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Sustaining Journalism in the Digital Age: The Rise of Subscription Models in Indian Digital News Media

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Abstract

This chapter examines the rise of subscription model as an alternative and sustainable revenue strategy for Indian digital news media. With tech giants such as Google and Facebook dominating digital advertising, online news outlets face mounting financial challenges and are increasingly turning to subscription-based revenue frameworks. The chapter highlights how traditional news platforms such as The Hindu, The Times of India, and on the other hand digital native platforms like Scroll and The Ken are experimenting with various approaches — including hard paywall, freemium model, and pay-per-use model — to generate a steady revenue stream for the media outlets. By shifting the focus from click-driven metrics to content quality, subscription models incentivize the production of high-quality, trustworthy journalism and infotainment content. Nonetheless, the transition is not without hurdles; deeply ingrained habits of free news consumption, price sensitivity among Indian consumers, and a cultural reluctance to pay for digital content vis-a-vas traditional modes of subscription pose significant challenges. The chapter also touches upon technological advancements

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in digital payments and personalized content curation, which support the model enumerated in the chapter. By analyzing current trends, consumer behavior, and case studies, the chapter assesses the potential of subscription model to secure the long-term sustainability of journalism and infotainment in India's rapidly evolving digital landscape.

Keywords: *Media economy, Subscription model, Digital news media, Revenue model, Digital advertising, Freemium model, Pay-per-use model.*

Introduction

In today's digital age, news is just a tap away—but behind every clickable headline is a media house struggling to stay afloat. As disrupted by the tech giants, digital advertising revenue is drying up for Indian news platforms. So, they are struggling to survive and are increasingly exploring alternative revenue models to keep the presses running (KPMG, 2020). The rapid expansion of the internet and widespread adoption of smartphones in India has transformed how Indians consume news. As of 2023, India boasts approximately 821 million internet users, with 65% of them accessing news online (Internet and Mobile Association of India, 2023). News is no longer confined to newspaper or TV news bulletins. Audiences now want and consume news updates in real-time, delivered directly to their smartphone or computer screens. This shift has presented both opportunities and challenges for news organizations, with the most pressing challenge being financial sustainability.

Traditionally, Indian news media thrived on advertisement-driven revenue model. The formula is simple: publish content, attract readers, and sell their attention to advertisers. However, in the age of internet, the model has been challenged significantly. Global tech giants like Google and Facebook now dominate the digital advertising space, leaving only a small slice of the revenue pie for traditional media outlets. As these tech platforms absorb the lion's share of ad revenue through programmatic and hyper-targeted advertising, digital news organizations across the globe are forced to rethink their business strategies (Chyi & Ng, 2020; Kohli-Khandekar, 2025; KPMG, 2020). The result is a growing interest in the subscription model, where revenue is generated directly from audiences rather than advertisers. (Simon & Graves,

2019) Indian digital news publishers are no exception in this scenario (Aneez et al., 2019; KPMG, 2020).

The merits of the subscription model extend well beyond just the financial stability for media organizations, offering advantages for audiences also. By directly supporting journalism through subscriptions, audiences can contribute to the creation of high-quality, trustworthy content. Thus, subscription model offers a promising alternative to ad-based revenue, allowing media organizations to prioritize content over metrics. When revenue depends on subscriptions, the focus shifts from generating clicks to creating meaningful content that audiences are willing to pay for. This is particularly crucial in a market often flooded with clickbait and sensational content. A robust subscription base not only offers financial stability but also supports quality journalism by reducing sole reliance on external advertisers (Borchgrevink-Bræmus & Moe, 2023; Dutta, 2023).

However, implementing a subscription model in a country like India is not without challenges. For years, Indian audiences have enjoyed free access to online news. Over time, this habit has become deeply ingrained. As a result, many are hesitant to pay for digital news, especially when free alternatives are just a search away. The willingness to pay is often influenced by factors such as the perceived quality of journalism, the exclusivity of content, and the trustworthiness of the media outlet. (Kantar India, & Google, 2023) Furthermore, India's diverse economic landscape, with a large segment of the population being highly price-sensitive, adds to the complexity of convincing audiences to subscribe. (Kübler et al., 2018).

Despite these challenges, there are encouraging signs. A growing number of digital news platforms in India, including The Hindu, The Times of India, NDTV, The Ken, and Scroll have adopted subscription models with varying degrees of success (Aneez et al., 2019; KPMG, 2020). These platforms have experimented with different models, from freemium and metered paywalls to membership-based approaches. Their experiences provide valuable insights into what works and what doesn't in the Indian market.

This chapter explores the rise of subscription models in Indian digital news media, analyzing current trends, challenges, and the sustainability of this approach. It digs deep into the evolution of revenue models in Indian media, and audience attitude towards the subscription model. Ultimately, the chapter aims to assess whether subscription models can offer a viable path toward sustaining journalism in the digital age in India.

The Evolution of Revenue Models in Indian News Media

Indian news media primarily relied on an advertisement-driven revenue model. While subscription fees contributed to revenue, advertising sales remained the primary source of income for both newspapers and television networks. This model thrived in a pre-digital era where media-outlets maintained control over their audience and advertisers had limited channels to reach the masses. High circulation numbers and television viewership translated directly into lucrative advertising deals, ensuring a steady flow of revenue for the news media outlets in India.

Hitherto, the digital revolution disrupted this well-established model. The internet opened up a new frontier for news distribution, where content became widely accessible and often free of cost via news portals and social media platforms (Aneez et al., 2019). Many traditional media organizations, eager to capitalize on digital reach, adopted a free-access model backed by digital advertising. Initially, this strategy seemed viable, with digital advertising.

However, the landscape soon shifted as tech giants like Google and Facebook redefined the advertising ecosystem. With advanced data analytics, hyper-targeted advertising solutions, and a huge number of user-base, these platforms became indispensable to advertisers looking for precision and scale in reaching their potential customers. Digital media outlets found themselves competing not just with each other but with global IT-enabled MNCs that could offer unparalleled audience insights and cost-effective ad placements. Consequently, the share of advertising revenue available to traditional media shrank, forcing news organizations to rethink their business models ((Chyi & Ng, 2020; Kohli-Khandekar, 2025).

This financial strain led to an increased focus on generating high web traffic, often giving quality the back seat. These strategies became commonplace, leading to a surge in sensationalism and clickbait content. This scenario perfectly aligns with the saying, "When the product is free, you are the product", highlighting how advertising-driven models often prioritize user data monetization over content quality. While this approach brought short-term gains to the media outlets, it undermined long-term trust with audiences and did little to secure sustainable revenue (Khawar & Boukes, 2024).

The implementation of subscription models in Western markets makes Indian digital news media think of exploring similar strategies. This inclination towards subscription-based models marks a critical evolution in India's news media. This reflects a broader global trend of transitioning from ad-reliant frameworks to reader-supported journalism.

The Subscription Model

Subscription model is a business framework wherein customers receive products or avail services on a recurring basis, with payments made at regular intervals (Rappa, 2004). Differing from one-time purchases, subscriptions offer companies a stable and predictable revenue stream, enabling long-term financial planning and reducing dependency on volatile sales cycles. This model is particularly advantageous for consumers, providing convenience and continuous access to services without the need for repeated transactions. Additionally, subscription pricing often proves more economical than purchasing individual products or services over time, enhancing its appeal in various industries (Gassmann et al., 2014).

Originating in the 17th century with German booksellers, the subscription model initially aimed to gauge demand for expensive multi-volume works such as encyclopedias and reference books. This approach quickly gained momentum in the newspaper and magazine industries, where it remains relevant even today. Over time, the model evolved beyond publishing, finding applications in diverse sectors, from software and digital media to consumer goods and internet services (Gassmann et al., 2014; Rappa, 2004).

Modern subscription models often combine free and premium options to attract a large number of audiences, especially in software and content businesses (Rappa, 2004). In the media and entertainment industry, where content is the product, there are few variations of the model. *Soft access* or *freemium model* offers some content for free while reserving premium content and features exclusively for paying subscribers. Free content is ad-enabled here while paid content is ad-free clean experience. This is usage-independent access model. *Metered paywall model* being a usage-dependent access model, allows limited free access to content before requiring a subscription. For example, a user can read 5 free news articles in a month and to read beyond this they need to pay or subscribe. *Hard access model* provides stricter access to content, with all content behind a paywall. *Pay-per-use* model requires users to make a small payment or 'micropayment' for each piece of paid content they consume. This approach benefits consumers by allowing them to pay only for content that interests them. On the other hand, pay-per-use model gives the content providers the advantage of lowering the entry barrier, attracting more potential users (Rußell et al., 2020).

The Growth of Subscription Models in India

The adoption of subscription models in digital news media has gained substantial momentum globally, with nearly 47% of digital news outlets in the United States and Europe implementing some form of paywall by 2019 (Simon & Graves, 2019). As advertising revenues declined due to competition from tech giants like Google and Facebook, news organizations increasingly turned to subscription models as a sustainable revenue strategy (Chyi & Ng, 2020; Newman, 2019).

In India, a similar trend is emerging as digital news publishers explore subscription-based revenue models to enhance financial stability. Established newspapers such as The Times of India, The Hindu, Indian Express, Hindustan Times, and Business Standard have introduced subscription fees for their digital editions or e-papers. The Hindu implements a complete hard paywall strategy, keeping the e-paper and all their website content behind paywall. Digital publications like Scroll and The Ken have adopted subscription-based approaches, reflecting a

broader shift towards reader-supported journalism. Many outlets are also experimenting with hybrid models. For example, NDTV and Times of India mobile apps offer subscription-based option, providing a mix of free and premium content (Aneez et al., 2019; KPMG, 2020). Publications such as The Wire, The Print, The Quint, and Newslaundry[1] use a freemium model, offering free access to general content while reserving premium features for paying subscribers. The Times of India also launched TOI+ for "exclusive stories, ePaper, market tools & other benefits"[2].

This growing adoption of subscription models in Indian digital news sector indicates an evolving media landscape, where news publishers are increasingly aligning with global trends to diversify revenue streams and reduce dependency on advertising. By adopting varied subscription strategies—from hard paywalls to freemium models—Indian media is gradually building a more sustainable financial model, mirroring the global shift towards audience-supported journalism.

The reason behind the shift towards subscription models in India's digital news sector is the shrinking ad revenue. Google, Meta (Facebook's parent company), and JioStar are the largest media and entertainment companies in India. Bennet, Colleman and company, The Times of India's parent company comes only in fourth position. The Indian media ecosystem has evolved, with Google and Meta dominating the ad-driven and user-generated content segments. These tech giants reach nearly all of India's 523 million online users through platforms like social media, short-form videos, search engines, and influencer content. Traditional media houses, which produce original series, films, music, and news, struggle to compete. Despite creating much of the content that powers these platforms, mainstream media sees limited financial gains. In 2023, Google and Meta captured over 95% of the Rs 64,500 crore spent on digital media in India, representing more than a quarter of the total media and entertainment market, highlighting the challenge for news organizations (and other

1   Information on these sites' subscription models can be found on their respective websites: The Wire https://support.thewire.in, The Print https://theprint.in/subscribe, The Quint https://www.thequint.com/plan-selection, and Newslaundry https://www.newslaundry.com/subscription.

2   Information on this can be found on the website: https://buy.indiatimes.com/TOI/plans

media organizations) dependent on advertising revenue (Kohli-Khandekar, 2025).

India's digital payment revolution has also contributed significantly to the growth of subscription models. The advent of seamless online payment options, particularly through the Unified Payments Interface (UPI), has transformed purchasing digital subscriptions into a hassle-free experience. With just a few clicks, consumers can complete transactions securely and swiftly, reducing friction in the payment process. This ease of payment not only enhances the convenience for users but also supports businesses in building a stable and predictable revenue stream through subscriptions (PwC, 2020, 2023).

Indian Audience Willingness to Pay for Online News

While the subscription model in digital news media is gaining traction globally, concerns remain about the willingness of audiences to pay for online news. Research studies indicate that audiences are generally willing to pay for high-quality, exclusive content, particularly from legacy media outlets (Goyanes et al., 2018; Simon & Graves, 2019). In Indian context, by 2023, only one in seven Indian online news consumers expressed a willingness to pay for news, with quality journalism, fact-checking, and exclusive information being key motivators for those who do (Kantar India & Google, 2023).

Research on Indian audience attitudes towards paying for online news remains limited. Tewari (2015) suggested a general reluctance to pay for digital content, a finding supported by the Kantar India and Google (2023) report, which showed that only 15% of Indian online news consumers are willing to subscribe. The Indian Digital News Report (Aneez et al., 2019) highlighted some potential, with 39% of English-speaking respondents indicating they were 'somewhat likely' to pay and 9% 'very likely' to pay. However, this sample represents only a small subset of India's diverse media landscape, leaving gaps in understanding the broader

Challenges to the Sustainability of Subscription Model in India

The primary challenge to the sustainability of subscription models in India, as well as globally, is the audience's reluctance to pay

for online news. Globally, while some studies indicate a growing willingness among consumers to pay for high-quality, exclusive content, there are still many obstacles. Many users still expect free access to online news, find payment processes inconvenient, or perceive online news as inferior to traditional print media (Borchgrevink-Bræhus & Moe, 2023; Chyi & Ng, 2020).

In India, these challenges are particularly acute. As previously noted, only a small fraction of Indian online news consumers are willing to pay for digital news content. The price sensitivity of the Indian market, coupled with the nation's status as a lower-middle-income economy (Metreau et al., 2024), intensifies the challenge. Studies highlight that India's consumers often prefer free content and are influenced by pricing strategies, as seen in the entertainment subscription market (Anand, 2020; Kübler et al., 2018). For the same reason, OTT giants like Netflix introduced an ad-supported, lower-cost subscription plan in India to better cater to the Indian market (Livemint, 2024).

World Bank ranks India as a lower-middle-income economy (Metreau et al., 2024). That means Indians have lower purchasing power. This further compound the challenge for adoption of subscription model, specifically in digital news scenario. Consequently, it is difficult for consumers to justify spending on digital news subscriptions, especially when free alternatives are readily available.

Moreover, cultural habits also play a role in this reluctance to pay. Many Indians have become accustomed to free news access, both online and through traditional media. This ingrained expectation makes it difficult for news organizations to convince consumers to transition to paid models. The vast availability of free news through social media, aggregator apps, and search engines adds another layer of complexity (Aneez et al., 2019; Khatri, 2021).

The Future of Subscription Model in Indian Digital News Landscape

The future of subscription models in India's digital news sector is cautiously optimistic. There are numerous challenges for digital news publishers to overcome to make this new revenue model sustainable. But certainly, there is potential. The Indian Digital News Report (Aneez et al., 2019) points to the potential growth

of the subscription model only if the publishers deliver diverse and high-quality content. The Google-Kantar India report (2023) also supports this. The report says that quality, exclusive content could be key to increase of subscription model in Indian digital news.

Studies have indicated that subscription models offer a promising revenue stream for digital-native media. However, the success of this approach hinges not only on business strategy but also on understanding audience behavior, particularly the willingness to pay for digital news. While many organizations have adopted paywalls, signaling a shift in the industry, the broader readiness of Indian audiences to embrace paid models remains unclear (Khan and Haneef, 2023; Mudgal and Rana, 2022).

To ensure sustainability, Indian media organizations need to navigate through multiple challenges. It is not just about delivering exclusive content, but also about building consumer trust, simplifying subscription buying processes, and demonstrating the distinct value of paid journalism over free alternatives. Moreover, leveraging data analytics to offer personalized content could enhance engagement, encouraging long-term subscriber loyalty. For instance, The Times of India demonstrated how leveraging data-driven personalized content strategies can boost subscription revenue, showing significant growth by enhancing user engagement and retention (Economic Times, 2022).

The path forward for subscription models in India will require a thoughtful blend of quality journalism, understanding audience attitude, right pricing, and effective audience engagement strategies. If media organizations can address these challenges, they may not only secure financial stability but also contribute to the broader evolution of audience-supported journalism in India's dynamic digital landscape.

Conclusions

The rise of subscription models in India's digital news sector reflects a global shift towards sustainable revenue strategies amidst declining advertising revenues. While challenges remain, including audience reluctance to pay, price sensitivity, and strong competition from free content, the potential for growth is undeniable. By delivering high-quality, exclusive

content, and personalized experiences, media organizations can build consumer trust and drive subscriptions. The adoption stories of Indian platforms like The Times of India, The Hindu, and Newslaundry demonstrate that subscription models can offer a viable path to financial stability. Ultimately, the key to sustainability lies in adapting global best practices, understanding local audience behavior, and innovating continuously to meet evolving consumer expectations in India's digital landscape.

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