

Digitization gives a push to community journalism

Last year, a story done by the Coimbatore-based *Covai Post* on pre-puberty girls being paraded bare-chested at a temple festival in Vellalur, Madurai, saw multiple follow-ups in mainstream media.

This is not an isolated case. Media outlets like *The Wire*, *Scroll*, *Huffington Post*, among others, regularly carry stories done by community-based, hyperlocal journalistic ventures like *Khabar Lahariya*, *Covai Post* and *The News Minute*, indicating a growing appetite for news from far flung regions of India. *Covai Post* also distributes its content to apps like the *DailyHunt*, *Times Internet* and *News Republic*.

Clearly, the era of digital storytelling has brought into sharp focus the appetite for hyperlocal news, especially among smartphone users. The increasing penetration of mobile data in tier 2 and 3 towns and villages has given this activity a considerable boost. While newspapers continue to have a presence in these areas, smartphone users are showing a preference for digital news that is credible,

Using technology to advantage

One of the Foundation's Grantees *CGNetSwara*, which operates in the media-dark regions of Chhattisgarh, works on a technology that involves an internet connection, a phone number, and an interactive voice response (IVR) system that allows anyone to report and listen to stories of local interest. The messages are mostly in the Gondi language and are transcribed, fact checked and then published. *CGNetSwara* founder Shubhranshu Choudhary says: "Mainstream media has very limited reach in places like Chhattisgarh. Also, the mobile phone has a reach of 28% in comparison to a national average of 68%. But thanks to Bultoo Bluetooth) radio, people from remotest areas have started sending reports in their own dialects".

most often free, and focusing on issues close to them. The growing consumer base of first-time mobile users, appear willing to even pay to get genuine local content. *Rocket Post Live*, is a WhatsApp-driven Hindi news service based out of Pilibhit in Uttar Pradesh. Founder Shivendra Gaur, who is a local reporter, has garnered more than 12,000 subscribers for this service at Rs 100 per year.

Community content draws attention: P3



Independent and Public Spirited Media Foundation

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Media houses look for alternatives as FB tweaks News Feed policy

In January 2018, Facebook dropped a bomb on media owners across the globe by tweaking its 'News Feed' policy. The feed algorithms will now be re-worked and users will get to see more posts from their friends and family than third-party organizations. This implies that Facebook will now scale back the visibility of public-content, which includes news articles and videos shared by publishers and other businesses.

With this, Facebook pages may see their reach, video watch time and referral traffic decrease. The impact will vary page to page, driven by factors like the type of content and how people interact with it. Pages with posts that people generally don't react to or comment on could take the biggest knock.

For publishing and media houses who counted Facebook as an important source for generating readership, this unexpected disruption has been unsettling. They have realized social media spends will not reap results and that Facebook is clearly moving to monetize the distribution of news.

Indian media takes a hit

Indian media companies have been equally impacted. Of the 1.4 billion daily active users of Facebook as of January this year, India has close to 250 million. Newsrooms are now looking to change track.

Alt News Founder Pratik Sinha said: "It is difficult to quantify the drop because we are producing more content now than before. But the traffic has stagnated, and the reach hasn't grown as we had hoped. Alexa rank of the website shows the stagnation".

IPSMF's Grantee *The News Minute* has started putting in place an alternative strategy before Facebook actually implements the changes. "We are diversifying our marketing spends, increasing spends on other platforms. We are putting in efforts to improve

search and referral traffic. We are also looking at other third-party tools to stabilize traffic growth and reduce dependency on Facebook," said Dhanya Rajendran, Managing Editor.

The Foundation's Grantees, like *Live Law* and *The Wire*, have started posting stories within communities on Facebook. Another Grantee *Dool News* is diligently replying to comments on stories posted on Facebook to increase the engagement of each post, working on paid campaigns, among other things to increase the audience base. Foundation's Grantee *Swarajya* has consciously worked towards building a direct traffic stream and

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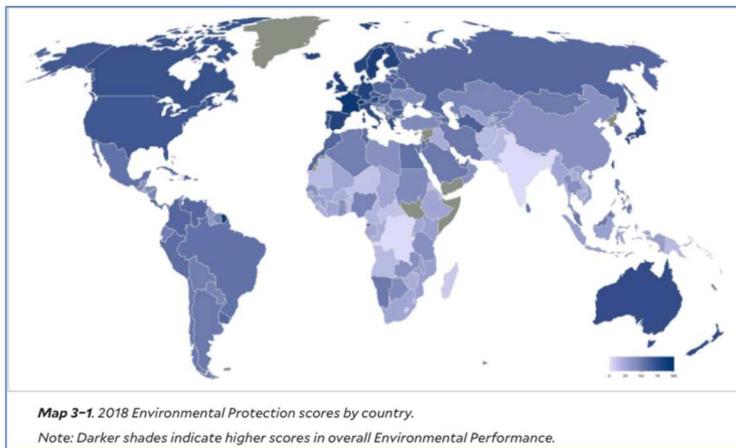
organically built up a loyal following on Twitter.

WhatsApp to the rescue

Facebook-owned WhatsApp has become the new favourite for news distribution in India due to its end-to-end encryption. Close to half of the IPSMF Grantees use WhatsApp to distribute news daily – which today boasts of over 200 million active users in India. Another of the Foundation's Grantees, *The Better India*, believes that WhatsApp allows them to reach an audience that otherwise does not exist on FB or Twitter or email. "A whole new audience is coming online in India and they are coming in through WhatsApp. So, this is a channel for us to push our brand to a completely new audience," Dhimant Parekh, co-founder, said.

Social Media Platforms	Users in India in 2016	Users in India in 2017
Facebook	165.57 million	194.11 million
Whatsapp	160 million	200 million
Instagram	16 million	35 million

We need to focus on the environment and here's why



Two years ago, India stood at 141 out of 180 in green rankings. Today, it is just above Congo, Bangladesh and Burundi. Clearly, there is a need to influence policy changes to safer and cleaner environment to our citizens.

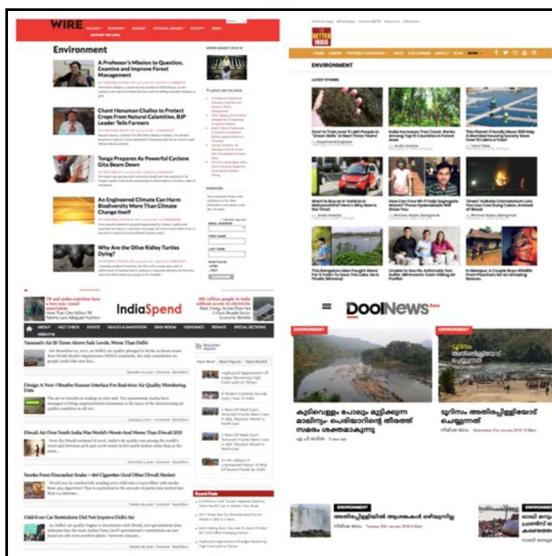
pollution, water scarcity and a host of other factors that lower the quality of life.

The Foundation recognises that environmental journalists are effective influencers of policy changes and play a major role in educating common people about what they can and must do to improve the quality of life on this planet.

India is the fourth worst country in the world when it comes to handling environmental issues. According to the [2018 Environmental Performance Index \(EPI\)](#) - the green rankings released on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum meet in Davos, out of 180 countries, India is ranked 177.

This is especially worrying because two years ago, India's rank was 141; low enough, but not so close to the bottom. The EPI report said that a low rank meant that a nation needed to step up its efforts in cleaning up air quality, protecting biodiversity and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

The environment and issues related to it have come to occupy significant media mind space, as reflected in regular coverage. There has been a noticeable positive change in mainstream media's coverage of the environment, which is often bordering on activism. Environmental journalism is no more restricted to pollution and saving the tiger but now extends to health advocacy, safety of the planet, population growth, sustainability, energy conservation, global warming, climate change, acid rain, destruction of tropical rain forests, accumulation of toxic wastes, disposal of all wastes, air



The Foundation has an impressive set of Grantees who believe that coverage of environmental issues should form an integral part of their editorial objectives.

"The bad news is that much of

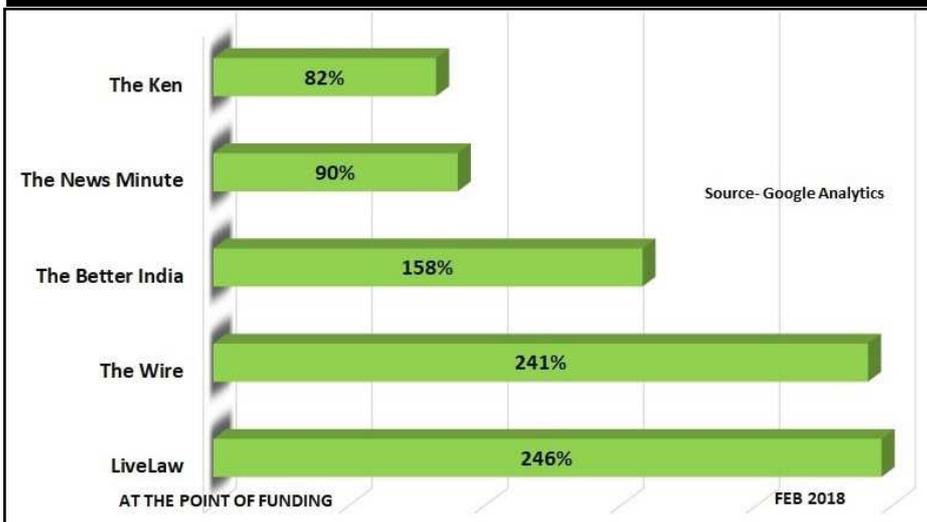
The Wire, The Better India, Dool News, The News Minute, IndiaSpend are among the IPSMF Grantees who cover environment related issues seriously and systematically.

mainstream coverage of the environment is either 'greenwashing', or very event-driven, sensationalist and designed to fit into shorter news cycles. Research or data-driven news coverage is almost entirely missing from the mainstream news," says Aditya Batra, Programme

Director of *Down To Earth*.

The Foundation's support, to entities like *Down To Earth* (DTE), is in acknowledgement of their commitment to make changes to the way the environment is managed, health is protected and livelihoods secured. "DTE provides mainstream media with valuable insights and stories and we find that they magnify our impact," says Batra.

TOP PERFORMING GRANTEES BY GROWTH IN MUV



TIMELINE OF GRANTS

MEETINGS	GRANTEE NAMES
FY 2017-18: 6 Meetings	Swarajya, The Caravan*, Alt News*, Samachara, The Wire (Urdu and Marathi), Think Pragati, Dool News, Khabar Lahariya*, The Print*, Down to Earth*
FY 2016-17: 7 Meetings	The Better India, LiveLaw, Gaon Connection, EPW, WTD News, The News Minute, The Wire (Hindi), The Ken
FY 2015-16: 5 Meetings	IndiaSpend, The Wire, CGNetSwara
TOTAL COMMITMENT – Rs 26.83 Cr	
*Entity yet to complete pre-funding formalities	



New entities supported by the Foundation

The recent set of Grantees the Foundation has agreed to lend its support to includes a variety of media organizations – both in the English and regional language domains.

Khabar Lahariya

Khabar Lahariya is the country's only women-run brand of digital first rural news with a network of reporters in 10 districts of Uttar Pradesh. It was started as a newspaper in 2002 (which has now stopped), as a collaborative idea of a group of rural women, newly literate and keen to enter media. Its website was launched in 2013 and today, it is a digital-only news venture.

The journalism of Khabar Lahariya aims to highlight the differences between the claims made by the government about rural development and empowerment schemes, and the reality.

Samachara



Samachara.com is an independent, Kannada digital media organization making an all-out effort to practice unconventional journalism. Samachara digs deep into subjects independently to produce uncluttered and unbiased reports. It is independent of ideological, political and corporate affiliations. Its stories take a stand on issues related to women, children and vulnerable sections of society. In each story, it tries to provide edu-

cative and thought-provoking angles.

Swarajya

With R Jagannathan and Sandipan Deb as its Editorial Directors, Swarajya is committed to the ideals of individual liberty unmediated by the state or any other institution, freedom of expression and enterprise, na-



tional interest and India's vast and ancient cultural heritage.

It is a big tent for liberal right of centre discourse that reaches out, engages and caters to the new India in a manner that's not arcane, abstruse, arrogant or self-referencing. It won two awards at the 2nd edition of the prestigious Magzimize Award this year.

Down To Earth

Started in 1992 by environmentalist Anil Agarwal, Down To Earth (DTE) is published by the Society for Environmental Communications (SEC) and headed by Sunita Narain. It is a fortnightly magazine which offers news, research, analyses and provides insight into grassroots-based environmental struggles. DTE's idea is to bridge the communication gap between science and policy, and between decision makers and practitioners across the wide environment-

development spectrum. The web edition was launched in 2002 and its monthly Hindi edition was launched in October 2016.

The Print

ThePrint.in is a news, analysis, opinion and knowledge venture, launched in August 2017 by editor Shekhar Gupta. It is sharply focused on politics and policy, government and governance. Its leadership team includes experienced and respected journalists with proven track records in the finest news organisations. Headquartered in New Delhi, the Print is in the process of building a network across India to invest in high-quality investigative and questioning journalism.

Think Pragati

Think Pragati is an online magazine that provides commentary about current affairs and public policy. Pragati began in 2007 as a magazine edited by Nitin Pai and relaunched itself in 2017. It believes that national interest is best served by safeguarding individual liberties and their remit is not to report on stories or do journalism, but to try and throw insight on politics and economics.



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The era of digital storytelling has brought into sharp focus the appetite for hyperlocal news. While newspapers continue to have a presence, smartphone users are showing a preference for digital news that is focusing on issues close to them.

Khabar Lahariya started as a newspaper in 2002. Today, it runs as a video-first news platform. According to Disha Mullick, Director of Strategy, the transition to a digital-first model was a move to reduce costs of distribution while reaching a large rural audience that was going online.

"The impact of the video medium was as powerful as the digital network. The content built an organic audience fast," she adds. Khabar



People in Chhattisgarh are seen recording a message for

Lahariya combines messaging and social media applications - WhatsApp for footage transfer and news distribution; YouTube and Facebook for publishing and distributing content.

"From a journalist's point of view, involving communities has gained wider acceptance through the online medium. Social media tools are to be followed closely since journalism now calls for reshaping skills that new media opportunities throw up," says Vidyashree Dharmaraj, Managing Editor at Covai Post.

The importance of hyperlocal news is also being realized by Google, which earlier this year announced that it is pilot testing a new app named "Bulletin" that allows anybody to submit stories for and about their communities.

**GRANTEE NEWSROOM****Reports call for action, reaction**

[The Ken's story about Google's bias](#) in search results, was widely circulated and discussed. Some portions of it were shared via screen shots. Later, Google put out a blog post saying it would aim to include more perspectives in its search. Though this may not have been a direct impact, it was the first such story to have scientifically shown what search bias looked like and, hence, can be correlated to Google response.

[Another story](#) forced the company Press Coin, to change its Initial Coin Offering product midway, add disclaimers to its website and apologise to journalist Barkha Dutt, who was roped in as an advisor without her consent.

In a report published in December 2017, [The Wire exposed](#) how ICICI and ICICI Prudential officials in Rajasthan, allegedly used their large database of account holders in rural areas to target unsuspecting consumers, especially farmers, labourers and senior citizens. The state police's special operations group is investigating multiple company officials for violating IRDAI norms.

Grantee stories focus on the debate around Aadhaar

The Constitution bench of the Supreme Court began hearing the petitions challenging the validity of Aadhaar from 17 January. While excerpts from the hearing were widely circulated by legal and mainstream media alike, [LiveLaw](#) is the only portal which covered the entire hearing from Day 1 to Day 10. It published [exhaustive reports](#) on the arguments with two reports daily - for the morning and afternoon sessions. It also published weekly reports with complete written submissions made by the lawyers.



The digital team at [EPW](#) recreated a paper based on a survey on how Aadhaar is denying the poor in rural Jharkhand of food rations. The 7000-

word research paper by Jean Drèze, Nazar Khalid, Reetika Khera and Anmol Soman-chi was converted into a "game": [a maze](#) where the reader has to put herself in the shoes of another person and experience the difficulties in obtaining the basic right to food.

In Karnataka's Chikballapur district, 22 Dalit families had been denied ration for not linking their Aadhaar card to their ration cards. After [TNM reported](#) the incident, the authorities took note and the 22 families received one-and-a-half year's-worth of ration and their PDS cards.

When you cut through the hyperbole from both sides of the debate, the benefits from Aadhaar seem to outweigh the pitfalls. While some of the criticisms are ill-informed and illogical, the real lacunae can be remedied through some quick course correction and stricter governance, says [this report](#) by [Swarajya](#).

Talking about transgenders

[Dool News](#) produced a [15-minute documentary on sex reassignment](#) (male to female) surgery. The documentary titled '[Lingam Baadhayathayaakunnavar – transgender jeevithathile chora puranda edukal](#)' (When gender becomes a burden; bloody episodes of transgender lives) has had over 2 lakh views. It shows that the surgery is ruinously expensive for transgender people who live in stigma, social boycott and state torture. Most of them meet their ends by sex work or manual labour.

Eco-friendly bags

Regeno biodegradable or compostable bags are made from wastes of maize, vegetables and paper. These bags, when disposed, degrade in three months' time based on the fertility of the soil without causing any damage to it. Besides, these biobags burn like paper and turn into ash. They can also be melted in hot water. [The article](#) by [The Better India](#) helped create awareness about these bags. The organisation received an overwhelming response

once the story was published and had a 56% increase in the visitors to their website that week. They also got many enquiries about their products and got a chance to interact with the target audience.

Road building starts

Ratna Kudiam, Sarpanch of Metapal village in Dantewada district of Chhattisgarh says that there were no good roads in some parts of her extended village and everyone, including children, has difficulties in walking and cycling to school. They had approached local officers several times without any result. They then recorded a message on [CGnet Swara](#). The road construction work has started. Ratna is thankful to all listeners who put pressure on officers.

Features on climate change

Though people can feel the effects of climate change, they can't see it so clearly and hence fail to understand and accept it completely. So, the climate change messengers have tried to bring climate change to the centre through some hard-hitting documentaries. WTD tried to narrow it down to those that

explain the [important features of climate change](#).

Insight on political discourse

Episode 49 of [The Seen and the Unseen](#), the weekly podcast hosted by Amit Varma on [ThinkPragati](#), dealt with the nature of political discourse today.

Expulsion revoked

A teenaged boy and girl were expelled in Thiruvananthapuram for a congratulatory hug. Even the Kerala High Court agreed with what the school did. After [TNM](#) broke the story, the incident got widespread attention and stirred up a heated controversy in Kerala. The matter went to Thiruvananthapuram MP Shashi Tharoor, and [the students were taken back](#).

Calling an officer's bluff

Danamma, a Dalit girl from North Karnataka, was allegedly raped and murdered. [Samachara](#) got hold of and [published](#) an 'off the record conversation' between a Dalit leader and an IPS officer where the latter was providing misleading information. Other TV channels followed the story.