

Data Journalism in the age of RTI

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Abstract

With the rise of democracy, the modern governments have slowly started opening themselves to the idea of open governance, i.e., a transparent and accountable governance. Several legislative patterns around the world are the proof of this paradigm. The Indian government after some amount of reluctance dipped its toes with the introduction of the Right to Information Act, 2005.

This has added a new requirement to the journalist's profession – Data Crunching. After slowly understanding the plethora of stories hidden underneath these data, the Journalists have started hunting for data that they can use in their stories.

Other than this, RTI has also paved way for the media organizations to serve the public interest better with data journalism. However, the data journalism comes with a huge barrier – the lack of familiarity about how to work with the data and the dearth of computing skills are the foremost of them.

This paper tries to understand the possible paradigms and viability of data journalism in the Indian Journalism.

Keywords: Data Journalism, Data Crunching, Open Data, RTI

Introduction

Data has been an integral part of any story in the discipline of journalism. However, the reachability of the data has become far more probable because of the embracement of technological advancement by the media institutions. This likeliness towards the technology by the media institutions is the result of them trying to trump one another. It is once again, important for us to remember that this ideology forms the basis of modern industrial society. In another paradigm, the world has been going through a phase, what the Marxist call as 'Late Capitalism' bringing in more openness and accountability into the governance. Several legislative patterns around the world are the proof of this paradigm. The Indian government after some amount of reluctance dipped its toes with the introduction of the Right to Information Act, 2005.

This idea of making the data available for the public comes with many appendages. One of the consequence of such a governance was illustrated methodically by Walter Lipmann in his work, *The Phantom Public*¹. In that, he argued that ordinary citizens live in a world which they cannot see, do

not understand and are unable to direct. Citizens were not "inherently competent" to direct public affairs. However, the Public has found their help in the form of Mass media and Journalists. Today's modern media institutions have the colossal task of shaping up public opinions. As data being an intangible evidence, the institutions have been showing fondness over them in order to do its task of shaping public opinion.

This paper tries to give its reader a peak into the current usage of data in the field of journalism in India. It also tries to address the possibilities and challenges that are ahead of the industry in the upcoming time. This paper heavily relies on the data acquired from a secondary source.

The aim of this short study is to explore a brief overview of the developing situation and the possible future of this discipline.

Open governance, Open data and India

The idea of "open governance" shares its ethos with conceptions like "open data", "open source", "open content"

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and “open access.” All the above stated conceptions want the information to be unbounded by restrictions. In another words, it relies on the public to be rational individuals who need only minimal interference from the invisible hand, be it from the state or the market. But, the same notion in India has its origin in counterpoint to the above mentioned idea.

In India, the need for open governance can be traced back to a grass root social movement called “*Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan*”; roughly translates to Association for the Empowerment of Workers and Peasants. The movement was born as the reaction to the extreme corrupt practices within the state.

The RTI

The Right to information act (2005) is undoubtedly one of the most empowering pieces of legislation enacted by the Indian Government. In just over a decade, it has become the bastion of Indian Democracy.

Democracy implies transparency simply because people do not know how the state is exercising its powers. The RTI act has not only enabled journalists to expose misdemeanors of the government, but it has also forced the bureaucracy to be more responsible to its citizens. This is probably the statute’s biggest achievement in a country where the administration has traditionally been insulated from the society².

Evolution

Right to Know or Freedom of Information has its origins with the British Raj just like every other Legislation in India. Not many know that there exists a statute passed by the British Government in 1872 which conferred on all its citizens the right to access public documents. Few, if any, ever used this provision. Journalists and Lawyers, who were the freedom fighters against the colonial powers at that period of time, failed to use this freedom to its full extent.

The statute, which is none other than the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 continues to be enforced throughout India (Except the state of Jammu and Kashmir).

The foundations for Right to Information Act, though laid by the Indian Evidence Act of 1872, began to grow only a decade later in 1994 with the farmer protests for right to information regarding rural development works in Rajasthan. A series of public hearings on the issue of public expenditure auditing woke up the state apparatus from a deep slumber. Here, Laymen laid the groundwork for what was about to be a revolutionary step towards “Open Governance” and Transparency³.

In 1996, the Press Council of India took the effort to prepare

a draft Right to Information Bill for the enforcement of this existing fundamental right, the right to information. It took four years for the draft to get tabled in the parliament and five more years for the bill to be passed after several revisions and dilutions from the initial draft. By then many state governments – Tamil Nadu, Rajasthan, Maharashtra, Goa and Delhi – had already implemented the act in their own states, the effectiveness of which remains questionable.

Today, a little over a decade later, RTI applications have continued to grow in number. It had already reached 7.55 lakhs in 2014-15, it rose by 22.67% in 2015 – 16. As per a study, about 1.75 crore RTI applications are reported to have been filed between 2005 and 2015 (Nayak and Chauhan, Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, 2015). It also pointed out that the top three – the central government, Maharashtra and Karnataka – received two thirds (65.43%) of all the applications submitted during this time period. While the central government received 47.66 lakh applications, Maharashtra received 46.26 lakh and Karnataka received 20.73 lakh applications. Tamil Nadu stands mid-way receiving only 9 Lakh applications⁴.

Threats to RTI

Ever since its inception, journalists and activists who fight for their rights and/or those of others are frequently exposed to violence. They are hardly protected by the police or the judiciary. In addition, several applications are rejected under the excuse of national security and the applicant is forced to visit the Central Information Commission (CIC) for further information.

The archaic Official secrets act, 1923 further prevents the dispersal of information with a non-upstate clause preventing access to information. The much promoted Whistle Blowers Act, enacted in 2011, with the aim to protect those who expose the illicit and corrupt activities of those in power is poorly implemented resulting in multiple acts of violence against the users of the act.

Now, the Indian government has thrown yet another challenge in the faces of RTI activists. It is diluting the act further in the name of reformation with the new draft rules published by the Department of Personnel and Training. The Draft Rule 12 which has a provision for withdrawing the RTI application could be leveraged by interested parties who could intimidate or bribe the applicant into withdrawing their application. It also suggests that in the event of the death of the applicant whose application is pending, the information sought will not be disclosed and the validity of the application revoked. Interventions of this nature will only weaken the backbone of the act rendering it ineffective.

The new draft, if implemented could thus cause irreversible damage to the fundamental right of Freedom of information.

Open data and Journalism in India

With Globalisation being the name of the game, looking at the trends in a specific nation might look like a frivolous task. However, it is imperative for us to remember, looking at the trends in the specific nation allows us to compare the development between the nations.

Despite having a very big number of talented younger population, Indian corporations are slower in adopting digitisation⁵. The most common reason stated for this habitat is the lack of proper infrastructure.

"We stand on the brink of a technological revolution that will fundamentally alter the way we live, work, and relate to one another. In its scale, scope, and complexity, the transformation will be unlike anything humankind has experienced before."⁶ These are the words used by the World Economic Forum to describe the ongoing Industry 4.0. Driven by the power of big data, high computing capacity, artificial intelligence and analytics, Industry 4.0 aims to completely digitise the manufacturing sector⁷.

If India lacks the infrastructure that it needs to take part in the ongoing revolution, it has to play catch-up just like the former revolution.

This is much evident in the discipline of journalism due to the mammoth growth of technology in the field of communication. Ten years ago, Journalist wouldn't even fathomed to the idea of using big data to produce a story as it was way out of their skill set. With the mother lode of data made readily available for citizens by the government which is also boosted by the power of RTI act, the job description of modern journalist is in the verge of changing from the Gatekeeper to the Curator.

From Gatekeepers to Curators and Explainers

When British journalist Simon Rogers called "Data journalism is the new punk"⁸, he clearly noted that the role of Journalists as the Gatekeepers has come to an end. However, the Journalists have more functions to do other than being a gatekeepers. One such role is the shaping public opinion, as stated by Walter Lipmann in his book *Public Opinion* (1922) where he argued that the competent opinion needed by democracy could come only from those specially trained, aided by Intelligence bureaus which would provide appropriate information for decision makers in the executive and legislature.

As the data has been made readily available to the public, We have to remember that the combination the traditional 'nose for news' and ability to tell a compelling story, with the sheer scale and range of digital information now available is a skill set that is very hard to come by.

Innovators in the Industry

Just like any other Industry, the early adopters towards this new trend are the newbies. Indiaspend.com is one such initiative which tries to take upon the job role of explainer than the gatekeeper. In its website, it states that the broader objective of the website is "fostering better governance, transparency and accountability in the Indian government."⁹ The mainstream media is also not too or behind. The Hindustan Times, Mint, and How India Lives have announced for a paid internship for a six-month paid Data Journalism Fellowship¹⁰.

Even the academia has acknowledged the immense need for this discipline. One such example is the Takshashila Institution which is providing a certificate course in Data Journalism¹¹.

The newsrooms have also felt the need for data team in their presence. These teams generally consist of a combination of skills in journalism, Web development, data analysis, visualisation and statistics.

The Future

The Coding part in data analytics, which is need to create stories with immense experience, has been minimized with the template culture. This was impendent, thanks to the idea 'Open Content'. Flourish¹², a web portal, cofounded by Duncan Clark and Robin Houston is an excellent example. To work on the big data, the modern journalist are armed with several

Free software available from the open source. Some of them are Google spreadsheets, Timetric, Graphinder, Google Fusion Tables, Google Refine. Because of the significance of the numbers, the news organisations of future are expected to have mathematicians and statisticians in the support roles in the data journalism teams. It is also important for us to remember that, even a data journalist is still a journalist and the most important factor for him to possess a journalistic sense of what is relevant and interesting, and of what questions need to be asked.

Data Journalism and the Business

Just like any other discipline, Journalism is supported and maintained by the industry that has grown out of it. Now, for the viability of data journalism in the modern media industry. At present, there is none. However, practising data journalism has something other than monetary advantages. It brings in the journalistic value and credibility to the practising organisation.

The stories that are born out of data journalism, at times, eat more resource than the routine stories. This goes against the principle behind the modern media industries.

However, the growing sense among the journalist as well as publishers alike on data journalism proves the worth of this practice.

Conclusion

This short study has mainly focused on the latest paradigms brought into the field of Data Journalism by the technological revolution that India is currently experiencing. India, with one the largest media in the world and a storied history of Journalists and activists is busy unearthing public corruption with the use of RTI act. We have an exciting yet challenging time ahead of us. In this Globalised world, Data is being collected everywhere. With the technological revolution at its peak, the government has a paradoxical role to play as it is both the main provider and the suppressor of information.

The path ahead of Journalists is to make sure that Open Data translates to Open Governance which lays the groundwork for Good governance. Comparison and Correlation between different sets of information is not only vital in exposing illicit activities and bringing down justice where it is due but also to protect the public interest by preventing such incidents from reaching its pinnacle.

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