

Android Apps of Malayalam Newspapers: Review of User Experience

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Abstract

The habit of newspaper reading is an integral part of Kerala society. The advent of satellite televisions and social media could not change the daily routine of newspaper reading. Leading Malayalam dailies have introduced mobile phone apps to extend their presence among mobile phone users. The study reviews the features and performance of the apps in the Android platform of four leading Malayalam newspapers namely Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, Deshabhimani and Madhyamam.

Keywords: News apps; Android; Mobile phone apps; Malayalam news

1. Introduction

Kerala people became very fond of newspaper reading many decades back. High literacy level and public library movement have influenced the reading habit of Kerala people. Indian Readership Survey 2017 says that about 60% of the Kerala population reads newspapers. Newspaper readership at the national level is about 16.5% (Media Research Users Council, 2018). "From literacy to political consciousness, urban dominance, history, sociology, demography and even geography – it all plays a role" (Cris, 2018). Kerala people love newspaper reading. Kerala has good statewide coverage of broadband and mobile phone. As per the CyberMedia Research report, Kerala leads among other states in mobile phone penetration with 65% (Thomas, 2018). The popularity of mobile phone and Internet have influenced the social life of Kerala people. Social media and mobile phones have played a significant role in coordinating relief operations in flood-affected Kerala in 2018(Thiagarajan, 2018). The advent of newspaper apps has been mobilising newspaper reading habits of Kerala people. Leading newspapers in Kerala has released mobile apps

to extend their presence on the fingertips of Kerala people. The paper presents the result of a study which reviews the features which enhance the reading experience of Malayalam newspaper apps in Android mobile apps.

2. Objectives of the study

Following are the objectives of the study:

- ♦ To review the reading experience offered by leading Malayalam newspaper apps.
- ♦ To review the performance of Malayalam newspaper apps.
- ♦ To identify the difficulties faced by users with Malayalam newspaper apps.
- ♦ To check the availability of feature with Android newspaper apps which supports physically challenged users.

3. Methodology

The study checks the features of newspaper apps which enhance the reading experience. Malayala Manorama, Mathrubhumi, Deshabhimani and Madhyamam newspapers app selected for the study. Indian Readership Survey 2017 used to select the first four popular Malayalam newspapers. A checklist used to know the availability of essential features which support the reading experience. Those features categorised into four: content organisation, reading, display and personalisation. Feedback of users from the Google Play Store has considered evaluating the apps. Personally tried all features in the checklist to narrate and assess the user experience of four newspaper apps.

4. Evaluation of newspaper apps

Essential features for the newspapers apps, user's feedback in Google Play Store and personal experience of the author with the apps have used for the review. Google Play Store reviews after the date of app updated last time considered. The version number and release date of apps reviewed for the study are given in Table 1.

Table 1. Details of apps of newspapers

Newspaper name	Version Number of app	Last updated
Malayalam Manorama	5.4.8	14 September 2018
Mathrubhumi	3.13	27 November 2018
Deshabhimani	1.4	23 November 2018
Madhyamam	3.0.7	8 August 2018

The four apps installed and tried on mobile phone brand name Asus Zenfone Selfie with the following hardware specifications; Qualcomm MSM8939 Snapdragon 615 SoC, Octa-core Cortex-A53 1.7/1.0 GHz CPU, 3 GB RAM, Adreno 405 GPU, and 4G. Android version 8 (Nougat) used in the phone.

5. Content organization

The organization of news and feature stories in the app influence the ease of reading. International, national and local news appear in the apps. Regular features, editorial and cartoons are available in newspaper apps. The availability of such features in the apps studied is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Features available in the apps

Features	Manorama	Mathrubhumi	Deshabhimani	Madhyamam
Latest news	✓	✓	✓	✓
District/ edition news	✓	✓	✓	✓
News categories	✓	✓	✓	✓
Search	✓	☐	☐	☐

Latest news: Readers use the apps to know the latest news instantly. All of the selected apps give the latest news in addition to news appeared in the printed edition. The four apps show alert and display of the latest news stories.

District/edition news: The four news apps have made available news from districts/edition wise. The readers can find the links from the menu and go to the concerned district's news. Madhyamam app does not follow district wise categorization. They organize local news under taluks.

Categories: The categorization of news and features based on popular topics is convenient for readers to jump into their favourite items. The selected apps follow more or less the same categorization like entertainments, sports, books, agriculture, education etc. Theme-wise categorization like editorial, cartoon etc. is also available.

Search: Search facility in the app is helpful for digging the previously published content. Only Mathrubhumi news app provide search facility. Searching of Malayalam content in Mathrubhumi app is satisfactory.

6. Reading

Newspaper apps give more enhancements in reading experience than printed newspapers. Language switching, changing of font size and offline reading give more ease to all categories of readers. Table 3 provides various aspects available with newspaper apps to enhance reading experience.

Table 3: Availability of features that enhance the reading of news items

Features	Manorama	Mathrubhumi	Deshabhimani	Madhyamam
Related news	✓	✓	☐	✓
Languages	✓	✓	☐	☐
Text zooming	✓	✓	✓	☐
Offline reading	✓	✓	☐	☐
Audio version	☐	☐	☐	☐

Related news: Display of related items along with news is helpful for readers to review the previously appeared stories. All the apps except that of Deshabhimani have this feature.

Languages: Availability of news items other than Malayalam is convenient for international readers. Manorama and Mathrubhumi have contents in both Malayalam and English.

Text zooming: Text zooming is essential for senior citizens and visually impaired people. With Manorama app, the reader can increase the text to the desired size by using fingers while reading. In other apps, the reader has to visit the settings option to change the font size.

Offline reading: Offline facility with the apps assist the reader to download news content and store for later reading. Offline reading is convenient without an Internet connection. Mathrubhumi and Manorama apps have offline news saving facility. Manorama app saves the content offline while bookmark the news.

Audio version: None of the apps provide audio version of the news, though it is helpful for visually impaired persons.

7. Display

Readers can customize the display of newspaper apps. Apps allow to customize the look and feel of display blocks by applying various themes and screen components. The availability of display features in the four apps is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Availability of features that enhance the display of apps

Features	Manorama	Mathrubhumi	Desha bhimani	Madhyamam
Night mode	✓	✓	☐	☐
Advertisement	✓	✓	☐	☐
Media convergence	✓	✓	☐	☐

Night mode: Manorama and Mathrubhumi apps have night mode facility. Readers can adjust light settings suitable for reading with night mode facility.

Advertisement: Deshabhimani and Madhyamam apps do not show advertisements whereas the other two apps show ads. Advertisements in Manorama and Mathrubhumi app disturb the ease of reading as per the reader's feedback in the Google Play Store. The selected news apps are free, and so the readers have to excuse advertisements.

Loading time: Mathrubhumi and Manorama take up to 10 seconds to load and open the app. Madhyamam and Deshabhimani app load very fast compared to Mathrubhumi and Manorama apps.

Media convergence: Facility to access e-paper, tv and radio channels of the same publishers is very convenient for readers. Readers can directly open and access Mathrubhumi television and radio with the app. Manorama and Mathrubhumi apps have included audio and video content along with text content.

8. Personalization

Popular personalized options with newspaper apps are reader comments, sharing with social media, customizing news on display and alerts. Comments with news stories reflect the views of the public.

Table 5. Features of personalization with the apps

Features	Manorama	Mathrubhumi	Desha bhimani	Madhyamam
User comments	✓	✓	☐	✓
News alert	✓	✓	✓	✓
Social media sharing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Bookmarks	✓	☐	☐	☐

User comments: Readers comments on news items are the active component of online newspapers. The readers have to login into the app to enter the comments. Apps have given provisions to sign in using various web services and social media accounts. Attempts to login into the Mathrubhumi and Madhyamam app using multiple social media account failed. Login process to Manorama app was felt to be somewhat extent easy. The number of comments under news stories in Mathubhumi and Madhyamam is very less than Manorama. Difficulties with login from the app may be the reason for less amount of user discussion in comment boxes. Deshabhimani has no provision to allow comments under news on the app. Difficulties in the login process to newspaper apps badly affect live discussions.

News alert: Newspaper apps display the latest news as alerts in the mobile notifications area. All apps except Madhyamam have control button for news alerts. The user can choose the desired category of news for the alert with Manorama app. It is observed that the latest news alert display on notification area after the latest story appeared in the app.

Sharing with social media: All the news apps provide sharing of news items to popular social media services like Facebook. WhatsApp and Twitter.

Bookmarks: Bookmarking of news items is helpful for future reference. Only Manorama app gives the facility to bookmark the news item.

9. Findings and suggestions

Following are the findings and suggestions of the study:

- ♦ The four Malayalam newspaper apps offer more or less the same features and functions.

- ◆ Performance of four newspaper apps is not up to the mark. Slow loading, bugs, crash etc. are common problems with the apps.
- ◆ Difficulties in authentication is a common problem with the four apps.

Following are the suggestions to improve the reading experience on apps,

- ◆ Need to add provisions for physically impaired people, e.g. audio version of the news.
- ◆ Need improvements in authentication with newspaper apps.
- ◆ Need more features and improvements with apps for academic use.

10. Conclusion

The review of four selected newspaper apps reveals that Malayalam newspapers are new kids in the block. Consistent efforts from developer's side are required to fix the bugs and improve the performance of apps. More attention is needed to review user feedbacks from the Google Play Store to collect suggestions and manifest in the next release. Addition of features which helps the physically challenged people should be taken care of as the social responsibility of newspapers.

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