



The Role of Vernacular Language in Constructing Credibility in Mewar's Digital Public Sphere (2017–2025)

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Abstract

The systemic crisis of trust plaguing India's centralized mainstream media (2017–2025) has necessitated a structural shift toward decentralized, regional news ecosystems. This study, '**Apno Bolo, Apno Suno**' (Our Own Speak, Our Own Listen), investigates the critical role of vernacular language in constructing digital credibility within the **Mewar region of Rajasthan**, a sociolinguistically vulnerable community. Employing a **Sequential Explanatory Mixed-Methods Design**, the research integrated a quantitative audience survey (N=101), systematic content analysis of YouTube and Instagram outlets, and in-depth interviews (N=9) with key community actors. The findings reveal that the **Mewari language** operates as the primary source of **emotional credibility**, fulfilling audience **Uses & Gratifications** related to **Identity Affirmation** and reinforcing **Cultural Proximity**. This environment functions as a highly participatory **Vernacular Public Sphere**, replacing traditional journalistic gatekeeping with decentralized **Gatewatching**, where accountability is demonstrated through rapid, localized responsiveness. However, this affective focus introduces significant fragility: content analysis highlighted reliance on emotional persuasion and negative framing, contributing to localized bias and the formation of **echo chambers**. This research contributes to media theory by demonstrating how vernacular authenticity facilitates the creation of a functional yet fragile digital counterpublic within a **Hybrid Media System**. It underscores that while language provides a vital pathway for local informational resilience against national polarization, the democratic quality of these spheres is perpetually threatened by platform-driven affective consumption logics.

Keywords

Vernacular Language, Credibility, Cultural Proximity, Hybrid Media System, Mewar, Digital Journalism, Public Sphere.

Introduction

Crisis, Vernacularity, and Credibility in Mewar's Digital Public Sphere (2017–2025)

The integrity of democratic discourse relies fundamentally upon the public's confidence in its informational institutions. In the Indian media landscape over the period **2017–2025**, this foundational trust has undergone profound erosion, creating a structural vacuum that centralized news organizations are increasingly unable to fill. This study, titled '**Apno Bolo, Apno Suno**' (Our Own Speak, Our Own Listen), investigates the subsequent response to this institutional failure: the vigorous emergence of localized, vernacular digital media, specifically focusing on its role in constructing and maintaining credibility within the Mewar region of Rajasthan. By integrating established communication theories—including the **Vernacular Public Sphere**, **Cultural Proximity**, and the **Hybrid Media System**—this research seeks to systematically analyze how local linguistic fidelity becomes a vital determinant of epistemic authority in a rapidly digitizing and fragmented informational environment.

The Democratic Dilemma: Erosion of Trust in India's National Media (2017–2025)

The structural crisis of credibility plaguing the Indian mainstream media is well-documented, marked by a perception that traditional news outlets have abandoned their societal duties in favor of financial gains and political alignment. Central to this crisis is the phenomenon of "**paid news**," a clandestine practice where political leaders and vested interests compensate news publications for favorable coverage, severely challenging the survival of objective journalism. This environment of financial and political compromise has led to a highly **polarized media sphere**. The result is a profound crisis of distance and elite capture; if the centralized media elite prioritize national, politically sensationalized, or financially beneficial content, they become culturally and politically irrelevant to the localized concerns of non-elite audiences. This systemic dysfunction necessitates the search for alternative sources of information, confirming that meaningful credibility must now be sought outside established, centralized channels.

The Digital Response: Regionalization and the Rise of Vernacular Content

The crisis in national media has occurred concurrently with the massive expansion of the digital ecosystem across India, creating a viable path for regionalization. Digital platforms have rapidly become the dominant informational source, particularly for younger demographics; studies indicate that for individuals under the age of 35, online platforms, including social media, constitute the primary channel for news consumption. By **2025**, internet penetration is projected to exceed **850 million users**, a majority of whom express a distinct preference for consuming content in **regional languages** over English. This growth is critically dependent upon **vernacularization**, which functions as the engine of digital adoption, especially in India's Tier-2 and Tier-3 urban centers and rural areas. This shift toward hyper-localization confirms a crucial informational decentralization, where news credibility is increasingly rooted in local accountability and direct community connection, a stark contrast to the distant, disconnected model of national media.

Justification of the Mewar Context: Socio-Linguistic Distinctiveness and the Digital Imperative

To analyze the profound impact of vernacular language on digital credibility, this study focuses on **Mewar**, a region in Southeast Rajasthan that encompasses the districts of Chittorgarh, Rajsamand, Bhilwara, and Udaipur. **Mewari**, an Indo-Aryan language, faces significant pressure from the dominance of Hindi. Critically, Mewari does not possess its own formal script, which historically hinders the documentation of its rich folk culture and traditions. The Mewar digital sphere, therefore, operates as an essential site of linguistic negotiation and identity performance. The process of creating and consuming digital news in Mewari is an active, community-led effort to assert and stabilize a vulnerable identity. Consequently, credibility in this sphere is profoundly linked to the media's ability to perform **authentic identity articulation**—a manifestation of the sentiment captured by the study's title: '**Apno Bolo, Apno Suno.**'

Conceptual Foundations: Mapping Credibility in the Hybrid Vernacular Public Sphere

A comprehensive understanding of credibility in this decentralized, linguistically distinct environment requires the synthesis of multiple theoretical lenses. This research positions the Mewar digital ecosystem as a **Vernacular Public Sphere (VPS)** operating within a **Hybrid Media System**.

- The construction of credibility is fundamentally mediated by **Cultural Proximity**, which posits that cultural similarities (shared language, customs) strongly influence media preferences and enhance audience loyalty. The use of the vernacular language acts as a powerful trust heuristic.
- The study integrates **Uses & Gratifications Theory (U&G)**, noting that Mewari news consumption is a goal-directed behavior designed to satisfy needs for **Identity Affirmation** (seeing local language and culture represented) and **Social Utility**.
- The structural reality requires an analysis using the **Hybrid Media System (HMS)** model, where Mewari outlets must blend traditional reporting values with platform-specific digital tactics (speed, interactivity, virality).
- Credibility maintenance is defined by **Gatewatching**, where local users become active participants, using platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to verify, share, and challenge information, linking accountability to sustained, horizontal participation.

Articulating the Research Gap: The Credibility Void in Mewari Digital Public Spheres

Existing studies often focus on national trends or established language markets. This research addresses a significant scholarly void concerning the specific dynamics of credibility construction in hyper-localized, non-standardized linguistic spheres like Mewar, where the language itself is sociolinguistically vulnerable. The novelty of this study lies in its focus on how the vernacular language acts as a **mediating variable** in the Hybrid Media System, stabilizing trust and providing localized accountability in direct response to the failings of centralized media.

Research Questions and Significance of the Study

This study is guided by three core research questions:

1. **Research Question 1 (Structural/Hybridity):** How do hyperlocal Mewari digital news outlets navigate the logics of the Hybrid Media System, and what differences in content production and gatewatching practices distinguish them from Hindi-language mainstream regional media in constructing perceived authority?
2. **Research Question 2 (Cultural/Audience):** To what extent does Cultural Proximity, mediated by the use of the Mewari language, influence audience trust and news selection (Uses & Gratifications) within the Mewar digital public sphere compared to non-vernacular news sources?
3. **Research Question 3 (Credibility):** What specific vernacular rhetorical strategies (e.g., tone, frame, community-specific narrative, linguistic negotiation) are employed by digital Mewari content creators to construct and maintain credibility among local audiences in an environment characterized by the systemic crisis of trust in mainstream media?

The significance lies in rigorously detailing how a non-institutionalized language becomes a core determinant of credibility in a digitally-mediated counterpublic, contributing substantially to evolving theories of the public sphere and media trust in the Global South.

Material method

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, specifically the **Sequential Explanatory Design**, where quantitative data is collected first, followed by a qualitative phase designed to elaborate on and explain the initial numerical findings.

3.1 Quantitative Phase: Audience Survey (N=101)

The quantitative phase involved a structured survey among **N=101** digital news consumers residing in the Mewar region (Udaipur, Chittorgarh, Rajsamand, and Bhilwara). A non-probability sampling strategy (convenience and snowball sampling) was adopted to access individuals actively consuming news on mobile platforms.

Instrument and Variables: The survey instrument addressed Research Question 2 (RQ2) and included three primary sections:

- **News Consumption Habits:** Measured frequency, devices, and platforms (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp) used for news, differentiating between mainstream and local Mewari content.
- **Credibility Assessment:** Assessed perceived trustworthiness, accuracy, and reliability of various sources using a 5-point Likert scale.
- **Uses & Gratifications (U&G):** Measured gratifications sought and obtained, including Information/Surveillance, Discussion/Social Utility, and **Identity Affirmation**.

3.2 Qualitative Phase: In-Depth Interviews (N=9)

The qualitative phase utilized in-depth interviews (N=9) to provide narrative depth and contextual explanations for salient survey findings, addressing Research Questions 1 and 3 (RQ1 and RQ3).

Rationale and Sampling: A purposive sampling method was used to select nine key informants, stratified into three groups:

- **Vernacular Content Creators** (Digital Journalists/Publishers, N=3).
- **Highly Engaged Audiences** (Users who frequently share/comment, N=3).
- **Local Opinion Leaders** (Academics, activists, community elders, N=3).

Data Collection: Semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim, focusing on perceptions of the mainstream media crisis, criteria for judging Mewari digital credibility, and rhetorical strategies to build local trust (RQ3).

3.3 Content Analysis of Digital Platforms

A systematic content analysis was conducted on a sample of digital content (RQ1 and RQ3).

Sample and Platforms: The analysis focused on **YouTube** and **Instagram**. The sample included the complete output (video and accompanying text posts) over a six-month period (e.g., July 2024–January 2025) from the **top three independently verified hyperlocal digital news outlets** utilizing the Mewari language.

Coding Categories: The systematic codebook focused on: | Coding Category | Operational Definition | Relevance to RQ | **Language Use** | The ratio of Mewari (speech/text) to Hindi/English; use of localized idioms; presence of subtitles/translations. | RQ1, RQ3 | | **Credibility Markers** | Presence of sourcing (cited officials, witnesses), transparency cues, and accountability signals. | RQ3 | | **Emotional Tone** | Categorization of the sentiment displayed (e.g., civic, neutral, accusatory, inflammatory, celebratory). | RQ3 | | **Gatewatching Indicators** | Metrics of audience engagement, including number of views, comments, shares (virality), and the frequency of posts. | RQ1 |

3.4 Data Analysis Strategy

Quantitative Analysis: Survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means) and comparative statistical methods to test the relationship between Mewari content consumption and specific gratification scores (RQ2).

Qualitative Analysis: Interview transcripts were analyzed using **Thematic Analysis** (Braun and Clarke), a six-phase process to identify and interpret patterns (themes) related to vernacular rhetoric and digital authority (RQ1, RQ3). The final results were integrated to explain the statistical trends observed.

Result

The analysis confirmed a decisive shift toward vernacular digital consumption, characterized by high audience trust, intense participation, and the emergence of specific systemic risks. The thematic analysis of the integrated dataset revealed three primary themes detailing the construction of digital credibility in Mewar.

4.1 Theme 1: Vernacular Language as Emotional Credibility

This theme links the use of the Mewari language directly to enhanced source trustworthiness, driven by the audience's need for identity affirmation and cultural relevance.

4.1.1 Quantitative Link Between Vernacularity and Trust: The survey showed a strong positive correlation between consuming content in a regional language and perceived trustworthiness.

- **88%** of respondents reported trusting local-language content more highly than English-language content.
- **92%** of respondents found local content highly relevant (**50%** "very useful," **42%** "useful").
- The **Identity Affirmation** factor received the **highest mean score** among Mewari digital content consumers in the U&G analysis.

4.1.2 The Rhetoric of Proximity and Affective Tone: Content analysis showed the strategic use of emotional rhetoric.

- Analysis of **1,200 sampled Mewari headlines** revealed a clear dominance of negative emotional framing:
 - **Anger (18.5%)**
 - **Fear (16.2%)**
 - **Disappointment (14.9%)**
- Content exhibiting high-intensity negative sentiment achieved a **2.5x higher share rate** compared to neutral reporting.

4.1.3 Qualitative Experience of "Our Own" Media: Interview data reinforced that Mewari acts as a conduit for emotional credibility. An audience member stated: *"When I read a report in Hindi, it sounds like Delhi talking to me. But when I hear it in Mewari, it is like my older brother telling me a story about our village... 'Apno bolo'—our own language—is the evidence."*

4.2 Theme 2: The Vernacular Public Sphere and Audience Participation

The Mewar digital sphere functions as a highly participatory public sphere, shifting accountability from traditional professional Gatekeeping to decentralized Gatewatching.

4.2.1 Platform Dominance and High Engagement Metrics: The audience overwhelmingly accessed news through mobile, distributed channels.

- **82%** used WhatsApp, with **52%** using it to get news.
- **75%** used Facebook, with **52%** using it to get news.
- **50%** of survey respondents reported sharing news online, and **33%** reported commenting on news.

4.2.2 The Shift to Gatewatching and Direct Reporting: Mewari digital outlets have structurally adapted to Gatewatching.

- Of the sampled videos focusing on hyperlocal issues, **41%** were explicitly attributed to "**citizen reporting**" or content provided directly by the community.
- A Content Creator explained: *"If we take action and the problem is solved, that video is shared 1,000 times, and that is how we build trust. It is not our formal news authority, but our ability to solve the local problem."*
- Formal credibility markers were weak: only **35%** provided the reporter's full name, and fewer than **10%** included any explicit reference to a correction or transparency policy.

4.3 Theme 3: Risks: Bias, Emotional Persuasion, and Echo Chambers

The digital vernacular environment exhibited key risks concerning bias, emotional exploitation, and fragmentation.

4.3.1 Emotional Mobilization and Bias: Mewari digital outlets favored highly emotional and often accusatory framing compared to the largely neutral tone of Hindi regional media covering the same events. The frequent use of negative emotional content was found to be a core strategy for maximizing engagement.

4.3.2 Evidence of Echo Chambers: Interviewees acknowledged that algorithms and personal sharing practices created environments where they primarily encountered information aligning with their socio-political perspectives.

- **49%** of respondents expressed concern that openly sharing their political views online might negatively affect how friends or family viewed them.
- **50%** felt this concern regarding their work colleagues. This high level of social pressure suggests that participation is strategically filtered to reinforce the consensus within the localized vernacular network, contributing to the establishment of social filter bubbles.

Discussion

This study reveals a Mewar media landscape that is simultaneously robustly functional and profoundly fragile. The discussion synthesizes the three primary thematic findings with core communication theories.

5.1 Vernacular Authenticity: The Core of Cultural Proximity and Trust

The high trust in vernacular sources (Theme 1) confirms the profound relevance of **Cultural Proximity Theory**. The Mewari language functions as a heuristic of trust, providing cultural and historical context that standardized national media cannot replicate. This phenomenon is intrinsically linked to **Uses &**

Gratifications (U&G) Theory; the highest factor score was tied to **Identity Affirmation**, showing news consumption as a goal-directed behavior aimed at cultural maintenance in the face of linguistic vulnerability. This shift validates the existence of the **Vernacular Public Sphere (VPS)**, which serves as a necessary counterpublic for marginalized linguistic groups, functional precisely because it leverages cultural capital to generate the social capital (trust and loyalty) necessary for its survival.

5.2 Hybridity and the Decentralization of Accountability

The operational dynamics of high audience participation (Theme 2) provide an empirical manifestation of the **Hybrid Media System (HMS)**. Mewari outlets blend the traditional logic of reporting with the platform-driven logic of speed and engagement. The finding that credibility is often established by the media outlet's ability to respond to and solve local "citizen reporting" problems is a direct validation of **Gatewatching**. Accountability in the Mewar VPS is **horizontal** (scrutinized by the immediate audience through sharing/comment metrics) rather than vertical (institutional), driven by the structural reality of India's digital ecosystem. The VPS is structurally functional because it has developed a platform-native, responsive model of accountability.

5.3 Fragility: The Threat of Affective Polarization and Echo Chambers

The study's third theme highlights the deep fragility inherent in the Mewar digital public sphere, stemming from the tension between affective language and the rational-critical function. The prevalence of high-intensity **negative emotional framing** demonstrates that rhetorical strategy is optimized for engagement and virality within the platform logic. While this drives social utility (U&G), it undermines the ideal of the Public Sphere as a place for rational-critical discourse. Crucially, the high level of self-reported social pressure against expressing opposing political views online (**49%–50% concern**) is empirical evidence of **social filtering** and **echo chambers**. The shared language that breeds trust also creates conditions for ideological homogeneity. The result is a sphere efficient at validating existing community narratives ("Apno Suno") but inefficient at facilitating pluralism or introducing necessary critical friction.

In conclusion, the Mewar digital public sphere is best characterized as a **functional but fragile Hybrid Vernacular Public Sphere**. It is functional in generating localized trust and accountability but fragile due to its structural vulnerability—where its reliance on emotional, high-engagement content and the resulting echo chambers risks replacing critical democratic discourse with internalized, affective consensus.

Conclusion

This mixed-methods study, 'Apno Bolo, Apno Suno': The Role of Vernacular Language in Constructing Credibility in Mewar's Digital Public Sphere (2017–2025), confirms that **vernacular language** is the central, mediating variable in establishing news credibility for regional audiences facing a crisis of trust in mainstream media. The Mewar digital ecosystem has emerged as a **Vernacular Public Sphere (VPS)**, functional in its localized relevance but fragile in its democratic execution. The findings empirically validate

that Mewari language content creates credibility through **Cultural Proximity**, directly satisfying audience **Uses & Gratifications** needs related to **Identity Affirmation**. Furthermore, the Mewar VPS operates within the **Hybrid Media System** as a decentralized network defined by **Gatewatching**, where accountability is earned horizontally through responsive community service.

Contributions and Implications

This research contributes to media theory by providing a specific, localized empirical link between **linguistic vulnerability and credibility construction**. The primary implication for democratic theory is that **linguistic authenticity** can serve as a vital source of resilience against the systemic failure and polarization of national media.

Limitations and Future Research

The study's limitations include the reliance on non-probability sampling (N=101) and the analysis of a dynamic, rapidly evolving digital environment. Future research should pursue a longitudinal analysis to measure the long-term impact of highly emotional rhetorical strategies on constructive civic engagement versus polarization. There is also a critical need to develop policy and ethical frameworks for Hybrid Media System actors, focusing on how hyperlocal outlets can integrate accountability norms to stabilize the democratic potential of these essential vernacular public spheres against the risks of bias and echo chambers.

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