and that platform dominance is monolithic (Nielsen and Fletcher 2023). Importantly, this paper does not trivialize the role of platforms in intensifying the challenges faced by news industries but redirects scholarly focus on the factors that complement it.

Indian news markets have long endured structural tendencies and political control that have come to define the present contours of actors, interests, and practices in the ecosystem (Chadha 2017). At the same time, persistent, yet unaddressed, challenges from legacy news markets have suffused the online news ecosystem, thereby imprinting contemporary market relations and news freedoms (Parthasarathi and Agarwal 2020). Given this influence, this paper examines how pre-existing structural and contextual conditions contribute to platform dependence in India, and whether and how these conditions inform publishers' strategic attempts to disentangle from platforms. To examine this, this paper undertakes a systematic review of Indian media studies literature combined with 32 semi-structured interviews with journalists, editors, social media, marketing, product managers, and chief operating officers (CEOs) at 12 news organizations in the country.

By engaging primary and secondary sources, this paper finds that pre-existing conditions—early commercialization of the press, a lack of in-house technological development, high levels of market asymmetries, and state (in)actions—have contributed to and augmented the Indian news industry's dependence on platforms. These conditions have also prompted Indian publishers to respond in three distinct, yet simultaneous, ways. Borrowing from the tactical response framework offered by Nielsen & Ganter (2022, 80), this paper shows that Indian news publishers respond through *co-existence*, *collaboration*, and *non-contestation*. While Nielsen & Ganter found that publishers were often in confrontation with platforms in the West, interviews with Indian publishers illustrate their lack of desire to contest platforms. Indeed, this paper will show how these three responses are situated within and informed by the broader

structural and contextual conditions discussed above. It contextualizes both platform dependence and publishers' negotiations to it within the pre-existing institutional, market and political conditions they are set in.

Situating this study within the context of India is crucial for several reasons. First, as one of the largest news media and platform markets in the world, India presents a compelling case to examine the interrelations unfolding between these actors. Second, and more importantly, the historical centrality of the state in India complicates this terrain, whereby a multiplicity of news players and global platforms operate under varying degrees of state control. Despite the resonance of such political structures in other media contexts in the Global South, research has somewhat overlooked the decisive role played by the state and regulatory structures in shaping platform-publisher relations. Thus, the analytical focus on the role of the state in India will enhance global scholarship on platform dependence. Finally, by situating the Indian case within wider research, this paper multiplies our frames of reference for critically and comprehensively apprehending platforms and their relationship with news and the state within diverse socio-political contexts. As such, the Indian case should be seen not as an exception but as crucial to building a representative understanding of platforms and publisher relations globally.

## Literature Review

News organizations everywhere have suffered considerable instability and loss of autonomy due to the entry of search and social media platforms. For the last decade, platformization of news, i.e. the porosity and institutionalization of platforms' governance, infrastructure and market structures across news processes, has resulted in varying degrees of dependency within newsrooms (Nieborg and Poell 2018; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022). Research thus far has studied this phenomenon from two directions: 1) the mechanisms and implications of platform dominance on critical news flows, and 2) the news industry's attempts at negotiating its independence.

The former highlights the adverse role of platforms' content policies, moderation practices, and visibility logics on editorial decision-making (Napoli 2015; Peterson-Salahuddin and Diakopoulos 2020), algorithmic and product changes on news distribution and consequent monetization (Meese and Hurcombe 2021; Myllylahti 2024), platforms' data infrastructure on operational independence (Nechushtai 2018; Agarwal 2025), and platform funding on newsroom interests and innovation (De-Lima-Santos et al. 2023; Papaevangelou 2024). The latter focuses on news institutions' perceptions and distinct institutional strategies to counter platform dependence (Nielsen and Ganter 2018). Scholars have observed a multi-directionality of responses, wherein publishers adopt multiple, often divergent, responses rather than taking a single stance towards platforms (Chua and Westlund 2019; Nielsen and Ganter 2022). They do so to reduce the potential shocks emanating from a changing platform ecosystem and to remain profitable and competitive at the same time (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy 2022; Yoo et al. 2024). Therefore, scholars find publishers' responses to platform dominance are rarely linear: rather, they practice varying degrees of disentanglement.

Much of the above research is insufficient in addressing the structural and contextual conditions that contribute to news' dependence on platforms. This paper stems from the critical question posed by Meese and Hurcombe (2021), "How and why these dependencies occurred in the first place" (10). The authors explore this question from a historical institutionalist lens, highlighting the continuities in legacy practices in responding to external shocks brought on by the internet and platforms. Particularly relevant is their reflection on how platform dependence is informed by path-dependent managerial hesitations towards newer models of distribution and revenue. Similarly, in another study, Nielsen and Fletcher (2023) show empirical and comparative variations in the degree of platformization of news based on historical news traditions and political contexts. This paper attempts to answer the above question on origin from a political economy lens, examining the pre-existing and persistent institutional, market, and political conditions that have contributed to news' dependence on platforms in India.

Importantly, this paper does not disregard platform dominance or its implications on news; rather, it claims that a monolithic focus on platform power can obscure other persistent structural and contextual factors that underpin their dominance. Therefore, a political economy examination insists against the essentialization of platforms' disruptive forces. Instead, it underscores platforms' ability to leverage and reinforce existing contingencies to seamlessly embed themselves within distinct economies (Athique and Parthasarathi 2020; van Doorn, Mos, and Bosma 2021). This approach, then, argues the analytical significance of pre-existing conditions that contribute to dependence even before the entry of platforms.

Indeed, critical media studies have remarked on various structural tendencies that led to the 'crisis of journalism' before the entry of platforms (Scott 2005; Fenton 2009; Curran 2019). Here, scholars argue that while platforms wield disproportionate power, they cannot be solely blamed for the systemic failures destabilizing journalism (Pickard 2020a; Winseck 2022). Instead, they pin this crisis of journalism on the 'intensification of negative trends' such as commercialization, market concentration, sensationalism, and insufficient media policies (Scott 2005; Pickard, 2020b). Similarly, scholars examining contexts in the Global South point to additional challenges, including political ownership, policy silences, and state censorship (Chakravarty and Zhao 2008; Chadha 2017; Parthasarathi 2018). These studies confirm that news dependency can be equally predicated on existing structural and contextual contingencies as much as the dynamics by which platforms reinforce their dominance.

Equally important, yet relatively underexamined, is the role of the state in enhancing or easing the effects of platform dominance in news markets. Much of the research emerging from Western democracies focuses on state responsibility, rather than state interests, in shaping the platform economy, and thereby their relationship with news publishers (Helberger, Pierson, and Poell 2018; Van Dijck 2020). However, situating platforms, historically and contextually, in the Global South reveals different configurations and ontologies of power between the state, media markets and technology (Wang and Lobato 2019). Here, emerging scholarship from Asia has highlighted the centrality of the state in orchestrating suitable market conditions that have incubated platform capitalism in India and China (Athique and Parthasarathi 2020; Zhang and Chen 2022). This produces a scenario where state sponsorship of platforms supports state interests

by precluding undesirable cultural products, market actors, and political dissidents (Steinberg, Zhang, and Mukherjee 2025). Furthermore, within illiberal settings, states have long used platforms as tools to subjugate critical news media (Agarwal 2022). Thus, investigating the role of the state and its underlying interests enhances our understanding of the political conditions shaping platform dependence.

In line with this argument, recent research from understudied geographies has hinted at the influence of the above factors not only on platform dependence but also their disentanglements from it. Scholars from Greece note that publishers refrain from resisting dominant platforms due to the weak economic environment in the country and the fear of disrupting the already limited flow of monetary benefits from platforms (Papadopoulou and Kalogeropoulos 2024). Similarly, comparative research from the Global South finds that existing market asymmetries and disproportionate access to platform benefits push smaller publishers to imbibe pragmatism instead of fighting platforms (Nielsen and Cherubini 2022). And, Ross Arguedas et al. (2022) in their comparative work show that the political undermining of the press in authoritarian contexts has eroded public trust in news, thereby compelling publishers to rely on platforms for regaining credibility and audience engagement.

Developing on the above literature, this paper deepens the investigation into platform dependence by asking two interrelated questions: how do pre-existing institutional, market, and political conditions contribute to Indian news' dependence on platforms? Concomitantly, how do they inform Indian publishers' attempts to disentangle from platforms?

## Methodology

This paper employs a critical political economy approach to answer the above research questions. It combines an analysis of secondary sources with 32 semi-structured interviews at 12 news organizations based in New Delhi. This paper benefits from a systematic review of the Indian media studies literature, highlighting the structural and contextual miscarriages that have characterized Indian news markets. Simultaneously, semi-structured interviews lend insight into how continuities in these conditions imprint the contemporary platform–publisher relationship as well as publishers' attempts to disentangle.

The sample of news organizations includes four legacy newspaper firms, with diversified interests outside of media, and eight native digital publishers that run online-exclusive operations. In-person and online interviews were conducted between January and November 2022, with a diverse set of institutional members including journalists, editors, social media managers, marketing and product managers, and chief operating officers. At some organizations, more than one individual was interviewed when accessible. All organizations produce multilingual news, but members interviewed for this study produced news in Hindi and English. Table 1 chronologically lists interviewees by their institutional role, profile of news organization, and primary language in which the organization produces news. Some of the guiding topics for interviews included existing challenges from platforms, perception of asymmetries between publishers and platforms, strategies for overcoming platform dependence (that is, if they believed they were dependent in the first place), and views on

**Table 1.** List of interviewees.

No.	Institutional role	Institution profile	Language
P1	Social Media Manager	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	English
P2	Social Media Manager	Legacy Newspaper <sup>b</sup>	Hindi
P3	Social Media Manager	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	Hindi
P4	Editor	Native Digital	English
P5	Founder	Native Digital	English
P6	Journalist	Native Digital <sup>d</sup>	English
P7	Social Media Manager	Native Digital <sup>d</sup>	English
P8	Social Media Manager	Native Digital	English
P9	CEO	Native Digital <sup>e</sup>	English
P10	Editor	Native Digital	Hindi
P11	CEO	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	English
P12	Social Media Manager	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	English
P13	Social Media Manager	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	Hindi
P14	Editor	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	English
P15	Product Manager	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	English
P16	Business Manager	Legacy Newspaper	Hindi
P17	Editor	Native Digital <sup>e</sup>	Hindi
P18	Editor	Native Digital <sup>f</sup>	English
P19	Marketing Manager	Native Digital <sup>c</sup>	English
P20	CEO	Legacy Newspaper <sup>b</sup>	English
P21	Editor	Legacy Newspaper <sup>d</sup>	English
P22	Product Manager	Legacy Newspaper <sup>d</sup>	English
P23	CEO	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	Hindi
P24	Editor	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	Hindi
P25	Product Manager	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	Hindi
P26	Information Technology Manager	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	Hindi
P27	Editor	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	Hindi
P28	Social Media Manager	Legacy Newspaper <sup>a</sup>	Hindi
P29	CEO	Native Digital <sup>f</sup>	Hindi
P30	Editor	Native Digital <sup>e</sup>	English
P31	Product Manager	Native Digital <sup>e</sup>	English
P32	CEO	Legacy Newspaper <sup>d</sup>	English

<sup>a,b,c,d,e,f</sup>Indicate the same institution.

regulatory interventions and the role of the state. Quotes from respondents in this study are anonymized to respect their privacy.

## Existing Conditions Augmenting Platform Dependence

Several structural and contextual tendencies have characterized the Indian news markets in the colonial and post-colonial periods. Since their inception, Indian newspapers and television news institutions in the country have been buoyed by the political and commercial interests of their proprietors. As a result, the press in India evolved with an early subordination of public interest values to profit-oriented imperatives. Simultaneously, the Indian state and media regulatory regimes have significantly shaped the news market dynamics and journalistic freedoms in the country. On the one hand, the Indian state maintains a heavy-handed political control over the flow of news. On the other hand, the state has strategically fostered the growth of large and politically aligned media conglomerates in the country (Parthasarathi and Agarwal 2020).

These conditions are inherited by the contemporary online news market and continue to influence their relations with platforms. More specifically, an analysis of continuities, particularly from newspaper and television news, reveals that

contemporary news dependence on platforms in India can be predicated on the institutional, market, and political conditions preceding the entry of platforms. The discussions in this section reflect on how these historical contingencies have contributed to and augmented platform dependence in India.

### **Commercial Interests**

Indian news businesses have long been guided by commercial interests, geared towards profit maximization above all imperatives. In the post-independence period, early newspapers were entrusted with unifying the nation and advancing the modernization movement (Sonwalkar 2002). As a result, the growth of a domestic and nationalistic press received a significant push from the state. It was around this time that many existing businesses with roots in jute, trading, industrial production, and packaging intensified their expansion into newspaper publication. Profit orientations of their erstwhile businesses seeped into news, whereby news proprietors expanded horizontally, owning multiple production facilities and newspapers, as well as commanding large portions of the linguistically and regionally diverse audience markets in the country (Nair 2003). Similarly, the privatization of television news in 1995 imbued a commercialization logic into a medium that previously functioned as a government mouthpiece. Indeed, scholars use the euphemism ‘Murdochisation’ to explain the emergence of commercial logics and corporate cultures in the Indian television market post the entry of Star TV, and its gradual suffusion into the newspaper industry (Sonwalkar 2002; Thussu 2007)

Analogously, advertisements emerged—and remain—the primary source of revenue backing the industry in India. News businesses in India experienced an influx of advertisement-related revenue soon after independence, which multiplied after market deregulation in 1991. Non-English language newspapers were initially carried on the backs of governmental and political advertising, followed by international advertisers attempting to localize in India by marketing a certain form of “Indianness” (Jeffrey 1997). By the 2000s, newspaper proprietors developed innovative workarounds to support their commercial interests, such as optimizing ad placements in the form of ‘jacket’ pages before the first page, securing company stocks in lieu of advertising money, and assisting brand building through paid-news articles (Chadha 2017, 3). Similarly, television news channels are often bundled with non-news channels to enhance their viability, yet the ratio of revenue from advertisements to subscriptions remains 80:20 (Kohli-Khandekar 2021). This historical overreliance on advertisements and sponsorship has led the Indian news industry to claim low retail prices and make limited efforts to develop or strengthen alternative revenue models.

“So we do at least 350 stories every day... a certain number of the best stories go behind the paywall, available only to people who have a subscription relationship with us. We’re doing 10 stories a day [behind the paywall], just 10 stories a day!... It’s not even 10% of our content... We really don’t want to put off readers right now, so we have a metre which is very high.” (P21)

As a result, Indian news players have weakened their position against platforms that not only receive higher digital advertising share but also consolidate and dictate the

norms of ad selling through their dominant media buying infrastructures. On the one hand, Google and Meta's duopoly claims 72% of the digital advertising market in India, whereas news publishers receive only 3% of the pie (Ficci 2024). On the other hand, digital advertising prescribes rates on platform-determined metrics of clicks, views, time-spent, etc., that are also contingent on platforms' visibility logics and algorithmic changes. Therefore, strong commercial interests and a failure to develop viable alternatives to advertising revenue have amplified and complemented Indian news' dependence on the platforms.

### ***Lack of In-House Tech***

The persistent drive for higher returns from advertising also meant a corollary need to systematically monitor, analyze, and monetize consumption data. However, historically lower levels of technological investment and in-house innovation in data management pushed publishers to rely on external data brokers. This externalization of control over proprietary data has impeded Indian news players in catching up with platforms' sophisticated algorithmic and data-rich governance systems. Concomitantly, this has informed their dependence on platforms for the monetary valuation of news.

Early technological advancements in newsrooms involved shifts from mechanical typesetting to computer-generated reporting, and in audio-visual news to ensure compact and secure transmission of news through cable and satellite. In both these cases, the innovative technology was rarely built in-house: it was imported, leased or bought. Moving online, low in-house investments in technology persisted as earlier news websites followed a simple blog format. Moreover, institutional perceptions of technology and associated risks played a significant role in the fragmented adoption of newer technologies and technologized formats (Ramaprasad, Liu, and Garrison 2012; Mishra 2016). Simultaneously, monitoring, research and validation of audience data have always remained external to print and television newsrooms. In India, large advertisers and news conglomerates championed the growth of the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) in 1948 to provide circulation numbers of the most valuable newspapers in which to advertise (Jeffrey 1997, 65). Since then, ABC and later the Media Research Users Council (MRUC) have formed a metrified legitimacy for the consolidated relationships between large advertisers and newspapers in the country (Jeffrey 1994). As for TV news, TAM Media Research and Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) secured dominant control over relaying the advertising potential of news content and formats based on metrics of "eyeballs". Although external, these data brokers are not bereft of private and political influence, and have engaged in data manipulation for certain players (Taneja 2013).

This lack of in-house tech expertise and externalization of, and consequent loss of autonomy over, proprietary data has exacerbated publisher's conditions in the platform era. On the one hand, platforms' changing distribution logics and technological precision have compelled newsrooms to upskill to stay relevant and profitable (Kumar and Haneef 2018). On the other hand, they have increased newsroom costs to hire external talent and software more suited for competing within the platform economy, including user experience and interface designers (UX/UI), data analysts, and search engine optimizers. However, the institutionalization of Google Analytics, Meta's CrowdTangle (until 2024),

and Comscore (a US-based data analytics giant) as the industrial default for assessing advertising potential has created uncertainties regarding the value of non-platform technology “because other consultants do not control the ecosystem” (P23). Therefore, a lack of in-house tech expertise and difficulty in playing catch-up have reinforced their dependence on free and pervasive platform infrastructures.

“[At first], everyone looks like they are adding some value, but there’s some trade-off we’re doing... Earlier, we used to partner with 10–12 different companies. So there are two downsides. One is that, once the code is on your page, it makes your page slower because every company that tracks your users puts a JavaScript on your page. This makes the page slower, and because, fortunately, or unfortunately [sic], we are very much dependent on Google for our traffic, so in Google’s eye, your page performance is going down, so it penalizes you. And second, we don’t want to share our data with anyone and everyone. That’s why we’re kind of optimizing the number of partners and we’re limiting it to 3-4 per page, not more than that.” (P25)

### ***Inherent Market Asymmetries***

While the above structural failures of commercialization and lack of tech saddle all news players against platform dominance, existing intra-sectoral asymmetries have produced fissures between large legacy and small native digital publishers, thereby complicating the terrain of platform dependence. India presents a crowded news market with 1,46,045 newspapers in circulation, 387 linear broadcast news channels, and 2752 officially recognized news websites (MIB 2024). Despite the multiplicity of players, news in India is characterized by high levels of concentration and consolidation by a handful of players across several linguistically divided markets (Nair 2003; Chadha 2017). A direct corollary of this is that large businesses not only gain significant economic might but also the power to influence political decisions (Parthasarathi and Agarwal 2019). Moreover, contrary to the disruptions in the West, legacy newspaper and television businesses in India continue to accrue high advertising and stable subscription revenues, albeit at lower growth rates (Parthasarathi and Agarwal 2020). As a result, their stronghold from legacy markets has transferred online, cushioning their digital expansion and odds against platforms.

On the other end, smaller native digital firms are born from the limited endeavors of venture capitalists, entrepreneurial journalists, and public-interest philanthropists (Sen and Nielsen 2016; Harlow and Chadha 2019). Many small publishers also harnessed the early democratic promises of platforms and launched entirely platform-dependent, i.e. as social media pages and channels (Aneez et al. 2017). Consequently, intra-sectoral asymmetries in access to audience, political, and economic resources have driven a wedge between legacy and native digital news institutions in the country, thereby impeding industrial potential for collective action against platforms. This was succinctly expressed during my interviews as a pertinent factor coupled with technological failures.

“When digital media in India started out, we kind of missed the opportunity on tech. Maybe if we had developed some kind of tech that allowed us to not be reliant on these platforms...now that we’ve missed that opportunity, we’re heavily reliant on Google and

Meta...The other thing is, can we [news publishers] get together and battle these platforms? ... Will that ever happen? I don't know. But that's the hope." (P14)

This is also evident in the industrial associations such as the Digital News Publishers Association (DNPA) and DigiPub that illustrate the ideological and economic divides between large and small publishers. The DNPA, launched in 2019, advocates for the interests of 21 large, moneyed legacy news brands that have expanded their news operations online. On the other hand, DigiPub represents over 90 native digital news organizations and independent journalists. In fact, DigiPub came together in 2020, specifically to distinguish their market concerns and policy interests from those of capital-intensive legacy news. The disunity between market players was also evident when the DNPA lobbied for restrictions on foreign direct investments (FDI) in online news to stifle the growth of venture-backed native digitals in the country (Kohli-Khandekar 2021, 34). The animosities between players have also been enhanced due to a recent slew of defamation suits filed by legacy media against independent native digital for critical reporting. As a result, long-standing intra-sectoral asymmetries have complemented and reinforced platform dependency in the country.

"In the battle of legacy media versus social media, social media is less evil than legacy media, purely because they are transnational corporations, so the level of control that government can exert on them [is limited]. I'm not saying it's none, but it's nowhere close to what can be exerted on legacy media... let me give you a simple example: I can trash Facebook on Facebook. In fact, we carried articles that were critical of Facebook while we were receiving Facebook grants... But I couldn't do that on a legacy media brand." (P9)

### **State (In)Action**

The above market conditions did not emerge in isolation, instead, they were supported by the sustained policy (in)actions of the Indian state. Since its independence, the Indian state has maintained a legacy of closeness with news conglomerates either directly through ownership or indirectly by trading favorable policies for favorable reporting (Sahni 1974). Consequently, the state has consistently adopted a notable "considered silence" approach (Parthasarathi 2018, 2024), whereby it deliberately chooses not to address much-needed policy issues despite the ensuing consequences for the news industry. For instance, research shows that even while concerns of market asymmetries and concentration in the newspaper industry were a matter of post-independence policy debates, they remained unchecked due to court orders and state inaction that upheld the interests of dominant players (Parthasarathi 2021). Subsequently, concerns of market concentration and cross-ownership in television news markets, flagged by the market regulator, were never statutorily addressed, and were instead deliberately overlooked by the state (Parthasarathi 2018). Persistent policy silences have cemented India's principled *laissez-faire* stance towards market concentration and asymmetries (Parthasarathi and Agarwal 2020).

In stark contrast to the above position, the Indian state upholds a legacy of imposing restrictive control over unfavorable speech. Here, too, the state employs a combination of direct and indirect mechanisms to restrict the flows of critical news. On the one hand, the state leverages vaguely framed media policies to exercise broad

control over news flows (Abhishek 2023; Agarwal and Heda 2023). On the other hand, when those fall short, the state has pursued criminal and financial intimidation to quell critical news in the country (Chadha and Arya 2021). This was particularly evident during the years of the politically declared Emergency in 1975, when the state used diverse measures such as political arrests of journalists, deliberate power cuts at news institutions, and the closing down of news companies to assert its political will (Pendakur 1988). Such articulations of force have travelled through the years, and are increasingly cemented as the default order by the current ruling government (Mehta and Amit-Danhi 2024).

This duality of deliberate policy inaction and restrictive state actions has imprinted the conditions of online news markets in India (Parthasarathi and Agarwal 2020). The state's signature *laissez-faire* stance has not only expanded the existing intra-sectoral asymmetries online but also contributed to the policy silence over widening asymmetries between platforms and publishers. Diverging from international regulatory developments aiming to balance these inequalities, the Indian state has not made any advances in addressing platform challenges faced by the news publishers in the country. Instead, the state exploits platforms' governance infrastructure to indirectly restrict online news operations in the country. In governing *through* platforms, the state compels platforms to take down critical news content or journalists' accounts, and/or block complete access to the internet (Agarwal 2022).

Thus, a simultaneously market liberal and excessively censorial Indian state plays a decisive role in shaping the conditions of platform dependence in two ways. First, continued policy silence has weakened Indian news publishers' trust in regulatory paths of corrections. Second, fears of state censorship have pushed publishers to view platforms in a friendlier light.

"I don't think the state architecture is addressing any concerns about our well-being vis à vis social giants...government regulations have done more damage to the digital news ecosystem in India than anything else. I think there is enough entrepreneurship here...there is funding... There are professionals who are very competent...News in India is a fantastic market. The one thing that is a disincentive and can completely spill cold water over all these combined, is government regulation, and the government is doing its best to make sure that they do their job properly. From the FDI rules to their IT rules to the new guidelines...everything is optimized to kill journalism" (P11)

## Publisher Negotiations with Platform Dependence

The above section reveals how pre-existing institutional, market and political conditions have contributed to news dependence on platforms in India. Building on this, the following section highlights Indian publishers' negotiations with platform dependence. In particular, it illustrates how the persistence of these structural and contextual conditions shape publishers' perceptions of and responses to platform control and dependence. Developing on Nielsen and Ganter's (2022, 80) tactical response framework based on their findings from Western geographies, I show that Indian publishers follow distinct, yet simultaneous, pathways of *coexistence*, *collaboration*, and *non-contestation*. While Nielsen & Ganter highlighted evidence of contestation, albeit rare, in the West, interviews with Indian publishers suggest a preference for non-contestation of platforms. The findings in this paper not only confirm the

responses outlined in Nielsen & Ganter's work, but also offer nuance to them by showing that contestation, as observed in other settings, is notably absent in India. Moreover, the findings illustrate how publishers' decisions to adopt either one or all responses can be predicated on the conditions predating platforms in the news market.

### **Coexistence**

Coexistence entails news publishers' acceptance or rejection of platforms' logics and generative governance structures based on their institutional interests. In other words, news publishers assess platform policies, algorithmic changes, and distribution formats against their own institutional goals before deciding to integrate them. Importantly, while entanglements of platform visibility and monetization leave little room for rejection of platform terms, long-standing dependence on advertising revenue contributes to their passive coexistence with opaque platform terms. During my interviews, publishers revealed that they comply with platforms' "ruthless" monetization policies despite the often "sensitive nature" of news because "we rely on whatever the platform will pay ...and, once monetization tools are available to us, we are completely at their mercy" (P13). Moreover, their overreliance on advertising revenue informs their careful compliance with a range of monetization policies to avoid reprimands in the form of warnings, strikes, and demonetization orders at all costs.

"Someone from the video team had created this hero image, which is the image that goes with the copies, that had guns in it... There's no way that we can have this on Instagram, Facebook or YouTube without it getting demonetized or without it getting restricted monetization...it would also get the age restriction thing [sic], which adds another click, i.e. you have to sign in to watch the video... So, we will not use this image because we want to not have any possibility of a strike from Instagram whatsoever ... we'll choose to do a different hero image instead" (P12)

At the same time, while many small and large publishers recognize the long-term challenges of relying on platforms' advertising ecosystem, they struggle to overcome this dependence due to failures in developing viable alternatives to advertising revenue. They are actively diversifying both their eggs—the types of services that can generate revenue—and their baskets—the sources of revenue generation on news. However, the uptake of alternative sources such as reader subscriptions and donations remain low among Indian audiences due to historically near-zero costs of news and the competing free nature of information on the internet. This has led to reluctance among Indian news consumers to pay for news, consequently limiting publishers from pay-walling news. This delayed development of viable alternatives has reinforced Indian publishers' dependence on platform advertising and, consequently, co-existence with platform-determined valuation metrics.

"It is difficult to let [platforms] go as an editorial strategy completely because how is your brand going to be recognized unless you have visibility on these platforms... So, you can't let all of them go while you keep working on alternatives. Alternatives also don't give you the kind of bulk traffic that these [platforms] have the potential to provide. Even one story, if it does a million in a week, it covers up for everything small that we could be doing with alternatives." (P19)

Finally, co-existence was evident from Indian news publishers integrating not just platforms' content and monetization rules, but also internalizing platforms' normative logics that prioritize advertiser-friendly content over public interest journalism. This, too, can be interpreted as a consequence of pre-existing commercial inclinations of the Indian news media, which make it easier for newsrooms to quickly adapt to interruptions caused by advertiser demands. Nonetheless, this co-existence was evident in how news publishers embraced platforms' preferences for the advertiser-friendliness of content as axiomatic, and news dependence as the norm.

"[platforms] tell you that this particular video is not monetizable, so we're going to limit monetization for this. [That] could be a sensitive video, purely newsy video, [or] that could be a very controversial topic. It's not Facebook's fault per se, but advertisers might not be interested in putting their ad on something like this, right? Because it could come across as not cool...so, that is understandable." (P14)

### **Collaboration**

Collaboration refers to news publishers' desire to actively work with platforms in order to gain access to platform features and infrastructural products, and an insight into platform decision-making. However, opportunities to collaborate are limited and orchestrated by the platforms, usually with only a select few publishers. Despite this, all news organizations interviewed had entered into at least one collaboration through programs such as the Google News Initiative (GNI) and the Meta Journalism Project (MJP). As part of different iterations under them, news publishers received short-term financial grants, journalistic training resources, and access to platforms' data analytics infrastructures.

Indian publishers also desire to collaborate with platforms for infrastructure and funding, largely because of the industry's failure to develop timely technology and proprietary data infrastructures. These motivations were evident in interviews where both legacy and small publishers highlighted the infrastructural tools to be gained from collaborating with platforms.

"We are here for each other, right? You [platforms] have certain services that you can provide - technology, and we can provide content, but not technology. So let us shake hands and move together...I am a very strong believer in collaboration and partnerships." (P20)

Moreover, legacy publishers expressed their delight not only in acquiring much-needed technology to succeed, but also in how exclusive collaboration opportunities with multiple platforms enhanced their brand value.

"In the last four years, we filed five case studies with Google...So, for Google, we are now the preferred partner to test a new technology or a new product. Their team is working with us to make sure that our revenue targets are getting achieved, or our product problems are getting solved, and things like that [sic]. Same thing with Facebook, we enjoy a high brand equity. We do a lot of work with them, including fact-checking and training their algorithms to become stronger in terms of detection. Apart from that, Amazon

launched Alexa in India, and they needed a lot of content, so we were their first three partners when they launched the service” (P23)

By offering multiple, and often exclusive, opportunities to legacy players, platforms harness and reinforce industrial rifts (Nielsen and Cherubini 2022). This is evident in Google selectively offering its revenue-sharing product, News Showcase, to only legacy publishers in India<sup>2025</sup> Meanwhile, resource-crunched small publishers rely on platform collaborations to pursue capital-intensive reporting or access sophisticated data tools otherwise impossible without platform funding (Agarwal 2025). Therefore, despite the fragmented collaborative opportunities, small publishers also prefer to collaborate with platforms.

“I mean, we’re still grateful for the kind of projects that we get because then we get to do a lot more...but just wish it was a more equal space! Google has the money to Data Map. They also have the resources to train people how to data map, which they offer to certain legacy organizations and not to us...I mean, if you ask, they’ll probably do a workshop, but that’s a generic workshop, right? It’s not like they will get into your website specifically.” (P19)

### **Non-Contestation**

My interviews also revealed that Indian publishers often choose to avoid confrontation with platforms despite the asymmetrical power relations and challenges of platform dominance. This response is in stark contrast with Nielsen and Ganter’s (2022) observation of publishers’ contestation in Western contexts, particularly by leveraging regulatory pressures to rebalance revenue share for news content. That said, Nielsen and Ganter also recognize that these efforts do not preclude opportunities for collaboration, nonetheless, contestation is a notable tactic of publisher negotiations. However, in India, publishers of different sizes actively prefer non-contestation of platforms. Here, path dependencies in market and political conditions have directly influenced this stance.

As discussed earlier, the Indian news industry has grown under policy silences over matters of market exchange, ownership, and concentration, making it conducive for unchecked profit-oriented growth and market expansion. In this scenario, publishers maintain an ideological and operational preference for neoliberal market conditions and governance structures. Furthermore, publishers that have gained substantial goodwill with platforms fear losing positive relationships and investments due to state intervention. This rationale became most evident in legacy players’ desire not to contest platforms despite them having filed an antitrust suit against Google for exploiting its dominant position in the news aggregation and digital advertising market in India. In fact, during my interviews, they disparaged the industry-led action to balance asymmetries.

“The lack of understanding or some publishers’ greed is making them do this. They are so threatened by the existence of these platforms... I am the only voice which says - Don’t do this, because it’s very easy to get everything shut down. Look at the money which a Google-like company [sic] has invested in a market like India - to create infrastructure, to create technology, to serve ads, to create a whole ecosystem, which is very important for

the scalability and sustainability of publishers. Now, imagine if you remove Google from the ecosystem? How would you serve ads?" (P23)

Similarly, despite their worse situation, native digital publishers have not launched any formal actions against platforms. Instead, they resist state involvement in any form due to the institutional memory of state control and the lack of legal protections against it. Such cautious negotiation with the regulatory framework is common across other illiberal democracies, wherein attracting regulatory attention could lead to adverse conditions for the industrial players.

"At this point, if the government were more involved in the news, I'd be rather more upset than I am now... I mean, if we were talking about a different government which had different priorities, then perhaps it would be something worth looking forward to. a more interventionist policy when it came to, you know, cutting down the hubris of major platforms like Twitter, Facebook... But, it seems that our government mostly uses it as a tool for dismantling democracy in many ways... In that case, I am very actively opposed to the government taking more of an interest in pretty much anything." (P8)

Therefore, Indian publishers' reluctance to contest platforms despite the challenges to sustainability is not just a passive stance but a rational response to their preference for neo-liberal market conditions as well as their fear of state repression of critical press. Moreover, these contextual conditions have weakened their desire for collective bargaining against platforms and trust in the Indian state to protect their interests against platforms.

## Concluding Remarks

The findings and discussions in this paper stress the importance of studying the pre-existing structural and contextual conditions that augment and sustain platform dependencies. Tracing the historical, yet persistent, detriments to news independence in India brings to the fore the conditions that have contributed to their vulnerable position against platforms. More specifically, the Indian case demonstrates how a combination of structural failures, inherent market disparities, and state (in)actions has exacerbated news dependence on platforms. At the same time, these conditions imprint the disentanglement decisions made by news publishers of varying sizes.

Importantly, this paper is not uncritical of the exploitative ways in which platforms gain dominance over news media in India and across the globe. Instead, contextualizing platform dependence in light of pre-existing conditions offers a more nuanced understanding of the multi-fold challenges that implicate news. Reflecting on the complicated media milieu in India, this paper underscores the variations in platform dependence and responses to it. For instance, although Indian news publishers employ strategies comparable to other geographies, their favorable attitude towards platforms is informed by their historical preference for the neoliberal market order as well as an avoidance of state censorship. Therefore, this paper shows that news' dependence on platforms is as much an outcome of structural and contextual conditions as platforms' dominance in the sector. Taking this analytical approach could redirect scholarly and policy attention to the roots of platform dependence, which are often obscured in these debates.

In its essence, this paper suggests that a stronger news industry in India, i.e. one not heavily reliant on advertising revenue, having proprietary ownership of software and audience data, and stronger industrial unity, would have a better bargaining stance against platform dominance. At the same time, political environments geared towards protecting, rather than undermining, the democratic press would strengthen the industrial resistance against platforms. Therefore, this paper suggests that disentangling news from platform dependence would also necessitate regulation diminishing the structural hold of commercial and political interests over news. The findings from this paper could propel future research to dive more deeply into a nuanced understanding of platform dependence in distinct geographies, rather than reinforcing unilinear narratives of platform power. Insights from India can contribute to a broader political economy understanding of platform-publisher relations, offering newer analytical frames of reference through which to study other contexts with similar structural trajectories and centrality of the state.

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## Data Availability Statement

The interviews conducted for this paper are anonymized for reasons of trust. The author can share further information on requests for legitimate purposes

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