Rooting Platform Dependencies in the Digital News Economy: Google News Initiative in India

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News industries everywhere have observed increased interventions from platform companies in the form of "support" under umbrella initiatives that bundle and distribute platform resources. I call these "platform support initiatives," showing that they serve to disburse platforms' funds, technical infrastructure, and skill training, thereby supporting the seamless integration of platforms into the digital news industry. This article studies the case of the Google News Initiative in India and critically analyzes the structure, implementation, and implications of its programs since its launch in 2018. I combine an analysis of the company's blogposts and case studies with semistructured interviews with news publishers in India. I find that these initiatives expand the unequal relationship between the platform and publishers, despite the rhetoric that the two are merely "partners." This imbalance of power is evident from the resultant institutional, infrastructural, and financial dependencies created among newsmakers in India.

Keywords: platform support initiatives, news industry, platform dependencies, Google News Initiative, India

Google is a mall, and within that mall, there are 40 shops, which are nothing but publishers. Now these 40 shops or publishers can run well if Google as a mall operator does certain things correctly, which is like you know, electricity, for example, air conditioning or safety or whatever . . . because they understand their ecosystem very well. (Interviewee 18, 2022)

In the last decade, search and social media platforms have become an indispensable part of news flows across the globe. Platform affordances, design, monetization opportunities, and policies increasingly influence all levels of news production, distribution, and consumption. Search and social media platforms' gradual institution as the dominant distributor and advertiser of digital news has widely shaped the Indian

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news economy. This is well expressed in the quote above by the CEO of a legacy news organization in India, where he compares Google with a mall provider. It highlights the platforms' role as a distributor matching publishers with consumers as well as its role of an operator that aggregates supply. At the same time, it underscores the news publisher's reliance on Google to ensure the essential parameters alluding to visibility, access, and monetization for publishers within the ecosystem.

India has a crowded digital news market, including legacy print and broadcast news players and digitally born native news websites. Within these, the legacy publishers have an upper hand, having expanded, and not migrated their news businesses online (Parthasarathi & Agarwal, 2020). They operate from a position of strength as their digital news operations are fueled by the still profiting newspaper sales and broadcast news viewership; digital news operations contribute merely 5% to their revenues (Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry [FICCI], 2023). In addition to this, legacy news publishers maintain diversified interests outside media—in industrial packaging, petroleum, jute, and other industries (Nair, 2003). Native digital and independent publishers, on the other hand, were launched online with minimal capital resources, which is a characteristic of digital journalism but a bane for its sustainability. To meet their operational needs, they rely on venture capitalists, political funding, reader revenue, brand extensions, philanthropic foundations, or platform funding (Harlow & Chadha, 2019; Nielsen & Sen, 2016). In this perspective, small newsrooms and journalists depend on a multitude of sources to run their primary— and only business—news. This section of disadvantaged publishers competes with legacy players for platform discoverability, and with distribution and aggregation platforms for the consequent digital advertising revenue, which is skewed toward the volume of content and clicks.

Simultaneously, Indian news markets endure historical trends of overreliance on advertising, unchecked market concentration, fragmented media policies, and excessive state control (Chadha, 2017; Parthasarathi & Agarwal, 2020). More recently, Indian government's coercive actions—in the form of access blocking, take downs, and financial and criminal intimidations—pose a pertinent challenge to critical news media as well as platforms (Agarwal, 2024). Existing structural defaults, political influences, and the lack of regulatory protections weaken Indian journalism against platform control. Given this, publishers, both legacy and native digital, readily integrate platforms that consolidate audiences and advertising revenue, freely disburse capital intensive infrastructural tools, and provide financial investments to news.

Indian publishers also quickly adapt to platforms' modular designs to expand their reach, stay relevant, and circumvent the risks of nonalignment with platform imperatives (Aneez, Chattapadhyay, Parthasarathi, & Nielsen, 2016, 2017). The current relationship between them is marked by a phase of "coopetition," suggesting a mix of cooperation with platform requirements and competition for audiences and sustainable revenue generation (Nielsen & Ganter 2022; Smyrnaios & Rebillard, 2019). In the effort of cooperation, platforms address publishers' needs through multiple means, such as appointing an account manager to resolve platform-related queries of the newsrooms, organizing platform-related training sessions, and broadly serving the news sector through umbrella programs such as the Meta Journalism Project or Google News Initiative.

This study takes a critical lens to the latter form of assistance from platforms. Particularly, I study the case of Google News Initiative (GNI hereafter), launched by Alphabet worldwide, and in India in 2018.

GNI involves short-term programs with competitive disbursement of platform funds, the introduction of platform-related technical products, and journalistic training for a selected group of organizations. GNI terms recipient news organizations that receive support in these forms as "partners" of the platform. This study aims to explore if these "partnerships" equally serve the interests of platforms and publishers or if they work to enhance the imbalance of power between them. To respond to the above, it asks two subquestions: (1) What are Google's underlying interests for extending support to news publishers through GNI? and (2) What are the implications of this support on the digital news ecosystem in India?

The first section of this study puts forth the concept of "platform support initiatives" to explain umbrella programs such as the GNI. Given the various types of interventions under these programs, I delineate the nature and scope of support extended by platforms. Furthermore, building on existing literature on the subject, I critically deconstruct the overarching platform narrative of "support" and "partnerships" to show how these programs primarily advance platform interests rather than the industry they target. In this way, the study scrutinizes platform-support initiatives and situates them within the broader scholarly and regulatory purview of platform capture and dependency.

The following sections critically explore the case of GNI in India through a combined analysis of blog posts, case studies, and interviews with Indian news publishers. Since its launch, GNI has strategically extended a slew of platform resources to the Indian news industry. Findings in this study show that Google bundles, often in a veiled manner, a range of training, technical, and financial resources to seamlessly cement its hold over the different needs of the news economy. As a result, GNI has instilled three distinct forms of dependencies—institutional, infrastructural, and financial—within the Indian news market. In this way, GNI reinforces the asymmetries between platform and publishers, disproportionately impacting small news publishers in the country. This study expands our understanding about diverse renditions of platform control and the implications of this control on the news industry in understudied geographies and political contexts.

Platform Support Initiatives

Platform imperatives and logics have a growing influence over the reorganization of news, revenue generation modalities, editorial decisions of journalists, and news information itself. Given the opaque platform ecosystem, researchers have highlighted publishers' lack of clarity in assessing the potential risks to audience reach and revenue if they do not align with platforms (Nielsen & Ganter, 2018, 2022; Poell, Nieborg, & Duffy, 2023). This asymmetrical relationship is exacerbated through continual forms of platform extensions (Rashidian et al., 2019). Smyrnaios and Rebillard (2019) critically view extensions in the form of monetization and distribution products as a means of subcontracting journalists for feeding the platform with profitable content. Here, platforms not only profit from news publishers' content; they also indiscriminately prioritize platform-native products. This compels newsroom labor to adopt platform extensions or risk survival within the platform ecosystem.

In this scenario, platform supports in any form must be viewed critically for their underlying interests and implications over the industries they target. These include platform outcomes like the GNI, Meta Journalism Project (originally Facebook Journalism Project), and Substack Local Initiative in the news

sector; FbStart Program, designed for mobile application developers; Google Partners Program for media buyers; Google AI Impact Challenge, aimed at civil society; and many others. I define them as Platform Support Initiatives (PSIs hereafter). PSIs largely involve the disbursement of funds either as limited grants or for equity in short-term innovative projects. They also include free integration of a large assortment of analytical, data management and sociotechnical tools that assist selected projects. Finally, they extend platform training and insights to selected recipients for a limited duration. Thus, PSIs encompass bundled disbursement of technical, financial, and instructive resources to cultural producers for a specified duration. When introduced in the news sector, I argue that these initiatives strategically dole out platform resources to support their successful integration into the digital news economy, thereby supporting platforms rather than the industry it is applied to.

PSIs support platforms' diverse interests through deliberate discursive work. PSIs launch with publicity fanfare and often term recipient organizations as "partners" of the platform, suggesting an economic exchange fulfilling the interests of both parties involved. However, existing literature on this subject, in the context of trusted application developers (Dance, LaForgia, & Confessore, 2018; Helmond, Nieborg, & Van der Vlist, 2019), and Google's funding to news in Europe, the United States, Africa, and the Middle East (De-Lima-Santos, Munoriyarwa, Elega, & Papaevangelou, 2023; Fanta & Dachwitz, 2020; Papaevangelou, 2023), show that such efforts support platform expansion into markets that were not in the initial scope of the platform's offerings. This is visible in Meta's large network of "trusted advertising partners" that progressively expand the platforms' hold over data aggregation and media buying economies (Van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021). This study then suggests that PSIs can be viewed as another means through which platforms expand their hold over the digital news ecosystem.

Further, PSIs portray as philanthropic endeavors aiming to induce funds and expertise in the development of the news industry. Scholarships studying PSIs for news have explored how the fear of regulatory action concerning news-revenue sharing served as impetus for their launch across the globe (Miller, 2021). This was also evident when the GNI Asia Pacific head linked their learnings from Australia's demand for fair revenue share with launching the Google News Showcase in India (Rajan, 2022). Scholars debunking the "philanthropic" framing have, thus, linked it to lobbying (Bell, 2019). Other researchers exploring the interests underpinning these efforts do so through the concept of "disruptive philanthropy" (Fanta & Dachwitz, 2020; Horvath & Powell, 2016). They critically analyze the discourse surrounding GNI as the work of private institutions to disburse funds while strategically influencing the public perception of a sector's problems and defining solutions to them. Expanding this, De-Lima-Santos, et al. (2023) highlight GNI's "philanthro-capitalistic" tendencies redefining relevant newsroom solutions as innovations that fit capitalistic norms of quick and enumerative results with limited funding.

When questioning the philanthropic narrative, it is essential to view PSIs differently from mere donations and social investment in the news industry. Any financial support extended under PSIs is conditional upon the rules set by platforms—such as application criteria, project goals, operational limits, funding formula, training structure, and more. Support in these forms reaffirms the dominant position of platforms and enhances the asymmetries between platform companies and publishers. It undermines editorial agency in story selection and prioritizing adequate financial and human resources for it (Jurno &

Brito D'Andréa, 2020). Further, PSIs also curtail freedoms by mandating the usage of specific news formats and technical resources when incorporating "partnerships."

Thus, PSIs are often presented as "philanthropic support" toward "partners," but the extant research points to other interests at play. In light of the above discussions, launching PSIs in news serves platforms' dual interests—(1) transforming the perceived social value of these platforms through a deliberate framing of public discourse and (2) introducing platform support as a requisite solution for a struggling digital news industry. The former could benefit from search and social media platforms' proactive work toward conveying themselves as neutral technology companies, despite their undeniable involvement in shaping the media industry (Napoli, 2015; Napoli & Caplan, 2017). This conceptual framework upturns the popular narrative adopted by platforms to reveal that PSIs intend to support the platforms rather than the industries they are applied to. Thus, it situates PSIs as a considerable means to expand platform control in the digital news economy.

Capture and Dependencies

To understand the implications of PSIs over news, the concept of "capture" becomes important to address. Capture alludes to the many ways in which critical news media is apprehended by vested corporate and state interests. Schiffrin (2018) emphasizes the rise of "media capture," wherein news media becomes subservient to direct and indirect political control. Similarly, financial and foundational support (a component of PSIs) to news media has been questioned for representing the interests of the financier and impinging on editorial independence (Benson, 2018; Lewis, 2012). Using this idea of capture, Nechushtai (2018) importantly draws our attention to "infrastructural capture," wherein reliance on platforms' technical resources—native products and data analytics software for various purposes of news production, distribution, and analytics—results in platforms' control over news content and businesses.

Previous research in this direction shows that platforms' infrastructural resources—software development kits (SDKs) and application programming interfaces (APIs)—are apparatuses to extend the operable and programmable boundaries of platforms (Ghazawneh & Henfridsson, 2012; Langlois & Elmer, 2013). Platforms mandate the integration of these resources to facilitate cultural distribution, thereby locking in external cultural producers (Foxman, 2019; Van der Vlist & Helmond, 2021). The proposition of opting out creates uncertainty for producers that are already dependent upon the platform distribution for reach and monetization (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Plantin, Lagoze, Edwards, & Sandvig, 2018). This is evident in the findings by Nielsen and Ganter (2018), wherein news publishers fear the consequences of losing out if they did not adopt platform formats and visibility logics.

To extend this scholarship, this study locates other means through which platforms attempt to capture the news industry. The platform ecosystem that news publishers operate in is highly datafied and opaque and are usually not conducive to traditional journalistic skills. In response to this, the news industry, like other culture industries, has had to invest in human capital that can understand and create profitable content to compete within the platform ecosystem (Kumar & Haneef, 2018; Neilson, Gibson, & Ortiga, 2023). To bridge this knowledge gap, an outcome of their own algorithms and priorities, platforms offer educational and skill training resources to newsrooms. However, it is pressing to recognize that such

resources aid in establishing platform control over editorial decision making and in redefining successful journalism as that which exists within the bounds of platform ecosystem and creates content profitable for platforms (Papa & Kuros, 2023).

The above mechanisms of capture, coupled with structural advantages of large platforms, instill dependencies within the news industry (Meese & Hurcombe, 2021). However, to avoid reinforcing platform deterministic arguments, it is important to reflect on the existing challenges that saddle news industries against platform dominance. This includes varied concerns across geographies, but most commonly observed—commercialization, unchecked media concentration, lack of consistent funding, and in-house technology, and political control (Chadha, 2017; Pickard, 2020). Given the already precarious position of news, PSIs root dependencies within resource-starved publishers that cannot incur huge costs toward developing proprietary technologies, thereby relying on readily available and often free platform infrastructure. It is precisely the reliance on platforms' resources that puts producers on the back foot, especially since publishers are not the only source of content for platforms and lately undervalued by them (Fischer, 2022). Thus, PSIs across many possible sites of news work cements platform dependencies that drive publishers into a position of subservience to the interests of external actors that provide those resources.

The subsequent discussions investigating GNI India demonstrate how GNI enhances the asymmetries between publishers and platforms by creating three distinct forms of dependencies—institutional, infrastructural, and financial—within the digital news industry in India. Findings in this study expand the above discussions on capture and dependencies by highlighting how platforms leverage PSIs to cement platforms' resources across the regionally and economically diverse newsmakers in the country.

Methodology

To answer the research questions of this study, I analyzed 16 programs launched under GNI India between March 2018 and December 2021. I studied 36 public documents, including blog posts, program-specific websites, case studies, and impact reports available on Google's official blog (*The Keyword*), its Indian subsection—*Google India Blog*, and the GNI website. The documents were selected based on the outputs from a search query for all public communications related to GNI programs launched in India.[2]

Google's public documentation—including program descriptions and application criteria—was studied to explicate the nature of support and intended aims of each program. Case studies and impact reports provided insight into the type of recipient selected, duration of support offered to recipient, and the platform-specific tools implemented during the course of the program. In other cases, where the program had only completed the selection round, news articles were studied to trace the partners and recipients under them.

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[2] A table indicating the different GNI documents analyzed for this study is available at:
https://osf.io/d89a3/?view_only=ec324a58a88a4003b3bfeebcb7dacfbc

To verify the realized implications of GNI programs, I conducted 20 semistructured interviews with chief operating officers, social media managers, and product managers of six traditional news organizations and six native digital news organizations of Hindi- and English-language news in India. Traditional news organizations include legacy newspaper and television news players that have expanded online, whereas native digital players include those that were launched and operate exclusively online and without existing audiences or brand value. These interviews were conducted online, on Zoom, between January and February 2022. Respondents were asked questions focusing on the programs their organization was a part of within GNI India, details about how they gained opportunity to the programs, what the application process was, and the short- and long-term benefits or risks of these programs to the organization. These interviews helped to understand the institutional perception and resultant implications of GNI in India. Quotes from the interviews are anonymized to protect the privacy of the respondents.

GNI India Rooting Platform Dependencies

Contours of GNI India

The GNI launched worldwide on March 18, 2018, to bring under a single umbrella all of Google's journalism-related extensions since the inception of Google News in 2002. The Indian chapter was introduced under the Asia Pacific (APAC) wing of Google News. GNI spent a sum of $33 million on the APAC news division between 2018 and 2020 (Google, 2020). In India, GNI launched 16 programs under the banner between June 2018 and December 2021. Figure 1 shows the timeline of these programs.
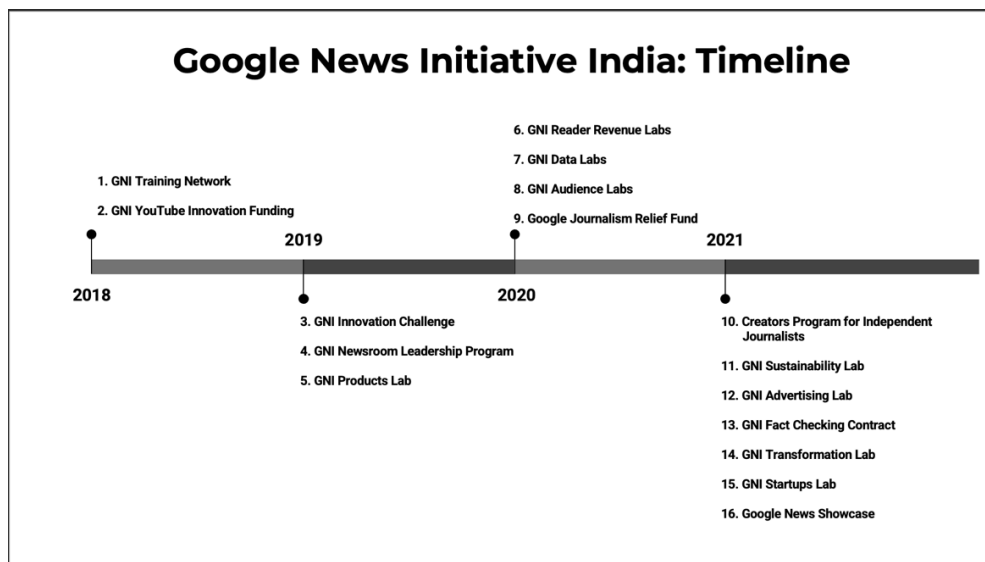

Figure 1. Timeline of Google News Initiative programs in India. Source: Author's original output.

Through all its programs under the GNI, Google forges two types of "partnerships." First, organizations in the news value-chain enter into economic arrangements with Google to deliver and localize

GNI programs in distinct geographies. These include technology consultants, sellers of AI tools, media buying agencies, nonprofits, and more. These industry agents or experts have been categorized elsewhere as "funding intermediaries" that facilitate—and by extension are captured by—the platform's funding efforts (Papaevangelou, 2023). Seeing an opportunity to scale their own business operations within the existing ecosystem of Google, these intermediaries further the value, accessibility, and structural power of platforms. For instance, for the very first program in India, GNI Training Network, Google partnered with DataLeads, a domestic company whose primary business involves training journalists in digital insights and analysis, data journalism, and fact-checking tools across India. Since its first partnership in July 2018, DataLeads has undertaken the training of 2,639 newsrooms in the country. As per their website, Google's funding has helped DataLeads develop other programs such as the community-focused FactShala, and become a signatory to the International Fact-Checking Network. Given this financial backing, DataLeads contributes to furthering Google's interests, situating Google's brand, funds, and infrastructural tools as indispensable to such training. (DataLeads, 2023).

The second type of "partnership" is forged with news publishers that are recipients of GNI and who participate in the application and selection process on a short-term program basis. This includes both legacy and native digital news publishers, although there are observable differences in the opportunities they gain with the platforms (Nielsen & Cherubini, 2022). This type of intervention is often masked as philanthropic and as social impact investments by the platform. Unlike the first type, the platform interests are less apparent and are often neatly hidden in the publicity of Google as a social benefactor and supporter of journalism. This was evident in the one-year blog post titled "How Google supports the news industry in India," describing Google's commitment to journalism through

> . . . decades of financial support by providing billions of dollars—sharing revenue with news publishers via our ad network, developing tools, training and funding through programs like the Google News Initiative, and launching Google News Showcase. *All of these have led to us paying news organizations significant amounts of money.* (GNI, 2018, para. 4; emphasis added)

Importantly, despite their publicity, funds under the GNI are neither philanthropic donations nor unconditional. Indeed, previous research highlights that GNI funds were transferred to news organizations through Google's corporate marketing budget to quell regulatory attention (Bell, 2019). In India, it is unclear which part of the company the funds come from; however, the company ardently maintains its supporter role. This second type of "partnership" and the nature of support under it is the subject of investigation in this study.

I classify the nature of support offered to news organizations under the GNI into three categories—tutelage, product incorporation, and sponsorship.

1. Tutelage includes training and mentorship sessions undertaken by the platform or expert agents within newsrooms. This often includes upskilling journalists for platform ecosystem, tutoring news businesses in increasing their platform reach, and training nascent news organizations in profitable use of platform products.

2. Product incorporation introduces and integrates platform tools and sector-specific products within the news ecosystem. This means Google's analytical tools, cloud, data-management products, and formats specific to news publishers or otherwise, are strategically dispensed through various programs.

3. Sponsorship includes financial inducements for equity or as one-time grants to news organizations for the realization of program-specific aims. Through these, the platform intends to fund various projects that address deficiencies in the digital news industry.

Table 1 (Appendix 1), presents in detail the partnerships established and supports offered under GNI India between 2018–2021.

Importantly, the above categories of support are bundled, and a single program can comprise more than one type of support intervention. For instance, the GNI Advertising Lab India (2021) call for applications stated its aim as "to uplift [publishers'] digital advertising revenue through tailored training and diagnosis led by expert consultants as well as hands-on technical implementation support for online assets optimization" (GNI, 2021). It encapsulates technical and analytical training for optimally integrating Google Ad Manager and AdSense on recipient news websites. Here we see tutelage and product incorporation bundled under the same program. In many cases, the initial program descriptions do not mention the integration of Google's native tools as the proposed plan of action. For instance, GNI YouTube Innovation Funding (2018) offered financial support to video news outlets on YouTube along with personalized training to enhance audience reach. Under this program, the publisher's desire for increasing audience reach was leveraged through YouTube's native tools such as Community Tab, LiveChat, MovieStudio, and others (GNI, 2020a).

Thus, GNI bundles platform resources, often in a veiled manner, to capture the widespread requirements of news publishers. Findings below show that Google leverages these partnerships for economic benefits accrued through a continual flow of news content and infrastructural expansion across the linguistic and regional news markets in India. This exacerbates the asymmetrical relations between the publishers and Google wherein reliance on GNI for any one or all types of resources instills institutional, infrastructural, and financial dependencies.

Platform Dependencies

GNI India, through the nature and strategic bundling of support, creates and affirms three types of dependencies within the digital news ecosystem in India—institutional, infrastructural, and financial. I explain this through an analysis of their intended aims (as presented by Google in its documents) and realized implications (as illustrated by case studies and interviews).

Institutional Dependence

GNI maintains a large repository of journalism-related educational material that includes prerecorded and live tutorials that fall under the "Training Center" section of the GNI website (depicted in Figure 2). These courses are available for free to news publishers worldwide. It includes certified courses on

topics such as election reporting, environmental reporting, data journalism, and others. They are also offered as certifications at the end of programs such as the GNI Digital Growth Program directed at product managers within newsrooms (Figure 3).
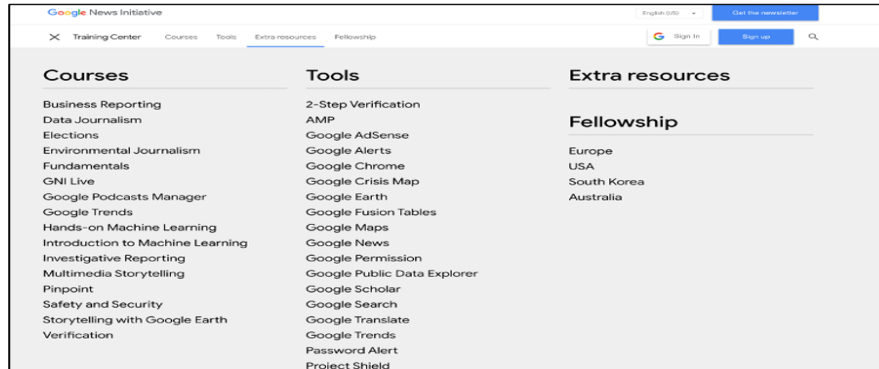

Figure 2. Snapshot of Google educational and professional certificate courses and tools offered under GNI. Source: GNI (2022a).
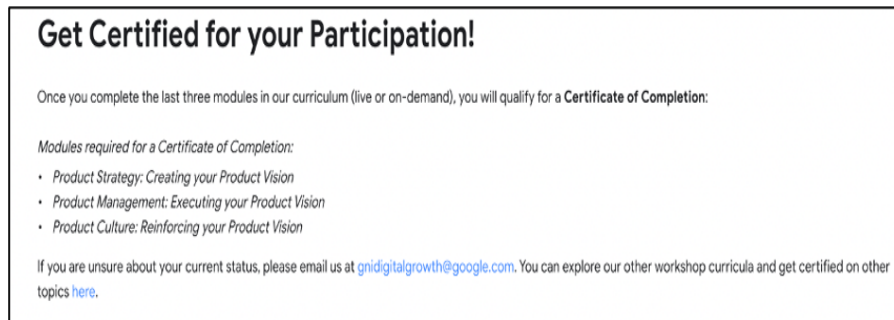

Figure 3. Snapshot of digital growth program. Source: GNI's Digital Growth Program (GNI, 2022b).

These courses and their certifications are increasingly incorporated in newsroom training for young journalists and have become a classifier of their expertise and qualifications. Indian journalists highlighted the value of such certification in hiring and appointments within institutions. A social media coordinator of a major English newspaper in India said:

> Before I had been given this additional responsibility, I was associated with the GNI India Network, wherein, it was primarily for fact checking and verification [*sic*]. Among all the members or rather the editorial team that we have, I was little more aware about the digital working set up because I had done some certification courses from Google and Reuters so that's why I was appointed as the coordinator. (Interviewee 3, 2022)

This increased value of the GNI brand and certification has led to Google gaining the authority of compiling, offering, and certifying educational and professional courses in journalistic work. It influences the news organizations' demand for platform expertise and training as key markers of journalists. For small news organizations lacking funds for in-house skill building, GNI partnerships become the sole avenue for formal training, demystifying platform imperatives, and gaining access to key members in platform teams. This was expressed by the social media managers at two different native digital news organization:

> [Google] will have these webinars . . . on SEO, social media, product side of team, business side of things . . . People before me [in the news organization] must have attended them, and then given that kind of knowledge to me. I attend them and I try to make sure that I either pass on that knowledge or make sure that my team is attending that webinar. (Interviewee 6, 2022)

> These forums are good, in a way, to understand or connect with the people who run these platforms . . . Generally, if we get an exposure to the strategies or what a platform like Google thinks about journalism or independent media houses, that also helps us individually figure out how to work around the platforms. So yeah, I mean we take these opportunities, whatever sessions or learnings the platforms want to share with us. We are always forthcoming to participate. (Interviewee 5, 2022)

Importantly, the courses not only train a journalist in digital skills but in the use of diverse Google tools to improve journalism practice and digitalization. For instance, the course on Multimedia Storytelling (Figure 4) depicts that it will train journalists in dynamic and interactive storytelling using Google Earth, Google Earth Studio, YouTube, and Google Permissions. As mentioned before, calls for applications for various training programs do not mention the integration of Google's native tools as the proposed plan of action, but are nevertheless presented as necessary solutions in the case studies of participating organizations. Training through Google's proprietary tools secures their positions as the go-to way of doing digital journalism (Papa & Kouros, 2023). Thus, the upskilling of journalists for journalism within platform ecosystem cements institutional dependence on GNI for formally defining and training journalists. This risks standardization of journalism, particularly within newsrooms that lack resources.
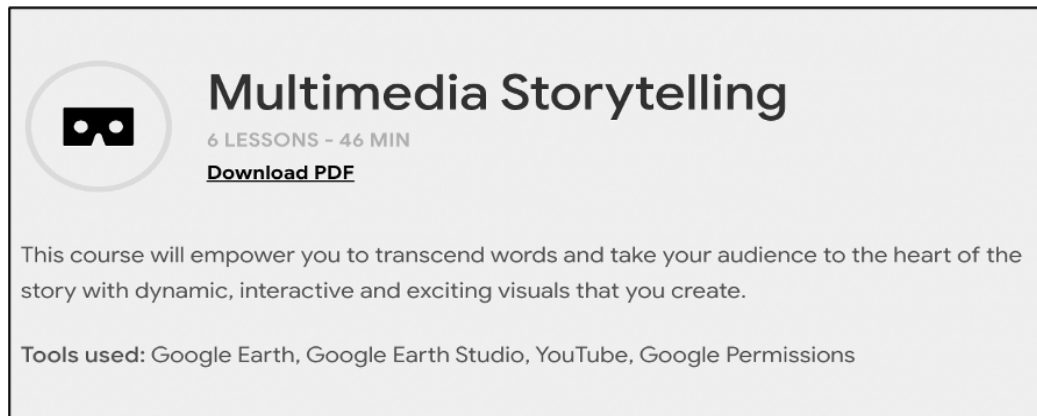
Multimedia Storytelling

6 LESSONS - 46 MIN

Download PDF

This course will empower you to transcend words and take your audience to the heart of the story with dynamic, interactive and exciting visuals that you create.

Tools used: Google Earth, Google Earth Studio, YouTube, Google Permissions

Figure 4. Snapshot of course on multimedia storytelling. Source: GNI (2022c).

Infrastructural Dependence

Within its first year, GNI had launched programs that doled out products without money or compensation costs to publishers. These included products for consumer data analytics (Real-time Content Insights and News Consumer Insights), monetization of content (Subscribe with Google, Google News Showcase), editorial tools (Fact-Check Markup Tool, Google Shield, YouTube fact verification feature), news formats (Google Web Stories—AMP Stories), and many others. Figure 2 above also depicts the range of Google tools and products available for news producer needs under GNI.

Notably, many of these platform tools and products were either built in collaboration with industry agents or from case learnings in different geographies to provide platform-based infrastructural solutions to news businesses. For instance, "Subscribe with Google" was developed with industry collaboration and beta testing with publishers across the world including India. GNI launched this tool in 2018 as a "simple way to subscribe to news publications and maintain access everywhere: websites, apps, even search results" (Albrecht, 2018, para. 2). The tool implants the subscription paywall on Google's platforms itself. It augments Google user identity when subscribing to a publisher to eliminate technical barriers to generating revenue. For news publishers, this tool cements Google infrastructure as a data and financial entry point in subscription management. Similarly, Google developed and offered data analytics tools such as Realtime Content Insights and News Consumer Insights to partnering news organizations. To use these tools, news publishers are required to have Google Analytics, Google Trends, and a Google account, thus solidifying Google's integration across data-driven decision making within newsrooms.

Similarly, Google pushes nascent news-specific products into newsrooms that then produce successful case studies for GNI. This is evident from the digital operations of an Indian legacy newspaper, Jagran Media Ltd. Jagran, as recipient of many programs under the GNI, adopted many of Google's products and tools within its newsrooms. Jagran then produced case studies on how they adopted Google's Accelerated Mobile Pages in 2018, and Google's Realtime Content Insights and News Consumer Insights in 2019 (Accelerated Mobile Pages, 2018; GNI, 2020b). As a part of the GNI APAC Data Lab, they onboarded other infrastructural tools such as Google DataStudio, Google Big Query, and Google Tag Manager (GNI,

2020c). Through these programs, Google has solidified the presence of its infrastructure within Jagran's newsroom.

Further, in the absence of resources to build their own infrastructure, news publishers rely on Google's partnerships as valuable alternatives. This infrastructural dependence on GNI was evident when a CEO of legacy print organization talked about the infrastructure to be gained from partnering with Google rather than developing it themselves:

> . . . AIML (Artificial Intelligence and Machine Learning) is the buzzword. How many of us can actually invest into a very strong team of data scientists to create a very strong AIML thing, right? . . . if I partner, let's say with Google Cloud, so then they already have AIML infrastructure and support there, you can use their Big Query tools. (Interviewee 18, 2022)

Thus, GNI's strategic transfer of free, relatively stable, and advanced infrastructural tools serve two purposes: (1) news outlets become testing and developing grounds for new platform tools and services, and (2) cement the dependence on the platform for the infrastructural needs of data, consumer insights, technical design, and adaptability of news content. Such extensions result in further reduction of publisher control over proprietary avenues of revenue generation and data decisions. Google's infrastructural expansion allows it to gain access to publishers' consumer data and a share in previously untouched publisher revenue from subscriptions (Myllylahti, 2021). Further, because of the dominant hold of these tools, opting-in is viewed as more beneficial for newsrooms than missing out (Nechushtai, 2018).

Financial Dependence

In a situation where small- and medium -scale news organizations in India rely on multiple sources of unsustainable revenue, funding from Google is viewed as welcome aid. However, the funding duration of six months to one year, sometimes for specific content, creates only temporary stability and leads to economic bootstrapping. It drives publishers to rely on project- or story-based funding, which suffers editorial limitations, in lieu of capital and infrastructural needs. For instance, a managing editor of the native digital news organization that received GNI funding said:

> We went into a collaboration with GNI for fact checking . . . So obviously, we would never have the funding for that kind of content . . . but that's not revenue, it's not funding towards the kind of work you want to do right?" (Interviewee 7, 2022)

It is also pertinent to address that under GNI, there is no direct cash offered for the editorial work done by the organization; rather, support takes the form of technical and logistical equipment, tools, and others (GNI, 2020d). In the absence of continual funding to establish their own fixed capital—such as newsrooms sets, content and subscription management systems, user analytics software, and technical equipment—GNI ensures dependence from early stages of operations. When asked about how GNI funds helped their news organization, the chief operating officer of a small, native digital news organization in India that received support for the creation of program-specific content for YouTube, said:

They helped us with equipment to shoot and make a set which was used not just for that show, but other shows. It definitely helped us at a time when there was hardly any other revenue source. You know when you don't have any investors on board, you are not a value proposition that anyone is really looking at seriously, but that time stuff like this can really keep you going. I know other organizations that received support and could not survive, which is unfortunate. I'm not saying it's a sure shot way of reaching sustainability, but it does help. (Interviewee 19, 2022)

Further, recipient organizations often do not have any bargaining power with Google that sets the terms of not just the initiatives, but of the nature and formats of outputs. For instance, the 2018 YouTube Innovation Challenge claimed to fund news organizations to develop innovative means to expand reach and revenue. Here again, funding was extended toward creation of specific news content that was developed using Google tools. ShepHertz, an organization assisting digital transformation of regional print publishers in India, was funded under this program. In turn, ShepHertz led the creation of over 60 YouTube news channels and over 9,000 YouTube videos in regional languages. This partnership cemented the use of YouTube tools, logics, formats among small publishers, and expanded YouTube's geographical reach through regional and relevant content (GNI, 2020e). Thus, GNI supports the dependence on platform funding among digital publishers, not just for creating specific news stories but also creating it within its own ecosystem through its own tools.

Additionally, Google's dominant position in the news distribution market affords it a unique position. News organizations view collaborations with GNI as a way of gaining legitimacy in a highly competitive market, which makes them more amenable to forgo monetary benefits. Partnerships with Google offer the promise of enhanced brand value in the market as well as higher visibility. A social media manager for a native digital website said:

Google may not give you "money-money," in terms of cash [*sic*], but it might put out a thing saying—[news organization] is collaborating with Google to give it ethical political content . . . Google collaboration, obviously will get a little bit more push on Google News, right?" (Interviewee 14, 2022)

Discussions and Concluding Remarks

Google, in its public communication, reiterates that GNI India plays "a constructive role in enabling a sustainable, independent, and diverse news ecosystem" (GNI, 2018, para. 3). In light of the above findings on platform capture and dependencies, this study demystifies these claims. It lends the conceptual framework of PSIs that unpacks the nature and scope of platform interventions in this form. Moreover, in alignment with existing research, I show that although GNI dons a philanthropic role, Google's support is intertwined with its own self-interest. The essential concept of PSIs upturns the "support" narrative adopted by platforms. It submits that platform support in this form aims to inject platform-compatible content, produced using platform tools and trainings, informed by platform analytics and logics, and supported by platform money.

Further, this study expands existing research on platform dependence by positioning PSIs as a method for rooting and reinforcing three distinct forms of dependencies. First, journalistic training best suited for a platform ecosystem leads news institutions to depend on platforms for formal training and redefining valuable journalistic qualifications. Second, platforms' extensions of free production and analytical tools instills infrastructural dependence within newsrooms that cannot develop proprietary alternatives. Third, stop-gap financial inducement bootstraps newsrooms and creates dependence for both base and brand capital and limits editorial freedom. The analytical framework of institutional, infrastructural, and financial dependence broadens existing research on this subject. Moreover, empirical findings from India contribute to the otherwise limited literature (with the exception of De-Lima-Santos et al., 2023) on this subject from the Global South.

In addition to the above discussions, this study proposes future analyses of GNI's claim of diversity. GNI support is unevenly disbursed among the Indian news market. Many legacy news organizations in India also receive support from GNI (indicated in bold in Table 1), and often exclusively without public announcements. This was evident in Google News Showcase, a revenue-sharing product launched in India in May 2020, which is exclusively licensed to legacy news publishers. Although these publishers also face the loss of audience data and reduction in revenue generation, their brand value and risk capital allow them to treat platform support as supplemental. This allows them to view their relationship with platforms as collaborative, as opposed to foundational in the case of small publishers. Thus, an uneven extension of platform resources reinstitutes the dominance of legacy actors in the market, rather than promoting diversity in the news ecosystem (Nielsen & Cherubini, 2022).

On the other hand, small and independent publishers bear existential risks by not accepting platform support. In the absence of continual funding, other profitable businesses, and political power to successfully compete within the platform economy, small publishers rely on platform audiences and consequent advertising revenue to operate. Given these anxieties, they readily accept support in many forms. However, intermittent and conditional funding are unsustainable means for the realization of their goals. PSIs last for a maximum duration of one year and do not promise continual income. In many cases, platform funds support only the initial versions of projects, leaving newsrooms with unfinished projects or needing additional funds to complete them. This form of conditional funding impinges on editorial decisions on story selection and organization, forcing publishers to cross-subsidize hard news for formats and content more profitable on platforms—such as short video snippets (Newman, 2022). Thus, injection of platform resources within budding newsrooms leads to the standardization of journalistic work, as well as increases chances for capture and dependencies.

Although this study does not explicitly discuss the possible influence of states over PSIs, they are important sites to study the interaction of state interests with platforms, especially authoritarian settings that intend to control through platforms (Agarwal, 2022). Platform relations with governments are marked by constant friction, requiring them to adapt their operations to state interests or quell regulatory attention whenever possible. A political economy approach reveals that platforms and tech investments are often entangled with the realization of state interests (Mukherjee, 2019). Given this, PSIs are not bereft of state influence. Platforms often launch initiatives as a public-private partnership to fill training and technical gaps that would otherwise be expected of governments to address. For instance, the Indian government has

partnered with Google to launch the "Appscale Academy" to support startups in the software development industry (Swamy, 2022). The government has also partnered with Google Cloud to meet its training, cyber security, monitoring, storage, and other needs (Bedi, 2021; Mishra, 2024). Further, the economic contribution of platforms brings them a certain level of goodwill with governments. For instance, independent Indian digital creators on YouTube alone contributed INR 160 billion to India's GDP in 2020 (Oxford Economics, 2022). Thus, closeness with the state to keep regulation at bay and/or advance institutionalization in the public sector risks the permeation of state interests in PSIs. Future research could evaluate the risks ensuing from state control over platforms, and dependent industries.

In conclusion, discussions in this study make relevant theoretical and analytical contributions to the existing research on platform power and news dependence. Future investigations could study the nature and interests underlying PSIs in other sectors such as content creation, gaming, finance, advertising, education, and entrepreneurship. The analytical framework could be applied to study the use of PSIs as a method to cement and reinforce dependence in these industries. Finally, new research could extrapolate the empirical findings to a global scale, compare the differences in resources offered to beneficiaries in the Global South and North, and the kind of dependencies this creates within diverse geographies.

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Appendix 1

Table 1. Overview of Google News Initiative Insertions in India (2018–2021).

PROGRAM TITLE	YEAR	DURATION	NATURE OF SUPPORT	EXPERT AGENTS	RECEPIENTS
Google News Training Network	2018	Renewal basis	Tutelage	Partnered with DataLeads BoomLive and InterNews	3 million journalists in India
GNI YouTube Innovation Funding	2018	One time	Sponsorship Tutelage		**Asianet News**, Bharatiya Digital Party (BDP), FACTLY, Gaon Connection, **India Today Group**, Live Data Visualization Pvt. Ltd, **NDTV**, Nyoooz, ShepHertz, Video Volunteers
GNI Innovation Challenge	2019	Renewal basis	Sponsorship Product Incorporation		Chambal Media, Turkbox, The Newsminute, Gaon Connection, The Morning Context, **Indian Express Online**
Newsroom leadership Program	2019	6 months	Tutelage	Columbia School of Journalism	Nitya Thirumalai, Gyanu Adhikari
GNI Products Lab—Design Accelerator Program	2019	One time	Product Incorporation	Echos, Splice Media	**IndiaToday**
GNI Reader Revenue Labs—APAC Subscriptions Lab	2020	4 months	Tutelage	WAN-Ifra, FTI Consulting	**The Hindu**, Quint Bloomberg
GNI Data Labs	2020	One time	Tutelage Product Incorporation	MightyHive, Tatvic	**Jagran Media Ltd.**

GNI Audience Labs	2020	One time	Tutelage Product Incorporation	News Revenue Hub	**Jagran Media Ltd.**
Journalism Emergency Relief Fund	2020	One time	Sponsorship	-	228 news organizations
Creators Program for Independent Journalists	2021	12 months	Sponsorship Tutelage	Northwestern University Medill School, USA	Pari Saika, Rohit Upadhyay, Sehar Qazi, Prema Sridevi, Anubha Bhosle
GNI YouTube Sustainability Lab	2021	12 months	Sponsorship, Tutelage and Product Incorporation		EastMojo.com, Faye D'souza, India Signing Hands, Mojo Story, Newslaundry, Unscripted by ScoopWhoop, TheWire, OneIndia, **Network18**
GNI Advertising Lab	2021	5 months	Product Incorporation and Tutelage	-	Chambal Media
Fact Checking Contract	2021	12 months	Sponsorship		WebQoof, The Quint
GNI Transformation Lab	2021	n/a	Tutelage and Product Incorporation	n/a	n/a
GNI Startups Lab	2021	4 months	Tutelage and Product Incorporation	DigiPub, Echoes	BehanBox, Bisbo, East Mojo, ED Times, Headline Network, Main Media, Suno India, The Bridge, The Cue, and The Probe
Google News Showcase	2021	n/a	Product Incorporation		**HT Digital Streams Ltd., The Hindu Group, Indian Express Group, ABP LIVE, India TV, NDTV, Zee News,**

Amar Ujala, Deccan Herald, Punjab Kesari, The Telegraph India, IANS (Indo Asian News Service), and ANI