

Urban-Centric Narratives in Emerging Naga Digital Media Platforms: Whose Stories Get Told?

Wapangsungla Longkumer, Nagaland University, India

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Abstract

Media gatekeeping and the construction of newsworthiness are inherently subjective processes that often privilege urban events over rural concerns, reinforcing urbannormative biases in news production. Such patterns of coverage not only shape public perception but also influence the historical record, as archives built on urban-centric reporting risk obscuring or omitting rural experiences. In the context of the rapidly blooming digital media landscape in India, new opportunities have emerged for expanding the visibility of rural issues and strengthening civic engagement. This study examines how three major regional digital news platforms in Nagaland, India—Hornbill TV, Global Window, and NLTV—report on developments across the state. Employing content analysis, the research systematically reviews and thematically categorizes news videos from each platform’s YouTube channel, focusing on key development indicators including infrastructure, education, healthcare, livelihood, agriculture, governance, policy, and the distribution of urban versus rural coverage. The findings reveal a marked imbalance, with media outlets prioritizing urban-centric regional, national, and international stories over those originating from rural areas. The study highlights the strengths and limitations of digital media in fostering inclusive journalism and underscores the need for improved representation of rural issues to support equitable information access and more responsive policymaking.

Keywords: media gatekeeping, urban-rural news coverage, digital journalism, content analysis

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Introduction

Journalistic gatekeeping serves as a critical filter that systematically culls information, often prioritizing metropolitan perspectives while marginalizing rural or non-urban realities in the construction of newsworthiness (Fu et al., 2024; Soroka, 2012). This selective processing relies on institutionalized news values and routine procedures that prioritize urban-centric narratives, often relegating peripheral regions to superficial or negative portrayals (Sucháček et al., 2016, 2023). This process is further complicated by the fact that newsroom decision-makers often curate content based on perceptions of audience preferences, which may unconsciously mirror the dominant, urban-centric ideologies of the journalists themselves. Furthermore, this gatekeeping process is rarely neutral, as the underlying journalistic epistemology often fails to account for the specific social cohesion and unique knowledge-building practices required to report on rural communities effectively (Perreault et al., 2024). Consequently, this institutional bias results in the systematic silencing or tokenization of peripheral populations, as editorial gatekeeping decisions frequently erase the lived experiences of those residing outside metropolitan centres (Mukherjee, 2026). This concentration of editorial power often mirrors broader societal hierarchies, where the interests of political and economic centers dictate which regional narratives are deemed worthy of public attention (Nath & Tamuli, 2022). This structural imbalance is exacerbated by the economic decline of regional journalism, where the closure of local outlets leaves a vacuum often filled by metropolitan entities that lack the contextual literacy to accurately interpret rural phenomena (Perreault et al., 2022). As this center-periphery dynamic dictates the flow of information, media organizations inadvertently reinforce a model where industrial and geographic peripheries are effectively excluded from the national discourse (Robinson, 2013).

While center-periphery imbalances have traditionally been studied within legacy media, the contemporary “digital turn” was widely expected to disrupt these inequities. This shift represents far more than an augmentation of broadcasting capacity; it fundamentally transforms our perceptions of news based on evolving societal expectations (Eldridge II, 2020), including the premise that local news organizations must crucially serve and represent their immediate communities (Jenkins & Nielsen, 2023). Theoretically, digital journalism leverages two-way communication by integrating technological, commercial, and editorial roles (Doyle, 2013). Because rapid, real-time dissemination is now a defining feature of digital media (Priyonggo & Adnan, 2021), these platforms inherently possess the structural capability to hyper-localize reporting and instantly elevate peripheral narratives.

However, the digital media landscape in Nagaland, located in North East India, presents a critical paradox. Administratively, Nagaland consists of 17 districts with a diverse mix of urban, semi-urban and rural regions; many districts remain predominantly rural due to their rugged geography, lower population density, and agrarian economies. Yet, the state’s media architecture is highly centralized, with most media houses headquartered in urban hubs like Dimapur, Kohima, and Mokokchung. While emerging digital portals and social media journalism initially promised to democratize this ecosystem and bypass traditional geographic gatekeepers, early observations suggest they frequently replicate existing biases. Driven by the urgency of real-time dissemination (Priyonggo & Adnan, 2021) and the commercial pressures of digital survival (Doyle, 2013), these platforms remain tethered to the urban axis where infrastructure, advertising revenue, and media literacy are concentrated.

Consequently, the unique governance systems, knowledge-building practices, and lived realities of Nagaland's rural districts remain largely invisible, filtered through an urban digital

gaze that lacks deep contextual literacy. This study addresses this gap by critically analyzing the gatekeeping mechanisms of emerging Naga digital media platforms. By evaluating a dataset of $N = 879$ YouTube news reports broadcast during November 2025 by three dominant digital news channels in the state, HornbillTV, Global Window, and NLTV, this paper asks, “*Whose stories get told?*” In doing so, it examines the structural, economic, and ideological forces dictating newsworthiness in Nagaland's digital frontier, exploring whether these platforms serve as genuine tools for peripheral empowerment or merely as digital echoes of older, urban-centric hegemonies.

Gatekeeping, Newsworthiness, and Urban Bias in Media

Theoretical Foundations and Evolution of Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping theory remains a foundational concept in mass communication studies, retaining its relevance since its emergence in the post-World War II era. Roberts (2005) emphasizes that the rise of weblogs has renewed scholarly attention to gatekeeping, reinforcing its importance in understanding modern media systems. Gatekeeping refers to the process through which information is filtered and shaped before reaching audiences, thereby constructing social reality (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). These decisions, though seemingly minor in isolation, collectively influence the nature, tone, and direction of news narratives (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). The evolution of journalism in response to economic and technological transformations has significantly altered traditional gatekeeping structures. Vos and Heinderyckx (2015) argue that these changes have introduced new actors, routines, and distribution channels, reshaping how news is produced and disseminated. Despite these disruptions, gatekeeping continues to adapt rather than disappear (Chin-Fook & Simmonds, 2013). The emergence of user-generated content has further complicated this process by blurring the distinction between gatekeepers and audiences (Deluliis, 2015). Vos (2014) highlights that inclusion and exclusion in news content directly influence how audiences perceive reality, making gatekeeping a critical site of analysis.

Institutional Norms and Organisational Structures

Journalistic practices and institutional contexts also play a crucial role in shaping gatekeeping decisions. Thorson and Wells (2015) demonstrate that journalists' truth-justification strategies are influenced by their professional positions, reinforcing institutional norms. Similarly, Lowrey (2015) identifies a shift toward solution-oriented journalism, where news selection considers community impact. These perspectives suggest that gatekeeping is embedded within broader social and organizational structures.

The Subjectivity of Newsworthiness and News Selection

A central component of gatekeeping is newsworthiness, which determines the selection and prioritization of news stories. Information related to significant, controversial, or timely issues is more likely to be selected (Shabir et al., 2015). News values such as proximity, importance, and novelty guide these decisions and enhance audience engagement (Zhang et al., 2016). Editors and media managers continuously evaluate competing stories to determine their relevance and prominence (Pashler & Heriot, 2018). However, newsworthiness is inherently subjective. Caple (2015) argues that it may reside in journalists' cognitive frameworks, the nature of events, or discursive practices within news production.

Structural Influence and Systematic Media Biases

Structural influences further shape news selection and representation. Herman (1994) highlights how ownership, advertising, sourcing, and ideological constraints influence media content. Additionally, while journalists often select topics, editorial decisions at higher levels determine the prominence and placement of stories (Boukes et al., 2020). Empirical studies reveal how these processes produce systematic biases. Bartlett et al. (2002b) found that newspapers often neglect research from developing countries and prioritize certain types of studies, while Lundman (2003) demonstrates that crime reporting is influenced by racial and gender stereotypes. In digital media environments, news selection continues to reflect patterns of perceived newsworthiness. Kim and Lu (2026) show that audiences are more likely to engage with headlines that rank higher in perceived importance compared to others. Similarly, Jacobs and Van Spanje (2023) find that certain types of hate crimes receive more coverage than others, shaping public awareness and political responses. However, evaluating bias remains complex, as defining a standard of impartial reporting is inherently difficult (Armona et al., 2024). Media coverage also varies based on demographic and situational factors, with more “newsworthy” events receiving greater attention (Jeanis & Powers, 2016).

Urbannormativity and the Rural-Urban Representation Divide

A critical dimension of media bias is urbannormativity, which privileges urban experiences while marginalizing rural realities. Urbannormativity reflects a cultural assumption that urban life is progressive and desirable, while rural life is perceived as backward or deviant (Fulkerson & Thomas, 2016; Nazariadli, 2018). These biases influence both media production and representation. Media consumption itself is shaped by geographic and social contexts, including lifestyle, occupation, and community engagement (Bostian, 1974). Research further highlights disparities in information access between rural and urban populations. Chen et al. (2018) demonstrate that rural communities often face structural barriers, including limited access to healthcare information and media exposure. From a production standpoint, Cruikshank (2016) shows that metropolitan media outlets tend to focus on national political agendas, whereas rural outlets prioritize locally relevant issues. While Okeke et al. (2026) challenge the assumption of qualitative bias by finding no significant difference in the quality of rural versus urban coverage, they acknowledge a persistent quantitative imbalance in representation.

Resource Disparities and Public Relations Infrastructure

External factors such as public relations and institutional support influence media visibility. Lahav et al. (2013) highlight that sustained professional public relations efforts are essential for rural areas to gain consistent and favorable media coverage. This suggests that disparities in representation are not solely editorial but also linked to unequal access to communication resources.

Existing literature demonstrates that gatekeeping and newsworthiness are dynamic processes shaped by technological, institutional, and cultural factors. These processes often reinforce urban-centric biases, contributing to the marginalization of rural perspectives in media coverage. This study builds on these insights by examining how such dynamics operate within regional digital news platforms in Nagaland.

Methodology

This study employs purposive sampling to analyse a dataset of $N = 879$ YouTube news reports broadcast during November 2025 from three YouTube news channels based in Nagaland: HornbillTV (757K subscribers), Global Window (555K subscribers), and NLTV (530K subscribers). HornbillTV and NLTV operate as satellite channels, while Global Window is a digital-native news platform. All three were selected on the basis of subscriber count as a proxy for reach and influence, ensuring the analysis captures channels with substantial audience impact. With only three channels analysed, findings reflect patterns within these high-reach outlets and may not generalize to the broader population of regional YouTube news channels.

Content from these channels was analysed using content analysis, defined by Berelson (1952) as a technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of communication content, and applied directly to YouTube news by the Pew Research Centre (2020). Stories were classified by geographic origin, following the Pew Research Centre (2019), which found that urban and rural audiences differ systematically in perceived coverage and topic priorities. Subject categories were assigned using the news values and gatekeeping framework of Galtung and Ruge (1965), later revisited by Harcup and O'Neill (2001, 2017), which explains why news coverage consistently sorts into recurring topical categories. Each story was further coded by style—investigative, opinion, event coverage, press conference, or press release, following established genre-classification practice (Möller & Hase, 2022) and the byline-based investigative/non-investigative distinction used by Lewis et al. (2008). Descriptive statistics and cross-tabulation were then used to summarize the coded data, consistent with the centrality of quantification to content analysis as outlined by Krippendorff (2019) and Berelson (1952). Finally, news frequency was compared across geographic scope—international, national, regional, and local, following the international news flow framework of Segev (2016) and the local-to-national comparative approach of Guo and Zhang (2023).

Results and Discussion

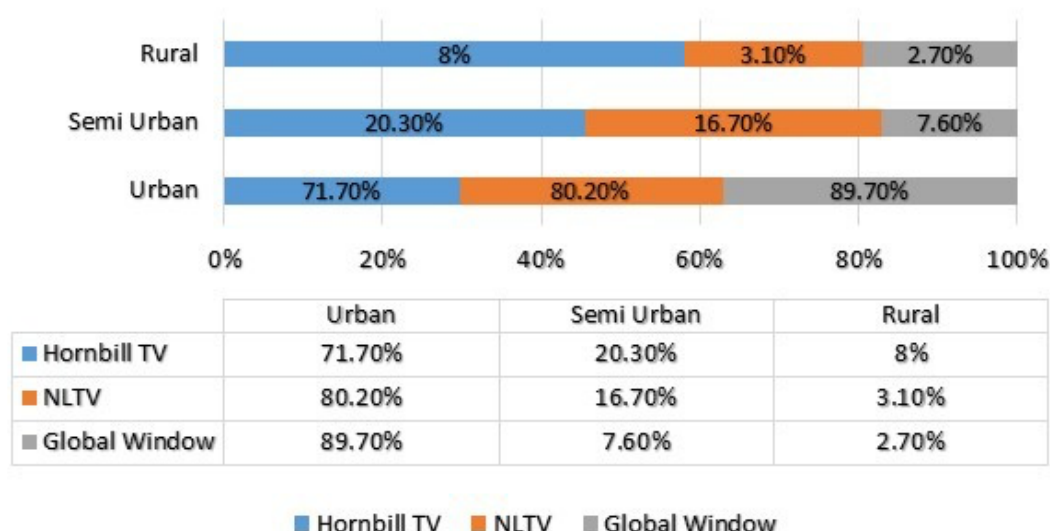
In Nagaland, the classification of places into Urban, Semi-Urban, and Rural zones is closely tied to its unique topography, administrative structure, and economic activities. Mapping out these zones across all 17 administrative districts requires looking at how each district's headquarters and sub-towns are governed. The state designates 3 Municipal Councils (urban hubs) and 36 Town Councils (semi-urban administrative and trade hubs). Districts that do not host a full municipal council or a heavily populated commercial zone are categorized by their main headquarters acting as the semi-urban centre, surrounded by a purely rural landscape (NewsOnAir, 2024).

Table 1
Geographic Distribution

#	District	Urban Zones	Semi-Urban Zones (Town Councils)	Rural Footprint
1.	Dimapur	Dimapur (Municipal Council)	East Dimapur	Minor rural fringe
2.	Kohima	Kohima (Municipal Council)	Chiephobozou	Large (e.g., Jakhama, Khonoma)
3.	Mokokchung	Mokokchung (Municipal)	Tuli, Changtongya, Mangkolemba	Dominant (Traditional Ao villages)
4.	Chümoukedima	Chümoukedima Town	Medziphema	Moderate agricultural plains
5.	Wokha	<i>None</i>	Wokha Town, Bhandari	High (Lotha Naga heartland villages)
6.	Zünheboto	<i>None</i>	Zünheboto Town, Satakha, Aghunato, Atoizu	Heavy (Sumi Naga villages)
7.	Mon	<i>None</i>	Mon Town, Naginimora, Aboi, Tizit, Tobu	Massive rural border villages (e.g., Longwa)
8.	Tuensang	<i>None</i>	Tuensang Town, Longkhim	Heavily rural
9.	Phek	<i>None</i>	Phek Town, Pfütsero, Chozuba	High (Chizami, Pfütsero agricultural villages)
10.	Peren	<i>None</i>	Jalukie (Major trade hub), Peren Town, Tening	Dominant rural forests/hills
11.	Kiphire	<i>None</i>	Kiphire Town, Pungro, Seyochung	Deeply rural mountainous terrain
12.	Longleng	<i>None</i>	Longleng Town, Tamlu	Highly rural
13.	Noklak	<i>None</i>	Noklak Town	High border-village footprint
14.	Shamator	<i>None</i>	Shamator Town	Predominantly rural
15.	Tseminyü	<i>None</i>	Tseminyü Town	Dense rural Rengma villages
16.	Niuland	Niuland Town area	Proximity sub-towns	Agro-plains
17.	Meluri	<i>None</i>	Meluri Town	Highly rural (Pochury Naga villages)

Data are presented below as percentages rather than raw counts to allow proportional comparison across channels with differing total story volumes, consistent with standard content analysis practice of using percentage distributions for cross-tabulated categorical data (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorff, 2019). This approach enables direct comparison of coverage patterns—geographic distribution, subject matter, journalistic style, and news frequency—across channels regardless of differences in overall output, ensuring that a channel with a larger sample size does not disproportionately influence the comparative findings. Percentages also facilitate cross-tabulation, allowing patterns within each channel to be read both independently and against one another, which supports the comparative aims of this study.

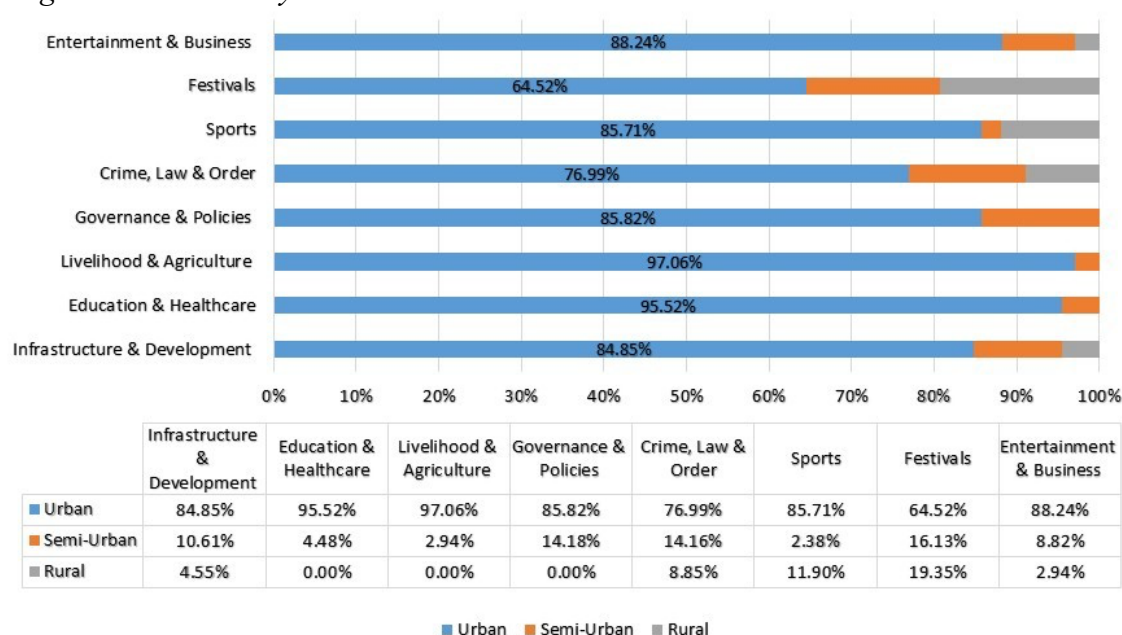
Figure 1
Geographic Distribution of Coverage



Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of geographic distribution in Figure 1 by channels reveals a pronounced urban skew across all three outlets. Urban coverage dominated each channel's output, Global Window (89.70%), Hornbill TV (71.70%), and NLTV (80.20%), while rural coverage remained minimal across the board (2.70%–8%), and semi-urban coverage occupied an intermediate position, with Hornbill TV allocating the largest share (20.30%) compared to NLTV (16.70%) and Global Window (7.60%). This pattern is consistent with the established literature on urban bias in media coverage, which finds that news organizations disproportionately favor urban-based content over rural reporting (Pew Research Centre, 2019). Notably, Global Window shows the strongest urban concentration and weakest rural presence of the three channels, with rural coverage remaining negligible across all formats.

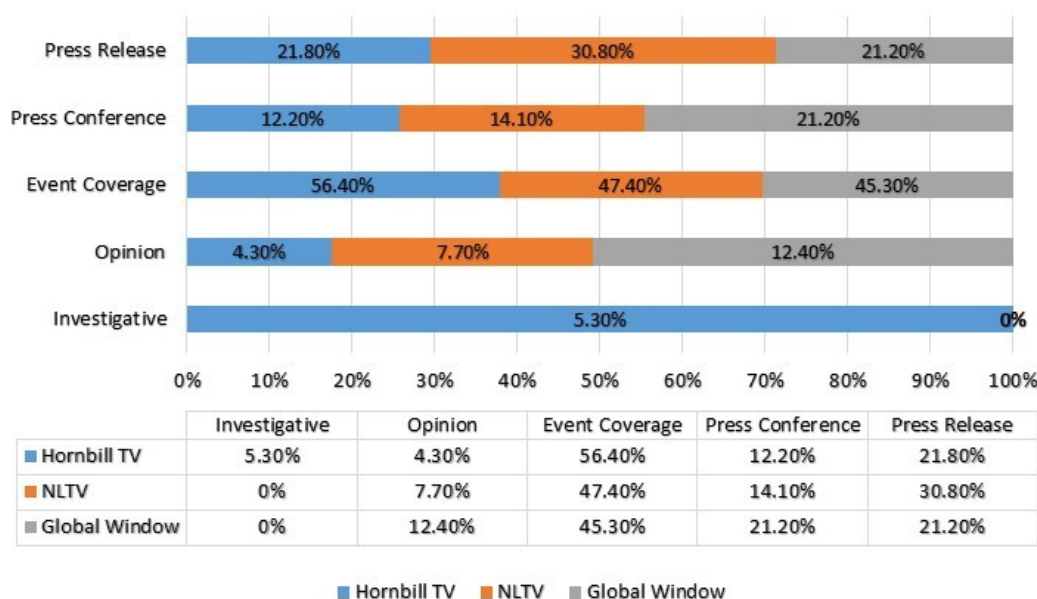
Figure 2
Regional Sector Analysis



Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of regional sector analysis in Figure 2 by geographic origin shows that urban coverage dominates every category, ranging from 64.52% (Festivals) to 97.06% (Livelihood & Agriculture). Categories tied to institutional and infrastructural development—Livelihood & Agriculture (97.06%), Education & Healthcare (95.52%), and Entertainment & Business (88.24%)—show the highest urban concentration and negligible rural presence, indicating that development-related reporting is almost exclusively cantered on urban areas despite its direct relevance to rural populations. Festivals recorded the highest rural share (19.35%) and the lowest urban share (64.52%) of any category, suggesting that rural coverage is largely confined to cultural events rather than governance, infrastructure, or livelihood issues that more directly affect rural communities. This pattern reinforces the urban-bias trend observed in the geographic distribution data and aligns with prior findings that rural areas receive disproportionately less coverage on substantive policy and development topics relative to urban centres (Pew Research Centre, 2019).

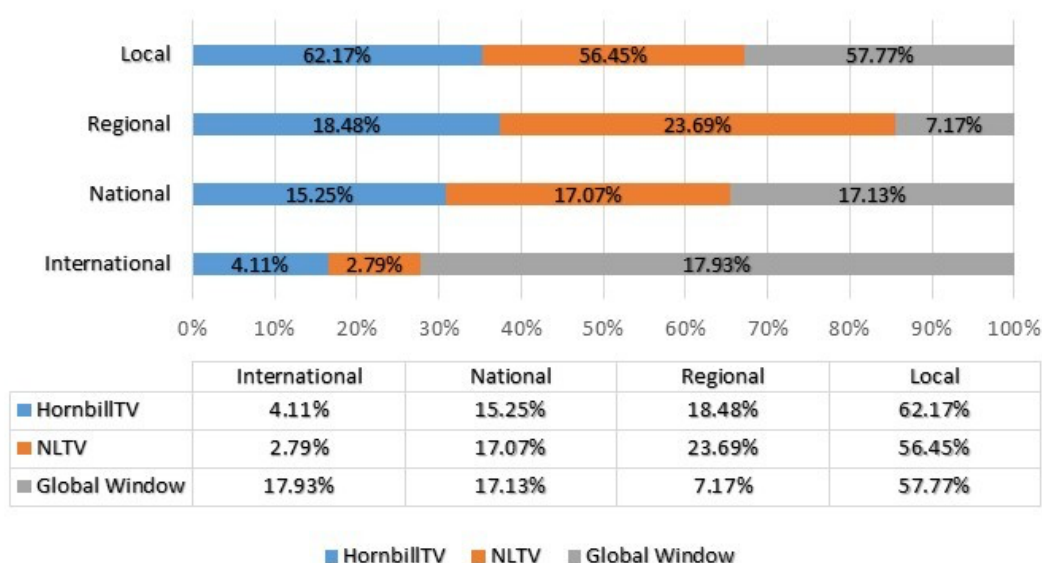
Figure 3
Comparative Themes



Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of journalistic style in Figure 3 by channel shows that Event Coverage is the dominant format across all three outlets—Hornbill TV (56.40%), NLT (47.40%), and Global Window (45.30%) followed by Press Release, which ranged from 21.20% to 30.80%. Investigative reporting was nearly absent, appearing only on Hornbill TV (5.30%), while NLT and Global Window recorded 0%. Opinion content was similarly minimal across all channels (4.30%–12.40%). This distribution indicates a strong reliance on event-driven and press-release-based reporting over original investigative work, a pattern consistent with the byline-based investigative/non-investigative distinction noted by Lewis et al. (2008), who similarly found independently investigated content to be a small minority relative to event coverage and agency- or release-driven reporting.

Figure 4
Comparative News Frequency



Source: Microsoft Excel

Cross-tabulation of news frequency in Figure 4 by geographic scope shows that local news dominates coverage across all three channels—Hornbill TV (62.17%), NLTV (56.45%), and Global Window (57.77%)—confirming a strong local-news orientation consistent with the channels' regional positioning. Regional and national coverage occupied a secondary, comparatively modest share (7.17%–23.69%), while international coverage was the least represented category overall, particularly for Hornbill TV (4.11%) and NLTV (2.79%). Notably, Global Window allocated a markedly higher share to international news (17.93%) than the other two channels, despite a comparatively lower regional share (7.17%), suggesting a relatively broader geographic scope in its overall coverage mix. This local-to-international gradient aligns with the international news flow framework of Segev (2016), which holds that geographic proximity and relatedness to the audience are key determinants of news prominence.

Conclusion

The findings reveal a consistent pattern of urban-centric, local-oriented news coverage across all three Nagaland-based YouTube news channels. Geographic distribution data show urban coverage overwhelmingly dominant (71.70%–89.70%) while rural coverage remains minimal across all channels, a skew that persists across virtually every subject category, with development-related topics such as Livelihood & Agriculture and Education & Healthcare showing the strongest urban concentration. Stylistically, coverage is driven primarily by event coverage and press releases rather than investigative reporting, indicating a reliance on readily available, event-driven content over independently sourced journalism. Frequency comparisons further confirm that these channels prioritize local news above regional, national, and international coverage, reflecting their core function as community-oriented outlets. Collectively, these patterns suggest that while YouTube news channels in Nagaland fulfil an important role in local information dissemination, rural communities and substantive investigative reporting remain comparatively underserved—a gap with implications for equitable information access across the state. As the sample is limited to three high-reach channels, these conclusions should be read as indicative of patterns within this subset rather than generalizable to the broader regional news ecosystem.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with literature identification, and language refinement, and QuillBot to assist with citation generation. After using these tools, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and content of the publication.

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