

Research article

Political Economy of Media Entrepreneurship: Power, Control and Ideology in a News Media Enterprise

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Abstract:

Purpose: With Internet technologies crushing entry barriers, India is witnessing a new wave of digital news media entrepreneurship. The purpose of this study is to understand the political economy of this rising number of news media start-ups. To do so, it explores the social, political and economic contexts of news media entrepreneurship and the role of technology in creating an independent space for democratic interactions.

Methodology: This is a qualitative case study. Following a mixed methodology approach, this study utilizes data from 18 interviews with the founders of a digital news media start-up and mainstream journalists as well as a variety of text materials, including news reports, trade materials and research reports. The data was analyzed using thematic coding and interpreted based on critical theory of technology.

Findings/Contribution: The study demonstrates that the digital news media entrepreneurship in India is an ideological process. It shows that the government and corporates control the Internet and social media. As a result, technology alone cannot create and sustain an independent, democratic media space. Further, a news media organization that is totally dependent on these technologies for news distribution faces protracted legal battles and possible censorship.

Keywords: Entrepreneurship, digital news media, social media, ideology, economy, Internet, shutdown, India

1. Introduction

Digital technological developments have aided the creation of “a new kind of entrepreneurial start-ups that are disrupting the media industry” (Compaine & Hoag, 2012). The emergence of new media organizations and the crises faced by the legacy media companies have paved way for media entrepreneurship gaining increased academic attention (Achtenhagen, 2017). Studies focusing on entrepreneurial journalism have looked at working conditions of freelance journalists (De Cock & de Smaele, 2016) and how they utilize social media to engage with the audience (Holton, 2016). There is also a substantial body of research from Europe (e.g. Picard, 2011; Carvajal, García-Avilés & González, 2012) that looks at the role of technology and argue that technology can facilitate flexibility,

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speed, economies of scope, user control over content and participatory, public service business models in the media segment. Changes are visible in India too and the country is witnessing a key development in its media landscape with an increased number of digital news media organizations. With 451 million monthly active Internet users, India has the second largest net users in the world after China. Indian net users are set to grow exponentially in the coming years as the Internet penetration is just 36% (Mandavia, 2019). The rise of digital news media in India can be considered as the third transformative phase in the history of Indian journalism. The first key development was the “post-colonial press in 1947” and the second key moment came as an after effect of the country opening its market in 1991. A globalized economy and the liberalization policies led to the rise of corporate media in the late 1990s (Chaudhry, 2016).

Traditionally, the media business model was centered around audience commodification (Smythe, 1981; Fuchs, 2009) to gain revenues. However, the new set of not-for-profit digital news media organizations in India are challenging this model with the help of technology as they are delivering news under a public service model that do not rely on advertising revenues and corporate funding (Bearak, 2014; Kohli-Khandekar, 2013). Unlike other countries, the spurt in the growth of digital users and the subsequent rise in the number of news media organizations have not yet prompted the country’s academic sector to produce any major research on news media entrepreneurship and the challenges associated with it. One of the major reasons for this can be attributed to the fact that India is still one of the few democracies, where print media is at a higher growth path compared to digital media (Pandey, 2017). As a result, most of the scholarly works (Thakurta, 2012; Ninan, 2014; Verman, 2015) focus on the political economy of mainstream media and their business model. In Addition, the existing research on digital media (Robinson, Grennan & Schiffrin, 2015; Nielsen & Sen, 2016) focusses on the putative aspects of technology.

This point towards a major gap in understanding the political economy of digital news media entrepreneurship in India. In addition, there is hardly any research in India that critically analyses the role of technology in creating and sustaining digital new media. Therefore, this paper is guided by two research questions: 1) What are the social, political and economic contexts of digital news media entrepreneurship? 2) Does technology help digital news media start-ups to create an independent, democratic space for interaction?

This paper addresses these questions using a case study of *The Wire* (www.thewire.in). Founded by veteran Indian journalists Siddharth Varadarajan, Sidharth Bhatia and MK Venu, *The Wire* started its operations in May 2015. It is published by The Foundation for Independent Journalism (FIJ), a not-for-profit, Section 8 Company in India. Varadarajan is the former editor of *The Hindu*, a leading English newspaper in India. Both MK Venu and Sidharth Bhatia have spent over 30 years in the field of journalism. While Venu worked with Siddharth Varadarajan at *The Hindu* as the executive editor of the paper’s North Indian Edition, Bhatia played a major role as one of the senior editorial team members involved in the launch of DNA newspaper in Mumbai. In February 2017, *The Wire* also launched its Hindi edition.

The following section discusses the studies that look at media entrepreneurship in general and the role of technology in particular. It also gives an overview of the broad critical theoretical framework employed by the study to analyze and interpret data. This is followed by a section on research methodology and an empirically supported analysis on the objectives and ideology of digital news media entrepreneurship that critically explains the social, political and economic contexts in which the digital news media firm – *The Wire* – operates. Further, this paper demonstrates how the technology owned by multinational corporations lead to commodification, exploitation and surveillance.

2. Literature Review

As part of the increased focus on media entrepreneurship, many scholars have tried to define media entrepreneurship and attempted to differentiate it from mainstream entrepreneurship. Achtenhagen (2008: 126) defines media entrepreneurship as “How new ventures aimed at bringing into existence future media goods and services are initially conceived of and subsequently developed, by whom, and with what consequences.” Khajeheian (2013: 128) considers media entrepreneurship as “Individuals or small firms of which use their own or others’ resources to create value by extracting opportunities via offering a service or product that is consist of any type of innovation in any of product/service characteristics, process, distribution channel or place, or different innovative usage, to the media market, or any other market that media is its main channel of interaction.” Khajeheian (2017: 106) further expanded this to define media entrepreneurship as “taking the risk to exploit opportunities (creation/discovery) by innovative use of (radical/incremental/imitative) resources (ownership/control) in transform of an idea into activities to offer value (creation/delivery) in a media form (content/platform/user data) that meets the need of a specific portion of market (businesses or consumers), either in an individual effort or by creation of new venture or entrepreneurial managing of an existing organizational entity and to earn benefit (money/attention/favorite behavior) from one of the sources that is willing to pay for (direct consumers, advertisers, data demanders or any customer of generated information of consumers).”

On the impact and functions of media entrepreneurship, Hoag (2008, p74) argues that media start-ups have the potential to challenge the increasing ownership concentration by providing “additional voices in the marketplace.” In their study on US media start-ups, Compaine and Hoag (2012) have analyzed the founders’ motivations for setting up new ventures and the barriers of entry faced by them. Khajeheian and Tadayoni (2016) found that media entrepreneurs can play a major role in public service media too by bringing in external sources of innovation. They argue that “promotion of media entrepreneurship in the society is a public value.” Media entrepreneurship studies have come from Asia too. Khajeheian (2013) studied the commercialization of digital innovations by Iranian media entrepreneurs and he says social media can help foster media entrepreneurship provided the entrepreneurs are willing to develop the business attitude and knowledge to use them for economic growth. In another study on media entrepreneurship policies in developing societies, Khajeheian (2014, 2019) says entrepreneurs in developing countries use “imitative innovation” by localizing the successful business models and products from the developed countries.

Studies have also looked at the role of digital technologies in creating media ventures, new revenue models and fostering participatory culture of interaction (Khajeheian, Friedrichsen & Modinger, 2018; Salamzadeh & Kirby, 2017; Salamzadeh, Williams & Labafi, 2019; Komulainen, Perttunen & Ulkuniemi, 2019). Roshandel Arabtani, Kawamorita, Ghanbary & Ebrahimi (2019: 50) suggest that to encourage media entrepreneurship, “policy makers must pay enough attention to infrastructures. They should “invest sufficiently on internet, payments, and communication infrastructures and also reduce the bureaucracy and regulations.” Salamzadeh, Markovic and MemarMasjed (2019: 71) point out the emergence of new opportunities for entrepreneurial activities in the field of media due to new technologies. They argue media convergence has led to an increase in media channel divergence and audience segments. Gleason and Murschetz (2019) contend that online interactivity is a major driver in the success of entrepreneurs as it helps companies to

dynamically adopt to customer preferences. McKelvie and Picard, (2008), focusses on the digital media start-ups that have disrupted the media markets and challenged the traditional practices by creating radically new ways of producing, marketing and distributing products. Carvajal et al. (2012) demonstrate that digitization has helped media to find new avenues to raise money and move to a participatory, public service-based business model. Benkler (2006: 30-32) argues that the Internet can help reverse the “concentration and commercialization of cultural production” by opening up alternative courses of action for people as individuals and as social actors. Jenkins (2006: 4-9) talks about the “participatory culture” brought about by media convergence and the emergence of “newly empowered”, “active” and “socially connected” consumers, which have led to “an alternative source of media power”.

While it is true that the digital technologies have helped foster media entrepreneurship by bringing down the entry barriers and the cost of production and distribution, the relationship between technology and society is more complex than these studies suggest, especially in a diverse and developing country like India, where it is important to study whether the government policies and private ownership of technologies are conducive for the creation of an independent, democratic news media. As Murdock (2013) says, digital media discussions often forget the fact that the rise of the Internet is central to the process of “marketization, which has significantly expanded the operational scope of private corporations while shrinking the public domain.” In addition, news as a media product is different from other consumer centric digital media products due to its public good character. For example, Siapera and Papadopoulou (2016) found that journalistic cooperatives in Greece focused on producing social benefits and social relationships with their audiences rather than profits. In their case study on *Mediapart*, Wagemans, Witschge and Deuze (2016) found that the online venture challenged and provided an alternative to mainstream press in France by following a traditional journalism ideology.

These analyses call for a critical approach to look at the social and political contexts in which a media start-up operates and the role of digital technologies and their use by the news media venture. As Deuze (2005) says while studying a journalism start-up, it is important to consider the social and political contexts of business formation. This is because unlike other businesses, journalism start-ups have to find a balance between commercial interests and their occupational ideology, such as editorial independence and autonomy.

Drawing on the critical traditions, this study utilizes Smythe’s (1981) concept of audience commodity to examine the use of social media and revenue model of The Wire. It also draws on Fuchs (2009: 80) theorization of how Google, Yahoo, YouTube, and social networking sites such as Facebook act as “commodified Internet space”, as they are governed by accumulation logic and offer free goods or platforms to attract users and sell space to advertisers. As advertising rates depend on size and demographic character of audience, these free platforms owned by multinational companies also engage in surveillance to collect data on users leading to exploitation (Andrejevic, 2009; Fuchs, 2011). Further, state institutions use Internet and social media for surveillance (Fuchs, 2014).

3. Materials and Methods

This article is part of a larger exploratory study of the political economy of digital news media in India. The study follows a qualitative approach to analyze three case studies, as the subject of the investigation – ad-less digital news media – is not well understood or covered in Indian academic research. The paper employs a case study method due to its “ability to discover a wide variety of social, cultural, and political factors potentially related to the phenomenon of interest that may not be known in advance” (Bhattacharjee, 2012: 40). This paper presents the findings and conclusions of

one of the cases under study – The Wire -- to offer an in-depth analysis of the objectives of entrepreneurship and the media's use of technology for news production and distribution. The three organizations under study were selected using Patton's (1990: 169) "extreme or deviant case sampling" method. Like the other two organizations, The Wire was selected as a case study due to its revenue model that does not depend on advertising, ownership pattern, funding, and type of content.

Empirical evidence for this article was collected by integrating qualitative methods of three types. The first was the 8 semi-structured interviews conducted with the founders, editorial staff, and contributors of The Wire between October 2015 and December 2016. In order to contextualize and build on the interview data, the researcher also used a wide assortment of texts related to The Wire, including news reports, trade material, research reports, published interviews with the founders, and editorial information on the site; as well as 10 informal interviews with mainstream journalists. For the semi-structured interviews, a questionnaire consisting of 25 questions was sent to the participants in advance. The questions focused on The Wire's revenue model, objectives of setting up a news venture, funding, reasons for choosing an ad-less business model, its use of technology, and its audience/readers and their participation in news production and distribution. The interviews were recorded and were transcribed manually.

The transcriptions were later sent to the interviewees for their approval. For the informal interviews, no formal questionnaire was used. Talking points mainly covered the journalists' perspective on digital news media space in general and ad-less media in particular; the advantages and disadvantages of ad-less revenue models; and the principles that guide the functioning of such media in a corporate-dominated communication industry. The researcher took notes during the interviews and clarifications were sought whenever needed during the subsequent data analysis. These interviews allowed the researcher to gain insight into the differences and similarities between an independent, ad-less digital media and advertiser-subsidized mainstream media.

The interview data were analyzed using thematic coding (Flick 2009: 318-323). Each interview was analyzed initially using open codes. Subsequently, interviews were further coded to generate root codes and sub codes. This helped understand the connection among codes. Finally, selective coding was employed to generate common themes across various categories. This approach was adopted to get a thematic structure that is grounded in the data and comparable across the interviews. For this paper, the author selected 9 themes -- entrepreneurial objectives, ideology, branding, technology's role, power and control, legal challenges, commodification, exploitation and surveillance (Table 1) --that are relevant to the research questions using selective coding.

For the critical analysis of technology, these themes were interpreted in accordance with the theories described in the review of literature to understand and critique the digital news media's objective of creating an independent media space and its dependency on corporate owned and government-controlled technologies. For instance, commodification, exploitation and technology's role are analyzed using the critical theories of Internet (Fuchs, 2009) and Smythe's (1981) concept on audience commodification. These themes are clubbed together and explained in detail in the following sections.

Table 1. Themes and Categories

Thematic Category	Selective Codes
Entrepreneurial Objectives	Founders' reasons for starting a new firm, leaving their employment, family ownership, corporate control
Ideology	Choosing not-for-profit structure, establishing independent media, ad-less revenue model, upholding individual liberty, watchdog media, strengthen democracy, protest movement against large corporates
Branding	Credibility, reputation, experience, expectations from public, elitist media
Technology's role	Low cost, bringing down entry barriers, immediate feedback, disproportionate influence
Power and Control	Governments' role, hostile policies, Internet shutdown, producers' control over content, powerful individuals trying to control news
Legal Challenges	Cases against the organization, slow pace of legal process
Commodification	Social media dependency, activities on social media
Exploitation	Free content creation on social media, User data being used for accumulating profit by social media
Surveillance	User data being collected by governments, data exchange between government and social media, data misuse by government against individuals

4. Results

4.1. Objectives, Ideology and Branding

The basic aim of establishing *The Wire*, said its founders, was to build a space for quality journalism, without being influenced by corporate funding or family ownership. V¹, one of the founding editors of *The Wire*, stated that as per Section 8 of the Indian Companies Act 2013, the three founding editors were the directors of the company. Blaming mainstream media's advertising-subsidized business model for eroding the professional standards of journalism, the founding editors wanted *The Wire* to be a not-for-profit organization supported by grants and contributions from individuals. In May 2016, *The Wire* had 10 employees apart from the three founding editors.

The decision of the founders of *The Wire* to not follow the business model of mainstream media has much to do with the circumstances under which they came together to establish the organization. Varadarajan's exit from *The Hindu* was not devoid of controversy. The fight between Varadarajan and the owners of *The Hindu* became public in 2013, when the owning family accused Varadarajan of violating the editorial code. Following a public spat, Varadarajan quit the newspaper, saying that the family who owned the paper wanted to take back control of *The Hindu* and that they did not want to run it as a professional organization. In fact, Varadarajan took to Twitter to announce his decision to quit *The Hindu*. There were other facets to the editorial changes at *The Hindu*. Media reports suggest Varadarajan's US citizenship and his decision to not place any stories on India's present Prime Minister Narendra Modi from the right wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) on the front page of the

¹ Interview participants are not identified by name in order to protect confidentiality

newspaper contributed to his resignation. One of the BJP leaders Subramanian Swamy had filed a case questioning Varadarajan's eligibility to become the editor of an Indian newspaper, citing his citizenship. (Choudhary, 2013; Staff, 2014).

It was against this backdrop of ideological battle that the founding editors launched the operations of *The Wire* as an independent digital news media, free from family and corporate control. As M, an editor with *The Wire*, said he used to work with Varadarajan at *The Hindu*. He recalled that things changed drastically in October 2013 as Varadarajan was forced to drop a lot of his projects. "Varadarajan was stressing on editorial independence from business interest. All of those aspirations sort of came together and we decided that this is the right time to start a venture." It should be noted that the third founder Sidharth Bhatia's exit from DNA did not involve any ideological battle. Bhatia said he left the paper in 2009 to devote his time to writing books on culture and cinema.

Opinions within the journalistic community were divided regarding Varadarajan's performance as the first professional editor of *The Hindu* who did not belong to the family of owners. As GP, a journalist with a leading news daily, said that Varadarajan along with then CEO Arun Anant tried to change the work culture at *The Hindu*. "Varadarajan hired new people and encouraged competition. But many senior editorial members who had been with the organisation for long could not approve of this change in culture."

As far as Varadarajan's political ideology is concerned, there were no doubts. As AR, an editor with a business newspaper, said, "Varadarajan was and still is against the kind of politics practised by right-wing Hindutva people, especially Narendra Modi." While AR thought such a stand is justifiable at the personal level, he said "as an editor you should not put a blanket ban on certain stories in a highly competitive media space as it could affect readership and revenues."

SG, an editor with a business daily, also believed that the BJP's big win in the 2014 parliamentary elections and Modi's rise as the prime minister have prompted the launch of *The Wire*. "For Varadarajan, these are strong enough reasons to launch a media that can provide a platform for anti-establishment news, criticizing the government and its policies." He however, had doubts whether *The Wire* would be able to follow the same stand if there was a change in government. SG also questioned the sustainability of an ideologically charged news platform in a capitalist society, where money was needed to survive. "Only a few like Varadarajan who belongs to an elite club of journalists can launch a non-profit digital media to take on the government without any assured source of revenues."

B, one of the founders of *The Wire* agreed that the founders' public image work in a positive way. However, he did not want to use the word brand image to describe them. "Unfortunately, the word brand is used to describe a human being. What you may say as a brand is decades of credibility, slowly built up." He felt that as everybody knew who they were, the expectations also could go up. High expectation from the public also could mean *The Wire* had to reflect the values of its founders. "The Wire has 7-8 articles put out on a day. Those articles have to meet the same standards as our credibility. Those articles have to be exactly of the same rigour, of the same quality," said B.

According to him, *The Wire* stood for clean writing, objectivity and fairness. He thinks at the moment “*The Wire* is the brand, not us.”

Although it seemed *The Wire* represented the left side of the ideological spectrum, the founders’ position was more nuanced than that. As V explained, “We are a not-for-profit public interest journalism platform. We hope that we can have revenue models which are not totally ad-driven.” V felt advertisers might influence editorial policies. “Our basic objective is to inform without fear or favor.” He said the founders’ basic value was that they stood for the right of the individual against the normally overbearing nature of the State. “We are socially and economically liberal in our approach.”

AM, a contributor to *The Wire* and other digital news media organizations, concurred that these sites were popular among the elite. He called them “alternative news sites” and said they had great traction among the academic and media communities. “There are a certain niche people who refer to them. It is the culturally dominant section of let us say alternative society or whatever you like to say.” As a former journalist who worked with CNN-News 18 (formerly CNN-IBN) and Times Now, AM considered news production as a political endeavor. He left the traditional media due to the corporatization of news.

SK, a novelist, corporate executive and contributor to *The Wire* and other online publications, said that commitment to ideology and commitment to truth were two different things. “Bias is inherent and the issue is how many biases a journalist can fight to offer public service news.” According to SK, in Western countries, it was mostly mandatory for financial journalists to disclose their business interests – e.g., if they hold a company’s stocks or have done consultancy work for a company – while writing about a company or an event. He pointed out that in India, while some people made disclosures for business writing, nobody made any such disclosures for political stories. “It never comes out whether one is a supporter of the BJP or not. At least four journalists have become Rajya Sabha members after Modi coming to power.” He admitted that when he was writing for *The Wire*, he could not write anything positive on Modi. SK considered himself a right-wing intellectual who did not want any kind of government intervention in society. Yet he wrote for *The Wire*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *Scroll* and *The Hindu*, all of which he believed support left liberal ideology. He admitted that if he were to strictly follow his ideology, he would not be writing anything at all. SK also revealed that he could exercise his liberty because he did not depend on journalism to make a living. He has a thriving corporate career and his contributions to various sites and newspapers helped establish him as a well-known writer. “I will not deny the fact that it improves my Google search ranking and contributes to my corporate career.”

It is evident that people’s interpretations of ideology are different making it sometimes difficult to draw a line between left and right. This is especially true in a country like India, where many journalists support free market ideologies, as the liberalization policies in the 1990s witnessed a rise in salaries and an increase in the number of job opportunities. Therefore, it is not surprising that SK, a right-wing corporate liberal who writes for fame and glory, and AM, an activist, who thinks journalism is a political process, find their space in a left-leaning not-for-profit public service news website.

Most of the interviewees, who started their careers in the late 1980s and early 1990s agreed that liberalization has worked well for the Indian media industry. They did not think advertisements influence news reporting. TA, an editor of a mainstream daily, said “the bigger the media house, the greater its power to withstand pressure related to advertisements.” He pointed out that the media industry was so competitive that to survive one cannot afford to take sides.

In fact, in India there were no laws governing the advertising space in newspapers. Concurring with TA, SG stated that what prevented newspapers from becoming mere vehicles for advertisements was the fear of losing readers. “If you lose readers, then advertisers will shift to another publication.” This is a thought that is in agreement with Smythe’s (1981) concept of audience commodity. Media advertisers pay for readers’ attention, and media houses want to increase their readership or audience so that they can command a premium from advertisers. Given the increased competition, media houses do not want to compromise on news quality for fear of losing readers and revenues, and this fear works in favor of readers getting quality news. What frames the news production process in mainstream media is this contradiction between maximizing advertisement revenues and protecting readers’ interests.

The mainstream media’s defensive stance is shared by B as he said “I personally do not think advertisements will dilute the content.” He considered that advertisements were also information. “No journalist will object to advertising. People will object to advertising influencing editorial.” However, Dubbudu (2015) noted that in India the government was one of the largest advertisers, and it used this status to buy favorable coverage from the media. Viewing advertising and news as church and state, B said the separation between them could not be taken to a ridiculous extent.

Furthermore, not all people from *The Wire* share the same point of view, as M stated “We are going to be completely independent. We have decided never to go for advertisements.” He considered *the Wire*’s launch and its journey as a kind of resistance or protest movement against the mainstream business media. “That is part of our identity.” Stressing on retaining editorial independence M said *The Wire* has decided never to take any kind of corporate funding. “If anyone chooses to give us money, it has to be in the form of grants or donations through a not-for-profit foundation.” He did not consider foundation funding as an investment. “It is not the same as IBN Network being bought out by Reliance, the largest corporate in India. That is not possible with *The Wire*.”

However, B thought that *The Wire* could not completely avoid corporate funding, as he said there were enough enlightened people in this country who would be willing to fund organizations like *The Wire* as long as they brought some serious issues into the national debate. He explained that such people were not saying “Here is the money and do this,” nor are they saying “Here is the money and do not do this.” As both facets are equally important. important.” He pointed out that those who were willing to fund *The Wire* were not going to sit on its board. “But they will fund those ventures whose focus is in alignment with their vision.” V also felt advertising revenues from small and medium companies and government campaigns for programs like immunizations should be fine, as they did not influence content production.

The wire was started with an initial investment of Rs 10 lakh each from the founders. In August 2016, *The Wire* received a grant of Rs 1.95 from the IPSMF and a second tranche of Rs 1.75 crore in March 2017. Until this point, the operational expenses of the organisation had been covered by the founders' personal money and donations from readers and supporters. As part of the donations from individuals, *The Wire* received Rs 1 crore in two tranches from Rs 50 lakh from Rohan Murty, son of N.R. Narayana Murthy, one of the founders of India's second largest IT services company Infosys. Rohan Murty's donations fund *The Wire's* science coverage.

There are also people who believe it is the duty of ordinary readers to make independent media sustainable through donations and subscriptions. SK said advertising as a model had its own consequences for the independence of news. "There are times when companies will withdraw advertisements. Governments have their own way of controlling media." He thought people should pay for news. "Why are people not willing to pay for news whereas they spend Rs 150 to buy a movie ticket? That to me is a more significant question."

These discussions and disagreements on advertising and funding stem from the fear that it may work against readers' interests and the delivery of news as a public service. As Splichal (2007: 255) states "public service media must be a service of the public, by the public, and for the public". Public service media (PSM) should be financed, controlled and produced by the public. *The Wire* faces issues of sustainability and finding new revenue sources. Individual donations are currently the organization's only source of revenues. *The Wire* is planning to establish a think tank that will provide research. It is also exploring collaborations with other media. As V said the objective was to cover the cost and plough enough surplus back into the organization. At a later stage, *The Wire* is planning to adopt a subscription model.

However, *The Wire*, cannot accept payments from abroad. Only Indian citizens can donate to *The Wire*. The organisation does not have Foreign Contributions Regulation Act (FCRA) clearance from the government. Considering *The Wire's* anti-establishment position and the number of cases filed against it by people closely linked to the ruling BJP government (Ninan, 2017), it is highly unlikely that it will receive FCRA clearance. In addition, a subscription model that places articles behind a paywall can undermine *The Wire's* objective of providing news as public service. It is also in conflict with its identity as a protest movement against the mainstream media, as a paywall restricts access and makes news a direct commodity being sold at a price to a consumer. As of the time of writing, the content is completely free to all readers on *The Wire's* site.

4.2. Power and Control Over Technology and Content

The interview participants from *The Wire* unequivocally stated that technology helped the organization to keep its operating costs to a minimum. The big advantage of the web for them was that unlike mainstream media they did not have to spend anything on distribution. According to them, the cost of establishing an online media organization is very low compared to traditional media like print or TV. As a result, the founders managed to launch the site with a very small capital base. As V explained that technology helped them to have such a disproportionate influence on the web in terms of competing with other media organizations with such a small capital investment. Despite a decentralized set up where contributors and some employees are located in other parts of the country, due to technology, coordination and connectivity never posed a problem in *The Wire's* functioning.

Although the participants were optimistic about the potential of the technology to bring down operational cost, they admitted that the news gathering (reporting costs including employee salaries and contributors' payments) were the same as those of mainstream media. In 2016, *The Wire* commissioned 60% of its content and 40% came as contributions from academics and other professionals. While *The Wire* was dependent on technology for the production and distribution of its content, B said "we should not make grand judgements on technology like the net is the answer to all our problems." He noted that at the moment everyone was rushing into online media. With competition increasing B thought that there would be people making silent compromises on content to stay afloat and nobody would come to know about it." His fears stem from the fact that it is easy to control the technology, as much of technology's potential to provide a democratic online space depends on government policies. As B says, "So far everything is open. How do you know what kind of rules the government is planning?"

These fears are in line with McChesney's stand on technology. As McChesney (2010: 142-143) argues, "The openness of the Internet is due to policy as well as technology. Telecommunication companies and cable companies have the power to censor the Internet and work hand-in-hand with the governments that grant them monopoly licenses." Smythe (1981: 217-223) also observes that technology is not an independent autonomous force. Although India has adopted net neutrality norms, the rules are likely to benefit large companies like Reliance Jio Infocomm and Bharti Airtel. These are integrated operators, which own both telecom infrastructure and content, and TRAI has decided to exempt content delivery networks from the regulation (Pandey, 2017). Reliance is also one of the largest media owners in the country (Media ownership, 2015). With significant telecom infrastructure under its control, Reliance is likely to attain an edge over others, especially small digital media companies like *The Wire* that do not own or control telecom infrastructure, suggesting the difference between access to the means of production and ownership of it (Andrejevic, 2011: 97).

In addition, technology is not a sufficient condition for the growth of independent media. It is dominated by capitalist structure. In the absence of suitable constitutional protection, state or the central governments in India can always control the media using legal provisions. This is evident in the case of *The Wire*, which is facing problems from a hostile central government. Unlike the US, in India, the constitution allows the state to impose reasonable restrictions on freedom of speech and expression (Venkataramanan, 2016), and it is difficult for any news media organization to uphold the right to free speech. They may either be forced to make compromises or be pushed into drawn-out legal battles. With the Indian Supreme Court having confirmed defamation as a criminal offence (Sen, 2016), there is an added danger of powerful individuals taking media to court on frivolous charges of defamation. *The Wire*, is engaged in a legal battle with Rajya Sabha (upper house of the Indian Parliament) member Rajiv Chandrasekhar and Home Minister Amit Shah's son Jay Shah in two separate defamation cases. *The Wire* was forced to take down two articles from its site following an ex parte injunction issued by a Karnataka state court in a case filed by Rajiv Chandrasekhar (Staff, 2017; NH Web Desk, 2019)

The state and central governments, powerful individuals and corporates in India have always used laws to control the media (India Today Web Desk, 2017) and it also tops the world with the maximum number of Internet shutdown (Reddy, 2018). The Indian government shutdown the

Internet purportedly to prevent political unrest, communal tensions and riots. The country's only Muslim majority state Jammu and Kashmir has been cut off from the world since August 2019, when the central government decided to revoke its special status and made it a union territory (Gilbert, 2019). Poorly-defined existing laws are sufficient to control the digital media and communication. In June 2019, a journalist was arrested by the Uttar Pradesh state police for a tweet on the state chief minister (Pandey & Singh, 2019). In most cases the courts failed to uphold Indian citizens' fundamental rights and sent them to jail for having a copy of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Vidya, 2019). Even the Indian Supreme court has imposed restriction on free speech as a bail condition in a corruption case involving a former finance minister of India (Roy, 2019). When even sentences uttered in a seminar can lead to sedition charges in India (Editorial *The Hindu*, 2010), it is almost impossible to expect the Internet and technological tools to establish a free media space.

The interview participants associated with *The Wire* said that they valued the Internet's potential to elicit instant responses. However, they moderated comments from readers. M said *The Wire* has very few comments compared to other online media, perhaps due to its comment moderation policy. As he explained that apart from instigating or intimidating comments *The Wire* did not permit readers to use bad language. "We like to use very good English and grammar. We do not allow comments that stray off the topic." It also hardly published any responses or comments submitted by readers as articles on its site. Yet the interviewees considered *The Wire* as an "independent" media that is willing to publish provocative or controversial content. As M puts it, "We don't have to answer to anyone." The interviewees said *The Wire* did not change their content based on their audience's comments or preferences. The only exception was factual errors, which were corrected immediately.

Many scholars (Shirky, 2010; Athique, 2013) have discussed the ability of the active audience of digital media to redefine the top-down information model of mass media and the subsequent shift of power from producers to users or audience. It can be seen that despite being an online media organization, *The Wire* cannot be considered as a medium that offers power to its audience. It does not provide a space for critical discourse or diverse opinions. A truly democratic media, as Herman (1995: 213-215) suggests, is one in which listeners, viewers, and readers not only choose programs, articles, and issues to be addressed – but the producers and participants of the resultant content are also in large measure. When examined through this lens, it can be inferred that *The Wire* does not function as a democratic medium.

4.3. Commodification, Exploitation and Surveillance

Being a news media organization, distribution of content is extremely important for *The Wire* and it depends on social media owned by private corporations to distribute its content. Social media, the interview participants from *The Wire* said, were "critical" for them. They consider social media as their main sources of distribution. As B says, "Without social media people will not come to the site." The founders of *The Wire* admitted that their dependence on social media was in stark contrast to their declared stance against corporate-funded and controlled media, as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter are large profit-oriented MNCs. However, they believed that they had no other option but to depend on these MNCs for reaching out to an audience, as *The Wire* is not "very well-known." They hoped that their dependence on social media would decrease once *The Wire* grew into

a known entity. B noted that “the importance of social media will still be there, but it will be relatively less than what it is today.”

Although social media act as free channels of distribution, they are completely controlled by for-profit corporations. They control *The Wire's* access to its audience. As Fuchs (2011) says, on social media, prosumers become unpaid workers generating content for the corporations. By disseminating its content on social media, *The Wire* generates content for the private corporations and in return gains access to distribution channels and audience. While the content produced by *The Wire* becomes a revenue-generating product for the social media, the creator of the content – in this case, *The Wire* – is not paid for its labor. This exploitation is the fee *The Wire* has to pay to gain access to social media and thereby to an audience. This also shows the class relations (Fuchs & Sevignani 2013: 262) that exist between social media like Facebook and *The Wire*, an ad-less digital news media that is struggling to raise money. Social media corporations accumulate capital through the exploitation of *The Wire* and its users' data without sharing that wealth with them. In addition, *The Wire* and its users also create free content for social media platforms leading to further exploitation.

As a not-for-profit digital news firm that does not accept advertisements, *The Wire* does not produce its readers and audience as a commodity which is sold to advertisers in return for revenues. This, however, does not imply a complete absence of commodification and commercialization. *The Wire's* YouTube channels host advertisements. This causes *The Wire's* audience to serve as what Fuchs (2011) calls “double objects of commodification.” These audience are first sold by social media companies to advertisers. Secondly, they are constantly exposed to the marketing campaigns by advertisers. This capitalist logic of commodification is evident in *The Wire's* attempt to attract an audience on social media by placing its content on these sites. In this process, *The Wire* becomes an advertiser in itself and its content on social media becomes an advertisement.

The Wire's content on social media is also susceptible to censorship. As contributor SK says, he has been trying to post an article on Mukesh and Anil Ambani, the brothers who own one of the largest private companies in India – Reliance Industries-- on his Facebook page. “Within no time, it will disappear. Thankfully, this is an old article and I have paper cuttings with me.” This kind of censorship on Facebook reflects digital news media's precarious relationship with social media as a means of distributing news and attracting an audience. Although its dependence on social media makes *The Wire* vulnerable to online censorship, the founders feel that social media is democratic. According to V, in 2016, Facebook blocked an article written by a former diplomat for *The Wire* which criticized the present government. The article was subsequently reinstated due to online protest. V thinks social media corporations may not control content for their own survival as they cannot afford to dilute their brand by censoring or cozying up to any governments.

However, the economic and political interests of private corporations and the state are a powerful force that can undermine the perceived democratic nature of social media. Advocating for a public-service social media “that transcends particularistic control and represents the public interest,” Fuchs (2014) notes that state institutions use the Internet and social media for surveillance. The Indian government's Personal Data Protection Bill, proposes to provide “blanket surveillance” power on personal data to investigating agencies to ensure the security of the state (Doval, 2019). The

US authorities have also begun asking visa applicants and other visitors for details of their social media accounts (Varghese, 2016), suggesting that governments can use social media to exert control and power over people.

The Wire's engagement with its readers is also mediated by capital, as it uses the Disqus platform for comment management. Disqus' revenue model is not markedly different from those of free social media platforms. The company tracks and collects user data from sites that use its commenting system. Disqus follows its users' activities across different sites even when they are not log in to its site (Couts, 2012). On the Disqus site under "Privacy Policy," the company provides a detailed description of its policies on collecting user data and sharing it with third parties for advertising and marketing purposes. By using Disqus' service, *The Wire* becomes its partner, providing a large number of users to the US-based marketing company, leading to the commodification of readers. Disqus in turn tracks these readers and sells their personal information to third-party advertisers, thereby commercializing the user data.

5. Discussion

This study suggests that launching and operating a digital news media organization is an ideological process. The case of *The Wire* offers useful insights into the way in which the news production and distribution is conceptualized and practiced. One of the main findings of this study is how a group of former journalists has come together to challenge the way in which mainstream media functions in India. The founders believe that focusing on profit may lead to compromise on news content. They also want to keep the organization as an independent media house and do not want their offering -- news -- to be influenced by corporate or capital. As Hoag (2008) argued, *The Wire* is an effort to challenge the ownership concentration by proving an alternative space for voices. The analysis shows that *The Wire* considers itself as a protest movement against the big corporates and family-controlled media businesses. The author's own study (Sreekala, 2019) on another digital news media start-up also shows that ideology plays a major role in creating digital news media entrepreneurship. These findings are also in line with what Wagemans et al. (2016) suggest in their study on the French journalism start-up *Mediapart*. However, unlike in France, an independent news venture with strong ideological leanings face many challenges in India. While this ideological battle can create a watchdog media that can uphold individual liberty and strengthen democracy by offering anti-establishment news, it is not easy to predict how such an organization will function if there is a change in government.

Another contribution of this research is that it finds that the Indian government is not committed to create an environment to foster news media entrepreneurship. While the paper demonstrates what was argued by Khajeheian and Tadayoni (2016) in their study that media entrepreneurship can help create public value, the government is unwilling to support firms like *The Wire*. The country lost over \$3 billion due to Internet shutdown during 2012-17. Kashmir alone suffered a loss of over Rs 100 billion since August 5 this year (Bakshi, 2019). In their study on audio-visual entrepreneurship in China, Xu and Hu (2019) find that SME entrepreneurs get limited support from the government and their functioning is constrained by license management and content censorship. The Indian

government's policies are also similar. Although it does not resort to overt content censorship, frequent Internet shutdowns are a way of controlling online communication. The lack of Internet freedom in India can not only adversely affect news media ventures but digital entrepreneurship in general also. As a result, it can be concluded that the digital technologies are not a sufficient condition for the growth of independent digital news media.

Contrary to general beliefs, this paper finds social media playing an exploitative role in the functioning of *The Wire*. While *The Wire* creates free content for social media in return for offering free space, social media companies do not share their profit with organizations like *The Wire*. In addition, social media appropriate the user data from *The Wire* and use it for profit accumulation. In this process, *The Wire* indirectly creates audience commodity similar to that of the traditional news media. However, unlike the traditional media, *The Wire's* revenue model is not completely dependent on this audience commodity. Social media's role is further complicated in India due to the government policies. These findings are in line with Fuch's (2009) theorization of Internet as a commodified space. The study further demonstrates what Andrejevic (2009) and Fuchs (2011, 2014) suggested how social media companies and government institutions use the technological tools for exploitation and surveillance. In addition, the analysis shows that contrary to its positioning as a democratic media, producers retain complete control over news content in *The Wire*, undermining its ability to provide a democratic space for interaction.

5.1. Research Limitations

These conclusions are based on a single case study. As a result, it may not represent every ad-less digital news media organization in India. In addition, these analyses are based on a set of questionnaires sent to a limited number of people. Considering that this study was done during the early stages of a start-up, conclusions may vary depending on the time, characteristics of the interview participants and the changes in the organization's structure and revenue model. Another factor of influence is the type of government in power in India. A right-wing government trying to oppress the fundamental rights of people and suppress the minority rights have played a significant role in this paper's analysis. Although the study offers a critical understanding of the ideological motivations of the founders, use of technology and the challenges faced by a digital news media organization trying to move away from the advertiser-subsidized business model, the analysis cannot be extrapolated to other digital news media organizations in India.

5.2. Theoretical Implications

The theoretical contribution of the study on digital news media entrepreneurship is four-fold. The first point is that it looks at news media entrepreneurship as an ideological process.. Secondly, the study shows that unlike entrepreneurs in other fields, journalist founders are not driven by profit motives. They look at entrepreneurship as a tool to change the society. In that way digital news media entrepreneurship falls under the category of social entrepreneurship. Thirdly, success and sustainability of digital news media entrepreneurship in India depends on government policies. Fourth, digital economy is driven by the interests of large multinational corporations that own most

of the technological tools and social media platforms. There is an increasingly unequal wealth generation taking place in the digital space, wherein small firms like *The Wire* contributes to the revenues of social media companies by supplying audience commodity and content, leading to exploitation and surveillance.

5.3. Suggestions for future research

Future studies can look at the impact of digital news media entrepreneurship on mainstream media in India, particularly on labor. Considering that digital news start-ups employ very little formal labor, mainstream media may have to look at cutting their labor cost to survive competition. Empirical evidence on how the mainstream media control its cost will be a fascinating research project. There are also several areas for further development, such as the legal aspects of the social media user data and its exchange in India and also how it affects an individual's privacy, which is a fundamental right in the country. Another area that can be explored is audience participation in the growing digital news media space. Studies can focus on readers' willingness to pay for news and how they look at privacy threats online. In addition, studies can explore business collaborations, including mergers and acquisitions in the field of digital news media start-ups.

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