Television’s role in Indian new screen ecology

Smith Mehta
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract
In this article, I discuss the various issues that have prompted select creators such as writers, directors, actors, producers and casting agents to focus their creative energies on Internet-based content. The article’s main findings illustrate that because a growing segment of Indian content, new media practitioners are disillusioned by the programming and industrial practices of television, they increasingly embrace digital delivery platforms as the preferred outlets for their creative expressions. By drawing from critical media industry studies framework, the aim of this research is to examine the everyday practices of content creators and compare the formal and aesthetic qualities of their textual artefacts, as these professionals navigate the larger structural tensions between television and Internet in India. The article marshals evidence based on qualitative interviews, trade press, and news articles to suggest that the television industry’s production culture discourages creators from seeking meaningful work and instead look for opportunities on the Internet.

Keywords
creator labour, digital media, India, media industries research, new media, television

Introduction
In this article, I discuss the various issues that have prompted select creators such as writers, directors, actors, producers, and casting agents, to focus their creative energies on Internet-based content. The article’s main findings illustrate that because a growing segment of Indian new media practitioners (n = 50) are disillusioned by the industrial and cultural practices of television, they increasingly embrace digital delivery content platforms as the preferred outlets for their creative expressions. The new screen ecology (see
Cunningham, 2015; Cunningham et al., 2016), comprising social as well as digital media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, Netflix, Altbalaji, Amazon Prime, Hotstar to name a few, have become a site for exploration for not only the upcoming content creators but also for some existing television media professionals from diverse departments including acting, production, direction, and casting. By drawing from critical media industry studies framework (Havens et al., 2009), this research aims to examine the everyday practices of content creators and compare the formal and aesthetic qualities of their textual artefacts, as these professionals navigate the larger structural tensions between television and Internet in India.

Investigating this issue is significant as the Internet came at a time when television was already available to the audio-visual content creators as the prime medium for expressing their creativity. Therefore, it is critical to analyse the factors that have prompted the shift of talent from television to the online medium. In doing so, I build on the previous assertions that the Internet has offered greater freedom, less ‘circumscribed agency’ to creators as opposed to television (Mehta and Kaye, 2019; Mehta, 2019a, 2019b). The article marshals evidence based on thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, textual analysis, trade press and news articles to suggest that the television industry’s production culture discourages creators from seeking meaningful work and leads them to look for opportunities in the new screen ecology. In adopting an ‘interpretivist’ perspective (see Geertz, 2000; Geertz, 2000 [1973]), my article focuses on how new media practitioner’s self-theorised reflections on television and the Internet is crucial in making an informed choice on the medium for expression. Like Caldwell (2008), my project is grounded in fieldwork and explores the self-ethnographic accounts of the media practitioners.

The article is part of a larger project that maps the overall industrial and cultural dynamics of Indian new screen ecology. In total, 65 new media practitioners were interviewed for the project. Besides creator profiles mentioned earlier (n=44), I have also interviewed streaming service executives (n=13), talent agents and multi-channel networks (n=8). A combination of convenience sampling and snowball sampling have been used to identify these practitioners. My previous experience as a media professional for 3 years with Viacom18 Media Pvt Ltd. was essential in recruiting respondents for the study. Except for 2 telephonic interviews and 11 email-interviews, 48 semi-structured in-person interviews ranging between 60 and 90 minutes were conducted during the fieldwork in India from the period between March and August 2018. Semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and together with other interviews, analysed thematically. All the respondents wilfully agreed to disclose their identity.

My claims of a more creator-friendly environment on the Internet are in some ways similar to Lotz’s (2018) argument of how the advent of cable television transformed the creative and businesses practices of television in the United States in the late 1990s with the introduction of subscription-based cable services, much before the Internet. It was the difference in the revenue strategies between advertiser-funded television channels and subscription-based cable television, Lotz (2018) claims, which led to the disruption in storytelling and programming strategies. In India’s case, however, it was the greater affordance of industrial and cultural practice on the Internet that led the creators to imagine audiences and create niche programming as a necessary branding exercise to establish
a professional identity. Being devoid of the gatekeeping and hegemonic programming practices of Indian television channels allowed creators to experiment and become part of YouTube’s participatory culture (Kay, 2018; Kumar, 2016). YouTube was one of the first sites to foster the creation, uploading, streaming, and publishing unlimited content with little technical knowledge at scale and globally (Burgess and Green, 2018). By 2015, about 7 years since the introduction of YouTube in India (Kumar, 2016), The Viral Fever (TVF) and All India Bakchod (AIB) were the first Indian creator teams to reach 1 million followers (Gadgets Now, 2015). TVF, owned by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd, launched its dedicated streaming platform in 2015, TVFPlay and has subsequently also produced web-series for several streaming platforms such as MX Player, Netflix and SonyLIV, thereby functioning as a YouTube creator, online producer and streaming platform at the same time.

Differing industrial and cultural logics

An overwhelming majority of 50 of my 65 respondents interviewed for this study pointed out at the television industry’s over-reliance on soap-operas as a quintessential factor in restricting their ability to engage with the medium. The ‘lack of relatability’ with the existing television content and its craft made it unappealing for these media practitioners. KPMG (2018) reported that Hindi language General Entertainment Channel (GEC) content dominated the television viewership in the first-quarter of 2018 (p. 36). Majority GEC inventory is driven by soap-operas and reality shows (Jaggi, 2011). Previous studies (Munshi, 2012; Pant, 2014) have also alluded to the fact that soap-operas drive maximum viewership and therefore occupies most of India’s television programming slots. The examination of soap-opera as a representation of the Indian television industry’s fictional storytelling considers these arguments as reasons for inquiry. Moreover, the fact that the GEC channels only produce 3.5 hours of original content on an average (KPMG, 2018: 36) also limits the possibility of engaging more storytellers who are looking for an opportunity as well as genre diversity. My objective here is not to offer a critique of soap-opera or its melodramatic tone. On the contrary, I ascribe to meaningful findings of several feminist scholars who have vividly emphasised on the usefulness of soap operas in demonstrating the issues that surround women in their everyday life (Ang, 2013; Geraghty, 2005; Mumford, 1995).

Rather, it is the critique of the broadcasters and their cultural understanding of television as a family-viewing medium and its audiences as ‘rural and predominantly women’ that have alienated it from creators, predominantly urban educated and influenced by international entertainment. Previous studies (Jaggi, 2011; Munshi, 2012) have already highlighted the distinctiveness of Indian soap-operas for their ‘larger than life’ sequences featuring overtly melodramatic narratives rendered possible by almost exclusive reliance on ‘flashback’ and ‘close-up’ sequences. The tacit understanding of the industry gatekeepers who assume that this audience would only be able to understand a ‘certain type and construction of melodrama’ has had a cascading effect on the professional lives of creators who feel their efforts could be better utilised. Implicit in this understanding is the failure of Indian soap opera in conforming to the idea of ‘modern’ and ‘urban middle-class’ families, especially Indian women who situate themselves between traditional and
modern value systems (Rao, 2001: 3). At the same time, the ‘hyper-sensitive’ approach to television rating points (hereafter, TRP) arising from the overdependence on advertising revenue model has affected television’s ability to produce innovative programming and nurture talent (Mehta, 2012). These reasons together, as will be discussed henceforth, have emerged as the catalyst for talent migration.

In investigating the industrial and cultural logics, first, I historize the television industry and trace its key development from the period between 1991 and 2018. In doing so, I also briefly discuss how the proliferation of television channels and the subsequent demand to fill up the inventory space have had direct implications on television content and thereby their creative practices leading to marginalisation of the works of media professionals. Third, I chart out the industrial practices within the television industry that affect the creator’s potential. This is elaborated by drawing on interviews with respondents who have opted out of working in the television industry to articulate the hegemonic practices of broadcasters (Kay, 2018; Kumar, 2016). By providing a comparison between Indian television and the online content, I discuss the differences in the content between the two mediums.

As I show, the differences in media-texts on television and the Internet are caused by a combination of industrial and cultural logics of media production activities. As Lotz (2019) argues in her analysis of HBO and Netflix in the post-network US television era, contemporary studies concerning the television industry must parse out the technological, industrial and business practices to offer clear view of the complexities that shape the production of media-texts. In accounting for these differences, my study signals to the broader shifts that are taking place in the international television industry owing to the ‘diverse cultural, social, technological and cultural factors, disaggregation of television content from television distribution networks and the growth of multiplatform distribution networks’ (Boyle, 2019).

**Television industry from 1991 to 2018**

Television in India has undergone a great transformation from its initial days of being a single Government-controlled ‘Doordarshan’ channel to over 800 channels in 2018, marked by a series of economic policies ranging from the privatisation of media industries, deregulation and liberalisation of markets to become one of the largest television industries in the world (Narayan and Narayanan, 2016). In 1991, Star TV was the first transnational satellite broadcaster to launch its service in India with five television channels (Star Plus, Prime Sports, BBC World, Star Movies, Channel V), followed by Zee TV, a General Entertainment channel, founded by local entrepreneur Subhash Chandra Goel in 1992 (Thomas and Kumar, 2003). While comparing the television programming between different television channels, Thomas and Kumar (2003: 123) also noted that while Star TV’s content was initially broadcasted across its television channels in English, Zee TV, with its repertoire of ‘Hindi Films, variety shows, game shows, and talk shows’ offered innovative programming to television viewers.

Post Rupert Murdoch’s takeover of Star TV in the mid-1990s, Star Plus channel launched a slew of Hindi language programmes that pitted them in direct competition against Zee TV, Sony Entertainment Television, Doordarshan as well as other Hindi language commercial
entertainment channels. Kumar and Curtin (2002) examined pop-cultural icon Alisha Chinai’s music videos on MTV to discuss the emergence of satellite television as a site for hybridised identity formation and contestation of patriarchy. While assessing the impact of privatisation and globalisation in Indian broadcasting, Thussu (1999) highlighted Zee’s use of hybrid use of Hindi and the English language in its programming, popular among India’s urban youth population. By mid-1990s, a total of 70 satellite as well as cable channels operated on Indian soil. It included global broadcasters like BBC, Discovery, MTV, Sony, STAR besides other local broadcasters (Thussu, 1999). Thomas and Kumar (2003) concluded from their study of television programming post-1990s that the mushrooming of television channels encouraged competition but also paved the way for the cloning of western programmes. They posited,

Television industry executives recognise that cloning and copycatting gives some hope of achieving a ratings winner, but also that it is by no means guaranteed. Yet the temptation to imitate is very high especially when a rival station has a licensed clone which is decimating one’s ratings and raking in the commensurate advertising and sponsorship revenues. (Thomas and Kumar, 2003: 136–137)

Writer-director Devashish Makhija (2018), who has created a string of award-winning short films that have found its destination on platforms like YouTube, Netflix as well as an upcoming Hindi-feature film Bhonsle, argued that the advent of liberalisation was one of the main reasons behind television’s stagnation. Makhija (2018) shared in an interview that the import of western shows such as Baywatch destroyed the original form of storytelling that television provided for hinting at the ‘westernisation’ of programming due to the advent of private players.

The proliferation of channels

At the same time, subsequent interventions in the cable and telecom policies by the Government such as the Cable Television Network (Regulation) Act (1995) and the New Telecom Policy (NTP) (1999) were introduced to address the poor quality, revenue leaks and transparency issues of Cable TV operators (Kathuria et al., 2019). The digitisation of the television industry was marked by granting permission for the transmission of television signals in ‘Ku Band’ in 2001 which led to the beginning of Direct-To-Home services in India. In 2011, the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act was amended in a bid to mandate the transfer of analogue cable services to digital addressable systems (DAS) (Ahluwalia, 2017). The Government implemented this policy in four phases, the last of which ended in March 2017. The process was introduced to enforce a formal regulation system and transparency to the fragmented cable operations in India, run by approximately 700 multi-screen operators (MSOs) and 60,000 cable operators as of 2017 (Ahluwalia, 2017). As of September 2018, Indian television boasts of 866 channels with 60% of its revenue being funded from advertisers (Kathuria et al., 2019).

The television industry was confronted by the growth of television channels as they struggled to meet the demand to fill the inventory claims co-founder of YouTube channel AIB Rohan Joshi. Joshi (2018, personal communication) posited in an interview conducted at AIB’s office,
As there was such a huge inventory demand, our country became used to the idea of daily programming. There was not enough talent and creativity to meet that demand. This led to a bureaucratic system where one player took control over everything. Balaji (telefilms) saw the opportunity and grabbed it.

Joshi’s claims are not entirely wrong, given that between 2000 and 2008, Balaji Telefilms produced three high-rated soap operas *Kyunki Saas bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi* (Because the Mother-in-Law Was Also Once a Daughter-in-Law, 2000–2008), *Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii* (The Story of Every Home, 2000–2008) followed by *Kasautii Zindagii Kay* (The Trials of Life, 2001–2008) in 2001 on Star TV (Munshi, 2012: 4). While discussing the television industry’s fundamental challenges, Nalin Mehta (2012) argues how the industry suffers from ‘severe’ dearth of talent. The then, head of Star TV, Uday Shankar is quoted in the study lamenting the lack of talent development and training measures that are affecting the content quality. Amrit Gupta, the head of Online media company TVF vertical Screenpatti, who has earlier worked in television on a general entertainment programme described its industrial practices as some sort of a ‘factory’ that indulged in creating homogeneous mass production. He exposes the ‘ghost-writing’ practice that exists within the television industry as he discloses in an interview,

Multiple writers work for a TV show but credits for the same are only given to one popular writer and the rest of them remain unknown, but quite known within the industry as ghost-writers. The main writer is supposed to get the work done from these writers, but the main writer usually does not have the time to invest in teaching or keeping a check which leads to a decrease in the quality of content that is being produced. (Gupta, 2018, personal communication)

These experiences indicate the identity politics at play reflects the poor industrial practices that are symptomatic of its quality. Inherent in these critical accounts are the gruelling production schedules that require broadcasters to serve content on an everyday basis. The television broadcasting system structure is shaped in such a way that it allows for very little room for even the existing professionals to demonstrate their creativity as was expressed by Rasika Dugal, an actress who has appeared in critically acclaimed television shows such as *Powder* (2010). Besides television, Dugal has also acted in several Bollywood films, Netflix and TVF web-series. Dugal (2018) discussed her preference to stay away from a ‘certain’ type of television content despite facing financial issues at one point of time. Dugal (2018, personal communication) argued in an interview that ‘One does not require brains while doing these kinds of television shows. There is no script or character treatment’. These factors, as she highlights, limit the creativity of the script as well as the characters and forces them to look for another medium to fulfil their creative aspirations.

**Content and logic.** Mehta (2012) attributes the lack of talent as one of the reasons behind average content marked by ‘low levels of innovation in programming and constant repetition of anything that seemed to work’ (p. 616). However, one needs to understand in detail, the exact nature of media-texts that he alludes to and the production practices that are influencing them. For instance, consider the aesthetic appeal of Indian soap operas that occupy the majority inventory of Indian fiction programming (Jaggi, 2011). Based
on extensive interviews with a diverse group of Indian television producers, writers broadcasters and television audience measurement (TAM) executives as well as textual analysis of five highly rated soap-operas between 2000 and 2010, self-confessed soap opera viewer and media scholar Shoma Munshi (2012) remarks,

Various techniques of representation such as the swish pan shot, thrice repeated, in different colors, at various climactic moments; the ‘recap–precap’ procedure; and the return from the ‘dead’ . . . which, in Indian soaps, includes plastic surgery to keep pace with new actors entering the show, or the same actors returning with makeovers. (p. 210)

While discussing the British soap-operas, Dorothy Hobson (2003: 67) observed that for majority of the time, actors were required to ‘produce performances that are understated and low-key, always less than “actorly”, for it is their job to create the illusion of the ordinary’, whereas, within the Indian context this is far from the truth. The portrayal is overtly melodramatic with several close-up shots which often limits the ability of the actors to deliver meaningful performances (Munshi, 2012: 91). Munshi (2012) also discusses the career trajectories of key television actors to highlight how the melodramatic overtone of Indian soap-operas often led them to be typecast and this affected their chances of seeking roles outside the television industry, as was argued by my respondents.

Veteran actor, writer and producer, R. Madhavan, has worked in Bollywood, television and regional film industries. Madhavan is also one of the first mainstream actors to appear in the web series space by appearing in a critically acclaimed 8-episode Amazon Prime Original series titled Breathe (2018). Madhavan (2018, personal communication), whilst citing many other reasons, dwelled upon the recognition and success of actor like Sumeet Vyas (ex-television actor who became popular after working in TVF web-series as Writer/Actor (multi-seasonal Permanent Roommates, 2014, 2016), (Pitchers, 2015), (multi-seasonal Tripling, 2016, 2019) who has become a hit among the young audience after shifting to Internet distributed content to articulate that the industrial logics of the television industry deterred actors from pursuing their craft.

Summing up the disturbing technical practices rampant within the television industry, Madhavan (2018) concluded in a telephonic interview, ‘Television is basically a medium of close-ups. All the drama in the television is in the close-ups, the acting graph does not really matter’. Other than money, these creators can rarely leverage the cultural capital accumulated by working in Indian soap-operas across the Indian media and industry landscape. The lack of genre diversification (Mehta, 2012) and over-reliance on overt drama and close-up shots affects their chances of seeking meaningful work. The television industry’s failure to adapt to the media standards indicates a sense of unprofessionalism and suggests an ecosystem that does not recognise the contribution of the writers. It also indicates the apathetic attitude towards the development of its writers who are expected to shell out scripts in a short amount of time with little or no supervision.

Munshi (2012: 50,58) notes repetitively in her ethnographic fieldwork on television industry professionals that the producers and broadcasters often feed on each other’s ‘instincts’ and ‘gut-feeling’ to decide ‘what will work’. These practices marginalised the autonomy of creative professionals who were trained for a specific task. For instance, consider the work of casting agents who identify and prepare actors, specifically who
have dialogues, for their roles. Casting agent’s service is pursued for his or her ability to identify actors that match with character descriptions. At times, they also conduct a series of workshops for featured casts to prepare them for the role. Comparing his experience of casting in television as opposed to the films and online mediums, Indian Casting Company co-founder Trishaan Sarkar, whose company has been responsible in casting for mainly Bollywood as well as Hollywood films as well as web-series for streaming platforms posited that their company generally abstains from casting in television shows as their methods are often driven by quantity over quality. Sarkar (2018, personal communication) recounted his experience of casting for the television channel Life OK,

For casting three characters, we kept auditioning for 20 days and ultimately chose the actor that the Director has mentioned on the first day. The rest two were my choices. Typically, they (Producers/Broadcasters) have a habit of going through hundreds of auditions before selecting an Actor. They are not comfortable if they are shown only three faces and are told to choose from that.

Sarkar’s frustration with the television industry arises from the fact that there is a lack of trust in the work of a casting director, thereby doubting the quality of his work. It also puts the agency of the casting agent in a doubt whose job revolves around ‘casting’ the right actor for the role. What Sarkar also highlights is the vague selection methods that value quantity over quality. Sarkar also noted from his experience that actors contacting him are often reluctant to take up acting roles in television, building on the popular self-theorised fear that they will be ‘treated like a prop on television where there is one wide shot and countless close ups’, offering little scope for demonstrating their talent.

Online Producers and streaming platforms rely on the casting agent’s expertise who have a know-how of conducting auditions and identify actors as per the need of the script. Explaining this to me was the co-founder of Casting Bay, Abhishek Banerjee. Casting Bay is one of the earliest casting agent companies to have ventured into casting for online content. Banerjee comes from a theatre background and has previously assisted in films before starting his casting agency. Casting Bay has worked on most of the TVF’s web series such as *Permanent Roommates* (2014), *Tripling* (2016), *Yeh Meri Family* (This is my family, 2018) to name a few. Furthermore, Casting Bay also collaborated with Amazon Prime for web-series such as *Inside Edge* (2017) *Mirzapur* (2018). While describing the absence of Casting Bay in television, Sengupta (2018, personal communication) highlighted in an interview,

Casting Bay has never even considered casting for television as they are not looking for actors. They are merely looking for faces who will connect with a housewife sitting in Kanpur (Tier 2 Indian city) or a man in Ranchi (Tier 2 Indian city) as it is a General Entertainment channel. I have had previous experience in television where actors used to get the script on the morning of the shoot. Television does not need ‘Casting Bay’, they need people who could just give them pretty faces and not creative expertise.

The perception of their work and therefore their classification as mere ‘coordinators’ has also rendered their services invisible, further discrediting their line of work. These
reasons have together pushed the casting agents looking for new challenges to focus their services towards online media and films where their skills are more valued.

**Economic reasons for logics.** The Indian television channels are heavily dependent on advertisements as compared to subscription fee, contrary to most developed television industries in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe (Mehta, 2012). This makes the broadcasters quite sensitive to television ratings. As Mehta (2012) notes, ‘the structural economy of television forces many channels to focus on content with the lowest common denominator that will register on television rating panels’ (p. 620). Good ratings mean that the Producers/Broadcasters are keen to stretch the storyline on the same constructed sets to save costs, even at the expense of creative fatigue. Connecting the dots between the demography of the audience and television programming, Sidharth Ravindran (2018, personal communication), Marketing Manager at Netflix and an ex-MTV marketeer observed in an interview,

> Television works on the advertiser’s money. If one looks at its relevant audience today, one has to look where the ratings come in from and mostly today, they come from smaller towns and rural areas which means that the storytelling has to be simple enough for them to understand. How this has impacted the content on television is that they have dumbed down their narrative, over-explained the situations (through the narrative), and overall spent a lot of time to seize the situation rather than what is the reaction of the character.

This explains the deployment of close-ups and taking up the screen time in employing ‘swish-pan’ shots as it works in increasing the length of the episode. As Ravindran (2018) quips, ‘Television has always been about economies of scale. What I mean is it has always tried to churn out the maximum number of episodes at the best cost possible’.

By indulging in these industrial practices, the broadcasters can shoot many episodes on a single set. This helps them to reduce the cost of production while also benefitting from the everyday viewing of the audience who are heavily invested in the character and do not mind the stretched narrative. At the same time, Ravindran’s articulation of television audience as ‘rural’ as well as Mehta’s (2012) attribution to television audience as ‘the lowest common denominator’ is the one that warrants attention. There is a populist perception owing to the digital and urban-rural divide in India, that television as a medium is construed as a medium for the masses as opposed to individuals. It is still a ‘collectivist’ escaping medium that encourages family viewing given that most houses in India own a single television set (KPMG, 2018). Thus, there is a systematic attempt by the broadcasters to create soap operas that are ‘family-friendly’.

There are strong reasons for the rural focus, even though the treatment may not be quite justified. First, as I discussed earlier, 70% of the Indian population still belongs in rural areas with lack of digital infrastructure leading them to depend on television as its single source of entertainment. Partho Dasgupta (2017), the CEO of the Broadcast Research Council of India (hereafter, BARC), the nodal agency for issuing television ratings highlighted two of the pertinent rural India practices that complement the current television industry’s pandering towards its rural audience,
96.5% of total 183 million television-viewing households) are single-TV households. This conveys that affluence may have led to the purchase of other consumer durables than opting to purchase a second Television. The unique Indian habit of the entire family sitting together prevails. Urban India may have 84 million of the total 183 million television households, with a penetration of close to 87%. But rural India has overtaken it with 99 million television households, even as television penetration remains 52%.

Television’s obsession with the TRP system often comes at the expense of creative inputs of above the line workers who seem to feel marginalised by its creation practices. This has also led Broadcasters to react quite sinisterly, adopting ‘lazy programming and taking short cuts to register high on the ratings, somehow, anyhow—whatever the cost’ (Mehta, 2012: 621). The cost was indeed about losing talent who, by now, have a direct alternative in the streaming platforms. At the same time, one finds enough empirical as well as literary evidence to suggest the gendered notion of television consumption. As Shanti Kumar’s (2010: 178) seminal commentary on Indian television programming post-1990 argues, content across television channels was constructed to evoke an identity of post-colonial ‘nationalism’ that drew upon the ‘collective sense of familial and cultural heritage’. The concept of familial values, however, was deeply rooted in the patriarchal history of India and contributed to creating a certain type of content that alienated the creators even further.

**Gendered perception of television.** Malhotra and Rogers (2000) concurred from their study of 10 top rated programmes of private television in 1997 that while women assumed greater visibility and screen presence, an abysmal 10% of women characters worked outside the home as opposed to 95% men characters, indicating characterisations conforming to patriarchal and national interests. While analysing soap operas produced in 2017, 20 years from Malhotra and Rogers (2000) findings, Sumitra Nair (2017) observed that, ‘women in television serials are either black-magic performing witches, docile daughters-in-law or exist only to protect or take care of another character’. Furthermore, in probing the construction of identities and portrayal of socio-cultural aspects of television soap-operas post-2008, Ruchi Jaggi (2011) noted that the media-texts ‘provides a lot of opportunities to include ritualistic and religious elements to construct stereotypical, traditional narratives’ (p. 146). Sujata Moorti’s (2007) research corroborates this analysis of television programming as she posits, ‘Independent women are presented as those requiring regulation and by the narrative’s end revert to being doormats or shadows’ (p. 13).

Munshi (2012) noted that the Indian soap-operas revolved around the conflicts between the ‘mother-in-law’ and ‘daughter-in-law’ and the latter’s idealistic portrayal to impress the former. The story unveiled in the post-marital home where they resided with their husband’s entire family in a traditional joint family set up. The narratives were strategically targeted at Indian households with a patriarchal setup where it was common for married women to stay at home while their husbands go to work. While it is not unusual for children to live with their parents after marriage, these shows indulged in blatant objectification and the vilification of some characters, in most cases women. Soap-operas consistently reinforce the patriarchal value systems by demonstrating that it is the only
sacrificial attitude of women that helps them to overcome conflicting situations. These conflicts are mostly planted inside homes, overtly posturing towards women’s role as a homemaker. At the same time, from a production perspective, an indoor shoot will always cost less. Shooting another episode on a set that is already rented ensures optimum use of space. Shooting episodes with sluggish narratives with women protagonists, I argue, is another example of catering to a female skewed audience. This was also, albeit, unintentionally pointed out by Nidhi Bisht (2018, personal communication), TVF Creative Director, in an interview,

narrative of these shows is usually structured in such a way that the housewives can watch these shows while cooking or other everyday household activities. For instance, the narrative is deliberately sluggish to allow them to catch up even if they are caught up with their household activities

highlighting the deep-rooted patriarchy existent where women are expected to take care of household chores. Conforming to familial values that celebrated patriarchy continues to mediate television content to date, alienating the young and urban audiences (Fazal, 2009) as well as the creators in the process. Incidentally, I was greeted with the following signboard outside TVF’s office.

The dual effect of antique industrial practices and regressive content has severely impacted the creative aspirations of creators as the differences between them and the broadcasters over what works and what does not keep growing as Dugal (2018) argued in an interview,

We (Producers, television broadcasters) are not doing justice by bracketing our audience into several headings by saying that ‘this audience is there on television and a particular type of audience is there on digital’. A person who watches Saas-Bahu sagas (meaning family dramas around mother-in-law and daughter-in-law) shows can even watch ‘Powder’.

Incidentally, ‘Powder’, a gripping limited episode narrative that sought to demonstrate the underbelly of the narcotics trade in Mumbai, in which Dugal acted, was discontinued due to low television ratings. ‘Powder’ was also recently acquired by Netflix for distribution on its platform (Johri, 2018). Dugal’s firsthand experience offers a frustrated
account of the contemporary tensions between the creators and broadcasters over the excessive obsession over TRP (see Mehta, 2012).

As has been evident from the sensemaking of the creators, they continue to compare the production practices of soap-opera with that of the work offered in digital media to highlight the distinctive work opportunities. Often, in these discourses, they refer to fiction storytelling on Internet such as sketches, long-form scripted content (web-series) as the ground for distinction. To analyse these distinctions in detail, the following section will focus on the gratification that creators seek in working on the Internet. Similarly, select media-texts created by digital media companies are analysed to unpack the contextual differences in the portrayal of content. Findings suggest that the repetitive and regressive content programming on television has served as a counterpoint for online media creators.

**New screen ecology practices.** While discussing the reasons for introducing a streaming service, Sunil Nair (2017), the Chief Operating Officer of Altbalaji noted in an interview,

> Altbalaji exists because the Indian TV industry over the last 27–30 years has kind of morphed in a strange manner where the GECs caters to the women and largely the rural audience.

Altbalaji is a subsidiary of the popular television production house Balaji Telefilms, which has run a host of highly rated television soap-operas. Ironically, it was Balaji Telefilms that brought the ‘saas-bahu’ (mother-in-law vs daughter-in-law) sagas to the fore – the shows that have been the subject of relentless criticism for their industrial and cultural practices. Its multi-seasonal television soap-opera on Colors channel, *Naagin* (Snake women, 2015–2018), despite generating high TRPs was berated for its regressive content and production style. That a leading Television production house opened a separate vertical and named it as Alt(ernate)Balaji, with a clear strategy of ‘everything that’s not TV’, is another distinction of television and Internet content and at the same time reflective of the segmentation, well accepted within the creator fraternity.

In comparison, consider, for instance, the first Indian web-series *Permanent Roommates* (2014) produced by TVF on the YouTube. *Permanent Roommates* describes the story of a couple (Mikesh and Tanya) in a 3-year long-term relationship wanting to get married. Mikesh’s insistence on marriage and Tanya’s subsequent reluctance leads them to a compromise where both agree for a live-in relationship as a testing period for marriage. The first season ends on a fallout between the two. The second season begins with a run-up to their marriage where Tanya’s and Mikesh’s families meet each other. However, things take a surprising turn as Tanya finds out about her pregnancy. The series tackles issues of live-in relationships and premarital pregnancy, both of which are common for the urban middle-class audiences and would not find airing time on television for reasons discussed earlier. The content on the Internet has also received favourable response from Indian millennials who find resonance with its ‘relatable’ content as opposed to television (Kay, 2018: 4).

Web-series, such as *Permanent Roommates* (2014), among many others, tackle issues of live-in relationships which find greater resonance among the audiences and creators than the stories about family sagas. For most of the individuals who have migrated to
metro cities to complete their education or in search of a job, the stories of live-in relationships and entrepreneurs are cathartic and represent ‘their’ everyday stories of struggle, choices, and aspiration. This is also because the writers of the web-shows identify with these young audiences and possess ‘lived experiences’ that are relatable. Writer/Director/Actor Dhruv Sehgal who works in digital media company Pocket Aces Pvt Ltd that produces sketches and web-series on its multiple YouTube channels as well as for Netflix argued in an interview that while writing, ‘he wants his craft to be as close to reality as possible’ and therefore he ‘writes stories by keeping in mind the characteristics of people he lives with’ (Sehgal, 2018, personal communication).

Having shifted to Mumbai from Delhi recently, he came up with the story of ‘a Delhi boy, living in Mumbai’ which eventually led in the culmination of popular web series Little Things (2016) on YouTube (second season bought by Netflix (Little things, 2018)) with an average viewership of 5 million views. Little things depicts the story of a diurnal life of a young couple in a live-in relationship. The primary characters, essayed by Sehgal himself, as a PhD student and actress Mithila Palkar as a Sales Executive bear semblance with the lifestyle and choices of the young educated urban India. The narrative of the show highlights the everyday anxieties associated with careers and relationships and how they deal with it.

Sehgal further explained as to how he kept the conversations real and grounded. For instance, from his own experience, he elaborated how migration from Delhi to Mumbai could lead to different pronunciations and further give depth to the character and the story setting. Sehgal (2018) posited,

As I belong to Delhi, my pronunciation is different for certain words. I cannot pronounce the word ‘Panda’ correctly. So, when I was making a web series in which one of the characters was also from Delhi, I intentionally used the wrong pronunciation of the word ‘Panda’. However, I do believe that it is good to commit mistakes as the internet is not supposed to be ‘pretty’ but is supposed to be ‘real’.

Similarly, Actress Chhavi Mittal left her illustrious television career to launch a digital media company named Shitty Ideas Trending (SIT) along with her partner and also ex-television actor Mohit Hussein. SIT operates predominantly on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook where they create sketches and web-series for the Internet audience. Reflecting upon her transition from television to Internet in an interview, Mittal (2018, personal communication) explained,

Television is catering to a certain section of the society who are expecting the shows to be a family drama, melodramatic and all that. I was kind of bored of doing all that. I have done stuff on SIT that I never thought that I could do in life. In my previous experience, I only used to act. I was given a script in hand and I was expected to deliver those lines. I was good at that, but I didn’t know that I could be a writer or producer. With SIT, I have done sound engineering too.

For Mittal, YouTube has allowed her to foster her creativity by reprising ‘exciting’ roles, exploring ‘newer forms of story-telling’ and more importantly challenging herself to ‘try her hand’ at other departments of filmmaking without conforming to stereotypes.
Mittal’s career trajectory as well as Chakraborty’s show how television’s rigid industrial conventions and ‘high-risk’ factors associated with mass viewing make it difficult for creators to experiment in multiple departments. At the same time, having a self-funded YouTube channel also means that one must be good at multi-tasking to save costs. Finally, unlike soap-operas, Internet dramas offer a time-bound commitment and do not tie actors down to a never-ending saga that restricts them from taking other roles. The absence of genre diversity on the television has also contributed to the fatigue of actors.

**Conclusion**

The industry lore of self-representation practices suggests more agency, freedom and job satisfaction in the new screen ecology. At the same time, the monopoly of television as the only medium of everyday creative programming as well as consumption has been challenged. While in some cases, incumbent television actors from the television industry have put their put down against doing the ‘same kind’ of shows, the dipping ratings of ‘super-natural’ genre shows such as *Vish ya Amrit* (Poison or Nectar, 2018–2019), *Tantra* (Magic, 2018–2019) hoping to follow the success of *Naagin* (Snake woman, 2015–2018) have forced the television broadcasters to shut these shows and rethink their content strategies (Dbpost, 2019). Moreover, the Ernst and Young (EY, 2018: 34) report noted that ‘while Indian broadcasters produce over 100,000 hours of content annually across languages and formats, newer players (OTT platforms) are investing higher amounts per episode (albeit for much smaller quantities of content) and are typing up with leading talent’.

For far too long, the broadcasters have grown comfortable with offering a certain type of content to an audience who were limited by opportunities and infrastructure to explore other options. With the increase in Internet penetration across the country and the subsequent low Internet prices, the audience will be exposed to diverse genres and styles of content and therefore, will be more discerning in their choice of consumption. The plethora of streaming services and their diverse value propositions coupled with the increase in personalised consumption habits mirror India’s changing industrial, economical and socio-cultural dynamics that television has failed to take account of. These reasons together may lead to a major restructuring within the television industry where both the programming and the creative practices might be reconfigured to address the pressing concerns of talent and audience migration. Offering creative freedom to different departments of production, reducing the creative hegemony, increasing the subscription costs to reduce dependency on advertisements and using the revenue to produce diverse quality scripts that are on-par with the various local and global streaming platforms can certainly help the Indian broadcasters in regaining its relevance with both creators and audience.

**Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank Prof. Kevin Sanson, Dist, Prof. Stuart Cunningham and Prof Amanda Lotz for their guidance. The article has also benefitted from paper presentation and discussion at the NCA Shenzen forum 2019.
Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iD
Smith Mehta  https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9429-3240

References
Ahluwalia H (2017) I&B ministry asks states to take action against cable operators using analog signals. Available at: https://www.livemint.com/Consumer/Lc6jGSJIS56rWfg18JUS4N/I-B-ministry-asks-states-to-take-action-against-cable-operat.html (accessed 13 September 2019).
Ang I (2013) Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination. London: Routledge.
Boyle R (2019) The television industry in the multiplatform environment. Media, Culture & Society 41(7): 919–922.
Breathe (2018) Amazon Prime. Produced by Abundantia Entertainment, Mumbai.
Burgess J and Green J (2018) YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
Caldwell JT (2008) Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Cunningham S (2015) The new screen ecology: a new wave of media globalisation? Communication Research and Practice 1(3): 275–282.
Cunningham S, Craig D and Silver J (2016) YouTube, multichannel networks and the accelerated evolution of the new screen ecology. Convergence 22(4): 376–391.
Dasgupta P (2017) How Indian TV universe expanded. The Economic Times. Available at: https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/how-indian-tv-universe-expanded/ (accessed 13 September 2019).
Dbpost (2019) Supernatural genre is fading away from Indian television industry; daayans, tantriks to say goodbye. Available at: https://dbpost.com/supernatural-genre-is-fading-away-from-indian-television-industry-daayans-tantriks-to-say-goodbye/ (accessed 13 September 2019).
Ernst and Young (2018) Re-imagining India’s M&E sector. Available at: https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/ey-re-imagining-indias-me-sector-march-2018/%24File/ey-re-imagining-indias-me-sector-march-2018.pdf
Fazal S (2009) Emancipation or anchored individualism? Women and TV soaps in India. In: Gokulsing KM and Dissanayake W (eds) Popular Culture in a Globalised India. London: Routledge, pp. 61–72.
FICCI-EY (2018) Re-imagining India’s M&E Sector. New Delhi, India: FICCI.
Gadgets Now (2015) AIB, TVF first Indian YouTube channels to hit 1 million followers. Gadgets Now. Available at: https://www.gadgetsnow.com/social/AIB-TVF-first-Indian-YouTube-channels-to-hit-1-million-followers/articleshow/46632767.cms (accessed 13 September 2019).
Geertz C (2000 [1973]) The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.
Geertz C (2000) Deep play: notes on the Balinese cockfight. In: Crothers L and Lockhart C (eds) Culture and Politics. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 175–201.
Geraghty C (2005) The study of soap opera. In: Wasko J (ed.) A Companion to Television. Oxford: Blackwell, pp. 308–323.
Havens T, Lotz AD and Tinic S (2009) Critical media industry studies: a research approach. *Communication, Culture & Critique* 2(2): 234–253.

Hobson D (2003) *Soap Opera*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Inside Edge (2017) *Amazon Prime*. Produced by Excel Productions Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai.

Jaggi R (2011) The great Indian television soap opera: issues of identity and socio-cultural dynamics. *Media Asia* 38(3): 140–145.

Johri V (2018) *Cult TV* Series ‘Powder’ Is Finally Getting the Platform and Attention It Deserves. Available at: https://scroll.in/reel/869836/cult-tv-series-powder-is-finally-getting-the-platform-and-attention-it-deserves?fbclid=IwAR2eqS-VY_Q6iZGG (accessed 13 September 2019).

Kahaani Ghar Ghar Kii (2000–2008) Star TV. Produced by Balaji Productions, Mumbai.

Kasautii Zindagii Kay (2001–2008) Star TV. Produced by Balaji Productions, Mumbai.

Kyunki Saas bhi Kabhi Bahu Thi (2000–2008) Star TV. Produced by Balaji Productions, Mumbai.

Kathuria R, Kedia M and Sekhani R (2019) An Analysis of Competition and Regulatory Intervention in India’s Television Distribution and Broadcasting Services. New Delhi, India: Indian Council for Research on International Economic Relations. Available at: http://icrier.org/pdf/An_Analysis_of_Competition_and_Regulatory_Interventions.pdf (accessed 13 September 2019).

Kay K (2018) *New Indian Nuttahs*. Berlin: Springer.

KPMG (2018) *Media Ecosystems: The Walls Fall Down*. Mumbai, India: KPMG.

Kumar S (2010) *Gandhi Meets Primetime*: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television. Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press.

Kumar S (2016) Online Entertainment| YouTube nation: precarity and agency in India’s online video scene. *International Journal of Communication* 10: 5608–5625.

Kumar S and Curtin M (2002) ‘Made in India’ in between music television and patriarchy. *Television & New Media* 3(4): 345–366.

Little Things (2016) *YouTube channel Dice Media*. Produced by Pocket Aces Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Little Things (2018) *Netflix*. Produced by Pocket Aces Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Lotz AD (2018.) *We Now Disrupt This Broadcast: How Cable Transformed Television and the Internet Revolutionized It All*. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.

Lotz AD (2019) Teasing apart television industry disruption: consequences of meso-level financing practices before and after the US multiplatform era. *Media, Culture & Society* 41(7): 923–938.

Makhija D (Dir) (2018) *Bhonsle*. Produced by Manoj Bajpai, Piyush Singh, Abhayaanand Singh, Sandip Kapur, Shabana Raza Bajpayee, Saurabh Gupta.

Malhotra S and Rogers EM (2000) Satellite television and the new Indian woman. *Gazette (Leiden, Netherlands)* 62(5): 407–429.

Mehta N (2012) Ravana’s airforce: a report on the state of Indian television. *South Asian History and Culture* 3(4): 614–625.

Mehta S and Kaye DBV (2019) Pushing the next level: investigating digital content creation in India. *Television & New Media*. DOI: 10.1177/1527476419861698.

Mehta S (2019a) Localization, diversification and heterogeneity: understanding the linguistic and cultural logics of Indian new media. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. DOI: 10.1177/1367787919880304.

Mehta S (2019b) Precarity and new media: through the lens of indian creators. *International Journal of Communication* 13: 20.

Mirzapur (2018) *Amazon Prime*. Produced by Excel Productions Pvt. Ltd., Mumbai.

Moorti S (2007.) Imaginary homes, transplanted traditions: the transnational optic and the production of Indian television. *Journal of Creative Communications* 2(1–2): 1–21.
Mumford RE (1995) *Love and Ideology in the Afternoon: Soap Opera, Women and Television Genre*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Munshi S (2012) *Prime Time Soap Operas on Indian Television*. New Delhi, India: Routledge.

Naagin (2015–2018) Colors. Produced by Balaji Productions, Mumbai.

Nair S (2017) Black magic and child brides in TV soaps. *The Week*. Available at: https://www.theweek.in/webworld/features/lifestyle/Of-black-magic-and-child-brides-in-tv-soaps.html (accessed 13 September 2019).

Narayan SS and Narayanan S (eds) (2016) *India Connected: Mapping the Impact of New Media*. New Delhi, India: Sage.

Pant R (2014) I’m a drama queen . . . But I’m the star you love to see! *Subversions* 3(1): 1–28.

Permanent Roommates (2014) TVFPlay. Produced by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Permanent Roommates (2016) TVFPlay (Season 2). Produced by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Pitchers (2015) TVFPlay. Produced by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Powder (2010) Sony TV. Produced by Yash Raj Productions, Mumbai.

Rao L (2001) Facets of media and gender studies in India. *Feminist Media Studies* 1(1): 45–48.

Tantra (2018–2019) Viacom18 Media Pvt. Ltd. Produced by Swastik Productions.

Thomas AO and Kumar KJ (2003) Copied from without and cloned from within: India in the global television format business. In: Keane M and Moran A (eds) *Television across Asia*. London: Routledge, pp. 134–149.

Thussu DK (1999) Privatizing the airwaves: the impact of globalization on broadcasting in India. *Media, Culture & Society* 21(1): 125–131.

Tripling (2016) TVFPlay. Produced by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Tripling (2019) SonyLIV (Season 2). Produced by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.

Vish ya Amrit (2018–2019) Viacom18 Media Pvt. Ltd. Produced by Rashmi Sharma Telefilms Ltd.

Yeh Meri Family (2019) Netflix/TVFPlay. Produced by Contagious Online Media Network Pvt Ltd., Mumbai.