INDIAN POPULAR CULTURE

Lecture33

Art Vs Content

Let us today discuss art versus content. We have already explored the historical background of OTT platforms, their impact, emergence, and the question of their longevity. The future of OTT depends on several factors, including the viability of subscription-based models versus advertisements and the influence of technology, particularly the advent of 5G, on streaming platforms.

In this context, let's examine the debate of art versus content. Within the realm of OTT, content is often considered king. Art seems to be getting integrated into content, but ultimately, content remains the primary focus. OTT platforms are businesses first and foremost, and their growth depends on delivering content that generates revenue. If these platforms were solely concerned with art, they would produce parallel cinemas or art-house films, which differ from mainstream cinema.

The streaming culture brings up an important question: how do these streaming monopolies offer endless choices to viewers? The vast array of genres available on OTT platforms creates an illusion of control and freedom for viewers. This illusion is fostered by algorithms that suggest content based on previous clicks. However, this sense of control is largely superficial. The reality is that the algorithm drives the choices, limiting true freedom. The control over what is consumed is thus more illusory than actual, a phenomenon that Nick refers to as platform capitalism.

In essence, while the algorithms give the impression of choice, they also limit it by directing users towards content that fits their data profile. This method of control is more ephemeral, providing a semblance of freedom while maintaining actual control within the platform.

This is called platform capitalism and where it is on the basis of algorithm and fields. They give you suggestions as to which program to watch or which is the

next program that you can watch. It is all based on algorithm and the control goes out of your hand. It is not entirely your choice to watch a particular program. Rather, it is given like a suggestion.

These advanced capitalist models are centered around extracting and utilizing a specific kind of raw material: data. For example, the searches you perform on platforms like Google, Microsoft, or other similar services generate raw data. OTT platforms use this data to make suggestions and recommend content based on your interests, which may not always align with your true preferences. What you might have searched for simply to gather information can end up influencing the content you are shown.

Nick refers to this model as platform capitalism, and it includes companies like Google, Facebook, Apple, Microsoft, Uber, Airbnb, Amazon, and others that operate as platforms. This business model relies on both hardware and software as its foundation. While platform capitalism has been praised for its profitability, it has also been criticized for its impact on users. While it benefits companies, it often limits the actual freedom of choice for audiences, who are subtly coerced into believing they are in control when, in reality, they are not.

The trends seen in platform capitalism bear similarities to those in surveillance capitalism. Surveillance capitalism, a term popularized by Shoshana Zuboff, relates to the practice of monitoring and analyzing individuals' data to predict and influence their behavior. This concept echoes the earlier idea of the Panopticon, as discussed by Michel Foucault. The Panopticon was a design for a prison that allowed a single guard to observe all inmates without them knowing whether they were being watched. In modern terms, surveillance capitalism operates through technologies that collect data and make decisions based on that data. For instance, Google Maps uses data to suggest alternate routes when congestion is detected, a practice that mirrors the principles of surveillance capitalism by leveraging data to shape user experiences and decisions.

The determination of congestion, for example, is made possible through a combination of hardware and software. Rather than relying on physical cameras, mobile networks play a crucial role. When a significant number of mobile devices are detected in a specific area, with data and location services turned on, it indicates a high density of people. This data helps in assessing traffic congestion

and advising users to avoid certain routes, which is a practical application of surveillance capitalism.

As streaming platforms have evolved from merely hosting pre-existing content to actively producing their own, they have increasingly relied on data to guide their content creation. They use our data to analyze viewing patterns and preferences, thereby influencing what content is developed. For instance, if a large number of people watch thrillers, streaming platforms will be incentivized to produce more thrillers. This reliance on data underscores how platform capitalism and surveillance capitalism intersect, with streaming services acting as data-generating machines beyond just content provision.

Pat Walsh, a data protection and privacy consultant, highlights that streaming platforms are not only altering what users see on their screens but are also reshaping the production of media itself. This shift is evident in how popular culture and mass culture interact with these platforms. What seems like personalized content on the surface is actually part of a broader trend where art is increasingly subsumed under the category of content. The integration of art into content means that art is often overshadowed or diluted in this model, leaving little distinction between what is considered art and what is merely content.

Under the guise of giving consumers more agency and choice, streaming platforms suggest what viewers are inclined towards and show them accordingly. They present this as a matter of user preference, but it's actually the reverse. This approach closes off opportunities for discovery, wonder, and experimentation that make engagement with art challenging and moving in unexpected ways. Instead of allowing viewers to explore new genres or change their preferences, these platforms limit the experience, making it difficult for users to think critically about their choices.

Netflix, like other disruptive media before it, exists at the intersection of innovation and disruption, problematizing traditional media paradigms. Theorist Ramon Lobato, in his book Netflix Nations, points out that these platforms not only create the content one watches but also decide what one can watch. This dual role is both fascinating and alarming, revealing the underlying control mechanisms of these OTT giants.

The documentary The Social Dilemma explores how tech companies, such as Facebook, keep users engaged through manipulative techniques. Despite being aware of the psychological effects of constant internet use, these companies prioritize data collection and user engagement for profit. This focus on data over well-being underscores the business-driven nature of streaming platforms. The shift from ownership to access is another significant change brought about by streaming platforms. Traditionally, owning a physical copy of a film or series represented personal ownership and control. Today, streaming services offer access to a vast library of content without granting ownership. This model emphasizes convenience but means users have no permanent control over their access. If a show or movie is removed from a platform, users lose access, despite their investment of time.

In terms of art versus content, the business model of streaming platforms often prioritizes profitability over artistic value. While platforms do integrate art into content, their focus remains on generating data-driven content that appeals to broad audiences. This approach can dilute the artistic quality of content, reducing it to a commodity driven by user data rather than creative expression. The commercialization of art into content can diminish the space for innovative and challenging works that push boundaries and provoke thought. Streaming platforms have transformed media consumption by offering the illusion of choice while using sophisticated data techniques to control and predict user behavior. This shift from ownership to access, coupled with the prioritization of data-driven content, reflects broader changes in how we engage with media and impacts the nature of art and content.

Now, the question of whether people prefer access over ownership is still to be conclusively answered. Anuja Pradhan is conducting a study on consumer culture to explore this hypothesis. The results of her study will reveal whether the hypothesis holds true. In the meantime, Netflix, grappling with subscriber issues, has responded by flooding its platform with mediocre content. This strategy reflects its struggle to retain subscribers with content that is not particularly exceptional.

In contrast, companies like Disney are producing fewer films for cinemas, focusing instead on blockbuster hits. Disney is developing extensive content for its streaming platforms to keep viewers engaged. Attention is crucial for these

platforms, as it directly translates to revenue, with time spent on the platform equating to money. The concept of passive consumption is also prevalent. People are increasingly engaging with media passively, allowing entire seasons of TV shows to drift by in the background. The proliferation of media with minimal artistic merit but strong visual appeal is becoming common. Shows like Emily in Paris, which lack substantive content and artistic depth, surprisingly perform well due to their visually attractive experience. This raises questions about the nature of content versus art and whether such content should even be considered valuable.

Anuja Pradhan also argues that it benefits companies to keep audiences in a state of passive consumption. This approach prevents viewers from critically reflecting on the ideals of consumer society and the belief that consumption leads to happiness. By keeping audiences engaged with low-quality content, these platforms discourage questioning and maintain the status quo of consumption-driven happiness.

The current culture of overworking, hustle, and the resulting exhaustion contribute to this dynamic. People, overwhelmed and too exhausted to think critically, find escape in content regardless of its quality.

The kind of environment people are living in today often drives the need for escapism when they get home. This escapism is sought through shows, which might be mediocre but provide a break from the hustle culture and work obligations. A similar phenomenon occurred with traditional TV: in urban and semi-urban areas, people coming home from work, tired and stressed, preferred lighter TV series over heavy news channels. Before the rise of OTT platforms, these TV series served as a form of escape.

The pandemic further accelerated this shift, making streaming the dominant form of entertainment. However, the competition among streaming platforms for revenue and views has led to a compromise on art. With the push to produce content rapidly, there is less emphasis on integrating art into the content. Mergers and licensing agreements often reduce art to a commodity, compromising its quality for profit.

Even well-established media are at risk of disappearing due to the rise of streaming platforms. For instance, TV channels, once dominant, are now

receiving less attention compared to streaming services. This shift has also affected different demographics, with non-working individuals, particularly women, remaining more engaged with traditional TV series.

Streaming platforms are increasingly making business-driven decisions over artistic ones. For example, Disney Hotstar and Netflix have both raised their prices, reflecting their focus on profitability. These platforms are also merging and offering bundled services, such as Discovery scrapping films and series to consolidate content under one streaming roof.

Whether the streaming wars are over remains uncertain. The current crisis within streaming platforms, marked by unilateral business decisions, suggests that platforms focused solely on profit and viewership might struggle to sustain themselves. The consumer culture driven by these platforms is pushing the boundaries of how media is consumed and valued.

Further, examining the business algorithmic angle reveals that streaming platforms indeed control what should be consumed by whom, creating a significant level of monopoly. There is discussion about potentially reverting to a TV-like model of releasing one episode per week, as opposed to the binge-watching model. This shift is being considered in response to audience fatigue. For instance, a recent Korean drama called The Demon adopted a model of dropping two episodes each Saturday and Sunday, generating considerable anticipation and engagement among viewers. This approach reflects a move towards slower consumption, which has its own value.

Despite this potential shift, the control remains with the streaming platforms, which continue to organize and dictate viewing schedules. Even if they introduce weekly episode releases, the autonomy of content consumption will still largely rest with these platforms. However, integrating art into content could offer a way to mitigate passive consumption. By reintroducing art into the content and embracing slower consumption models, streaming platforms might enhance the quality of viewer engagement and offer a more thoughtful media experience.