

“My TV is the family Oven/Toaster/Grill”: Personalizing TV for the Indian Audience

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ABSTRACT

Interactive TV is a new, exciting entry into the drawing rooms of Indian families. By examining current and nascent interactive TV services we trace ways in which they are deployed, received and consumed in the Indian home. From ethnographic probes we offer observations from Indian domestic contexts in the threshold of adopting interactivity as part of everyday TV viewing. We foreground India as a new and primary emerging site adopting interactive TV and to expand attention from the predominance of designing for Western cultural contexts. We develop a specific focus on personalizing TV, a dominant media attribute of interactive TV, conflicting with conventional viewing patterns in the Indian home. We note emergent challenges for interactive TV adoption patterns, particularly for personalization, in the Indian home. Here, TV is viewed as a) Comfort media b) Shared media c) Media for family bonding and raise concerns for viewer preferences around personalizing TV

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.4 [Social and Behavioral Sciences]: Sociology

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1. INTRODUCTION

‘There is no entertainment without TV’, a comment from a homemaker in our study, is no exaggeration. Since the first television broadcast in 1959, the Indian audience has adopted TV as the primary everyday entertainment medium across socio-economic segments: this is true for 115 million households in India. Over the last decade, Indian audiences have been witnessing and adopting transforming television technology, content and services. Over four decades of linear, one-way broadcast TV is steadily being tapped by the interactive TV

market in India, offering possibilities to radically transform viewing experience. We approach TV primarily as social technology and pose research questions, not merely on characteristics and uses of TV as media and means of entertainment, but on kinds of social life, living room cultures and everyday domestic rhythms they are capable of ordering and sustaining (Goodman 1983, Buerkel-Rothfuss 1982, Lull, 1980). More particularly, we go beyond what people actually see and do in front of the TV and capture forms of sociality that seem ‘to automatically flow from the kind of technology TV is’ (Morley 1986).

TV in India is an overwhelmingly family medium, an entertainment and information gateway on life styles and fashion. Its viewing patterns interleave and arrange domestic rhythms (Rangaswamy 2008). We ask how might Indian audiences re-orient traditional patterns of viewing to accommodate technology that propose to significantly transform viewing conventions. Further, how do cultural practices ordering family dynamics deal with a ‘transformative’ approach to TV viewing?

Debates around TV as social medium have been dominated by studies from North America and Europe. Perspectives developed from studies of families living in these regions depart significantly in their socio-historical contexts and potential to contextualize the medium. A cross-cultural perspective on TV viewing environments is significant as technology in India goes direct to home (DTH) via satellite, and global definitions of culture and life style find local adoptions. We focus on the following issues to foreground Indian television environments 1. To highlight everyday domestic rhythms that inflects TV viewing patterns in households 2. To study family adoption of nascent interactive TV services 3. To gauge audience response towards advanced interactive TV scenarios. We do these to focus on and explore the idea of interactive TV consolidating rather than individuating everyday Indian domesticity. We will particularly focus on issues of ‘personalization’ of TV as a challenge confronting conventional patterns of viewing. We use five personalizing scenarios to gauge opportunities in the Indian audience readiness to adopt interactive TV into domestic routines.

The paper presents findings from a five-month ethnographic study of 10 families in Mumbai city between October and March

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2008. Responses were collected through open ended interviews and participant observations. We spoke to 39 people: 20 parents, nine grandparents (three couples, one grandfather and two grandmothers) and 10 children, ages 12-22, living with their families. All interviews and family TV viewing sessions were voice and video-recorded and transcribed.

2. FOREGROUNDING DEBATES

A working definition of interactive TV predicates new forms of television viewing on greater control over what, when and how to watch TV. These open up direct participation as a two-way medium (Jensen 2002, Daly-Jones & Carey, 2000, Mountford 1992). For the last two years in India, technologically-based experiments with interactive TV are on-going using strategies that develop services based on existing technologies. A slow graduation to advanced states of viewing is expected to evolve with better infrastructural ecology. The assumptions in this approach to interactive TV is that it necessitates staying with slow adaptation of viewers to transform them in due time to interactive users (Jensen, 2005:89). As new TV technologies expand viewer potential to subvert linearity of broadcast flows, they pose challenges for traditional TV viewing situations; more importantly, the challenge to transform a passive 'comfort' media to a dynamic interactive one. In our study, we encountered another challenge of a shared medium facing prospects of personalization and individuation.

2.1 Personalizing TV

Personalized TV takes many forms. It enables and preempts viewer metamorphosis from a passive content viewer/receiver into a sender/producer of content. The most popular of such technologies is the personal video recorder (PVR) or digital video recorder (DVR) that allows viewers to manipulate broadcast flow enabling automated recording to support convenient viewing time. Thus, TV becomes a random access medium, like a newspaper or a book – browsable, with little effect of time and day (Negroponte in Jensen, 2002). What are the implications for personalizing TV content and viewing? The individual viewer can customize his/her TV content, install and set favorites, personalize interfaces, pre-ordain recording schedules, and access the more popular formats for SMS TV like voting, games and chat (Düsseldorf & Partners in Jensen, 2005: 90). These expand the combined potential of a TV-set to that of a regular telephone, computer with Internet access and a mobile phone with SMS. Interactive TV is essentially networked media suggesting 'more ways to zap...more ways to interrupt flow' of content (Kelly et al in Jensen, 2002: 385). There are several features that denote and qualify interactivity (Jensen 2005; Brown & Barkhuus, 2006). In this paper we use 5 features that attribute interactivity to television to test readiness and awareness of the Indian home to adopt them. We test receptivity with 10 families to ideas of 1. Electronic programme guide (EPG) 2. Personal video recording (PVR) 3. Enhanced TV 4. Video-on-demand (VOD) 5. Customizing TV.

Currently, TV audiences in India include a significant number of people familiar with nascent EPG features. Many are not avid users tending to ignore features that offered limited interactive possibilities. The personal video recorder (PVR)/ digital video recorder (DVR) are yet to enter the Indian market, but heighten curiosity among TV viewing audiences. That the viewer can

pause, rewind and fast-forward during a broadcast or simply schedule a recording to be watched at leisure is understood as evolutionary outcome of interactive TV technologies. These evoked a mixed response in our respondents.

In our sample, TV viewers responded inconsistently to adopting simplistic features of enhanced TV as they engaged with futuristic creations of advanced TV viewing scenarios. While enhanced features were accepted as viable, they were viewed predominantly as challenging the primary function of passive, unilateral TV viewing. Video-on-demand (VOD) in its complete form is yet to feature in India. Near video-on-demand is readily available and has uniformly failed to capture the Indian market. Our fifth and final feature of customizing TV was introduced as viewing/viewer ability to control and order the nature of viewing and enable TV to reflect and facilitate viewer-specific usage patterns. That the TV can look and feel like a 'personal homepage' customized to the viewer was met with both apprehension and curiosity.

The five features taken together were presented as main contributors to personalization of TV resting on user preferences and patterns of interaction with TV content and services. In the following section we focus on responses to the five features of interactive TV and their overlay with existing viewing patterns in 10 Indian households. We highlight ethnographic anecdotes bringing out adoptions of newly introduced interactive TV and family responses to possibilities of enhanced interactivity with the medium.

3. PERSONALIZING TV IN THE INDIAN HOME

"We all connect through the TV" said a home maker, 26, mother of an infant son, in a joint family of 8 members in response to our probes for personalizing her TV. Personalizing TV was a concept fairly removed from the Indian viewing situation nevertheless representing a possibility of negotiating preferences. Will it do away, altogether, with shared TV watching behavior? Are there possibilities for more focused but shared TV viewing with better scheduling opportunities? In this section, we describe audience response to the five types of interactivity outlined above. Apprehensions around efficacy of a new and remote technology combined with cultural conflicts of personalizing TV. Respondents noted conflicts with the conduct of domestic affairs in their households that shape and were shaped by TV watching routines. TV was essentially family media fostering something more than everyday entertainment. It stabilized routine domestic cadences and strengthened family bonding behavior by enforcing collective interactions amongst family members. The greatest resistance to all personalization possibilities was rooted in the passivity associated with TV viewing, its overwhelming promotion of shared participation and ownership and fear of losing the collective experience of a live broadcast.

EPG, VOD, PVR, enhanced TV and customization features were described verbally to thirty nine respondents from 10 families. Seven of ten families had direct to home (DTH) television technologies and were familiar with the set top box as hardware, and nascent features of interactivity. We provide vignettes from ethnographic probes on responses to each

interactive feature. We further deliberate upon mismatches and correspondences between existing TV watching behavior and a specific interactive scenario.

3.1 TV is Like the Family Oven/Toaster/Grill

We began with testing EPG, the simplest of features supporting interactive TV behavior. The EPG feature was present in seven of the homes and 12 members (4 children, 3 women, 5 men) had varied experiences of its manipulation. Nine had never used it. No grandparent felt the need to use EPG. Adept at channel flipping they followed a pattern of preferred viewing by manually operating the remote control device. Despite availability, EPG was not adopted with ease or panache. A majority of viewers were slow to give up their morning routine of browsing paper lists. Women said it was time-consuming to learn it and settled for traditional ways of knowing what's going on TV, while men were slow to accept and adopt EPG. Children were quick to try it but rarely showed excitement. The 22 year old under-grad son, the only child in our study, to own a personal TV, customized and refreshed the EPG regularly to reflect personal choices. Two fathers tried experimenting but neither has adopted the EPG into TV viewing routines. We observed negative response to customizing or even using the EPG as a simple service aiding personalizing features overriding the family over individual preference. Nevertheless, as an 18 year old high school student suggested, it did not rule out the possibility of a different use of EPG customized to family favorites rather than reflecting individual choice.

Our next feature, video-on-demand (VOD) had to contend with several prevailing video viewing cultures. VOD almost always was a family option. All DTH providers in India offer near VOD and charge approximately two dollars per movie viewing. Families rarely rented DVDs with prices of original DVDs costing a little less than a dollar to three dollars. Almost all families emphasized the sociality attached to 'going out to a swank multiplex for a movie'. It was an accepted way of 'chilling out with family'. Broadcasts of pirated DVDs of new releases are eagerly awaited on the local cable network. These, despite dodgy sound and image quality, came for free. One of our respondents, a 40 year old home maker and Yoga teacher, expressed she might consider buying the service if VOD fetched them the latest movies in town. The only yuppie husband in the study wanted a huge genre-based data base of movies to choose from. The convenience of VOD was mitigated by pricing, piracy and the family experience of watching a movie together. Only two of the seven families that had this feature ever tried it.

The next feature, PVR (DVR), received the most provocative feed-back from nearly all of our respondents. At present, no TV technology allows freedom to manipulate the temporality of content. We explained scenarios of pause and play, rewinding and fast forwarding content, scheduling recording in advance and viewing it at one's absolute convenience. The idea of tampering with the temporal flow of 'broadcast' found difficulty of translating into every day parlance of TV watching. Children, as savvy internet users, fully understand the scope and idea of content buffering and view the possibility of moving back and forth and pausing content as mandatory feature of interactivity. A 22 year old student of architecture and self-confessed compulsive 'content ripper' said, *'This would be exactly like recording live TV on Media Center'*. A homemaker and mother

of an eight-year old noted a family-friendly function of DVR employed effectively as parental control tool. She said, *'I should be able to fast forward an entire portion of something that I don't want my son to watch...'* However, recording and rescheduling everyday TV threatened domestic rhythms around viewing. A 54 year old industrialist father said, *'... We see whatever is playing. .. We've evolved a comfort zone around family watching TV'*. A 15 year old high-school going daughter did not approve of PVR as revolutionary, *'Who does that? Who needs it? I watch TV that mom likes. We sit around and have dinner. I have my own laptop to take care of my stuff'*. There were also doubts about the redundancy of the exercise. A 78-year-old retired professor/grandfather recalled, *'I used to diligently record all those old shows on VHS tapes. But I never went back to watching them – not once!'* Most grandparents were content to slip into a TV viewing rhythm. Three grandfathers told us that they watched their spouse's favorite channels. A single grandfather watched his favorites on the TV in the living room and shared with his son's family during prime time. The second TV in the bedroom accommodated his daughter-in-law's and grandson's favorites. He said he has no need for a PVR! Young sport lovers took to the idea. A 20 year old student of computer programming thinks PVR will resolve problems of his football season! *'Those football matches are late at night because of the time difference between the countries. And I remember when I used to be in my school and we used to bunk school and watch'*. Almost all respondents who shared TVs and adjusted viewing time for favorites wondered how this might re-organize domestic and TV schedule.

Enhanced TV with additional features that combine graphics and text evoked the weakest responses among subjects. 12 audiences (four children, three women, five men) in seven families were exposed to picture-in-picture, multi-mosaic and multi-angle features overlaid on to the TV image. Activating these demanded a fee that none of the families subscribed to. Responses pointed to a uniform lack of excitement in using features still at a lower level of enhanced functionality not warranting additional expenditure. The upwardly mobile couple in our sample, both young professionals, wished the picture-in-picture function as a thumbnail feature, to be dismissed and recalled at will without attenuating viewing experiences. However, while no respondent wished to have two simultaneous on-screen live TV windows, almost all were enthusiastic about having a smaller window at the bottom of the screen to browse content on other channels. Older respondents expressed reservations with any feature that would disturb the linear flow of broadcast, channel organization and selection. They found them restricting and uninteresting. Our most enthusiastic respondent is a 33 year old sports lover, running a family business, and organized family TV watching behavior around his preferences. He showed great enthusiasm for enhanced TV if it included sporting news, data and statistics. We saw potential for cross-referencing statistical data in live sporting telecasts, advanced multi-angle features and commentaries in regional/local languages. Interesting responses tied enhanced TV with family dynamics. They were seen as potential solution in households reconciling divergent interests among members. A 31 year old home maker in a joint-family thinks it made shared-viewing hassle-free. Some children were enthusiastic about these 'smart' features as they represent a 'coming of age TV' synchronous with 'smart' communication and entertainment

technologies. Overall, smart TV evoked a weak subject response with mobile phones and PCs more than compensating for 'smartness' in everyday media technology.

Our fifth and last feature, customizing TV, brought together a string of and personalizing elements, including EPG, PVR, and VOD and enhanced TV. We sought responses to customizing TV among 37 respondents to observe adoption potential in everyday TV watching. 13 from the parental generation showed insufficient interest in understanding features and dismissed them as frivolous and troublesome. 14 voiced apprehensions: The older audience feared the possibility of customization 'hassling' time-tested practices. A grandfather preferred technology that was simple as turning-on an electric switch, "... *all these functions are too complicated to do or remember. I like TV with all the breaks and intrusions*". Eight out of ten children directed their skepticism towards concerns of 'who will the TV be customized to'. A 20 year old Psychology under-grad categorically stated, '*I would put my photograph on my laptop, not on the TV screen!*' She would love to customize the family TV in the living room. However, she is unsure of going about customizing a TV shared by her entire family! A 41 year old stock broker suggested addressing the personalizing of television around family consensus. The Physics professor who lived with his spouse, two sons and parents sensed struggle with personalizing TV in his family. The 20 year old Psychology undergrad didn't mind personalization of her mobile phone and her PC, but she added, '*... TV is like the family OTG (oven/toaster/grill)*'.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Interactive TV organized and personalized the viewing experience. It transformed TV scheduling around an individual viewer's need and converted the TV viewer to a TV user. How did this impact a family culture that restricted the need to indulge an individual's choice? What feature held potential for personalization when viewing is a negotiable exercise, leveling individual choices to accommodate family preferences?

The Indian audience shares a comfortable culture of family TV routines across a variety of family types and viewing situations. Families share their TV viewing time with single or multiple sets in the household. Children watch the mother's favorite family soaps and fathers are just happy to enjoy watching them with family. Nobody minds a particular favorite sporting broadcast disrupting routine schedules. Sometimes, people move between rooms to watch TV to suit his/her preference. Women adjust their domestic rhythms with TV schedules. Families accommodate working mothers watching week-end TV with desperation to catch-up on missed shows. Multiple TVs becoming popular to accommodate preferences do not dislodge or mitigate the notion and occurrence of shared viewing.

Where television is a critical component of domestic rhythms, the ability to control and manipulate broadcast has great consequences for TV watching behavior among the Indian family. Interactive television offered unique opportunities, its features both disturbing and exciting the Indian family audience. Initially critical of interactive TV, they were quick to note possibilities and made adaptations for familial viewing around

interactive features. Our research subjects offered solutions where televisions reflect family personas, more than individual tastes. Features that break the temporality of broadcast were seen to address needs of 'catching up' with lost shows. Multi mosaic windows allowed reconciling multiple viewership choices within the family. Next-generation features allowing multi user gaming, multimedia sharing and storage attracted young users looking for hip, convergent home technology. Interactive television, including a design sensibility for personalizing TV for the Indian family audience, holds potential to evolve into a home media-and-communication hub.

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