

OTT MEDIA IN INDIA: AN OVERVIEW OF MODES AND INTERVENTIONS

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Abstract

With the advent of Over-the-top (OTT) Media in the audio-visual entertainment space in India, starting from 2008, there has been a growing interest of viewers to supplement or even substitute with it their media engagement from conventional sources. Such a massive transformation has this new medium brought, that the very idea of audio-visual content consumption has undergone a tectonic shift in little more than a decade. In the last five years particularly, there has been tremendous growth in the number and scope of OTT platforms in India, making it a fast-growing industry by bringing revolutions in the areas of entertainment, information, and communication. It becomes extremely relevant then to analyse the working of OTT to underscore the social, cultural and political ramifications of such a medium. The current paper is designed to probe the advent of OTT in India with the objective to review its modes and interventions. The modes of the medium: technology, industry, content, viewership, and competition need to be probed to gather an understanding of the intervention that OTT brings about especially vis-à-vis its relationship with the digital communication industry.

In 2008, the Indian media saw the advent of Over-the-top (OTT) entertainment platforms along with indigenous telecom giant, Reliance BIGFlix, which ushered in the era of anytime downloading of cinema content. In a time when television service providers were moving towards digitization and basking in the glory of the new-found success of Direct to Home (DTH) services, OTT services entered the entertainment space as a seemingly innocuous medium serving as a

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supplement to the erstwhile prevailing services: radio, TV, cinema, and the internet. What was probably not foreseen by the existing service providers was perhaps the reach that OTT was to establish in a short while after its arrival and that led to the sudden death of the early mediums. But before venturing into an analysis of how OTT is situated within the mediatic space, it is imperative to assess the main media forms that exist before its arrival. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, when radio, television, and commercial cinema arrived on the socio-cultural scene, media has been claiming a central significance thereby creating a formidable paradigm shift within which cultural analyses and evolution can be delineated. Andrew Crisell, in his 1986 work *Understanding Radio*, while elaborating on the characteristics of radio, calls it a “blind medium”, in that, it has no visual mode. He identifies visuality as the most significant aspect of consuming content and explains about ways in which radio attempts to make up for this lack. It is evident in Crisell’s admiration of the modes of radio, that visuality is definitely a facet that makes media far more effective and influential. Television and film then become more significant forms of media since they combine the audio with the visual in their content and hold at least two of the senses of the viewers at all times. Between these two, however, television comes out as a clear winner in terms of user access and consumption because of its domestic existence since its introduction and its larger and more diverse content in comparison to film. The role of the television has indeed been paramount in creating a social sphere of culture for people with its audio-visual format and its penetration into the homes of consumers. The need of cinematic paraphernalia, high cost of content production and the scheduling of cinema halls are only some other features that make films have a comparatively lesser impact than the television. Countering the clear distinction of television, radio offer users mobility and flexibility because of its simple, wireless technological design (especially since the arrival of the transistor) and its audio-only form. The development of low-power FM stations and interactive radio content in the early twenty-first century only adds to the reach and advantages of the radio mode. But this competition between traditional forms of media is almost entirely side-lined with the arrival of the Internet and service providers such as YouTube in 2005, which create a parallel and much more emancipating space of content generation and consumption for users. The internet brings about an age of peer-to-peer (P2P) content and thrives on the dual capacity of users to consume as well as create. Jean Burgess and Joshua Green analyse this aspect of the

participatory culture of YouTube in their work *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (2009), in which they highlight that YouTube offers a space to users to establish a sense of “cultural citizenship” (77). The internet primarily remained a medium of information and communication for users until the arrival of OTT audio-visual media, post which the relationship between forms of media became ever more complex. This paper is designed to probe the success of OTT in India vis-à-vis other forms of media, particularly in terms of its modes and interventions, and analyse its place and ramifications in the Indian media space.

OTT platforms are simply defined as web-based applications that assist in transferring audio-visual content from creator to consumer. In its simplest form then, OTT becomes a logistical tool for transferring data and does not primarily become a content creator. Some of the most successful OTT platforms worldwide, such as Netflix and Amazon Prime, broadcasts individual productions and commissioned content. With the development of high-speed 4-G internet and smart phone technology, OTT platforms become popularly downloaded applications allowing multi-equipment compatible usage.

Back in 2006, Wedge Green and Barbara Lancaster defined OTT services as

the buzz-expression for services carried over the networks, delivering value to customers, but without any carrier service provider being involved in planning, selling, provisioning, or servicing them – and of course without any traditional Telco booking revenue directly from them. (np)

In 2006, when OTT had yet not made a foray into audio-visual content for entertainment purposes, the use of the technology was made for communication alone and the business model was one that Green and Lancaster defined based on provision of services from portals such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, and Google etc. without generating any direct profit from it. Users did not pay a subscription for OTT-based voice-calling through Skype, WhatsApp etc. . The profit that was gained by enhancing consumption of data from these portals was essentially linked with advertising, where OTT platforms charged the companies and not users. In India too, a similar business model has been in play where users pay for the internet connection and their smartphone but not for OTT-based communication applications. The matter changes however, with OTT-based audio-visual entertainment content applications. Here the OTT service receives a portion of profits earned by content

creators from their advertisers and/or charges a subscription fee from users.

In India, after a gradual initial growth of OTT from BIGFlix in 2008, the market suddenly saw a boom from 2015 with the introduction of several indigenous portals such as Hungama, Zee Pictures, Jiocinema as well as global players such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, Disney Pictures, Sony, Hotstar, Eros International and Warner Brothers in the OTT market. These service providers use a combination of advertisement-based revenue and/or user subscription model and have rapidly taken over the entertainment market in the country from prior leaders of DTH such as Tata Sky, Reliance TV, Dish TV, etc. The new leaders have either ventured into the OTT business themselves or come up with a line of products that combine the DTH and OTT models.

With the ease of access and the compatibility between multiple devices such as mobile phones, laptops and TV, OTT services offer novel mobility to users and allow for movement between places and portals with much greater flexibility than their restrictive DTH counterparts. Users needn't be bound by the locational restrictiveness of equipment and can access entertaining and informational content on the go. Which allows more users to save or download content and access it as per convenience rather than being restricted by what Stiegler calls "calendar organization" of conventional media where "audiovisual temporal objects were aired at a given time on a given day: a social synchronization organized by calendar" (52). The restriction of time, place and equipment is evidently challenged by OTT media and this served as a major reasons for its popularity.

Alongside the technological advantages, OTT also allows users to choose their own content and not be bound by the demographic and target-based content presentation. Conventional media forms follow a demographic-based content targeting system and schedule it strategically to facilitate consumption by an expected and suited set of viewers/audiences, meanwhile offering the latter to advertisers as potential customers. While discussing the content design of TV, Simon During notes:

TV Shows deliver particular sectors of the audience (demographics) to advertisers, and prime time is scheduled in strips in which a sequence of shows is designed to keep particular demographics viewing one program after another, with careful consideration given to audience changes determined by real-life events – domestic meal – and bed-times....Within the strips it is important that commercials retain viewers' attention so they merge more and more seamlessly into programming in order to

prevent the channel skipping and muting enabled by the remote. (2005: 118-9)

Similarly, Chignell notes a relationship between advertising and demographic-based radio content:

Advertisers may exert an unwanted influence as a result of their demand for a certain slice of the audience demographic.... push[ing] radio into restricted formats and generally pander[ing] to the lowest common denominator of safe and predictable radio; hence the dominance of contemporary hits and country formats in the USA. (2009: 113)

In comparison to these conventional media forms then, OTT offers an open content base, and scheduling and targeting does not restrict users to a certain kind of content alone. While advertisers do create interruptions according to demographic statistics in programmes on subscription-free OTT platforms, paid OTT platforms currently do not feature too many advertisements in India.

Further, content need not essentially be accessed similarly by a group or family, even within a single subscription. Service providers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime offer subscriptions that allow for multiple profiles within a connection, which can have individual settings, content selection and usage schedules. With a personal mobile phone then, multiple members of a family can access content simultaneously, yet individually. This facet makes users prefer such new mode rather than conventional media wherein a single connection offers content on one device at a time and only a particular kind of content can be accessed at a time. Simon During notes that “television’s content and regulations have always had to address family values and lifestyle patterns.... One TV set in a family household tends to mean disputes about programme selection” (110). This aspect of content restriction within a group is solved with the coming of OTT media.

Further, the effective lack of censorship on OTT media makes the content stand apart from that of traditional media. Users find it refreshing to access content that is bolder, novel, and more unapologetic about so-called social deviancies and eccentricities. While TV, film, and radio are governed by a strong regulatory mechanism that insists on discursively and socially acceptable content and rendition, media on OTT platforms is not largely subservient to such rules and regulations. Sundaravel and Elangovan note that:

Content with extreme violence, nudity and strong language find its home in OTT platforms because the OTT sector in India is less regulated than its offline counterparts like film and television. (2020: 494)

They further note the standpoint of the Telecoms Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI), which

has stated concerns over disturbances to the country's social fabric caused by content carried by OTT platforms. The Government of India reaffirmed that, as VoD services are available over the Internet, which is a public medium, OTT platform operators do not require any license to operate. Moreover, TRAI believes that the Information Technology Act, 2000, offers enough safeguards. The Information Technology Act, 2000 allows the government or the court to either block or take-down content that they consider objectionable. (494)

However, such censorship has not been enacted rather sternly on OTT media giving it a semblance of unprecedented freedom of expression and making users feel more inclined towards it. According to the FICCI-EY Report (2018) *Re-imagining India's M&E Sector* there were an estimated 250 million consumers of OTT audio-visual content via free or paid portals in 2017, and the report predicted that the number would grow to 500 million by 2020. Considering the availability of free time and the global lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the number surely seems rather conservative. According to a Publicis Report featured by Brand Equity, an electronic business portal of *Economic Times*, OTT registered a 34% increase in March 2020 during the government-imposed lockdown in India due to the pandemic (2020, np). The culture of binge-watching has risen tremendously and has become a veritable form of planned entertainment as well.

With OTT, unprecedented mobility and user-determined content consumption has been initiated as the existing audio-visual platforms are not capable of competing against their given technological and logistic situation. The freedom from censorship and regulatory dictates makes OTT content bolder, diverse, novel, and once again, this aspect challenges its competitors. . However, the growth of OTT media in terms of popularity, subscription, and even conversion from conventional media engagement should not be taken as an indication of unquestionable merit. The politics of OTT media makes its own interventions in the social/cultural space that raise many significant issues. Undoubtedly, the profit motive is paramount in OTT media too like any other form of media, and consumers are targeted by a much broader system here. The creation of largely uncensored content, which can satisfy the latent tendencies of a population that is largely bound in a family-oriented culture of silence and coyness in India, the provision of personal profiles to promote private and even secretive viewing, the availability of international content in

native Indian languages, are some of the ways in which the Indian demographic can be targeted by OTT media.

At a larger level, the business model of OTT media which is that of bringing content created by the third parties to consumers allows it to become a point of aggregating information and data about consumers. OTT has converted the erstwhile media business of B2C (business-to-consumer) to B2B2C (business-to-business-to-consumer) model, whereby it is placed in a strategically profitable space of being the bridge between the content creators and the consumers. This location in the business model allows OTT platforms to aggregate information about consumers through their individual profiles, their content preferences, their binge schedules, their content sharing along with their personal profiling information. This aggregated information becomes the key product that the OTT platforms make available to their advertisers for substantial gains.

OTT also uses this aggregated data to create consumer types and offers suggestions to consumers regarding what they may *like to watch*. This suggestion of content to users based on their categorization by the user algorithms is similar to the target-based content generation that was typically found in conventional media forms. What Adorno called the creation of an illusion of choice by culture industry, is once again manifest in the functioning of OTT industry. Simon During, while talking of the television, said that Adorno argued,

Television reduced its audience's capacities to reflect on and critique society and culture....by providing powerful forms of distraction, which transformed modern mass culture into a medium of undreamed of psychological control. (115)

He further added that

TV de-individuates people; it offers them a profoundly standardised image world; it reinforces the false domination of private life over the public sphere; it creates fantasies and false satisfactions that allow capitalism to maintain itself. (115)

A similar strategy seems at work with the OTT media that accentuates the illusion of open choice, diverse media and freedom to consume any kind of content, while optimizing consumers for its business partners and advertisers.

At a much more serious level, this de-individuation, that During talks about with reference to TV becomes paramount with OTT considering that the medium allows greater engagement in terms of time devoted by consumers. The very idea of binge-watching

suggests a kind of enslavement of consumers by the system that follows them around wherever they go and constantly asserts itself upon them. The ability to process, critically analyse and respond to content received via OTT then becomes minimal.

Despite its advanced influence on viewers in comparison to the radio, and TV, Hawkes observed that “an isolated picture-frame ‘cynosure’ does not monopolize the attention, because the screen itself sheds light on, and draws to itself a known and literally ‘inhabited’ environment” (emphasis in original; 1973: 233). Mendelsohn similarly suggests for the TV viewers:

people who seek and experience mass entertainment do not do so as isolated, autonomous individuals – as theorists of ‘mass society’ suggest – but, rather as group members, and in social contexts that call for a high degree of interpersonal communication. (1966: 74)

Contrary to this, OTT media is essentially an individually consumed media, and the possibility of interactive consumption is minimal especially with its offered temptation of customised programming. Where Fiske and Hartley observe a “convergent selectivity” (2003: 86; the term is originally from Stephenson, qtd. in Fiske and Hartley) at work among a large number of TV viewers, “who freely choose similar opportunities for themselves,” and “each family audience... negotiate[s] its own stance towards the message and so modify[ies] its meaning” (86), OTT offers each individual consumer a personalised profile with content that has been selected by herself and therefore reduces the possibility of any convergence of sensibility.

What becomes most hazardous with the development of OTT media and its rising popularity then is the total reification of individuals in a state of isolation and the absolute impossibility of a public sphere. With reference to internet-based communication, and the primary source of understanding of the public sphere, Habermas, suggested:

Use of the Internet has both broadened and fragmented the contexts of communication. This is why the Internet can have a subversive effect on intellectual life in authoritarian regimes. But at the same time, the less formal, horizontal cross-linking of communication channels weakens the achievements of traditional media. This focuses the attention of an anonymous and dispersed public on select topics and information, allowing citizens to concentrate on the same critically filtered issues and journalistic pieces at any given time. The price we pay for the growth in egalitarianism offered by the Internet is the decentralized access to the

unedited stories. In this medium, contributions by intellectuals lose their power to create a focus. (Habermas, qtd. in Sorensen, 2009: 142)

But internet-based communication does allow for some communication at least. The consumption of OTT-based audiovisual media at an individual level then compete the subversion of a society that is collectively enslaved in a state of total control and inaction. The passive consumption of content in a state of negligible interaction and exchange completes the de-individuation of users and poses a threat to social and cultural existence.

As we move towards a future of 5G technology and faster internet in India, the scope of internet connectivity is reaching further into the recesses of rural India. OTT media content creators are also moving towards developing regional content in various languages and dialects so as to capture the rural market as well. In India where a majority population still resides in these areas, the boom of OTT industry is yet to arrive and the success that one can envisage looking at the pilot urban project is definitely unprecedented in any other media form. Tier 2 cities and small towns have already recorded a formidable percentage of consumers who are either supplementing their media engagement with OTT or have substituted the former with it. With the arrival of better connectivity, cheaper technological equipment and indigenous content, OTT media seemingly have no obstacles in its path to capture a large market in India.

With the market however, the public sphere also stands to be captured and in that context OTT media can become a power centre from which any and all paying content creators can manipulate the large demographic pool of our country.

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