

CUSTOMISING CONTENT FOR THE INDIAN MULTILINGUAL AUDIENCE

Gitanjali Diwakar

Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Mass Communication (IIMC), Kottayam, India
gitanjali.diwakar@gmail.com

Abstract— In this age of the Internet, the concept called audience seems to be appearing more jaded than ever before. Not only has technology evolved, but information can be easily accessed by almost anybody—from a toddler to an octogenarian. With 24X7 television, stories can now be viewed by anybody at any time. With minimal moderation over the content being published or displayed on websites and mobile applications, understanding the audience has become difficult. This has altered the methods of story-writing as well. The present study explores possibilities of effectively drafting apt content for the Indian audience—wherein many of them speak at least one non-native language. It discusses topics such as audience and their influence on news content published online in India, probabilities and factors determining customisation of news and methodologies adopted by online news organisations in India.

Keywords— Print media, online social media, media audience, media content

JM&C

Volume 1 Issue 2
© Central University of Tamil Nadu
Thiruvavur - India

Diwakar, Gitanjali. (2017). Customising Content for the Indian Multilingual Audience.
Journal of Media and Communication, 1(2): 35-47.

Introduction

This paper hopes to understand the possibilities of providing content via new means of communication – such as the internet, mobile phone apps and so, to Indians who speak not only their native language but who have also mastered languages of lands where they seek employment or a future in academics. The aim of the present study was to provide an in-depth understanding of the following aspects of online-new publishing:

1. Audience and their influence on news content published online in India.
2. The need for customisation of news-related information for the Indian New Media audience.
3. The possibilities of a successful methodology that could be adopted by online news organisations in India.

Secondary sources of data were utilised to throw light upon the role of sociological and linguistic backgrounds of India's online news media audience. The research also employed survey questionnaires as well as interviews with heads of online-news publishing houses to substantiate the data. Based on the analysis, it can be concluded that thorough assessment of the readers' needs, preference and mode of consumption could help in the formulation of crowd-friendly content presentations.

Content creators could devise techniques that function based on the 'single tap' principle as well as the comprehensive presentations of facts and figures. Websites or mobile applications with fewer pages are likely to have a lower bounce rate. Thereby assuring one of higher possibilities for longer and better user-engagement. This could lead to more traffic and revenue. Tailoring the content based on the critical analysis of the demography and interests of the target population would yield a better outcome, than awaiting a rippling effect of cumulative viewership on a content based on nothing other than hypothesized acceptance.

Driven by the masses

The 21st century has witnessed a rather large consumption of information and content by the public at large. Large-scale penetration of portable devices like mobile phones, in the Indian market, has been instrumental in creating avenues that offer unlimited access to various information. The effectiveness of these methods of content-consumption, however, is questionable. Instantaneous communicability of information from the source to the receiver and vice versa has made this form of media popular.

On the one hand, it has made the target group an active part of the information exchange process, while on the other, new media has triggered several concerns with regards to the content and its presentation styles. The lack of content moderation is one such area that is often discussed and debated due to the rise in the number of issues related to it.

The most common issues are the lack of website traffic, legal complications and lack of revenue. The internet has paved the way for both types of communication – namely social and personal. Thereby, introducing a new style of presentation and exchange of facts.

The changes are visible, especially, on different Indian news websites. Short and concise news alerts that are transmitted by means of a mobile network, the rise in the number of pictorial or graphic representations of information and the use of ‘SEO-friendly’ syntax are a few examples. Prefixing a word with a symbol such as a hashtag ‘#’, for instance, is popular among many media personnel. It could, hence, be argued that online news does have the potential to change the way the public learns and processes the news (Hacker and van Dijk, 2000). The impacts of an interactive news forum have been observed and analysed by many experts in the recent past. The floods in Chennai, a calamity that struck Tamil Nadu’s capital city in 2015, is an example of how the media’s content was driven by the audience.

Local news versus national news

Online news media has been instrumental in bridging gaps between regions and the communities residing in various parts of the country. In a country, with many ethnic groups, each taking pride in a language or dialect as well as a culture that is unique to their community, news media is bound to witness a range of alterations in the way content is perceived, interpreted and accepted. An average Indian is likely to be literate in three languages, namely – English, the local lingua-franca and the language of the neighbouring state. It must be noted that by ‘literate’, it is inferred that the people can read, write and speak these languages fluently.

This ability to interpret statements and cultures presents an interesting analysis of the content and its presentation to the public. A significant number of news organisations followed the strategies of media houses established in the United States, Australia and a few other countries also produce region-specific content with the intention of reaching out to the ‘local’ residents. It is this aspect that paved the way for local online news.

Interestingly, the 'local' residents have often expressed an interest and were inclined to the information pertaining to an environment situated outside their homeland. Hence, many Indian online news organisations not only presented facts in a language that is valued and cherished by the people of a specific region but also promoted their areas of interest such as international relations, politics and cinema.

Case Study

The Malayala Manorama Co Pvt Ltd is one of India's oldest media organisations. Established in the year 1890, the company has made its mark in the print arena with over two million copies of its Malayalam daily 'Malayala Manorama' being circulated on a regular basis.

The organisation's English news magazine 'The Week' as well other feature publications such as Vanitha (which is also published in Hindi) are popular among the public even today. Manorama Online, the firm's online news venture, has also become one of the most sought-after online news websites in the state of Kerala as well as among Keralites and non-Keralites over a span of two decades. Despite having many portals, the statistical data published in SimilarWeb.com show that the three websites of the online news venture have proven to be the most preferred platforms of the firm's online audience base. The websites are the Malayalam current affairs website – manoramaonline.com, the local news forum – chuttuvattom.com, and the English news website – onmanorama.com.

These websites have been influenced by the strategies adopted by media organisations in certain western nations and have often emphasized on the philosophy of 'local before the world'. It is for this reason that www.manoramaonline.com is said to have more website traffic as opposed to the firm's English news website. However, the study also shows that the 'hyperlocal' information might not draw as many readers or viewers in comparison to that of the 'local' website. Indeed, the bounce rates or the rate at which members of the audience browse through the website and its pages is the lowest on www.onmanorama.com. But the data does not indicate a rise in the number of unique visitors or increased traffic to the website. This is unlike the case of www.manoramaonline.com, despite its high bounce rates.

Hence, it could be concluded that the audience base of the local website is more widespread yet specific not only in terms of the content

presented but also with regards to the language and the psychological preferences of the members.

Manoramaonline.com presents a collection of news stories ranging from societal issues to international business in a language that is understood by the Keralite – Malayalam. A Keralite, irrespective of his place of residence, is keen on knowing more about the world in Malayalam for he or she is likely to associate better with the style of presentation (especially the syntax followed). Although www.chuttuvattom.com offers similar content with a ‘hyperlocal’ approach, it is likely to reach out to a smaller group of people and not the Keralite at large.

The study also raises a pertinent question with regards to the impact of internet journalism in the globalized world. While many would assume that an English website on Kerala and topics associated with the Keralite could imply a larger audience base, the statistics prove otherwise.

This is despite the website traffic having traces leading to the USA, the UAE and other foreign nations. Upon a discussion with senior journalists at the Malayala Manorama, the following could be the possible reasons behind the drastic change in responses:

1. *Non-residential Keralites, speaking many languages and foreign dialects, prefer the presentations in Malayalam fearing that translations of the same piece of news could lose its true essence.*
2. *Most often, the content related to Kerala or Keralites presented in English or any other language fails to establish a certain connection with the proposed target group.*
3. *‘Local’ content needn’t necessarily concern the Keralite who resides elsewhere.*

Similar views could be valid from the perspectives of other Indians who have migrated from their native lands to other Indian states or abroad. For example, a story in a village called Gudalur, situated in Tamil Nadu, needn’t necessarily interest a Tamilian residing in Kolkata.

The people’s media

The 21st-century journalism is beginning to become the people’s most preferred means of communication.

One of the many features that have facilitated the convenient exchange of information is the portable nature of communication devices. Modern-day mobile technology, for instance, allows a member of the audience to access information even during travel. The concept of ‘live’ coverage allows one to be an active participant in the communication

process, through platforms such as comment columns on websites as well as on social media fora. Twitter, Facebook, Google Plus and even Snapchat have, also, further enhanced the abilities and provided more opportunities for the 'citizen journalist'. The second feature of the people's media is its ability to present concise information with clarity. Thereby, making it easier and faster for one to convey facts and figures.

This is often supported by the conventional options of accessing a news channel or subscribing to the organization's dailies or magazines. New Media, therefore, offers a platform for media convergence. Mobile phone applications developed by various news organizations across the world, such as CNN, BBC, etc. are evidence of the same.

These processes have bridged the gap between the provider and recipient of the news media-based information. The use of a lenient 'syntax', consisting of colloquial and multilingual terms within a single presentation, has been a significant contributor to this process. Thereby, granting the opportunity for the audience to be active participants instead of being passive recipients of information.

Audiences today

Audience fragmentation has become a key factor in modern-day communication. This has also led to demassification or the splinter of homogenous groups into special interest groups (Theories of Information Society, Frank Webster, 2006).

The matrix of interest among individuals has resulted in the formation of multiple and varied groups that have a combination of common interests in some fields while having diametrically different interests in others. For instance, few members of women's book reading clubs might be interested in classics while the others may be interested in theatre. Thereby, possessing a greater challenge to media organizations to present information in an effective yet comprehensive manner.

This has led to the creation of an alternative storytelling format. These include articles presented in a sequential manner (denoted by numbers or an alphabet), long-form multimedia articles – with videos, photographs, audio recordings, social media inputs such as tweets, Facebook comments etc. substantiating the text, and many more. Websites such as 'Scoopwhoop' as well as those belonging to major media houses like NDTV, Network18 and regional news websites prefer content presented in a sequential manner.

Senior journalists and even web-designers state that the format is not appealing but is also less stressful to the eye, especially when the content is being viewed on portable devices like mobile phones and tablets.

Case study

In a move to provide informative yet simplified content to its audiences, the Malayala Manorama Co Pvt Ltd also displays news stories in a sequential manner. Each fact of the day's main story is presented as a 'bullet point' or are numbered. The reception of such stories, according to one of the organization's senior content producers, is better than those presented in the long form format as they are easy to update and view.

Technology determining the audience

In the 2015 survey conducted by the Manorama Online, in association with RYLA (Rotary Youth Leadership Awards), about 80 percent of the sample size have access to the internet via their mobile phones and tablets, while the remaining 20 percent do so via laptops and desktops. The survey, hence, implies that content must be presented for a group of people who are said to be 'on-the-move.' While it has been claimed widely that the youth (those aged between 17-26 years approximately) view content on portables often, the random survey also showed that about 20 percent of those aged between 40-60 years also access information via these devices.

It is this factor that often increases the ambiguity that exists in content development strategies. The members of the audience, who belong to the latter category, have been less accustomed to technology-driven lifestyle unlike those in the former category.

Of representations, associations and culture

The perceptions and practices prevalent in a society are a result of the patterns of representation and its connotations. Interpretations of various customs and traditions, hence, are often effectively explained in the native dialect. Thereby, creating a certain set of associations that are quintessential of a people or practitioners of a culture. The word Pooram, for instance, is the Malayalam word for festivities. However, the term is also used by native speakers as an expression that defines the intensity or the gravity of a situation. This implication would not be easily understood by those speaking other Indian dialects, including Dravidian dialects like Tamil or Kannada.

A similar approach may be adopted to further understand the impact of the written word. Texts are often read in relation to cultural contexts. For instance, News stories about Karva Chauth would interest more women of a northern Indian lineage as opposed to those residing in southern or eastern India. The influx of alternative methods of electronic communication and the rise of cosmopolitan lifestyles are likely to have altered outlooks.

Thereby, leading to what Jean Baudrillard defined as the hyperreal. Not only are 'copies' of various traditions being reproduced but they have begun to influence attitudes and views of a society without a firm understanding of the context.

This is evident from various wedding ceremonies that have been adopted and weaved into different cultures. The Sangeet ceremony, for example, is one such custom. Although it is a tradition typical to northern India, many belonging to southern India have made it a customary aspect of their wedding festivities. As a result, articles on livening up this ceremony, irrespective of its relevance in one's own culture, are bound to attract more people to a website due to its 'fun and exciting' nature. Such cross-cultural attention might not have been possible prior to the advent of 'New Media'.

The language of technology and culture

It is true that languages are the 'identity' of a people. Its syntax and phrases are often weaved around a cultural context, the priorities of most native residents as well as the values of the society. Although the Indian constitution has recognized over 14 'national' languages, the Democratic Republic of India is the land of over 184 recognized languages and over 50 dialects. The data also states that there are over 32 languages with over a million native speakers. We have over 574 languages of Indo-Aryan origin that are spoken by the residents of Northern India while about 153 Dravidian languages are spoken by those residing in the southern region of the country. In addition to these facts, about 0.73 percent of the population speak languages of the Tibetan-Burman origin. It could also be noted that while each of the language groups speaks their native tongues fluently, they are also well-versed in other major languages as well. For instance, 96 percent of the population residing in Kerala speak Malayalam. However, a large section of the residents also speak Tamil, Kannada and even Tulu. This could be attributed to the activities of the past. Many citizens of other southern Indian kingdoms (that are now divided into 5 states – Tamil Nadu, Kerala,

Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) had travelled across the borders of these areas in search of better prospects. Individual groups carry their traditions and folklore resulting in a multicultural amalgamation of art and culture blurring the geographic delineation of the individual state. The Hubli-Dharwad region of Karnataka is a good example where venerated styles of Hindustani and Carnatic classical music exist side by side. The people of this region are connoisseurs of both. A similar blend has been observed in the celebration of festivals in Karnataka. Hence, distinguishing effective and apt content for an Indian audience, especially in the online arena, is not only complicated but also interesting in the sense of understanding the sociological implications of the written word or even the images that are being displayed.

The use of Facebook Memes is an ideal tool that depicts the sociological and psychological impacts of certain phrases and images. Hence, languages not only establish social relationships but also convey relevant information about a person. Thus, there is a possibility of customizing technology to appease the audiences of a specific linguistic background. However, the effectiveness of the content presentations could cease to attain high standards due to the exposure to multiple language backgrounds. For instance, a person hailing from Kerala but raised in New Delhi may not appreciate the subtle humour presented in a set of Facebook Memes as opposed to a person who was born and brought up in Kerala. This is contrary to the publishing strategies of European nations such as France, Germany, Italy, the United Kingdom, as well as of the United States of America. The primary reasons could be attributed to the existence of a uniform culture and societal norms as well as the use of one language by most of the population.

Effective content, higher revenue

The primary purposes of communication have been to inform, educate as well as entertain. A combination of these aspects enables the communicator to determine the audience as well as the method of presentation for different pieces of news or information. Defining the audience of the 21st century has been more difficult due to many factors – such as the overall growth in the population, accessibility to information, technology and the overall ‘global’ environment. In a document published by the UNESCO, it was stated that 30 percent of the country’s population are internal migrants.

A large majority consists of men who migrate to other parts of the country due to better job opportunities. This implies that a significant section of Indian residents are exposed to cultures and lifestyles apart from theirs at various stages of life, especially post marriage.

Hence, the concept of the media, which initially aimed at catering to an 'audience' seems rather abstract. On the contrary, media houses of the present world must cater to a 'crowd'. The audience is often said to be the group that consumes a specific style or presentation, while the crowd chooses to consume or neglect content. The content is no longer meant for those with a common way of life. It is, in fact, a blend of lifestyles.

Thereby, creating a certain degree of speculation regarding the content and the public assessing or consuming it. For instance, travel stories published on Onmanorama.com, the English News portal of the Malayala Manorama Co Pvt Ltd, are often viewed or read by those from Kerala and by the people who are mere tourists. Experts state that the collective behaviour provides an avenue for social experimentation. Online opinion polls have depicted this aspect of human psychology many a time.

According to psychologist Sigmund Freud, a crowd possesses a collective psyche. They always grow larger to attract more members and get their approval. For instance, most websites or apps gain popularity by means of customer or user reviews. When more people recommend the fora mentioned above, the fora grow in popularity. It is this practice that leads to prominent results that are measured in terms of a website's performance and the revenue generated. Revenue is one of the many determinants of a website's success rate. Most often, a website's corresponding mobile app and even online subscriptions are the common means to generate income.

Although advertising offline and online is still deemed to be one of the most preferred options, the topic continues to be debated by many media leaders. The increase in the number of Ad-blocking software has reduced the number of ad views, thereby, hampering the prospects of revenue generation online. Native ads - i.e. advertisements which resemble search engine results, tweets or even other social media promotions, as a result, are beginning to surface in the business of media. Then again, revenue ceases to exist without website 'traffic'. Therefore, the quantum of data sent and the responses of the website's viewers is termed to be one of the main factors for the success of an online Indian news portal.

A few journalists would argue that there is always an ideal time for optimal website traffic, like its contemporaries - the print or television news channels. For example, a story published by Omanorama, Manorama Online's English news website, in May 2016, on the class 12 Kerala state board exam had hiked the number of unique visitors on the page by over 30 percent even two hours after the information was announced. Whereas, the stories related to Kerala's state budget session failed to hike the number of unique visitors post the half-day-long assembly session. It could be noted that the overall revenue generated was indeed higher in the case of the story related to the Kerala state board exam results.

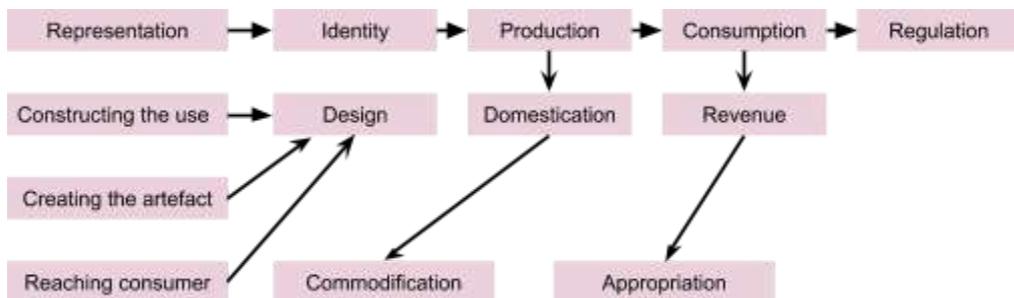
Recollection and Recognition

The circuit of multi-lingual online news content

The impact of content published via online media could be analysed by means of the 'The circuit of Communication'.

Figure 1: **The circuit of multilingual online news content**

(adapted from Introduction to Cultural Studies by Pramod Nayar)



With respect to the treatment of Online-new content, the information is often 'constructed' to not only inform the audiences but to also engage the members in a contributory debate. An in-depth understanding of the culture and perceptions of the target group is instrumental in identifying the purpose of the content, creating its draft and subsequently making it available to the public. Design or presentations related to information not only capture the attention of the reader but also help to communicate facts and figures effectively. Most importantly, it strives towards triggering more audience interaction and could thus be termed the people's content.

Online news ‘catches’ the consumer or the reader by the means of user-engagement initiatives. These not only include blogs or articles published by a team of subject-matter experts but also concise responses in the form of Tweets, comments under the content published online or even discussion via social media platforms.

Therefore, the content must instigate an interest and ensure that the reader plays a crucial role in its presentation, directly or indirectly. This has become an inevitable aspect with regards to events such as elections, international sporting events, and many others.

Lest the organisation is compelled to re-work and re-invest on content strategies that would help them meet their short-term goals such as an increase in the number of new visitors per month. Poor content moderation or moderation of the audiences’ response could also affect the website’s performance. For it could also lead to unforeseen conflicts.

Conclusion

As digital technology becomes an integral part of the information exchange process, it is important to be able to collaborate technology and the fundamental sociological aspects of the crowd. A thorough assessment of the readers’ needs, preference and mode of consumption could help in the formulation of crowd-friendly content presentations. The challenge, however, is to be able to create presentations that are not only user-friendly but also interactive, stress-free and unambiguous. For instance, the world of portal technology strives towards catering to the user by means of ‘one tap’ on the screen. Content creators could formulate techniques that function based on the ‘single tap’ principle as well as the comprehensive presentations of facts and figures. The key, however, is to determine the specific ‘type’ of content that the website hopes to offer to the public. News portals with niche content, i.e. information that focuses on one group or topic, often have a larger pool of viewers or readers. A few examples of niche websites are – Dainik Bhaskar, Tripto, or even popular movie websites. Websites or mobile applications with fewer pages are likely to have a lower bounce rate. Thereby assuring one of higher possibilities for longer and better user-engagement. This could lead to more traffic and revenue. Hence, tailoring the content based on the critical analysis of the demography and interests of the target population would yield a better outcome, than awaiting a rippling effect of

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Gitanjali Diwakar is an online journalist and is presently working at The Hindu Business Line. She holds a masters in Magazine Journalism from Cardiff University, UK as well as PG Diploma in Television Journalism from the Asian College of Journalism. Her areas of interest include design, new media trends as well as culture.
