Re-humanising News: Delineating the Trends and Research Scope for Curatorial Journalism

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Abstract

The pivot to online news in the last two decades has had far-reaching changes in the way information is created, disseminated and consumed. One aspect of this transformation to digital has been the salience of curatorial journalism – a human-centric practice involving selection of newsworthy content, its organisation and presentation in consumable styles and formats. News curation has been pitched as an antidote to an ecosystem of information overload. While research into the practice online exists in certain contexts, it has been sparse in countries such as India. This paper reviews and synthesises contemporary literature pertaining journalistic practice and roles, news curation and its formats, digital intermediaries and structures of the digital journalism ecosystem. It thematically suggests three approaches that could be adopted by researchers to fill the gaps in the discourse around news curation : the role and identity-centric approach; format and style-centric approach; and, business and economy-centric approach. While the role and identity-centric approach emphasises on how many journalists today work as 'information "managers"', the format and style-centric approach delves into how curatorial products may adopt a conversationalised style to engage audiences. The question of the value proposition of curatorial products in a precarious environment is dealt with by the third approach. By placing the discussion of these approaches in the context of four curatorial offerings in the English language Indian news ecosystem, the paper highlights the vast potential of research that exists for a diverse country like India. But at the same time, these approaches would be applicable to other contexts as well, where extant research on curation has been found lacking.

Keywords: algorithm, curation, digital journalism, gatekeeping, gatewatching, online news

1. Introduction

With rising internet penetration, the processes of news creation, dissemination and consumption have transformed globally over the last two decades. The term information overload – popularised by Toffler (1970) – encapsulates today's ecosystem characterised by the ease with which anyone can access, produce and amplify a multiplicity of content – including news – in a matter of seconds in a hyperconnected world. Thus, has arisen the need for a reimagining of the very concept of journalism, and the actors and the roles associated with it. As Bruns (2018, p. 8) has pointed out, in today's journalism, the professional news industry exists as just one, albeit an important, part of the puzzle, which he calls the 'social news media network'. It does not enjoy the kind of authority, centrality or exceptionalism it used to before, with non-professional actors as actively involved in the processes associated with news as professional ones. Moreover, with multiple actors actively putting out large amounts of information in such a network, the practices of news organisation and curation have become as central to journalism as traditional news gathering.

Usually associated with museums and art exhibits, the term curation holds significance for the field of journalism as well, more so in today's digital news ecosystem. In journalism studies, the term is found to have been interpreted differently by different scholars (Cui & Liu, 2017). While on one hand, news curation and news aggregation have been treated as one and the same practice, others have delineated a clear distinction. From the point of view of the author of this paper, a distinction may be drawn between curation and aggregation, primarily on the basis of the former being a human-centric practice involving 'journalistic judgement' and 'narrative', while the latter is a 'mechanical' process (Jack, 2016, p. 10), largely driven by platform companies' algorithms. News curation, then, involves the process of selecting, organising and presenting content deemed newsworthy by a professional or non-professional journalist. What

sets it apart from typical reportorial news is that it involves indirect sourcing of information instead of direct. The central role of curators in the context of news has been described as that of 'information "managers"' (Guerrini, 2013, p. 10), turning '"noise into signal"' (Guerrini, 2013, p. 7). What, essentially, a news curator does is sifting through a surfeit of information, organising and presenting what is relevant in consumable styles and formats, often complementing it with the necessary context, and sometimes interpretation.

1.1 News Curation in India

News curation today is an integral part of news publishers' editorial offerings online. The curation of relevant social media content – including user-generated content, trends and debates – is central to publishers' content strategies. Journalists also refer to content published by external news publishers as well as reportorial content of their own publisher when curating stories. In terms of formats, both online verticals of legacy publishers as well as digital-born ones offer not just typical news articles, but also live blogs, briefings and newsletters that are curatorial in nature. In the Indian context, both categories of publishers in the English language ecosystem offer a multitude of curatorial products ranging from The Indian Express' Daily Briefing (Philipose & Gupta, 2023) – a daily edition summarising the top stories of the previous day – to The Quint's Sunday View (The Quint, 2023) – a curation of the "best weekend opinion reads" – to The Wire's The India Cable (Kanjilal, 2023) – an email newsletter claiming to offer the 'most definitive daily picture of India'. Moreover, there also exist curatorial products in India that are their respective publishers' central offerings, such as the website Splainer.in and the business and technology-focused newsletter The Signal.

News curation has been pitched as an antidote to an ecosystem of information overload that exists, engendered to a great extent by social media platforms. 'We don't have a problem that we don't have enough news. We have too much news ... We're interested in solving the problem of news pollution. When you want to know what's happening in the world today, you want to find what's relevant and curate it for you, someone has to do the hard work of going through all those sources and saying these are the biggest stories, headlines that matter,' said Lakshmi Chaudhry, Founder, Splainer (L. Chaudhry, personal communication, January 16, 2022). In the context of curatorial newsletters, Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, former Deputy Editor at Scroll.in, said, 'The curatorial approach I see as an outcome of a surfeit of information online. There are innumerable things you could read on any given day, and one of the complaints that readers had... is the feeling of not being able to complete... You get the sense that online, you could always go to the next thing, there's always something more to read, which can lead to a sense of dissatisfaction and incompleteness. In a way, newsletters that are curatorial help resolve that problem' (R. Venkataramakrishnan, personal communication, January 21, 2022). Despite the salience of curatorial journalism in India's online newsrooms today, there has existed sparse academic literature looking into the different facets of the same. This contrasts with studies in certain other contexts, where the concept and its practice have received a fair degree of attention.

2. Method

This paper employs the qualitative approach to review and synthesise contemporary literature pertaining to journalistic practice and roles, news curation and its formats, digital intermediaries, and structures of the digital journalism ecosystem. Relevant academic and journalistic literature was sought out and purposively sampled using keywords such as news curation, gatekeeping and gatewatching, digital intermediaries, email news/newsletters, among others. This was complemented by purposively sampling and analysing additional literature that contextualised the topic with broader trends seen in contemporary media as well as the characteristics of the Indian news media industry. Barring two sources, the literature, in term of its time period, ranged from 2005 to 2023, with majority of them being from between 2010 and 2020. Broader meanings in each piece of literature were identified, extricated and thematically analysed. As a qualitative method, thematic analysis identifies, analyses and reports patterns within a data corpus. While any qualitative dataset could generate a multitude of themes, 'only those that answer the research question are important to a given analysis' (Scharp & Sanders, 2019, p. 117-118).

3. Results

Based on analyses of the above-mentioned literature, and synthesis of the same, the paper suggests three thematic approaches as to how the journalistic practice of news curation can be studied. These include:

- The role and identity-centric approach
- The format and style-centric approach
- The business and economy-centric approach

Any one of these approaches or a combination of them can be adopted by researchers in the near future when it comes to studying curatorial journalism. While delineating the research agendas for the field, references have been given to four curatorial offerings in the Indian context. However, the approaches would be equally applicable to other contexts as well, wherein news curation as a practice is significant and extant research has been found lacking.

4. Discussion

4.1 Role and Identity-Centric Approach

With internet changing the way news content is produced, disseminated and consumed, it is clear that researchers' understanding of the role that journalists play needs to shift, with emphasis also on how they negotiate their identity in a changed milieu. Any study within the field of journalism today, and especially those looking at curation as a core practice, needs to take into account three interconnected considerations. First, journalism is no longer just the domain of professionals representing news organisations, with non-professionals (or 'independent "storytellers"', as Guerrini (2013, p. 11) calls them) also actively involved in the various processes of news creation, dissemination and amplification – exemplified in the reimagining of journalism as a 'social news media network' (Bruns, 2018, p. 8). Hermida's (2013) concept of 'ambient journalism', marked by an 'always-on' nature, as well as synergy between journalists and audiences, also encapsulates today's digital news ecosystem. The constantly evolving and collaborative nature of today's journalism is further captured by Hermida (2012) when he calls it 'less of a final product presented to the audience as a definitive rendering of events than a tentative and iterative process where contested accounts are examined and evaluated in public in real time.' Second, there is a need to acknowledge that the traditional theoretical lens of gatekeeping presents limitations, when it comes to conceptualising journalists' (both professional and non-professional) roles in a multi-faceted online network. In this regard, Bruns' concept of gatewatching – defined as the 'observation of output gates of news publications and other sources, in order to identify important material as it becomes available' (2005, p. 17) – assumes importance. It builds on the gatekeeping framework that has been used time and again to understand the factors involved in news selection – ranging from an editor's personal preferences, audience perceptions and judgments in White's (1950) seminal study to factors operating on the levels of individual, routines, organisational, extra-media and ideological (Shoemaker & Reese, 2013). Third, in a context wherein the producing, disseminating and amplifying large amounts of news content has become easier than ever before, resulting in the oft-invoked environment of information overload, Bruns (2018) has pointed to how the practice of news organisation and curation have become as central to journalism as traditional news gathering, with those adept at it better placed to stand out from the crowd. The changed roles that journalists are expected to perform in the contemporary context have been defined as those of harvesters, curators, and community managers (Bakker, 2014, p. 596). 'Producing original content is not a core business' for many of today's journalists, Bakker (2014) points out. Guerrini's (2013, p. 7-10) conceptualisation of journalists as 'information "managers"', whose role is to turn '"noise into signal"'– or a chaotic abundance of information into something more discernible – also underscores how important organisation and presentation of newsworthy information is today, so that it can stand out from a crowd.

4.1.1 Journalists as 'Information Managers'

Thus, many journalists involved in curating information online today – whether from social media, or from other publishers' stories, and/or from the stories of their own publisher – function as gatewatchers or secondary eyewitnesses (Bruns, 2018). Often, the unique selling point of their curatorial products lies in selection, organisation and presentation. This is exemplified in how The Signal newsletter and Splainer.in pitch their news offerings on their websites:

'Get smart with our curated stories that separate The Signal from the noise. Informal yet informative, our crisp analyses and sharp insights give you the edge. In just a few minutes.' (The Signal)

'[…] It's just relentless: the sheer volume of news. It's incredibly loud… and, dear god, there is so much of it! Why does it have to be noisy and exhausting? It's time to KonMari your news… declutter and spark a bit of joy!' (Splainer)

Considering the salience of curation in today's digital news ecosystem, it is important for researchers to delve into how journalists perceive their identity and value of serving as 'information "managers"', wherein they rely on indirect sourcing to report on the news, which might contrast with the normative notion of journalists as reporters who source information directly, often by going to the ground as primary news gatherers. Among other aspects that could be delved into in such studies include: how essential do journalists view the practice of curation when it comes to news delivery, in comparison with typical reportorial news; and what are the ethical concerns they face in their role of a news curator. The question of how journalists adopt and justify content curation has been dealt with by Duffy, Tandoc and Ling (2018) in their ethnographic study of digital news publishers in Singapore. Placing emphasis on the identity of news producers and the use of rituals such as 'objectivity, multiple sourcing and comparison with other news outlets' to legitimise the practice of curation, Duffy et al. (2018, p. 1354) provide an important methodological framework for researchers who might want to look at how journalists negotiate their identity and role while performing the practice of curation, and the ethical concerns it raises.

4.2 Format and Style-Centric Approach

From a typical news article bringing together the most hard-hitting tweets around a particular controversy; to a morning briefing offering the top five or ten stories of the day; to an email newsletter summarising all the news and analyses on

the business and tech beats; to live blogs providing minute-by-minute updates on a breaking news story, curatorial news today is reflected in a myriad of formats. Each of these may be suited to delivering news for different purposes and for different kinds of situations, although there might be an overlap in some cases. For instance, Bruns' (2018) characterised live blogs as following a social media logic, wherein news is being disseminated on a publisher's website in a way similar to Facebook or Twitter feeds. The journalists working on a live blog often function as gatewatchers, monitoring and curating the content being posted on social media and on other news websites, alongside incorporating updates from their own network of on-ground reporters.

Meanwhile, the enduring popularity of email newsletters, despite proclamations of the medium's rudimentariness and its potentially imminent death in the face of more advanced technologies, has received the attention of many. Their usefulness to drive deeper engagement among audiences has been emphasised in a context wherein a large amount of news is disseminated and consumed on digital intermediaries – including social media platforms and search engines. Indeed, the audience dependence on social media has only increased, with as much as 30 per cent of the global sample in a survey for the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2023, selecting it as the main way of accessing news – an increase of seven percentage points from 2018, and well above email, which stood at 5 per cent and declined by one percentage point from 2018 (Newman, Fletcher, Eddy, Robertson, & Nielsen, 2023, p. 11). However, the effectiveness of email as a medium in terms of helping audiences 'figure out what's worth paying attention to', forging 'intimacy' and 'connection' has also been emphasised at the same time (Carr, 2014). A survey for the Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022 across 42 countries showed that an average of 17 per cent of respondents used email newsletters weekly. Though its weekly use might have declined in markets such as the US – from 27 per cent in 2014 to 22 per cent in 2022 (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Eddy, & Nielsen, 2022, p. 46) – one has not seen a complete subsuming of the channel in the face of news delivery through social media and mobile notifications. Characterising email newsletters as having the qualities of 'discovery, curation, serendipity and "finishability"', Jack (2016, p. 7) argued that these qualities will remain of immense significance to journalism, even if email as a medium goes out of favour in the future. Among the editorial products analysed by Jack (2016) include those of leading American and British publishers such as The New York Times, Washington Post, Quartz, The Economist, Financial Times, and The Times. Email newsletters may also be characterised as a means of *taking back control* from the news dissemination logic of social media platforms or aggregators. That is, the newsletter may be pitched as a more conscious, bespoke and human-centric curated collection of news, offering value in contrast to the vast and chaotic algorithmic aggregation of news on say, Google News or the Facebook News Feed. To understand email newsletters as a means of taking back control, one also needs to appropriately place it in the context of the relationship that publishers share with digital intermediaries. Based on a strategic case study, Nielsen and Ganter (2018) characterised the relationship as being essentially unequal, with the former showcasing dependency on the latter.

'[...] News media that developed into an increasingly independent institution in the 20th century – in part enabled by news media organisations' control over channels of communication – are becoming dependent upon new digital intermediaries that structure the media environment in ways that not only individual citizens but also large, resource-rich, powerful organisations have to adapt to.' (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018, p. 1600).

In such a context, therefore, the question to ask would be whether email newsletters could be a space adopted by publishers where the diktats imposed on creating and disseminating news by digital intermediaries are resisted. A caveat here would be that email as a medium is itself controlled by the so-called Big Tech companies (Google or Microsoft). However, their influence in terms of shaping what kind of news should be packaged and distributed, and how, is limited, as compared to their platforms.

4.2.1 'Conversationalised' Curations

At the most basic level, content analysis-based studies on curatorial news could look at the number of stories directly sourced vis-à-vis stories indirectly sourced to gauge the emphasis on curatorial news by a given publisher. Studies could also focus on a specific format – for instance, a newsletter – and under that, its focus, subject area and the beats that the stories belong to (national vs international; politics/government, business, technology/science, health, lifestyle, entertainment, sports, etc) could be explored, as employed by Seely and Spillman (2021). Analysing the content of 'daily, general interest, morning newsletters' from nine leading US-based news organisations, Seely and Spillman (2021) also drew a distinction between formal and informal tonality of newsletter items. Undertaking a content analysis of the style of curatorial products would offer insights into how they might be breaking the conventional journalistic writing norms to become more personalised or conversationalised in nature. It may be noted that a curatorial offering being personalised or conversationalised does not necessarily mean it would go against the journalistic values of objectivity and impartiality. Another instructive categorisation, while undertaking quantitative content analysis of three American online news publishers, was adopted by Cui and Liu (2017). Emphasising on the practice of hyperlinking in the curation of news, they deployed a three-category framework, wherein links in news stories were coded under

sourcing curation, contextualising curation and interpreting curation, depending on the function each hyperlink and the accompanying text perform. The study was conducted using the content of US-based news websites as the sample, namely nytimes.com, vox.com and Huffington Post.

Content analyses of curatorial products such as certain newsletters in the Indian online news ecosystem following frameworks similar to those discussed above would provide insightful results, highlighting the idiosyncrasies of curatorial practices in a specific context. For instance, just a cursory look at one of Daily Briefings of The Indian Express (Philipose & Gupta, 2023) establishes it as a curatorial product with a formal tone, having hyperlinks that fall under the sourcing curation category. In contrast, the use of GIFs and prompts in a newsletter of The Signal (Gupta & Nair, 2023) add a conversationalised tone to the product, and its use of hyperlinks goes beyond just the sourcing curation category.

4.3 Business and Economy-Centric Approach

The digital disruption of the last two decades and its impact on news have produced a myriad of accounts on how journalism as a business is struggling. With print and television headed towards decline, news publishers have been finding it challenging to adapt their established business models to the digital ecosystem and remain financially viable. Due to its inherent attributes, news as an industry has been characterised as one beset with challenges, being susceptible to market failure (Nielsen, 2019)**.** But the situation has been exacerbated with the digital disruption. As far as the digital media ecosystem is concerned, it has been pointed out that its exponential rise has upended the low-choice, high-market power economic context in which news publishers operated, into a high-choice, low-market power one. Three interconnected factors have defined this transformation: 'the rise of platform companies'; an ecosystem of information overload with cut-throat competition; and, increased dependence on alternative sources of money amid a reduction in advertising revenue (Nielsen, 2019, p. 331). The low rates of online advertising (Nielsen, 2019), as well as their capture by digital platforms (Newman et al., 2022) has betrayed the unreliability of a solely ad-driven revenue models for online news media, and put into focus the scale of the challenge that digital news publishers face. In view of the lack of viability of running news operations solely on the basis of ad revenues, both Nielsen (2019) and Bruns (2018) emphasised on the leveraging of alternative revenue models for journalism to remain sustainable, with the former noting a trend of publishers coming to depend on paywall/subscription-based models.

As far as the economic context of journalism in India is concerned, while various encouraging numbers have told a story of growth and expansion since the 1990s, Chadha (2017, p. 1 & 14) has highlighted 'troubling structural trends that characterise the country's media landscape' and that are a 'threat to Indian journalism'. These include the growth of commercialism, rising cross-media ownership, media concentration, corporatisation and politicisation of media ownership. On digital news in the Indian context specifically, Prasad (2021, p. 2133) has characterised online journalism startups not as disruptors, but as being involved in the process of 'field repair'. While stakeholders of these digital news media startups offer a critique of the functioning and practices of legacy/mainstream media, with their own work highlighted as overcoming such shortcomings, it is largely directed at the broadcast media, and not print. The critique is on three levels: political economy, content and professional norms/ethics. With regard to print media, the startups conceptualise their role as being supplementary in nature, as they '(align) themselves and (seek) validation from newspaper journalism' (Prasad, 2021, p. 2135).

4.3.1 Value Propositions for Curatorial News

Considering how editorial decisions in newsrooms may be intertwined with the economic context in which they operate, research into the whys and hows of adoption of curatorial practices should probe into both business models of specific newsrooms as well as the economic conditions of the larger industry. The question of whether curation has become a necessity due to lack of investment in resources needed for directly-sourced reportorial news, which in turn might be due to the precarious financial situation of a newsroom, is an important one to ask in any given context. From there, researchers could inquire into whether the reliance on curatorial news is higher among digital-born publications vis-a-vis online versions of legacy publications. Looking at the business models of specific curatorial products offered by publications and the rationale behind them could also be the locus of research. In Indian context, there exist both non-paid as well as paid curatorial products. While The Indian Express' Daily Briefings are free at the point of consumption, offering merely summaries of the top stories of the day that are hyperlinked to the original ones (some of whom might be behind a paywall), The Wire's The India Cable is essentially a paid newsletter, wherein free subscribers only have access to a 'truncated newsletter' (The India Cable, 2023), with the paywall being relaxed once a week. For paid curatorial products, what also needs to be delved into is how they create value propositions for their potential subscribers. In the case of the The India Cable and splainer.in, the propositions emphasise on writing style, the ability to select the right stories from a wealth of information, and easy consumption. Consider these:

'[…] You get the big picture, analysis and best reporting on that one big story everyone's talking about. Catch up on key headlines, and discover a wealth of cool, funny, smart reads and videos from across the globe. There is zero jargon

and no rants - and all of it's served with a generous dose of cheeky humour that makes you lol! It's easy, painless and (hallelujah!) fun. In fact, you have such a good time, we promise that you'll miss us on the weekends!' (Splainer)

'Once a week, we relax our paywall so non-subscribers can see for themselves the value of paying Rs 200/month (or Rs 2000/year) to get the most definitive daily picture of India in their inbox every day.' (The India Cable, 2023)

Audience-centric studies on why readers may or may not be subscribing to paid curatorial products (or willing or not willing to do so) could look at the same from the perspective of reference prices online (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2017). Typically, content available online has been seen as having a reference price of zero, with the expectation that information available on the internet should be free to access by all. However, with the penetration of over-the-top (OTT) media streaming services and news publishers introducing paywalls in the last few years in the Indian context, the reference prices online have no longer remained zero. The question to inquire into is how audiences are coming to terms with having to pay for news content online that they once used to access for free, and what kind of resistance is it generating.

5. Conclusion

The landscape of curatorial journalism in the Indian context is constantly evolving and innovating. By thematically delineating three streams of research – role and identity-centric approach; format and style-centric approach; and, business and economy-centric approach – the paper aims to provide an impetus to the academic community in journalism studies to fill the research gaps that exist on such a topic for contexts such as India. Each of the three approaches contain various sub-themes that could be inquired into individually and would complement each other in terms of their findings. Moreover, considering the diversity of news offerings in India cutting across various languages and regions, each sub-theme could also be probed severally across different sub-contexts, each resulting in findings that are unique. Indeed, the references to curatorial offerings in this paper are limited to the English language news media, which represents just a small part of a large and diverse Indian news ecosystem. The outcomes of such studies may also benefit the journalism industry which, using the insights provided into curatorial practices, may effect changes in their editorial processes and strategies.

However, a word of caution is necessary to insert here on the potentially temporal nature of such studies on curatorial practices. The characteristic of temporality needs to be recognised as a shortcoming for all areas of research looking at digital technologies, as highlighted by Cousineau, Oakes and Johnson (2019) in their paper that sets an agenda for research into digital spaces, particularly what it labels as Geo-Social Networking Apps (GSNAs), using digital ethnography as an approach. While their argument is put across in a different context, it is equally applicable to all digital spaces, including online curatorial journalism. In other words, the constant state of flux in digital technologies (in the form of new trends, applications, features and updates, rapidly changing behaviours of online users, etc) presents a challenge for scholars in terms of keeping their research up-to-date. For instance, while Bruns (2018, p. 354) had called news curation algorithms 'still a considerable way away from being able to replace human curators', such an assessment may now have to be re-looked at in the face of the advancements in algorithmic curation in the years since. Of sizeable importance are also developments in the field of artificial intelligence (AI), essentially with the emergence of ChatGPT and its potential to transform the processes of news content production and consumption (Adami, 2023). Though still valuable, human-based curations and its associated advantages may come under increasing pressure from such advances in the years to come.

Another instance is that of how central social media platforms and news are to each other. While Bruns (2018) had pointed towards the *centrality of social media platforms for news*, in recent times, it has been seen that the *centrality of news for social media platforms* is dynamic and can take unpredictable trajectories. For instance, the November 2022 layoffs at Meta (formerly known as Facebook) were characterised as 'another step in Meta's journey to get the heck away from news', with other decisions cited having shown the company's disincentivising of news relating to its News Tab, newsletter programme, Instant Articles, algorithms and payments to publishers in the US (Scire, 2022). Indeed, among 12 countrries surveyed, Facebook's news use has declined from 42 per cent in 2016 to 28 per cent in 2023 (Newman et al., 2023), arguably due to such policy decisions. Moreover, in the backdrop of the shutdown of BuzzFeed News, the publisher has been characterised as a 'casualty of its lopsided relationship with Facebook' (Hennessy, 2023), with the former not capitalising on alternative revenue models such as subscriptions and paywalls and remaining dependent on the latter. In the backdrop of instances such as these, it is now being argued that the preponderance of social media platforms for news distribution and consumption could change, with older trends – marked by deeper engagement rather than virality or scale – regaining traction. (Tani, 2023). This only highlights how priorities and decisions of digital intermediaries can have implications for the news business.

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