

INDIA AS A NEW MEDIA CAPITAL: THE GLOBAL AND REGIONAL IMPACT OF INDIAN TELEVISION

Nalin Mehta

La Trobe University

It was unthinkable in the 1960s to imagine that Detroit would one day cease to be the centre of the world's car industry. By the 1980s, however, the swift rise of the Japanese industry had displaced Detroit, irrevocably shifting the balance of the global car trade. We are now seeing the beginning of a similar shift within the global media industry as well; the rise of what has been called new 'media capitals' in Asia which have already begun to shift the balance of the global entertainment industry from Hollywood to newer centres in the region. This paper outlines the broad contours of this process in South Asia, with respect to the Indian television industry, and speculates on its possible consequences for the region.

Let me first explain what I mean by 'media capitals'. This must be located within debates over capitalism and globalization, at the heart of which are deep concerns over location: centres like Hollywood concentrate resources, and have spheres of influence which, in turn, leads to divisive debates over culture, identity and power. The term 'media capital' was coined to denote geographic centres which transcend national boundaries and become global. These are places where resources, talent and production processes accumulate, following the inherent logic of capitalism: the accumulation of capital, the migration of creative talent towards it, and the ruthless logic of efficiency which fuels perpetual circuits of expansion. Capitalist expansion, by its very nature, seeks to "create a world after its own image"¹ but when it comes to the media industry, in particular, this expansion arouses the maximum concerns because of its socio-cultural dimension and its impact on local issues like language, cultural identities, communal imaginaries etc. In this context, one of the big problems with the globalization debate is the instant connection between globalisation and Americanization - partly because since the end of WW II, the American entertainment industry has been the 'media capital' of the world. But this is no longer true. There is a great deal of evidence now to show that media centres in China and India have emerged as powerful new centres of the global media industry and are re-

ordering international global flows of information.² In this context, a city like Mumbai, has, since the 1970s, produced more films yearly than Hollywood but the emergence of satellite television has led to a fundamental new shift.

Since the mid-90s India has emerged as the most vibrant television market in the world. From just one state-owned television channel in 1991, it now has more than 300 private channels - 56 of which are 24-hour news channels in 11 languages. It is also the world's third largest television market, which means that every global entertainment corporation wants a piece of the action. Australia's own ABC, for instance, launched the Australia Network last month with a specific channel aimed at India. Increasing viewership in India is the most important immediate target for the network's executives and in the ABC's case, Australia's strategic orientation and market dynamics have come together.³ But the Australia Network will be just one among hundreds in India and the India itself is now a major supplier of information across the world.

Let me explain this: Zee TV is already a global satellite empire with 17 international and 25 domestic channels.⁴ It is available in more than 120 countries on all continents and the international audience contributes 25% of its total revenues. Of a total of 962,000 subscribers, 338,000 are in the Americas, 171,000 in Europe, 49,000 in Africa and 404,000 in the Asia-Pacific.⁵ Significantly, roughly 70% of the content on these overseas channels consists of Indian programming, which is recycled, but the remaining 30% comprises local programming produced locally, including local news. There is no doubt that most of Zee's current global viewership is accounted for by overseas Indians or people of South Asian origin. What we are seeing is "globalization of the local,"⁶ globalization in reverse, that allows diasporic communities around the world to use global media networks to cling to their local mores, news, traditions irrespective of their geographic location. It is being driven by large Chinese and Indian diasporas around the world that constitute huge markets but there is also a fundamental transformation underway here in flows of information.⁷ Zee is now beginning to expand its wings into foreign languages. By 2006, Zee had become confident enough to start dubbing its content into four foreign languages, starting with new services in Indonesia and Malaysia.⁸ Its 24-hour channel in Bahasa Indonesia started in March 2006 and this month it is starting Russian channel with Indian films dubbed in Russian. Another channel for Afghanistan in Pashtu is also in the pipeline.⁹ This expansion

is being driven partly by the fact that Indian channels can tap into the immense cultural capital of Bollywood. From the 1950s, the popular culture of Bollywood has always been popular in vast areas from Russia, to the Middle East to the Far East. For instance, in 2002, one of the most popular television events in Indonesia Shahrukh Khan, live in concert.¹⁰ Two years ago, in Iraq, when insurgents captured a group of Indian workers, their key negotiator at one stage publicly announced that the Indian hostages would be released “immediately” if Indian film stars like Amitabh Bachchan, Asha Parekh and Dharmendra were sent to negotiate.¹¹ It is not surprising, therefore, that Indian television industry has begun to enter new markets by riding on the openings created by Bollywood.

But cultural capital is not the only muscle that TV is flexing. In June 2006, NDTV partnered with Astro, a leading South East Asia media group, to jointly launch a 24 hour news, infotainment and lifestyle channel called “Astro Awani” in Indonesia. Broadcasting primarily in Bahasa Indonesia and distributed throughout Indonesia on PT Direct Vision’s platform, this is the first channel launched by NDTV’s outside India. It is also the first news channel in Astro’s bouquet of channels and the deal is simple: NDTV has set up the entire infrastructure, because it is already running similar channels in India, and Astro provides the content. This is the first instance of an Indian company launching a news and infotainment channel outside India in partnership with an international media company. NDTV’s chairman is clear on the implications of this deal for the future of his company: “We regard this as one our most exciting new ventures and look forward to launching many more channels outside India in the future.”¹² NDTV’s Indian channels themselves are now available across North America and all over South-East Asia. Just as India emerged as a major platform for outsourcing of game designs and cartoon animation and NDTV’s venture in Indonesia indicates that the same process is underway with television channels.

What does all this mean for South Asia in particular? Three 24-hour news networks operate in Bengali out of Kolkata, and the heads of all three agree that their biggest viewership is in Bangladesh, where television is strictly controlled by the state. For the Bengali TV CEOs, the only concern is that “they haven’t found a way of tapping into Bangladeshi advertising”¹³ but the fact remains that Indian Bengali channels have now have huge cultural currency in Bangladesh. I was in Nepal in 2001, covering the assassination of the royal family for NDTV and within 2 days of the killings, the Nepalese

government banned Aaj Tak because some of its broadcasts questioned the official versions of the assassination. NDTV, the BBC and CNN questioned that version as well, but because we were broadcasting in English, they let us alone - it was the Hindi networks that were banned because that was the language the Nepali street understood.

But the most significant ramification of this is for the India-Pakistan relationship. In 2004, when the Pakistan government granted 39 licenses to private broadcasters, many of them made overtures to Indian channels for technical cooperation just as the Indian channels had looked to Western consultants when they themselves had started.¹⁴ When an Indian parliamentary delegation went to Pakistan in 2003, the newly launched Geo TV got a visiting Indian journalist, NDTV's Rajdeep Sardesai, to anchor its special coverage in a joint-production with NDTV. Why? Because, an Indian journalist had more leeway to ask Pakistani politicians tougher questions. Most Indian and Pakistani channels now have reciprocal agreements wherein they share video footage free of cost and provide visiting television teams from either side with free studio facilities. During the Kashmir earthquake in 2005, a special broadcast that emerged from this kind of cooperation resulted in a live television audience from both sides of the LOC talking to each other. In an especially poignant moment during this programme, a family from the Indian side actually discovered people in the audience on the Pakistani side, who knew some of their missing relatives in Pakistan and were informed on live television that their relatives had died in the earthquake.¹⁵ It was a coincidence but it resulted in the Indian government granting a rare visa to the one surviving child from that family to come to India.

What is new about all this? Indian and Pakistani entrepreneurs have long cooperated in matters of commerce, in areas like the sugar industry. But television is different because it is a cultural product and it creates its own social dynamic. Pakistani channels have followed the model set by Indian private channels who got around tough Indian broadcast regulations in the early years by broadcasting into India from foreign soil.¹⁶ Similarly, most Pakistani channels broadcast from Dubai. The Pakistani government, under a military dictatorship, has largely been supportive because it needs Pakistani news channels as a response to Indian television's powerful cultural influence. The story of the Agra summit sums up how seriously the Pakistani establishment takes Indian private television. On the second day of the summit, when everything seemed to be going well, General Musharraf

met Indian newspaper editors for an off-the-record breakfast meeting. It was off-the-record and the only camera that was allowed in was a Pakistan TV crew, ostensibly for archival purposes. At that meeting, contrary to the atmospherics of that summit, Musharraf reiterated the Pakistani hardline on Kashmir, referring to militants “freedom fighters” and justifying the Kargil war as revenge for Siachen. This was fine as long as it remained off-the-record but as soon as the meeting got over the General’s staff decided to leak the PTV recording to NDTV’s Prannoy Roy. Roy ran out with the tape to his broadcast centre and the minute it was played on television, the entire dynamic of the summit changed. This was a Pakistani head of state stating a no-compromise position in the middle of what was meant to be an ice-breaking summit. From that moment, the Agra summit could only have failed. We must be careful not to exaggerate the influence of television and the summit failed for a variety of complex reasons but the crucial point is how Musharraf used Indian television to project the Pakistani view. Even Pakistan Television, whose crew had recorded the breakfast meeting, did not have a copy of that recording and had to poach it off NDTV’s broadcasts. When Musharraf dashed back to Islamabad in the middle of the night, the Indian side, which was still in traditional diplomacy mode, did not come out with a statement for another 24 hours. But the Pakistani Army spokesperson, within minutes of his President’s departure, was on Aaj Tak and in a live thirty minute interview pinned the whole blame on “hardline elements” within the Indian side. If Musharraf’s breakfast meeting had projected him as the uncompromising defender of Pakistan, the Aaj Tak broadcast painted him as the peacemaker, thwarted by Indian hardliners. Such a platform for the Pakistani government would have been unthinkable just ten years ago, in the era before private television. The result was that for the first two days the entire media discourse of the summit revolved around the idea of sabotage and divisions within the Indian negotiators.¹⁷ It was no accident that soon after the Agra summit, General Musharraf gave the green light to Pakistani private networks.

The point is that globalisation is not just about the crass spread of capitalism, it is also about *new complex ways of communication*. As Thomas Friedman points out, “The iron law of globalization is simple: If you think it is all good, or you think it is all bad, you don’t get it. Globalization has empowering and disempowering, homegenizing and particularizing, democratizing and authoritarian tendencies all built into it. It is about the

global market, but it is also about the internet and Google.”¹⁸ It is also about Musharraf on NDTV and discovering that your family is dead on live television, across a border that has been fortified for sixty years.

Television is a cultural practice, located at the junction of capitalism and politics. As such, it offers a unique entry point into understanding the transformation of India over the past decade and its story is the also the story of a rapidly transforming India. The massive expansion of Indian television has created an entirely new form of mass media in India and new ways of engaging with the Indian state for a vast number of Indians. The muscular television industry is also a reflection of India’s burgeoning economic strength and that of its diasporas around the world. This is fuelling a gradual re-ordering of global flows of televisual information and as a major producer of television content India is now turning into a major supplier as well, along with the rudimentary beginnings of the outsourcing of India’s television expertise. All this has had a significant impact on India’s immediate region. In terms of the global media industry, we can identify four broad levels of media agglomeration: the first tier belongs to Hollywood, the global media capital; the second belongs to centers in India and China - with their own spheres of cultural influence and below these are television economies that are focused on national or local audiences.¹⁹ The crucial factor in India and China is that the boom here is just beginning, driven by demographics and economic growth rates, and it is possible to imagine that we are witnessing the beginning of a subtle, but major shift in global information patterns.

¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, quoted in Robert Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader* (New York: Norton, 1978, 2nd ed.), p. 477.

² Michael Curtin, ‘Locating Chinese Film and TV: Towards a Theory of Media Capital’, Paper presented at 16th Biennial Conference of Asian Studies Association of Australia, University of Wollongong (Wollongong: June 28, 2006). The argument is detailed in his forthcoming *Playing to the World’s Biggest Audience: The Globalization of Chinese Film and TV* (University of California Press, in press). Also see ‘Media Capital: Cultural Geographies of Global TV’, in Jan Olsson and Lynn Spigel (eds.), *The Persistence of Television: From Console to Computer* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

³ Personal conversations with Heath Watt, Chief Operating Officer, Australia Network (Canberra: 9 Aug. 2006).

⁴ *Business Line*, ‘Zee Plans Russian Channel Foray’ (June 24, 2006), www.exchange4media.com

⁵ Figures from ‘Zee Telefilms Limited: India’s Leading Media and Entertainment Company’, Zee TV Presentation at CLSA Investors’ Forum (Hong Kong, Sep. 2004), www.zeetelevision.com [Accessed April 21, 2004]. Zee began operations in Africa in 1996 and the U.S. in 1998.

⁶ Indrajit Bannerjee quoted in Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Century*, pp. 507-9

⁷ Arjun Appadurai has argued that the new global architecture of television leads to new flows and disjunctures as well as new forms of electronic mediation that create new diasporic public spheres. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1996)

⁸ Subhash Chandra interview with Sanjay Pugalia on CNBC TV 18's Hindi news channel *Awaaz* (March 17, 2006), Transcript reproduced on www.indiantelevision.com [Accessed April 15, 2006]

⁹ *Business Line*, 'Zee Plans Russian Channel Foray' (June 24, 2006), www.exchange4media.com

¹⁰ A.C. Nielsen Media Research figures quoted in Ida Rachmah, 'The Construction of the Television Audience in Indonesia', Paper at 'Televison in Asia' conference, La Trobe University (Melbourne: 12 Dec. 2005).

¹¹ Vinod Mehta, 'Letter: India's Polite Refusal', 2 Sep. 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/3618560.stm> (Accessed 30 Aug. 2006)

¹² Media News, 'NDTV Astro Channel Launched in Indonesia', (Mumbai, June 19,2006) www.exchange4media.com [Accessed June 19, 2006]

¹³ Personal Interview with Uday Shankar, CEO and Editor, Star News and Star Ananda (Shanghai: 22 Aug 2005).

¹⁴ Personal Interview with Rahul Kulshreshtha, Technical Producer, TV Today (New Delhi: 22 Jan. 2005)

¹⁵ *We The People*, NDTV 24x7 (Oct. 2005)

¹⁶ Sonya Fateh, 'The Geography of GEO', *Himal: South Asian*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Sep-Oct. 2005. Also available on http://www.himalmag.com/2005/september/special_report_1.html (Accessed 30 Dec. 2005)

¹⁷ For more on the politics of the Agra broadcast see Bhavdeep Kang, 'Breakfast TV', *Outlook* (New Delhi, 30 July 2001).

¹⁸ Thomas Friedman, *The World is Flat: The Globalized World in the Twenty-First Centur* Friedman, p. 510.

¹⁹ Michael Keane, 'Once were Peripheral: Creating Media Capacity in East Asia' (Forthcoming).