

India's Digital News Landscape in 2025: Key Players and Models

Introduction

India's digital news space has evolved rapidly, with legacy publishers and digital-native platforms adopting varied strategies to engage audiences and generate revenue. Mobile-first consumption dominates, and while only a small fraction of Indian users pay for online news, major outlets are experimenting with subscriptions alongside advertising ¹ ². Below, we analyze 4-5 major competitors in this landscape – including how each is faring in the digital domain, their subscription/paywall models, and content delivery approaches – to inform Bharat Herald's digital roadmap strategy.

The Times of India (TOI)

Digital Strategy & Performance: The Times of India, India's largest English-language daily and a leading digital news outlet ³, has built a massive online reach. As of 2024, Times Internet (TOI's parent) reported over 100 million monthly users on its news platforms ⁴. TOI has traditionally been ad-driven, but it is increasingly focusing on reader revenue. In 2021 it launched **TOI+**, a premium digital subscription, which quickly amassed over 120,000 paid subscribers within its first year ⁵. This indicates initial success in converting a fraction of its huge user base into paying customers. However, the vast majority of TOI's audience still accesses free content, meaning TOI+ is growing but remains a small slice of TOI's overall reach.

Subscription/Paywall Model: TOI uses a **freemium model**. Most news on Timesofindia.com remains free (supported by advertising), while TOI+ offers "exclusive" journalism behind a soft paywall ⁶. Subscribers to TOI+ enjoy an ad-free experience and access to premium content such as in-depth analysis, opinion pieces, podcasts, and even interactive features like crosswords ⁷ ⁵. The annual subscription is priced affordably (around ₹599-799/year) to target India's price-sensitive readers ⁸. To lower barriers further, TOI introduced a **pay-per-article** option – readers can unlock individual paywalled stories for a small fee (~₹30) without a full subscription ⁹. This micro-payment approach is aimed at casual readers and has been part of TOI's strategy to capture its large daily audience that might not commit to annual plans. TOI's parent company also leverages bundling: for example, a **Times Prime** membership bundles TOI+ along with other Times Group offerings (like **ET Prime**, entertainment, and lifestyle perks) to spur cross-platform subscriptions ¹⁰ ¹¹. This bundle strategy helps increase the value proposition and attract subscribers via combined deals.

Content Delivery: TOI is **mobile-first** and multi-platform in content delivery. It has a top-ranked news app (on Android/iOS) and a responsive mobile website ¹², ensuring seamless access on smartphones. It delivers breaking news alerts and personalized updates via app notifications – an approach that helped boost engagement and retention ¹³ ¹⁴. TOI also curates content in newsletters and email "mailers" for TOI+ subscribers ⁷, offering daily digests and topical insights. The platform maintains an active presence on social media, and some content is shared via messaging: for instance, TOI launched official channels on

WhatsApp and Telegram in 2023 to broadcast news briefs to followers (a response to the growing trend of news consumption on chat apps). Overall, TOI's model blends a huge free audience (monetized by ads) with a growing base of premium subscribers, while distributing content across apps, web, email newsletters, and messaging platforms to maximize reach.

The Hindu

Digital Strategy & Performance: *The Hindu*, a respected legacy newspaper, has been a pioneer among Indian publishers in pushing digital subscriptions. It launched its paywall in 2019, and after some early missteps focusing too much on subscriber acquisition, The Hindu shifted towards **retention and engagement** as core goals ¹⁵ ¹⁶. This retention-centric strategy is paying off. By 2023–24, The Hindu saw double-digit digital revenue growth and strong audience gains, even as many peers faced stagnation ¹⁷. Subscriber engagement is notably high – paywall subscribers consume **10× more content** than non-subscribers, reflecting deep loyalty ². The Hindu's digital arm also reports that less than 50% of its digital revenue now comes from ads (implying over half is from subscriptions and other sources) ¹. This marks a significant shift toward reader revenue, suggesting The Hindu is succeeding in building a sustainable digital base.

Subscription/Paywall Model: The Hindu operates a **freemium paywall** model. About 5% of articles are placed behind a hard paywall for paying subscribers ¹ – typically premium, in-depth journalism such as explainers, opinion pieces, and exclusives. The majority of daily news remains free, preserving traffic, while the paywalled content and e-paper require a subscription. This selective paywall has been effective: even with only a small fraction of content locked, it has driven a growing subscriptions business. Subscribers are offered a package of perks to enhance value: **exclusive newsletters, webinars, archives, and events** are bundled with the digital subscription ¹⁸. For example, The Hindu found that hosting subscriber-only webinars boosted retention by 24% – even if many subscribers didn't attend live, just the access to such events increased their perception of value ¹⁸. The Hindu's pricing is relatively modest (approximately \$12–14 per year, or ~₹999/year) ¹⁹ to encourage volume. It also experimented with creative incentives: at one point it offered free e-books worth \$5 each to subscribers, which drove a surge in sign-ups by tangibly illustrating the value of a ₹999 subscription ²⁰. Overall, The Hindu's model is **premium content + loyalty perks**, aiming to justify the paywall by depth and distinct offerings rather than quantity of locked articles.

Content Delivery: The Hindu delivers content across **multiple digital touchpoints** while maintaining a “reader-first” approach ²¹. Its website and mobile app form the core platforms, featuring a clean, reader-friendly experience. The Hindu has a dedicated e-paper app for digital replica editions, popular with traditional readers. Email newsletters are a key channel – including personalized weekly digests for subscribers powered by AI recommendations (sending articles a subscriber is likely to have read if they visited the site) ²². This personalization aims to re-engage sporadic readers by bringing content to them. Additionally, The Hindu is present on social media and has historically used messaging platforms: for instance, it offers a Telegram channel and had WhatsApp bulletin groups for daily news briefs (within platform policy limits) to reach users who prefer news via chats. While its content skews toward serious news (the outlet avoids Bollywood gossip or clickbait, maintaining a premium tone ²³), The Hindu leverages live blogs and “live updates” for big events to drive real-time engagement ²⁴. This cross-platform delivery – app, web, newsletters, and messaging – combined with a loyal subscriber community, has helped The Hindu carve out a strong digital identity with a sustainable paywall strategy ¹.

The Indian Express

Digital Strategy & Performance: *The Indian Express*, another prominent English daily, has aggressively transformed into a digital-first newsroom in recent years ²⁵. It boasts a **vast online audience** – the Express Group's news sites draw over 200 million monthly unique users, with IndianExpress.com alone accounting for ~100 million ²⁶. Amid the pandemic's hit to print, the Express pivoted to digital subscriptions in 2020–21 as a new revenue pillar ²⁷ ²⁸. By 2021, it became one of India's first major newspapers to implement a **hybrid paywall** ²⁹ ³⁰. This strategy has shown promise: since launching the paywall, Indian Express has seen “solid uptake” in subscriber acquisition and built a “robust subscriptions business,” according to its digital CEO ³¹. While exact subscriber numbers aren't public, the initiative has been credited with adding a steady stream of paying readers. The Indian Express is also exploring **diversified monetization** (like e-commerce integrations via ONDC) to supplement ads and subs, recognizing that a mix of revenue streams is needed in the challenging news business ³² ³³. This indicates a forward-looking approach to financial sustainability.

Subscription/Paywall Model: The Indian Express uses a **metered + freemium paywall (hybrid)**. Readers can access a limited number of articles free each month (the meter), after which a subscription is needed ³⁰. Alongside this, certain “Premium” articles are gated outright for subscribers only – typically investigative pieces, expert columns, or the popular *Explained* series. In practice, a casual visitor might read a few free news reports, but more in-depth content prompts a subscribe overlay. The Express offers digital-only plans (for premium website content) and bundled plans that include the **e-paper** (a digital replica of the print edition) ³⁴ ³⁵. A subscription also grants an **ad-lite experience**, exclusive subscriber-only newsletters, and access to archives ³⁶. Notably, The Indian Express has tailored products for specific segments – for example, “**UPSC Key**”, a daily current-affairs brief for civil service exam aspirants, is behind a paywall targeting that niche audience ³⁷. Pricing has been competitive (often around ₹999/year for premium access, with student discount offers) ³⁸. By combining a metered paywall (to capture loyal readers once they hit a limit) with selectively premium content, the Express is balancing reach and revenue. This model is still maturing, but it positions the Express to convert its large audience into a subscriber base gradually.

Content Delivery: Indian Express delivers news **across platforms and formats**. Its mobile app and website publish breaking news, investigative reports, and the signature *Express Explained* articles (which often drive subscriptions due to their depth). Push notifications and a morning email newsletter (“Express Daily Briefing”) keep audiences updated daily. The Express has also embraced **audio and social channels** – it produces one of India's most popular news podcasts (“3 Things”) and promotes content via YouTube and Twitter. For messaging apps, the Indian Express has experimented with WhatsApp alerts and now uses Telegram to share top stories and Explained pieces with interested followers. Additionally, the brand hosts **Express Events** (like Express Adda talk series) and live webinars, sometimes offering subscribers priority access. These events not only deliver content in new forms (video, live discussions) but also strengthen the community of readers. Overall, Indian Express's content strategy is **digital-first, multimedia**: real-time news updates, explanatory journalism, podcasts, and interactive content, all delivered via app, web, email, and social media. This broad approach supports its hybrid paywall by providing a rich experience that readers may pay to unlock fully.

Mint (Livemint)

Digital Strategy & Performance: *Mint*, a business and financial news daily, has carved a niche with its quality journalism in the economic and corporate domain. Part of the HT Media group, Mint was among the earlier Indian publishers to go behind a paywall. In **February 2020**, Livemint.com introduced a subscription for premium content, notably bundling exclusive access to **Wall Street Journal** articles as a selling point ³⁹. This partnership (and later inclusion of content from *The Economist* in offers ⁴⁰) signaled Mint's strategy to differentiate itself by offering global business insight alongside its Indian coverage. Mint's digital subscription growth has been steady if not spectacular – the publication appeals to a relatively smaller, business-focused audience. As of 2024, Mint's parent reported engaging a loyal base of subscribers, though overall traffic (and ad revenue) in the business news category remains dominated by the larger Economic Times ⁴¹. Mint has been **iterating on its model**: for example, introducing limited-time discounts, free trial periods, and multi-year bundles to entice readers. Financially, Mint's digital push aligns with HT Media's broader pivot from print advertising to reader revenue; while specific figures are proprietary, Mint is seen as a key piece in HT's strategy to capture high-value readers who can be monetized through subscriptions and premium ads.

Subscription/Paywall Model: Mint employs a **hard paywall with a freemium twist**. A significant portion of Mint's online content is marked as **"Mint Premium"**, accessible only to subscribers. Casual readers may get a few free reads (metered) or certain briefs for free, but most in-depth pieces (market analysis, opinion columns, long-form reports) are locked. The paywall launch came with a **bundle offer**: Mint Premium subscribers not only get unlimited Mint articles and e-paper access, but also "best of WSJ" content curated on Mint ⁴². In 2023–24, Mint has marketed combos like *Mint + The Economist*, leveraging tie-ups to increase value for money ⁴⁰. This bundle strategy suggests Mint aims to attract business readers by being a one-stop subscription for multiple sources. The pricing is on the higher end of Indian news subs – around ₹2,999–3,999/year (especially for bundles including international content). Mint's model can be described as **premium business journalism behind a paywall**, targeting professionals willing to pay for quality and exclusive content. Advertising remains part of the revenue mix (Mint offers an "ad-lite" experience to subscribers, not completely ad-free), but the focus is on upselling readers to paid plans with the promise of deeper insights and clutter-free reading. Given its specialized audience, Mint's paywall strategy is about maximizing revenue per user rather than sheer volume, contrasting with general news sites.

Content Delivery: Mint delivers content in a **digital-centric, reader-tailored manner**. Livemint's website and app feature real-time stock market trackers, personalized stock watchlists, and push alerts for major financial news – reflecting a service approach for its core audience of investors and professionals. Content is also distributed through **daily newsletters** (such as Mint Morning and Mint Evening briefs summarizing market highlights) and WhatsApp groups for daily headlines (Mint was one of the brands experimenting with WhatsApp channels for business news updates). The e-paper remains important for traditional subscribers, and Mint has an HTML5 e-paper reader on web and app for a seamless experience. For wider reach, Mint leverages social media (Twitter, LinkedIn) to share notable stories and infographics, tapping into professional networks. It also produces multimedia content like webinars and online panel discussions on budget day or economic policy announcements – often sponsored, aligning with its revenue goals. In summary, Mint's content delivery focuses on **speed (fast financial news)**, **depth (premium analysis)**, and **user convenience** (alerts, curated newsletters). Being part of HT Media, Mint sometimes comes bundled with Hindustan Times digital access, but it primarily stands on its own as a specialist platform delivering business news through web, apps, and curated digital products aimed at an informed, premium audience.

The Economic Times (ET)

Digital Strategy & Performance: *The Economic Times*, India's largest financial newspaper (from the Times Group), has a formidable digital presence. **EconomicTimes.com is India's most popular financial news site**, reaching about 45 million monthly active users as of March 2022 ⁴¹ – far ahead of other business news competitors. ET's digital strategy blends wide free reach with a premium tier for its most engaged readers. In 2018, ET launched **ET Prime**, a members-only subscription product, to provide deep-dive business stories and attract subscriber revenue ⁴³. Since then, ET Prime has steadily grown; by 2022 it was noted as "gaining a massive number of subscribers," reflecting its rising importance for ET's digital portfolio ⁴⁴. While exact figures aren't disclosed, ET Prime's growth is evident in the proliferation of Prime-branded content on the site and its integration into Times Group's cross-subscription deals (like Times Prime). ET's digital revenues have been buoyed by this subscription uptake alongside robust advertising from its huge audience. In terms of success, ET remains the **dominant player in online business news** by traffic ⁴¹, and it has cultivated a loyal readership among professionals – one survey found 1 in 4 ET online readers is a senior business decision-maker (CXO, founder, etc.) ⁴⁵. This high-value audience is a key strength for monetization. ET's challenge, as with others, is balancing ad income with subscriber growth, but it appears to be successfully doing both, leveraging the credibility of its brand.

Subscription/Paywall Model: The Economic Times uses a **freemium model with a metered paywall** for ET Prime. The main ET website and app offer the day's news, market updates, and commodity data free, supported by advertising. However, **ET Prime** articles – typically investigative pieces, industry insights, and exclusive interviews across 20+ sectors – are behind a hard paywall for members only ⁴⁶. Non-subscribers encountering a Prime story see a teaser and are prompted to subscribe. ET employs a meter as well: after consuming a certain number of free articles, even non-Prime content may require login or subscription, nudging frequent users toward the paid tier. The ET Prime subscription is priced around ₹999/year (often discounted) and includes benefits like an **ad-free** experience on app/web, access to the ET e-paper, and invitations to subscriber-only webinars or events. The Times Group also cross-sells ET Prime via Times Prime bundle (e.g., offering a 3-month ET Prime trial as a Times Prime perk) ⁴⁷ to convert users. Notably, ET Prime positions itself as a **"business storytelling platform"** beyond just news ⁴⁸ – focusing on narrative, analytical journalism that adds value beyond commodity news. This positioning helps justify the paywall. In summary, ET's model retains a vast free user base for scale (important for advertising and brand reach) while siphoning its most avid readers into ET Prime for specialized content and a premium UX. This two-tier structure (free vs Prime) has allowed ET to tap subscription revenue without alienating its mass audience.

Content Delivery: The Economic Times delivers content through an **integrated digital ecosystem**. Its website is a comprehensive portal for business news, stock quotes, and financial tools, attracting both casual readers and market enthusiasts. The ET mobile app is feature-rich: it provides real-time market data, personalized news feeds, and alerts (for example, notifications on stock price movements or news on watched companies). ET Prime content is accessible within the same app/website, marked with a "Prime" tag. ET also sends daily newsletters (like *ET Morning Dispatch* and *ET Evening Brief*) and topic-specific newsletters targeting investors, which often include Prime story recommendations to drive conversions. On the emerging platforms front, Economic Times has embraced **WhatsApp and Telegram channels** for sharing top business headlines, and it actively uses LinkedIn and Twitter for dissemination given its professional readership. The brand's reach extends to voice platforms as well – ET was among the first in India to have news bulletins on Alexa voice assistants, catering to on-the-go consumption. Additionally, ET engages readers via live webinars (e.g., on budget day) and podcasts on market outlook, some of which are available to Prime members as exclusive content. This multi-channel delivery ensures ET stays ubiquitous

for its audience: whether through a desktop terminal during work, a mobile alert after market hours, or a WhatsApp broadcast in the morning. By being present wherever its readers are, ET reinforces its position and funnels the most engaged users into its subscription offerings.

InShorts

Digital Strategy & Performance: *InShorts* represents the new wave of digital-only news platforms in India. Launched as a mobile app, *InShorts* delivers bite-sized news summaries (around 60 words each) tailored for quick consumption. It has become **one of India's most popular news apps**, especially among younger, urban users. As of early 2024, *InShorts* had an active user base of over 12 million people and more than 15 million app downloads. It consistently ranks as a top news app (and is the highest-rated news app in India). The platform is **free-to-use** and has grown primarily by offering a unique, time-saving user experience rather than through any pay model. *InShorts*' success is evident in engagement metrics – users appreciate the concise format and often share summaries on social media or messaging. However, the company's financial performance highlights the challenges of the ad-driven model: in FY2024, *InShorts*' revenue was flat at about ₹181 crore, and it continued to post net losses (₹228 crore net loss, though 26% lower than the previous year) ⁴⁹. This suggests that while the user base is large and loyal, monetization (mostly via ads) hasn't fully caught up to expenses yet. To address growth and engagement, the *InShorts* group has diversified by launching the **"Public" app in 2019**, a hyper-local short video news platform. *Public* provides local news and events videos in vernacular languages and has exploded to 70+ million active users across 3,000+ cities ⁵⁰ ⁵¹. The success of *Public* indicates *InShorts*' broader strategy: capture users with various content formats (text summaries and video) and in multiple languages. Overall, *InShorts* is succeeding in user engagement and reach, though still striving for profitability as of 2025.

Revenue Model (No Paywall): *InShorts* eschews subscriptions entirely; its model is **advertising and content partnerships**. The app monetizes via in-app ads – both display ads and sponsored content cards that appear between news summaries. It has worked with over 1,500 brands on native content campaigns and ads ⁵², leveraging its large millennial audience. Notably, *InShorts* has remained free to access, believing that scale and engagement will drive ad revenue. There is no paywall or premium tier; instead, the focus is on refining the user experience to keep people using the app longer (thus viewing more ads). In 2024, *InShorts* did signal some strategic shifts: reports suggest it's exploring influencer-driven content and longer-form offerings within the app to increase user session time (a pivot to capture more ad opportunities) ⁵³. The **Public app** is similarly free, monetized by ads and potentially e-commerce listings for local businesses. *InShorts*' decision to stay ad-driven aligns with the broader Indian market reality that consumers are hesitant to pay for news content. While this means relying on volatile ad markets, *InShorts* has attracted significant investor funding (from the likes of Tiger Global and others ⁵²) to support its growth-first strategy. In summary, *InShorts*' revenue approach is **scale now, monetize via ads**, using its innovative format to differentiate in a crowded news space.

Content Delivery: *InShorts* is distinctly **mobile-app-centric** and designed for the social media era. Its primary content format is the 60-word summary in a card interface that users can swipe through. The app uses algorithmic curation to personalize the feed based on user preferences. **Brevity and convenience** are the selling points: users get the gist of a story at a glance, and if interested, can tap a link to read the full article on the original source's site. Importantly, *InShorts* offers content in **both English and Hindi** (and has expanded to a few other regional languages), switching seamlessly to cater to a diverse user base ⁵⁴. This bilingual approach broadens its appeal across India's linguistic audiences. The app also enables easy sharing of summaries via WhatsApp, Twitter, etc., turning users into distributors of its content. On the

Public app, content delivery is via short videos (often citizen-reported or aggregator-curated) in local languages – effectively creating a geo-targeted news feed for each user based on their location, with real-time community updates ⁵⁰. Push notifications are another channel: InShorts sends timely alerts for major breaking news, tailored to the user's interests. Unlike traditional outlets, InShorts doesn't rely on a website or e-paper; it's overwhelmingly consumed on its app. That said, the company maintains a minimal web presence for those who encounter its brand via search. Lastly, InShorts leverages AI for summarization and personalization, ensuring content delivery is fast and relevant. Its frictionless UX – swipe for next story, share in one tap – and the absence of paywalls or sign-ups have contributed to its viral growth. For Bharat Herald, InShorts exemplifies a **mobile-first, minimal-friction content strategy** that trades depth for reach, a model diametrically different from subscription-driven publishers but highly effective in capturing on-the-go readers.

Conclusion

Across India's digital news landscape in 2025, we see a spectrum of models. Legacy publishers like *The Hindu* and *Indian Express* are finding new life with **freemium paywalls and loyalty-focused subscriptions**, successfully driving engagement and reader revenue ¹ ³¹. Mass-market giants (*Times of India*, *Economic Times*) leverage **hybrid strategies** – maintaining large free audiences for ad revenue while upselling a fraction to premium tiers ⁵ ⁵⁵. Niche and business outlets (*Mint*, *ET Prime*) bet on **high-value content bundles** to justify their paywalls ³⁹ ⁴⁰. Meanwhile, digital-native players like *InShorts* choose **reach and innovation over paywalls**, scaling up users with snackable content and monetizing via ads ⁴⁹. For Bharat Herald's digital roadmap, these examples underline key insights: the importance of a clear value proposition for subscriptions (be it depth, exclusivity, or partnerships), the need to meet audiences on mobile platforms and social/messaging channels, and the potential of hybrid models (free + paid) in an Indian market still warming to paid news. Each competitor's journey shows that success in digital news is multifaceted – balancing content quality, user experience, and monetization in a way that aligns with the outlet's brand and audience.

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