Algorithmic Gatekeeping in Mobile-First Journalism: A Conceptual Study of News Production in the Indian Digital Media Ecosystem

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Abstract

The rapid growth of mobile-first journalism in India has transformed how news is produced, circulated, and consumed. Alongside this shift, algorithmic systems embedded within digital platforms increasingly shape editorial visibility and audience reach. While existing scholarship has examined mobile journalism and artificial intelligence separately, limited attention has been paid to how algorithms function as gatekeepers in mobile-first news environments, particularly in the Global South. This paper conceptualises algorithmic gatekeeping as a socio-technical process that restructures news production in the Indian digital media ecosystem. Drawing on gatekeeping theory, field theory, and Indian scholarship on digital journalism, the study argues that algorithms, platforms, journalists, and audiences operate as co-gatekeepers in mobile-first journalism. Through qualitative theoretical synthesis of existing literature, the paper identifies new forms of journalistic power and capital that redefine editorial authority and professional autonomy. The study contributes to journalism theory by extending gatekeeping frameworks to account for algorithmic influence in mobile-centric media systems.

Keywords: Algorithmic gatekeeping, mobile-first journalism, Indian digital media, socio-technical systems, news production

Introduction

India's journalism landscape has entered a mobile-first phase marked by extensive smartphone use, affordable internet connectivity, and platform-based news distribution. News production increasingly occurs in environments shaped by mobile devices and algorithm-driven platforms that prioritise speed, visibility, and engagement. Journalists routinely rely on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and news aggregation apps to distribute content and reach audiences.

While mobile journalism has enabled real-time reporting and expanded news access, it has also altered traditional editorial structures. Decision-making processes that were once confined to newsroom hierarchies are now influenced by algorithmic systems that determine visibility, ranking, and circulation of news. Despite the growing significance of this transformation, academic research in India has largely treated algorithms as technical tools rather than as structural actors in journalism.

This paper argues that algorithmic systems function as gatekeepers in mobile-first journalism by shaping what news becomes visible, relevant, and authoritative. By conceptualising algorithmic gatekeeping within the Indian digital media ecosystem, the study addresses a critical gap in journalism scholarship and offers a framework that integrates technology, professional practice, and institutional power.

Mobile-First Journalism in India

Indian scholarship on mobile journalism highlights its role in enhancing speed, flexibility, and cost efficiency in news production. Studies observe that mobile devices enable journalists to operate independently, particularly in resource-constrained newsrooms and regional media environments (Thakur & Harsh, 2025). Research also notes the increasing use of mobile phones for live reporting, field-based storytelling, and social media dissemination (Bhardwaj & Siddhaqui, 2023).

However, much of this literature focuses on professional practice and technological adoption, offering limited insight into how mobile journalism reshapes editorial power and decision-making structures.

Gatekeeping and Digital Journalism

Gatekeeping theory traditionally conceptualises journalists and editors as key decision-makers who control the flow of news (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Digital journalism research suggests that this model has been disrupted by platforms and algorithmic systems that influence content visibility and audience engagement (Vos et al., 2012). Yet, gatekeeping in mobile-first contexts remains under-theorised, particularly in non-Western media systems.

Algorithms and News Production

Research on artificial intelligence and digital journalism highlights how algorithmic systems influence news distribution, personalisation, and visibility (Carlson, 2015). Indian studies on online journalism further suggest that platform logics increasingly shape editorial priorities and professional routines (Lokeswari & Priyanka, 2025). Despite these insights, existing work often treats algorithms as external influences rather than as integral actors within journalistic processes.

The study aims to:

1. Conceptualise algorithmic gatekeeping in mobile-first journalism.
2. Examine how algorithms reshape news production and editorial authority in India.
3. Extend gatekeeping theory to account for socio-technical dynamics in the Indian digital media ecosystem.

This research adopts a qualitative conceptual methodology based on systematic review and theoretical synthesis of scholarly literature on mobile journalism, gatekeeping theory, algorithms, and Indian digital media. The study does not involve primary data collection but develops its argument through critical interpretation of existing research and documented newsroom practices. This approach is appropriate for theory-building and conceptual clarification in journalism studies.

Algorithmic Gatekeeping as a Socio-Technical Process

The analysis suggests that algorithmic gatekeeping in mobile-first journalism operates as a socio-technical process involving both human and non-human actors. Algorithms embedded within platforms influence which news content gains visibility, shaping editorial outcomes even before traditional gatekeeping decisions occur. In the Indian context, where mobile platforms dominate news consumption, algorithmic systems play a central role in structuring news flows.

Redistribution of Editorial Power

Algorithmic gatekeeping redistributes editorial power across journalists, platforms, and audiences. Journalists increasingly adapt content to align with platform metrics such as engagement, reach, and timeliness. This shift weakens the exclusive authority of newsroom editors and introduces new forms of influence rooted in algorithmic prioritisation.

Emerging Forms of Journalistic Capital

Three forms of capital shape algorithmic gatekeeping in mobile-first journalism:

- **Platform capital**, linked to visibility and algorithmic favourability.
- **Technological capital**, associated with the ability to navigate digital tools and analytics.
- **Audience capital**, reflected in engagement, trust, and participatory interaction.

These forms of capital increasingly determine professional legitimacy within Indian digital journalism.

Implications for Professional Autonomy

While algorithmic gatekeeping enables faster and broader news circulation, it raises concerns about editorial autonomy. Dependence on algorithmic visibility may encourage content strategies driven by virality rather than public interest. This tension highlights the need to critically assess how journalistic values are negotiated within platform-dominated environments.

Conclusion

This paper conceptualises algorithmic gatekeeping as a defining feature of mobile-first journalism in India. By integrating gatekeeping theory with socio-technical analysis, the study demonstrates how algorithms reshape news production, editorial authority, and professional legitimacy. The findings suggest that journalism in mobile-first societies operates within hybrid gatekeeping structures that challenge traditional models of editorial control. The paper contributes to journalism theory by offering a framework that captures the realities of algorithm-driven news production in the Global South.

Recommendations

1. Journalism education in India should include critical training on algorithmic systems and platform power.
2. Media organisations should develop editorial strategies that balance visibility with journalistic values.
3. Future research should empirically examine algorithmic gatekeeping across regional and linguistic media in India.

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