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Smartphone-based GenAI and the Ruralization of Indian-Language News

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Abstract

This paper investigates the impact of smartphone-based GenAI on the editing and increasing representation of rural news in Hindi-language speed news in India. As an innovation, speed news refers to the recitation of news summaries by presenters at an accelerated pace across mobile, television, and digital platforms such as YouTube. Drawing on the anthropological conception of “ruralization” and fieldwork in northern India, I argue that smartphone-based GenAI enables small, rural actors working mainly with mobile phones to more effectively condense and edit speed news stories. Smartphone-based GenAI tools such as ChatGPT help package raw speed news stories into pithy, punchy sentences that resemble a form of *kahawat* (“saying”) or *sutra* (“aphorism”), thereby striking cultural chords with Hindi-language news audiences, particularly in rural India. This improved news-editing process also facilitates the steady production of speed news bulletins, contributing to the deeper ruralization of Hindi news. The commentary concludes with a brief reflection on the potentials and pitfalls of smartphone-based GenAI in India.

Keywords: smartphone-based GenAI; ruralization; Hindi speed news; rural journalism; Global South

Smartphone-based GenAI and the Ruralization of Indian-Language News

In the summer of 2023, while visiting my home in the northern Indian city of Jaipur, I was irked by my father's newly adopted habit of periodically listening to news bulletins at a high volume on his Android smartphone's speaker. It gradually occurred to me that what bothered me was not only the loudness of the phone's speaker, but also the accelerated pace at which the presenters read the news. When I asked my father what he was listening to, he answered matter-of-factly: "speed news." What began as a source of irritation later turned into my intellectual engagement, as I embarked on a research project to study this emergent form of news delivery on Indian television and, increasingly, mobile platforms.

Speed news refers to the recitation of news summaries by anchors at an accelerated pace such as 100 news stories in 10 minutes (translating to about one news story every six seconds). Speed news is at once an urban and rural phenomenon. Like mainstream news more broadly, it retains a predominantly urban focus, but compared with traditional news bulletins, speed news devotes relatively greater space to stories from rural areas, even though these bulletins themselves are packaged and relayed from major cities. Speed news is an innovation in Indian-language media such as Hindi, Kannada, and Malayalam and, to a lesser extent, English-language media. There is a lack of detailed data on the reception of speed news¹—let alone any scholarship on the subject—yet there are clear signs that this disruption is gaining prominence in Indian-language mobile spaces, as evidenced by the recent surge in smartphone apps and YouTube programs dedicated to speed news such as *India TV Speed News*, *Bharat Superfast*, and *Bullet 100*.

This commentary investigates the role of smartphone-based GenAI in the editing and increasing representation of rural news in Hindi-language speed news.² In

particular, I study how smartphone-based GenAI helps news actors edit and package Hindi-language speed news from India's rural regions. In so doing, this commentary seeks to contribute to three underrepresented threads in mobile media scholarship: (a) the dynamics of AI use in majority world countries (Xu & De Souza e Silva, 2025); (b) the nexus of mobile media and journalism (Duffy et al., 2020); and (c) the adoption of AI in rural, Indian-language contexts. The multidimensional nature of this inquiry warrants engagement with scholarship from interdisciplinary fields such as mobile media studies, journalism studies, and area studies.

This commentary theorizes the relative growth in rural news within Indian-language speed news as a process of “ruralization,” an anthropological term that serves as a heuristic to foreground rural areas, and things associated with the rural, in analytical inquiry (Krause, 2013). It calls for attention to the sets of socio-technological relations in rural sites, and how they interact with that which is understood as urban (Stirr, 2017). Ruralization provides a way to address the “multiple instances of recontextualization” (Stirr, p. 19) of the rural present and its everyday affairs, as articulated through the Indian-language news media. As this paper will show, the ruralization approach allows us to study new developments (such as Hindi speed news) that “only become visible once we abandon the narrow focus on urbanization” (Krause, 2013, p. 236). This commentary therefore considers ruralization both as a conceptual framework and a real-world phenomenon to advance the following research question: How and why have news media actors adopted smartphone-based GenAI in the ruralization of Hindi-language speed news?

I tackle this question through fieldwork carried out in northern India over two consecutive summers in 2024 and 2025. During this period, I visited multiple newsrooms and conducted 27 in-person interviews with journalists and actors who were

involved in Hindi speed news editing and production. The semi-structured interviews were mainly conducted in the Hindi language. Of the 27 interviewees, 21 were male and the remaining six were female, which broadly mirrored the gender distribution of the workforce in the Hindi news media industry. The interviewees worked for national or state-level news media outlets such as *India TV*, *NDTV*, *Patrika TV*, and *News18 Rajasthan*. Based on these interviews, I argue that smartphone-based GenAI enables small, rural actors to more effectively condense and edit speed news stories, leading to improved news-editing process and the steady production of speed news bulletins, in turn contributing to the deeper ruralization of Hindi news.

Mobile Phone Communication in India

In rural India, mobile phones are the primary channel through which people access the Internet, and by extension, speed news. As such, most Indians have never owned desktop computers or telephone landlines, as they “leapfrog straight to the smartphone internet era” (Agrawal, 2018, p. 3). Today, over 85 percent of India’s population of 1.3 billion owns a mobile phone (Suneja, 2025; Waghmare, 2025). Through information sharing, mobile phones have improved the working conditions of marginalized groups such as the “fishers community,” helped establish rural banking services, and enabled farmers to learn more about agriculture (Ling, 2004; Sreekumar, 2011).

Mobile phones and emergent technologies including AI more broadly have contributed to the ruralization of the information ecosystem by foregrounding news from India’s villages and mofussil regions. For example, alternative media outlets such as *Gram Vaani* and *CGnet Swara* provide hyperlocal news and information against the backdrop of the growing corporatization and political partisanship of urban, mainstream media (Mudliar & Donner, 2015; Paul, 2018).³ In an analysis of *Dalit Camera* (a portal

that provides a voice to the Dalit population, most of whom reside in rural India), Paul and Dowling (2018) demonstrated how news actors from diverse professional backgrounds ranging from social activists to computer engineers came together and leveraged mobile phones and digital technologies to report live news and events that were ignored by mainstream media. Technology-oriented actors are now increasingly shaping journalistic work and affecting roles and enactments of journalism in rural India, and this is reflective of the broader, worldwide trend in online journalism (Eldridge, 2018).

Speed News and Smartphone-based GenAI in Rural India

Over the past five years, with the emergence of Hindi-language speed news bulletins requiring about 1000 news stories daily, the importance of news stories from rural areas has relatively increased, even if sometimes just to meet the quota. As a result, a new category of technology-oriented actors (what one of my interviewees from *News18 Rajasthan* labeled as “news informers”) has emerged primarily in rural India. Although members of the public have long supplied information to reporters, the “news informers” described here constitute a more formalized role: they are paid to provide news outlets with regular, “bite-sized” information from their local areas. Smartphones have made this role easier by allowing informers to photograph, compose, and transmit stories from their locations. The news informers are specifically tasked with supplying two-to-three-sentence-long stories palatable to the Hindi speed news audience, as an interviewee from *News 24* explained:

Informers send the news from their areas daily by inserting two or three lines of news...and for sending such news, there are no additional expenses to be incurred. So ultimately this type of news becomes speed news. It is very simple: one can take photographs with the help of a

mobile, and after inserting news of two or three lines, send it. For example, now it is monsoon season, and news of floodwater entering the road or house is a common matter...roads becoming like rivers...this type of information is converted into speed news.

Smartphone-based GenAI is increasingly mediating this conversion of information into speed news. Working mainly through their mobile phones, news informers in rural areas use GenAI tools such as ChatGPT on their low-cost Android smartphones to tighten and edit news stories. “It helps me write news stories in a digestible form,” explained a news informer with *India News* when asked about his smartphone-based GenAI usage. This helps in the process of ruralization as individual news stories from villages and towns are relatively more important in a speed news bulletin than in a traditional news bulletin.

Indeed, smartphone-based GenAI is progressively becoming a part of the lifeworld of news informers in rural areas as it is helpful in resolving a unique predicament for Hindi speed news gatherers: on the one hand, the linguistic structure of the Hindi language necessitates verbosity to convey information compared to other languages such as English; on the other, the genre of speed news requires that a news story be concise. Here, smartphone-based GenAI is valuable in condensing speed news stories, especially for a news informer who generally has a lower facility in the Hindi language in comparison to a full-time, seasoned journalist.

Smartphone-based GenAI’s role in condensing and editing Hindi speed news stories—and thus making them more accessible to the audience, ultimately strengthening the ruralization of the media ecosystem—is indispensable for a news informer. This is because the allure of speed news to audiences partly lies in its cultural resonance with the patterns of Indian thought and speech. Speed news characteristics

such as brevity and a certain sense of urgency in delivering a news story align with the distinctive cadence of Indian-language speakers. In his mid-twentieth century novel *Kanthapura* set in a South Indian village, the metaphysicist Raja Rao (1938) famously described the thought and speech processes of rural, and by extension, urban Indians as associated with rapidness: “We, in India, think quickly, we talk quickly, and when we move we move quickly” (p. 6). The “tempo of Indian life” (Bhoil, 2015, p. 84) aligns with the Indian cultural conventions of fast-paced narrative and the oral quality of storytelling, exemplified fittingly by the speed news format. The short, abrupt news stories relayed in speed news resemble slogans, a popular mode of communication both in historical and contemporary India (Pandey, 1975). One of the interviewees, a senior journalist with *Dainik Navjyoti*, explained this aspect as follows.

In Hindustan [India], there has been a longstanding, prominent culture in which people seldom pay attention to matters very seriously. They pay more attention to slogans. That’s why *kahawats* (“sayings”) are very popular here. If you delve into the deep history of speed news, you’ll notice that the ancient Indian literature is to be found in *sutra* (“aphorism”) or code form. This involves coding. The code needs to be decoded... so from an audience perspective the idea behind speed news is basically: who will bother to do the head-scratching to understand the whole thing; you tell me in *kahawat* or *sutra* form.

Smartphone-based GenAI is thus able to transform a potentially longer Hindi-language news story into a kind of *kahawat* or *sutra* form, one that is apt for consumption in the fast news format. Whereas technically a Hindi speed news story can also be condensed and edited in the newsroom, production editors tend to prefer stories that closely adhere to the norm of conciseness, because newsroom tasks have multiplied

in the speed news production mode with a high volume of incoming content from news informers. The innovation has also hastened newsroom routines and practices, particularly for desk journalists and production crew, who are crunched for time to edit individual speed news stories. In this regard, news informers' use of smartphone-based GenAI has, to some extent, reduced the burden on the desk staff in editing speed news stories.

Notably, news informers' use of smartphone-based GenAI has facilitated ruralization of news not by adaptation to local dialects or adopting region-specific cultural practices, but by merely enabling a greater number of news stories from rural regions to secure airtime in speed news bulletins. One journalist from *India News*, for example, remarked that “there is a person near Chomu [a town in the state of Rajasthan] whose news is not being shown in the traditional news bulletin due to the paucity of space, but his news would be included in the speed news bulletin.” Such inclusion helps speed news gain rural audiences.

Smartphone-based GenAI: Aspiration and Onward

This commentary set out to study the impact of the adoption of smartphone-based GenAI on the ruralization of Hindi-language speed news. It illustrated that smartphone-based GenAI enabled small, rural actors working mainly through mobile phones to more effectively condense and edit speed news stories and facilitated the steady production of Hindi speed news bulletins, contributing to the deeper ruralization of Hindi news. Smartphone-based GenAI tools such as ChatGPT aided news informers in packaging speed news stories into pithy, punchy sentences that resemble a form of *kahawat* or *sutra*, thereby striking cultural chords with Indian-language news audiences. Like in the case of the adoption of mobile phones, smartphone-based GenAI is slowly

and progressively implicated in redrawing of the boundaries between what in journalistic quarters is understood as rural and urban (Goggin, 2006; Stirr, 2017).

That said, I am careful not to exaggerate the practice and potential of smartphone-based GenAI in India, because despite its growing use, smartphone-based GenAI at present constitutes a relatively marginal trend in Indian-language journalism, and more broadly, other spheres in the country. Future studies could examine how rural Indian communities, including news actors, navigate constraints on data, network connectivity, and mobile phone hardware such as memory capacity in their smartphone-based GenAI usage.

For many of my interviewees, the possibilities of smartphone-based GenAI remained aspirational. It is certainly not a replacement for a human actor in rural areas who engages with information gathering in the raw amid the increasing ruralization of Indian-language news. At times, the journalistic and audience communities have also leveled critiques against smartphone-based GenAI for its hyperreal nature of news content. In such cases of AI-related “errors” or distortions, the eventual accountability rested with the newsroom, as one interviewee from *NDTV* described:

[Smartphone-based Gen] AI is being used more often, and there is a certain backlash against it also because people are saying that it looks more real than it actually is, and if it was not like that, then why did you [as publisher] put it out in the public domain, so there has been a backlash. I think now we have been told by editorial we have to be more careful with how we use AI, because sometimes AI can be more romantic than the actual event.

The use of smartphone-based GenAI is unlikely to be a game-changer for the news media industry. Its use itself is not distinctive to rural contexts; it is merely a tool that news informers use in editing speed news stories. But, crucially, for individual news actors in the country's rural regions, it enables them to register their presence in the larger, Indian news ecosystem, which has long been stacked against rural journalists and actors and defined by its urban focus (Mudgal, 2011). Smartphone-based GenAI serves as a small yet important cog in the wheel that can help make the rural, as Stirr (2018) would have it, "the center of analytical focus, turning the dominant paradigm of global urbanization on its head" (p. 18). Together with emergent media formats such as Hindi speed news, smartphone-based GenAI can place the everyday rural onto the mainstream journalistic map with more agency than ever.

Notes

¹ For an account on the audience viewership measurement issues in India, see Chakrabarti (2014). According to an *India TV* report, over 65 percent of Hindi news viewers favor speed news formats, and more than 30 percent of these audiences tune in multiple times throughout the day (India TV News Desk, 2024)

² One of the primary top-down factors driving the growing representation of rural news is the Broadcasting Audience Research Council's increased reliance on rural audience metrics for television ratings (see Taneja, 2024; Gupta, 2024).

³ Although some of these media outlets such as *CGNetSwara* predate the use of the word "AI," today they are increasingly experimenting with or using AI in their operations (e.g., Earp, 2025; TAS, 2025).

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