



REGIONALIZATION, DIVERSIFICATION AND HETEROGENEITY: UNDERSTANDING THE LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL LOGICS OF INDIAN NEW MEDIA

KHADIRPASHA

Research Scholar

Linguistic Department

Potti Sri Ramaulu Telugu University

Hyderabad

Khadripasha.p@gmail.com

Abstract

In this article, I foreground the granular movements that determine the ubiquitous nature of India's new media economy created by the advent of streaming media platforms and the emergence of regional online content creators in India. I argue that the increasing preference of Indian audiences to consume online content in their own language has led to a demand for 'regional' content, whereby streaming platforms and online creators are increasingly investing in 'non-Hindi' and 'non-English' language content to cater to the linguistically and culturally diverse Indian population. Through a primary focus on online content creation practices in Bengali and Marathi languages, the article explores their 'local', 'regional', 'transnational' and 'global' appeal, and subsequent blurring of boundaries between 'regionalization' and 'localization'. The remainder of the article focuses on the emerging diaspora of regional online content creators who are adopting distinct content strategies to develop relationships with online communities based on commonalities of language and culture

Keywords

Cultural geography, cultural politics, digital media, globalization, India, internet television, linguistic diversity, new media, regionalization, streaming platforms

Introduction

The online streaming market in India has witnessed unprecedented growth, increasing from 8 streaming platforms to about 32 in 2018, with the potential to become a market worth US\$ 5 billion according to one report (BCG, 2018). The concentration of local and global streaming platforms in the marketplace is partly down to the fact that India has the cheapest data prices, with a gigabyte of mobile data costing US\$ 0.26, as compared to a global average of US\$ 8.53 (Roy, 2019). This has also amplified the economic viability of different strata of Indian society accessing the internet. The Boston Consulting Group (BCG) report also predicted an increase in demand for regional content spurred by the penetration of the internet beyond metropolitan cities (Laghate, 2018). For instance, Mark Lefkowitz, YouTube's Asia Pacific head of Creator and Artist Development acknowledged in an interview that as much as 95% of the internet consumption on its platform is consumed in Indian languages other than Hindi

and English in 2014 (Chaturvedi, 2018). Another industry report predicted that approximately 75% of new Indian internet users would be from rural areas (EY, 2018: 120). The report also claimed that 75% of these users would prefer to consume content in their local language (EY, 2018: 120). It is widely estimated that the rapid uptake and proliferation of the technology will lead to an increase in Indian-language internet users from 275 million in 2018 to 550 million by 2021 (Bidawataka, 2018).

The advent of streaming platforms has not only streamlined access to regional content but also expanded the scope of such content by producing original web-shows, short films and films. As I will show in this article, YouTube and Facebook have afforded agency to individual regional creators in enabling the creation and circulation of regional content. Access to viewer data helps creators as well as platforms in accurately tracing the content consumption of local and global audiences. YouTube (Ganguly, 2018) and Facebook (Laghate, 2018) have also held creator camps for regional language content creators to expand their content database beyond the Hindi and English languages. The courting of non-English-speaking YouTubers does seem like an obvious strategy, given that YouTube is host to about '230 million regional language users' (Krishna, 2018).

There is a general concern over the imperialist attitudes of 'Western' streaming platforms like Netflix (Jin, 2007), which are known to distribute US-centric titles. However, this claim is questionable in India's case, given the country's multilingual population. While the content slate of Netflix is heavily skewed to English titles, its recent foray into original content in Hindi and Marathi languages is symptomatic of the company's localization strategies in India (Mitter, 2018). Given the complexity of India's diversity, catering to regional Indian languages is a critical step in platform localization practices in order to appeal to a larger Indian audience, as was agreed by the global streaming platform executives of Netflix, Amazon Prime and Spuul. I use the term 'complex' to articulate India's diversity and draw attention to the fact that, even within India, on average, there is only a 36% chance that any two Indians can communicate with each other (Kawoosa, 2018). This means that India's population is so diverse that even Indians from different regions would find it difficult to speak through a common language.

Method

This article is part of a bigger project that investigates the cultural and industrial dynamics between online creators and streaming platforms in India. One of the recurring themes that emerged from this study involving a motley group of 52 online creators such as vloggers, stand-up comedians, media company executives specializing in content on social media as well as 13 streaming platform executives (n = 65) was the 'localization' practices carried out as a strategy for establishing a niche within the marketplace. The participants have been identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. My previous experience of three years as a media practitioner in Viacom18 Media Pvt Ltd proved to be crucial in making initial contacts with the respondents.

Of the 65 respondents, 33 emphasized the importance of language and cultural context in creating online content. The themes emanating from interviews were identified by, first,

performing the keyword search 'region', 'language' and 'regional language' from all the transcripts on NVivo software and, second, by conducting a thematic analysis of transcripts to extract common themes. Semi-structured in-depth interviews, ranging between 60 and 90 minutes in length, were conducted with online content creators as well as streaming platform executives. In places where conducting personal interviews was not possible, telephone interviews (n = 2) and email interviews (n = 13) were preferred. Questions posed to creators covered themes such as motivations for creating content, quotidian online content strategies, monetization, opportunities and comparisons with traditional media, audience and platform dynamics, while streaming executives were asked questions specifically on themes of content strategy, collaborations with online creators, audience traffic and monetization strategies. Additionally, notes were prepared to make observations while on fieldwork to ensure accuracy.

The blurring of regionalization and localization boundaries

While studying the television media landscape of India, media scholar Athique (2009: 163) noted that liberalization was instrumental in moving television away from government-promoted 'Hindi-centric' policies, allowing more space for regional players that had the potential to cater to 'national, international and intensely local' interests. In evidencing the popularity and transnational ability of the Indian television industry.

Media studies scholars have also foregrounded the importance of regional and cultural dynamics within the spatial dimensions of platform localization practices (Tinic, 2005; Venegas, 2009). The transnational exchanges between media businesses and the migration of people across the world (see Appadurai, 1990) mean that geographical regions can no longer be imagined as based on one language alone and likewise languages are no longer confined to one regional space. These studies serve as an important intervention in iterating the importance of language and region in diffusing internet practices across the world (Goggin and McClelland, 2009). More so in India's case, where, historically, Indian regions and states were identified on the basis of their culture and language. Academics such as Kumar (2013) and Hardy (2015), through their seminal research on Indian Bhojpuri language content, have already argued against this narrow territorial imagination.

Regional online creator perspective

Cunningham and Craig (2017) asserted in their study of social media creators that maintaining authenticity constituted a distinctive feature of social media creators as it helped them to build trust and maintain their relevance for the audience. For Indian regional online content creators, this authenticity is maintained by creating content in their own language as well as using themes and inferences that are relevant to their community. Further, Cunningham and Craig's (2019) seminal study, mapping the global social media ecology, highlighted the distinct creator culture of social media entertainers wherein they discussed the emergence of native-to-online genres such as gameplay, DIY (Do-It-Yourself) and vlogging practices. They argued that these established screen industries of films and television.

In many ways, the regional online content creators that I discuss in the next sections are similar, given that they are located strategically at the intersection of the film and television media industries, and are separated by their content production practices, styles, and genres.

Localization strategies

Indrani Biswas, known to her YouTube and Facebook audience by the name of 'Wonder Munna', argues that a part of her online identity is synonymous with the Bengali culture of having two names, 'one real and one nickname' (interview 2018). The word 'Munna', comes from her nickname and 'Wonder' was suggested by her friends. Biswas creates humorous sketches centred around the everyday lives of people from Kolkata. She writes, produces and edits all the videos by herself. Biswas was also adjudged the winner of 'YouTube Next Up 2018', conceived to recognize upcoming YouTubers with awards, production support and mentoring (Kundu, 2018). She highlights the motivations behind creating content in Bengali, stating that it is her mother tongue.

Moreover, for a lot of them, it is a matter of pride to be able to create content that is non-Hindi and non-English language. Saurav Kar, the creator behind 'Being Bong' YouTube channel (Being Bong, n.d.: Home), strongly argues that online content creators do not need to leave their city of origin for Mumbai in order to make a name for themselves. This, he maintains, is a common perception among some creators. (Interview 2018). Kar creates Bengali language content across diverse narratives, from prank videos and vlogging to comedy sketches.

Sarang Sathaye, co-founder of digital media company Bhartiya (Indian) Digital Party specializing in creating Marathi language content on YouTube channel BhaDiPa (Bhartiya Digital Party, n.d.) discussed the example of fellow Marathi YouTube channel 'Khaas Re TV' to highlight the importance of origin and identity in localizing content practices.

While discussing the state of Marathi films and television, Sathaye, who has acted in both Hindi and Marathi language films lamented how 'television broadcasters, of late, had converted the medium into a factory' and how the 'Marathi film industry was largely star-driven'. The self-theorized accounts suggest a lack of agency and even opportunity afforded to them as they reflect on frustrations with traditional media's industrial practices and content.

Scope of regional online content creators

Even though Telugu language is widely spoken only in the Indian states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, Sathaye argued that the language-based diaspora in India accounts for a greater number than the population of certain countries. He deliberated, 'The entire population of Telugu speaking audience is 75 million and the entire population of Canada is approx. 33 million which is half of Telugu speaking audience' (interview 2019). With over 83 million native speakers, the Census of India 2011 reports Telugu as the third most spoken language in India behind Hindi and Bengali. Overall, Telugu is the 19th most spoken dialect in the world.

Collaboration with regional online creators helps film celebrities to reach out to their regional audiences. Often, the creator's social media channels are used as a site for spreading awareness about the film. At the same time, these collaborations also have the potential to transcend national boundaries, as my respondents acknowledged having received collaboration requests from Bangladeshi creators that were popular on YouTube in the past. Thus, the opportunity to translate social media credentials into a means for scoping future work across multiple mediums encourages regional creators to remain consistent on social media platforms and build a repertoire of content and a loyal viewership.

Conclusion

The increase in creation, circulation and consumption of regional online content also comes against the backdrop of pushback against the incumbent Indian government's efforts to enforce Hindi language as a compulsory language within its National Draft Education policy under the garb of nationalism (Ranjan, 2019). The imposition of Hindi language, which in hindsight seems more of a strategy to invade the stronghold of regional parties in non-Hindi states, has actually led regional political parties, especially those from Maharashtra, West Bengal and southern states of India to protest together, eventually forcing the government to backtrack on its proposition.

Having said that, there are inherent limitations to this study as I have only focused on the cultural politics of Bengali and Marathi languages. As highlighted previously, there are over 121 languages spoken in India and more research is needed to examine the impact of other languages and the sustainability of regional creators in the Indian new screen ecology.

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