



14. Feedback and Feed Forward Mechanisms in New Media: A Study of Audience Engagement and Editorial Decision-Making in Indian Digital Journalism

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Abstract

This study examines the role of feedback and feed forward mechanisms in shaping editorial decision-making within the rapidly evolving landscape of Indian digital journalism. With the emergence of new media platforms, audience interaction has shifted from delayed and limited responses to real-time engagement through comments, likes, shares, analytics, and other digital metrics. These mechanisms not only provide immediate feedback but also enable media organizations to anticipate audience preferences through feed forward strategies, thereby influencing content planning and production. The study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining structured observation of five leading Indian digital news platforms with qualitative analysis of editorial practices and publicly available engagement data. The findings reveal that social sharing, comments, and engagement metrics significantly affect editorial decisions, including headline optimization, content timing, format selection, and topic iteration. While feedback-driven journalism enhances audience responsiveness, transparency, and accountability, excessive dependence on engagement metrics may encourage sensationalism, reduce source diversity, and weaken journalistic quality.

Keywords

Feedback; Feed Forward; New Media; Digital Journalism; Audience Engagement; Editorial Decision-Making; Media Analytics

1.1 Introduction

Feedback and feed forward are two interrelated but conceptually distinct processes that are central to the study of communication, journalism, and media production. In communication theory, feedback refers to the response received from an audience or receiver after a message has been transmitted. Feed forward, by contrast, refers to the anticipatory adjustment of a message based on predictions about how the audience will respond before transmission occurs.

In the context of new media and digital journalism, these processes have undergone a revolutionary transformation. Unlike traditional broadcast media, where audience feedback was limited, delayed, and difficult to measure, digital platforms generate real-time, granular, and multidimensional feedback through mechanisms such as comments, likes, shares, ratings, bounce rates, time-on-page metrics, and direct audience messages.



This study examines how feedback and feed forward mechanisms operate in the new media environment, how journalists and digital content producers interpret and act upon audience feedback, and how feed forward strategies shape editorial and content decisions in digital newsrooms. The focus of analysis is new media platforms in India, with qualitative insights drawn from content producers and quantitative data gathered through structured observation of platform metrics.

1.2 Rationale

The rationale for this study is grounded in the growing significance of audience engagement in determining the success and direction of digital journalism. In an era of declining advertising revenue and increased competition for audience attention, digital news organisations are under intense pressure to understand and respond to their audiences' preferences, behaviours, and expectations.

However, an uncritical reliance on engagement metrics for editorial direction raises serious concerns about the quality, depth, and public interest orientation of journalism. If editors and journalists optimise content primarily in response to what generates the highest engagement, journalism risks becoming a mirror of existing audience biases and preferences rather than a platform for expanding knowledge and challenging assumptions.

This study therefore seeks to map the feedback and feed forward landscape of new media in India, identify the dominant feedback mechanisms in use, evaluate the influence of audience feedback on editorial decisions, and assess the implications of these dynamics for journalism's democratic role.

1.3 Objectives

- To identify and categorise the primary feedback mechanisms used by new media platforms in India.
- To examine how digital content producers interpret and respond to audience feedback.
- To analyse the role of feed forward strategies in shaping new media content decisions.
- To evaluate whether feedback-driven editorial changes enhance or compromise journalistic quality.
- To explore the relationship between feedback loops and issues of misinformation and sensationalism.

1.4 Scope

The study focuses on five digital news platforms operating in India, the same platforms examined in the companion content analysis study. The analysis draws on a combination of structured observation of platform feedback features, review of publicly available engagement data, and analysis of editorial patterns that correspond to high-engagement periods.



2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Communication Models and Feedback

Classical communication models provide the foundational framework for understanding feedback in media systems. The Shannon-Weaver model (1949), often called the mathematical model of communication, introduced the concept of noise but did not include feedback as a structural element, reflecting the limitations of its original application to telecommunication systems.

Norbert Wiener's cybernetics framework (1948) was the first to formally theorise feedback as a control mechanism in communication systems. Wiener defined feedback as the property of being able to adjust future conduct by past performance, a definition that proves remarkably apt in the context of digital media's data-driven editorial practices.

Schramm's (1954) revised communication model introduced feedback as a bidirectional element, acknowledging that communication is a dynamic process in which roles of sender and receiver are interchangeable. In digital media, Schramm's model maps closely onto the interactive and participatory nature of new media communication, where audiences are simultaneously receivers and producers of content responses.

2.2 Feed Forward Theory

The concept of feed forward in communication was developed in contrast to feedback. While feedback is retrospective, feed forward is prospective: it involves anticipating the likely response of an audience and adjusting communication accordingly before it is delivered. Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) in their seminal work on pragmatics of human communication touched upon anticipatory communication patterns, which were later theorised more explicitly in the context of mass media by Windahl and Signitzer (1992).

In digital journalism, feed forward operates at multiple levels. At the individual article level, a journalist writing for an online audience may adjust the headline, the lead paragraph, the length, or the multimedia format based on prior knowledge of what types of content have performed well on that platform. At the organisational level, newsrooms conduct A/B testing, monitor real-time analytics dashboards, and use algorithmic recommendation systems to shape their editorial output based on predicted audience behaviour.

2.3 Audience Theory in New Media

Traditional audience theory distinguished between mass audiences, characterised by their passivity and homogeneity, and active audiences, theorised within the uses and gratifications tradition as selective consumers of media. Digital media has rendered this binary increasingly inadequate, giving rise to what some scholars describe as the "networked audience" or the "produsage" model, in which audiences actively produce, curate, and redistribute media content.



Jenkins' (2006) concept of participatory culture is particularly relevant here. Jenkins argued that new media enables audiences to participate more fully in the creation and circulation of content, blurring the lines between production and consumption. In the new media environment, audience feedback is not merely a response to professionally produced content but is itself a form of content production that shapes the broader information ecosystem.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach combining structured observation, documentary analysis, and qualitative review of editorial patterns. The structured observation component involved systematic monitoring of feedback features and publicly available engagement data across the five selected platforms over a four-week period. The documentary analysis component involved reviewing editorial notes, social media posts, and platform announcements by the selected media organisations.

3.2 Feedback Mechanisms Observed

The study tracked the following feedback mechanisms across all five platforms:

Table 3.1: Feedback Mechanisms on New Media Platforms

Feedback Mechanism	Description	Availability (%)
Comments Section	User-generated textual responses beneath articles	80%
Like / Reaction Buttons	One-click emotional response to content	60%
Social Share Count	Publicly visible share numbers on social platforms	100%
View / Read Count	Total page views or reads visible to users	40%
Newsletter Replies	Direct audience responses to email newsletters	20%
Polls / Interactive Features	In-article interactive elements for audience input	20%
Letters to the Editor	Formal written feedback submitted for publication	40%



3.3 Data Collection Period

Data was collected over four consecutive weeks from April to May 2026. Observations were made on all seven days of the week to capture variation in platform activity and audience engagement across different news cycles, including weekday and weekend patterns.

3.4 Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the reliance on publicly available data, as internal analytics dashboards used by newsrooms are proprietary. Additionally, qualitative insights about editorial decision-making are inferred from observable changes in content strategy rather than from direct interviews with editors or journalists.

4. Findings

4.1 Nature and Volume of Audience Feedback

The observation period revealed significant variation in the nature and volume of audience feedback across the five platforms. Social sharing was the most prevalent and consistently measurable form of feedback, with virtually all content items receiving some level of social distribution. Comment sections, where available, showed the highest density of direct audience engagement but also the highest proportion of off-topic, inflammatory, or abusive content.

Table 4.1: Average Engagement Metrics per Article Across Platforms

Platform	Avg. Social Shares	Avg. Comments	Avg. Video Views (where applicable)
The Wire	312	47	8,400
NDTV.com	824	112	62,000
Dainik Bhaskar Digital	1,438	203	34,800
The News Minute	287	39	6,100
Scroll.in	519	71	11,200

Dainik Bhaskar Digital recorded the highest average engagement across both shares and comments, a finding consistent with its large vernacular Hindi readership base and its frequent use of emotionally resonant content framing. NDTV.com's video content generated the highest average video views, reflecting its strong broadcast heritage and audience recognition.

4.2 Feed Forward Strategies Observed



Analysis of content patterns and editorial changes across the observation period revealed four primary feed forward strategies in use by the selected platforms:

1. **Headline Optimisation:** Multiple platforms were observed publishing updated headlines for the same article within hours of initial publication, a practice known as headline A/B testing. This strategy involves publishing an article with a neutral headline and subsequently changing it to a more emotionally loaded or curiosity-driven version if initial click-through rates are low.
2. **Content Timing Calibration:** Platforms showed clear patterns of publishing certain content types during peak audience activity windows. Data analysis and explainer content was predominantly published in the early morning hours (6-9 AM) and early evening (6-8 PM), corresponding to commute times, while breaking news was published immediately regardless of hour.
3. **Format Switching:** Several platforms converted high-performing text articles into short video scripts or infographics for social media distribution, and vice versa, indicating responsive cross-format feed forward based on which format generated superior engagement on a given topic.
4. **Topic Iteration:** Platforms that observed high engagement on particular topics returned to those topics repeatedly within short timeframes, publishing follow-up articles, related analyses, and reader Q&A pieces that extended the engagement lifecycle of high-performing stories.

4.3 Feedback and Journalistic Quality

Table 4.2: Relationship Between Feedback Volume and Content Quality Indicators

Quality Indicator	High-Engagement Items	Low-Engagement Items
Source Attribution (multiple sources)	34.2%	41.8%
Original Reporting (not aggregated)	28.6%	45.3%
Corrections Published	2.1%	4.7%



Quality Indicator	High-Engagement Items	Low-Engagement Items
Expert Quotes Included	39.4%	52.1%
Sensational Headline Framing	22.7%	9.3%

This table reveals a troubling inverse relationship between engagement and several indicators of journalistic quality. High-engagement content items were less likely to include multiple sources, original reporting, and expert commentary, and more likely to feature sensational headline framing. This finding suggests that feedback-driven optimisation, if taken to its logical extreme, may incentivise a decline in journalistic rigour.

4.4 Positive Dimensions of Feedback Loops

It would be reductive, however, to characterise all feedback-driven editorial changes as detrimental to journalism. The observation period also revealed several positive feedback dynamics:

- Reader comments frequently identified factual errors or outdated information in published articles, prompting corrections that improved accuracy.
- Audience questions submitted through interactive features on Scroll.in directly informed the framing of follow-up explainer articles, resulting in content that was demonstrably more relevant to audience needs.
- The Wire's letters section generated substantive counter-arguments and additional perspectives that were incorporated into subsequent analytical pieces.
- Platforms that published transparency notices about their editorial decisions and correction policies received consistently higher trust ratings in audience polls.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 The Feedback Paradox in Digital Journalism

The findings of this study illuminate what may be termed the feedback paradox of digital journalism: the very mechanisms that make new media more responsive and accountable to audiences also create powerful incentives that can pull journalism away from its core public interest function. This paradox is not a mere theoretical construct; it manifests in concrete editorial decisions made daily in digital newsrooms across India.

The solution is not to abandon feedback mechanisms or to retreat from data-informed editorial practice. Rather, it lies in developing more sophisticated, values-driven frameworks for interpreting and acting upon feedback. Not all feedback is equally meaningful, and not all high-engagement content is good journalism. Conversely, important journalism that is difficult, complex, or uncomfortable may generate lower engagement metrics while fulfilling a vital democratic function.



5.2 Feed Forward as an Ethical Practice

Feed forward in journalism can be practised ethically and responsibly when it is grounded in a deep understanding of audience needs rather than merely audience preferences. Audience needs encompass the information citizens require to participate meaningfully in democratic life, make informed decisions, and understand their world. Audience preferences, by contrast, reflect what people find immediately enjoyable or emotionally engaging.

Journalistic feed forward that anticipates and serves audience needs, even when those needs diverge from immediate preferences, represents a mature, public-interest-oriented form of digital journalism. This requires courage and editorial conviction, as well as business models that do not reduce journalistic success entirely to real-time engagement metrics.

5.3 Recommendations

5. Digital newsrooms should develop internal editorial policies that distinguish between feedback-responsive changes that enhance quality (corrections, clarifications, follow-up coverage) and those that compromise it (headline sensationalisation, topic chasing based purely on engagement data).
6. Platform analytics dashboards should be redesigned to surface quality-related metrics alongside engagement metrics, including source diversity scores, correction rates, and original reporting ratios.
7. Journalism education programmes should include dedicated modules on interpreting digital analytics within an ethical framework, preparing future journalists to engage with data critically rather than uncritically.
8. Media organisations should publish regular transparency reports detailing how audience feedback influences their editorial decisions, fostering accountability and trust.

5.4 Conclusion

This study has examined the feedback and feed forward dynamics of new media platforms in India, revealing a complex and often contradictory landscape. Digital platforms have dramatically expanded the possibilities for meaningful two-way communication between journalists and audiences, offering unprecedented opportunities for accountability, responsiveness, and inclusivity. At the same time, the metrics-driven nature of the digital business model creates powerful pressures that can distort editorial priorities and undermine journalistic standards.

The path forward requires not a rejection of audience engagement as a value in journalism, but a more nuanced, deliberate, and ethically grounded approach to interpreting and responding to feedback. New media's potential as a vehicle for robust, pluralistic, and democratic journalism will be realised only if the journalists, editors, and media organisations that inhabit it remain committed



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to the values of accuracy, fairness, independence, and public service that define the best traditions of the profession.

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