The English media has so far been anointed the ‘preponderant influencer’ on national affairs. The Indian language media has been regarded as the poor cousin.

But that is now changing, and how. With mobility and purchasing power increasingly penetrating the hinterland, the numbers of Indian language internet users are beginning to count.

They are expected to account for nearly 75% of India’s internet user base by 2021, according to a 2017 Google-KPMG report. The number of Indian language internet users is expected to reach 500 million-plus in the next two years. A Google estimate says that 95% of all current video consumption is in regional languages. No wonder then that new media players are turning to Indian languages.

We interview three of our Grantees who have just embarked on that mission.

‘People are most comfortable in the mother tongue’

Shubhranshu Choudhary, a former BBC journalist in India and Knight International Journalism Fellow, launched CGNet Swara – a voice-based online portal that allows people in the forests of central tribal India to report local news by making a phone call. Most of the reports are in Gondi language – spoken by around two million people of the Gond tribe, living in Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Telangana, Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh.

We spoke to Shubhranshu about the challenges and the way forward for language-based citizen journalism. Excerpts from the interview:

What are the main challenges of a portal like yours which operates in Hindi and a rarely spoken language like Gondi?

Our main challenge is to reach people in remote areas and train them to be reporters. We use dance, drama and puppet shows to attract people and initiate them into reporting. We are trying to establish that even if people are not very literate, they can report in their own language, using their own phones, overcoming the constraints of traditional media. But this concept needs time to take firm roots.

Why do you think it is important for media to focus on languages of the hinterland?

People often understand mainstream languages, but they find it difficult to express themselves clearly in languages other than their mother tongues. If we want to increase the participation of these citizens in media, then we will have to create platforms in regional dialects.

What according to you prevents mainstream media from addressing issues of media-dark regions in, for instance, Chhattisgarh?

Media-dark regions are also revenue-dark regions. So mainstream media is not interested in the painstaking and relatively costly task of real, ground-based reporting from these areas.

Using tech to dive deeper—Page 3
### THE FOUNDATION’S INTERVENTIONS

**Fake News Busting**
- Alt News

**Environment**
- Down To Earth

**Legal**
- Live Law

**Policy Biz & Economy**
1. Economic & Political Weekly
2. India Spend
3. The Ken
4. Think Pragati

### TIMELINE OF GRANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEETINGS</th>
<th>GRANTEE NAMES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FY 2015-16: 5 Meetings</td>
<td>IndiaSpend, The Wire, CGNetSwara</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL COMMITMENT – Rs 31.25 Cr**

*Entities yet to complete pre-funding formalities

### POLITICAL NEWS & OPINION

1. Azhimukham
2. Imphal Free Press
3. MediaVigil
4. Samachara
5. Swarajya
6. The Caravan
7. The Covai Post
8. The News Minute
9. The Print
10. The Wire
11. WTD News

### LOCAL / COMMUNITY JOURNALISM

1. CGNet Swara
2. Dool News
3. Gaon Connection
4. Ippodhu
5. Khabar Lahariya
6. The Better India

### AWARDS & ACHIEVEMENTS

**Think Pragati’s podcast ‘The Seen and the Unseen’** was listed as a part of the curriculum for the Fall 2018 Course: Democracy, Development, and Conflict in South Asia at the University of California, San Diego.

**ECONOMIC & POLITICAL WEEKLY**

- Three articles from the Economic and Political Weekly were cited in the Supreme Court’s judgment that struck down Section 377.
- (http://bit.ly/2M5XT9T )
- (http://bit.ly/2wLlSGM)
- (http://bit.ly/2NWcDd4)

A Google News Lab co-ordinator cited EPW’s Engage, a digital initiative for media promotion. EPW has also entered into a resource sharing partnership with Wikipedia Library. Wikipedia editors will be using EPW articles as references.

**LiveLaw.in**

- Legal News portal Live Law was shortlisted for the Agami Prize 2018 in the Citizenship Category.
- Swarajya won a Gold at WAN IFRA South Asia Digital Media Awards 2018 for the Best Reader Revenue Initiative.
**Stories that work in English don’t always connect in Hindi**

The Better India, founded by Dhimant Parekh and Anuradha Kedia in 2008, is a digital platform that brings together technology, media and social consciousness to galvanise large-scale social good. The platform, which started out in English, has now been launched in Hindi. Within a span of four months, the Hindi edition has achieved a monthly reach of 10 million readers.

*In conversation with Dhimant Parekh.*

**We plan to start in at least one more language this year**

Imagine the kind of change we can bring about when we foray into regional languages - inspiring a larger section of our society to drive change. We had in-house talent in Hindi and so it was a natural extension.

**What are the learnings from the Hindi thrust? Editorially, have you had to change anything?**

The main learning has been that the stories that work for English audiences don’t necessarily connect with the Hindi audience. So, the story selection had to change. Also, we learnt that content about literature and arts have a huge traction.

**Are you planning editions in other languages?**

Yes, we do plan to start in at least one more language this year and we are in the process of preparing for it.

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**Busting fake news in English alone was not enough**

Founded in 2017, AltNews is a fact-checking website started by former software engineer Pratik Sinha. It started out in English and very soon launched a Hindi edition.

*In conversation with Pratik Sinha.*

**What made AltNews think of producing content in Hindi? What made you realise that there was an appetite for your content in the language space?**

A majority of the rumours that we debunk on social media are often circulated through Facebook and Twitter mostly in Hindi. For a long time, we were counting on English to counter gross misinformation. However, we were not reaching the audiences that were affected by this misinformation. Hence, the decision to write, translate, our stories into Hindi.

**Are there any particular challenges when you deal with fake news in Hindi?**

While we have garnered a huge audience in English, our current challenge is to create a space in Hindi as well. We are on the verge of going big with videos in Hindi.

**Editorially, are there any changes you have had to make to tailor yourself to a Hindi-speaking audience?**

We are trying to tailor Hindi content to the audience. For instance, simpler language and avoiding technical terms, as far as possible.

**Are you planning to get into any other language?**

We are keen to get into Gujarati, as we have in-house and intimate knowledge of the language. However, we would like to make our mark in Hindi before we wade into Gujarati.

Currently, we have 20,000 followers of our Hindi page and an average of about 75,000 views on our Hindi portal per month.

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**‘We are using technology to dive deeper’**

From Page 1

**How does CGNET leverage technology? What remain key challenges?**

We are now working on creating tools for machine-translations between Gondi and Hindi. Earlier, we were working on creating a standard dictionary for Gondi which is yet to be completed. It is difficult to do credible journalism in Gondi without creating a standard language. Gondi is the second-biggest tribal language of India. For other tribal languages, the situation is even more challenging.

We are trying to create a model of Voicebook, where people with no access to internet will be able to report. Some from the community who have access to internet, and speak the language, will be doing the gatekeeping or editing.

To reach areas where there are no mobile signals we use Bluetooth (christened Bultoo locally), which is now available on almost every phone. Villagers increasingly use Bluetooth to put out audio clips to share their views and report and we edit, curate and enable that to be shared with other mobile users, and thus, build a community around it.

We need to create a business model out of these Voicebooks and ‘Bultoo Radios’ so that the concept can be sustainable in revenue terms rather than depend solely on grants. Once we have a critical mass of many Voicebooks, we can graduate to an entity akin to a ‘Times of Rural India’, which can be democratic, independent and representative. We get around 1,500 people calling us every day to listen to the stories. Around 150 people record a message or a song. After cross-checking, editing and curating we put out 15 stories everyday.
‘We are not Right in a narrow sense’

Foundation Grantee Swarajya Magazine’s Editorial Director R Jagannathan spoke about the learnings from their journey and best practices for media initiatives. Below are excerpts from the interview.

As a self-avowed “big tent for liberal right-of-centre discourse”, how has Swarajya’s journey so far been, in terms of response, influence and impact?

We started out thinking we are a niche publication only to discover that we are, in fact, viewed as a much wider platform by a larger cross-section of people than we had originally imagined. Market-based economics and general pragmatism in economic thinking cannot obtain widespread support among the people without the natural constituency that supports this kind of thought - the cultural Right. We see ourselves as Right only in the sense of being pragmatic and rooted in our cultural ethos. We are not Right in any narrow-minded sense of the term.

Are there any critical learnings from your experience that could be a best practice for other Foundation partners?

One thing we learnt is that truth has many sides, and the current obsession with fake news or facts is narrow. What needs correcting is fake narratives - stories built on a one-sided acknowledgement of selective facts - like the ‘church attacks story’ based on four minor incidents in 2014, when the reality was 260 temples faced the same kind of attacks around the same time.

Another learning is that sending people to do ground reporting on incidents in 2014, when the reality was 260 temples faced the same selective facts is fake narratives. Obsession with fake news or facts is narrow. What needs correcting could be a best practice for other Foundation partners?

How far has Swarajya contributed in remedying this perceived skew? And, what more can be done?

We have established proof of concept. The key is more funding for entities like ours, and also identifying the right kind of talent.

How Grantees dealt with major events

- IndiaSpend produced a data-based analysis, revealing that 67% cases under the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act, 1967, ended in acquittal/discharge.
- The Wire’s editorials discussed how the atrocities in the name of ‘nationalism’ offer history lessons beyond Bhima Koregaon and did a detailed write-up on the five arrested in the case.
- Section 377
  - Legal news portal LiveLaw tweeted the court proceedings. The portal’s tweets/reports and its coverage was followed-up and cited by other leading news portals. LiveLaw also ran several editorials on the impact of this landmark judgment on hetersexual relationships in India.
  - The Print also carried varying perspectives prior to and post this judgment – the articles discussed BJP’s oscillation over Section 377 over the years, and how political parties are passing the buck to the courts for simple decisions.
  - The Caravan interviewed advocate Menaka Guruswamy, who argued on behalf of petitioners from the Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi.
- Swarajya’s editorial spoke about evolving a uniquely Hindu perspective on LGBT rights.
- Dool News produced a short video showcasing the joy of LGBTQ activists and supporters, and also summarized the historic struggle of the community.
- Prior to the judgment, Think Pragati’s editorials discussed how homosexuality was always treated as a taboo in India and how the Supreme Court should not – and need not – get into the question of what forms of sexual identity or orientation are ‘natural’ in order to find Section 377 IPC unconstitutional. Editor Amit Verma’s podcast discussed what it is to grow up gay in a deeply homophobic country.
- The News Minute wrote on how the verdict must give way to lessons in inclusion for mental-health professionals.
- The Wire also wrote on how the verdict should be treated as a marker of evolution of mental-health rights.