

Viewing serials, seeing ads

The CII-PwC Report, Indian Media and Entertainment Outlook 2012, estimates the Indian television industry at 340 billion INR, out of which 116 billion INR come from advertising and 224 INR come from subscription revenue. A turf war has broken out between TAM, the advertising industry and the television channels over the last several months, first on the ratings issue, later on the tax liability of channels and advertisers, and now on the periodicity of reporting ratings.

In May 2013 several channels blacked out ad agencies that were refusing to comply with net billing, now the ad agencies are refusing to advertise on channels that were demanding monthly reporting of ratings instead of weekly ratings. Seven networks that account for some 100 channels and nearly 70% ad billing appear to be dictating to the advertisers and their clients.

TAM which was peddled as the god-given bench mark for all advertising activity on television, is suddenly being trashed by senior media managers as “misrepresentation of viewership,” “a work of speculative fiction,” even as some channels have challenged the veracity TAM operations in courts.

The latest in this battle – whether TAM should report weekly ratings or monthly ratings – for the first time highlights and interesting contradiction between the interests of the channels and the advertisers. The channels have forced TAM to agree to monthly ratings. The advertising industry has threatened to withdraw all TV advertising if the channels do not continue to provide weekly ratings. This is a severe stand taken by the ad agencies to maintain status quo.

Consumers’ interest is one question that is not being debated in this war for ad revenue. How seriously have ad agencies taken the weekly ratings so far? And how seriously have the channels taken their social responsibility, whether ratings are reported weekly or monthly. Does public interest matter at all in this commercial turf war? What are the issues really to be debated about the role of the channels and advertising industry in the cultural life of the people?

Anita Nagulapalli of CMS Media Lab in collaboration with Padmaja Shaw of the Department of Communication and Journalism, Osmania University, undertook an intensive study of Telugu daily serials to analyse the violence depicted in them. A secondary objective of the study was also to see the kind of advertising support such programming is receiving.

The study analyzed 144 episodes, 36 each from ETV, ZEE Telugu, Gemini, MAA shown in three primetime time slots 7.30 – 8.00 PM, 8.00 – 8.30 PM and 8.30 – 9.00 PM during August, September, October of 2012.

The study measured in minutes the violent content in evening prime-time soaps telecast on the four major general entertainment channels in Telugu: ETV, Zee Telugu, Gemini and Maa. The serials telecast in the three selected time slots were: ETV – Manasu Mamatha, Chandramukhi, Bharyamani; Zee Telugu – Pasupu Kumkuma, Muddubidda, Radha Kalyanam; Maa – Anna Chellellu, Missamma, Kanchana Ganga; Gemini – Maa Naanna, Padamati Gaali, Ala Modalaindi (7.30 to 8, where Maa Naanna was removed and Padamati Gaali began. Padamati Gaali was

moved to 8.00 slot and was replaced at 7.30 by Ala Modalindi), Agnipoolu, Mogalirekulu.

The unit of analysis was a 'violent event'. Each event was measured in time from the beginning of a sequence to its end, generally constituting character continuity, location continuity, idea continuity or all of them. Violence was further divided into actual violence, verbal violence, implied violence and graphical exaggeration. All instances of murder, physical assault, rape, kidnap and other such instances where deliberate physical harm of the victim is shown were categorized under actual violence. In verbal violence, conspiracy to commit violent acts, conspiracy to murder, discussion of plans to physically assault, 'telling on people', abuse, conspiracy (intent to harm other than the intent to cause physical harm), discussing murder, negative verbal behaviour like taunting have been included. Implied violence included body language, gestures and facial expressions. In graphical exaggeration, production techniques like visual effects, sound/music, display and use of weapons, and exaggerated makeup of characters have been included.

The content was examined to see who is shown as victims and who as perpetrators. The depiction of protagonists was fairly simplistic and polarized in most of the serials, allowing for categorization of characters into positive and negative roles.

The analysis also looked at the number, duration, origin and extent of advertising on the serials. The episodes were recorded and analyzed using the criteria described above. The following are the findings.

Violence in its various forms

Out of 144 episodes studied, there were 282 violent events or acts. Of the four channels showing daily serials on prime time, ETV with 34% has shown the highest number (96) of violent events. The second highest of 24% (68) was shown on Maa TV, with Zee showing 22% (64) and Gemini showing 19.4% (54) each.

The violent content when calculated as part of overall running time including the advertisement time shows ETV at 41.9%, Zee at 38.7%, Maa at 31.7% and Gemini at 19.6%. However, when the same is calculated excluding the advertisement time, the percentage of violent content on ETV shoots up to 57.6%, Zee to 55.6%, to 44.9% on Maa and to 24.8% on Gemini.

Within the overall 282 events of violence, there have been 1289 instances of various kinds of violence. While the actual acts of violence like murder were shown only 8%, verbal violence (19.5%), implied violence (30.2%) and graphical depiction (42.1%) were pervasive in the serials. In actual violence, physical abuse appears to be the most common form shown.

ETV has shown the most percentage (40.3%) of actual violence, followed by Zee Telugu (22.1%), Maa (21.1%) and Gemini (16.3%). ETV also leads in verbal violence with 40.4%, followed by Maa (21.4%), Zee Telugu (21%) and Gemini (17%). In implied violence category also ETV leads with 34.8%, followed by Zee Telugu (26.9%), Maa (21.5%) and Gemini (16.6%). In graphical exaggeration

category too ETV leads with 37%, followed by Maa (25.9%), Zee Telugu (23.9%) and Gemini (13%).

Discussion: Violence in its various forms

Out of a total of 282 violent events, Gemini has the least number of violent events (19.4%) as well as least amount of violent running time (24.8%). Gemini also has the fewest instances of actual, verbal and implied violence and uses least amount of graphical exaggeration techniques.

The three major channels, ETV, Zee Telugu and Maa have a pervasive presence of violent content in their soaps each of them spending more than 44%, and some exceeding 50%, of the running time of such content.

While depiction of actual violence may be less, there is a pervasive presence of verbal violence, implied violence and graphical exaggeration that enhances the depth and spread of violent instances. The dialogues frequently refer to the desire to kill, maim, hang and quarter. Use of intemperate dialogues is widespread. There is a sense of extreme intolerance to differences and a penchant for resorting to violence as a primary response to conflict and not as a last resort.

The perpetrators and the victims

The study also examined victims and perpetrators of violence. It is interesting to note that out of 282 instances of violence, as many as 138 (48.9%) are committed by female characters. Only 31.9% are committed by male characters. Positive male characters are perpetrators 42.5% of the times, while positive female characters are perpetrators 39% of the times. Female negative characters are perpetrators 53.3% of the times, while male negative characters are perpetrators only 27% of the times.

Out of the 282 instances of violence, females are victims 34% of the times, while males are victims 23% of the times. There are also several instances of violence where no particular victim is shown but the general intent to harm, destroy or undermine are discussed or plotted. Among 133 positive characters who are shown as victims, positive female characters are shown 74 (55.6%) times while positive male characters are shown 50 (37.6%) times. Out of the 44 negative characters shown as victims, 22 (50%) are female and 16 (36%) are male.

When power status of perpetrators and victims was analyzed, it was found that dominant characters committed violence 57 (20.2%) times out of 282 instances, while characters of indeterminate status committed 106 (37.5%) times, equals committed 70 (24.8%) times. Characters of subordinate status were perpetrators 36 (12.7%) times while they were victims 40 (14.1%) times. Characters of equal and indeterminate status were victims 38 (13.4%) times and 69 (24.4%) times, respectively. As mentioned earlier, there were 105 (37.2%) instances where there is no direct victim shown but a violent ambience was shown.

Discussion: The perpetrators and the victims

Significantly, the data shows that it is women who predominate as both victims and perpetrators of violence, while men are fewer compared to women even

among negative characters. It is also significant that men are also shown as victims of violence. Women playing both positive and negative roles are shown as both perpetrators and victims. Violence as a mode of interaction is normalized and women are shown using this mode persistently.

As can be seen from the data, women are at the centre of conflicts, often clashing with other women. In episode after episode, the serials show graphic and pathological negativity. There is also no decipherable pattern of violent behaviour. Both dominant and subordinate characters and the characters with indeterminate relationship to the protagonists (for example, hired goons, henchmen, persons unknown to the characters etc.) also indulge in violence. The social status of dominance and subordination is bypassed constantly and people with equal and indeterminate status relationship to the protagonists appear to be perpetrating violence more frequently.

Violence is an integral part of drama, but in the serials shown by the Telugu channels, violent content has an overwhelming presence. In an effort perhaps to create novelty the nature of violence is also increasingly perverse.

In Pasupu Kumkuma (453) shown on Zee Telugu, the episode begins with conflict and continues to the end on a negative, exaggerated conflict mode for the next 18 to 19 minutes. The episode shows rivalry between two young women, one of whose face is smeared with ink. The father of the young woman arrives and asks her to wash her face. The young woman declares that unless she sees the dead body of her rival, she will not wash her face. Her father approvingly agrees, saying: "If you put a lakh of rupees in an envelope, her dead body will be home-delivered in a box". It is an example of serious crime like murder being depicted as easy, desirable and devoid of social consequences, by a father figure.

In a randomly picked episode of Manasu Mamatha (543) on ETV, there is a prolonged attempted rape scene of 7.30 minutes that culminates in the positive female character stabbing the negative male character. Another 14 minutes of the serial goes on to show physical assault with wooden clubs and bare handed combat between a positive male character who enters the scene and the henchmen of the negative character. The conflict is interspersed with threats of killing and revenge. Almost the entire viewing time of the episode is steeped in violence and fear.

In the Maa serial Anna Chellellu, the lead character of the brother is disguised as a female household help, a la Tootsie. In episode 250, around 11 minutes into the serial there is a conflict event between two female characters. One of them who is a resident of an opulent house, dressed in western clothes is portrayed as negative, while the visitor dressed in traditional sari is portrayed as positive. The negative female character has henchmen, invents perverse schemes to torment the female visitor and repeatedly threatens her.

The general ecology of the serials is inhabited by socially unexplained desire for revenge and a sociopathic hatred that is unredeemed by any possibility of reflection or change. There are no sane voices or voices of wisdom. The dominant emotions are fear and hatred. The violence-free parts of the serials seem to be just mere interludes before another cycle of violence is unleashed.

This world of violence is untouched by the larger society or its norms. One rarely hears saner voices presenting positive side of life, neither does one see the law and order machinery at work even in cases of murder and grievous injury. The characters, both negative/positive, subordinate/dominant act lawlessly. Impunity is pervasive. There is no accountability, atonement or lawful punishment. After several episodes of impunity, the 'positive' characters are shown taking the law into their own hands and providing vigilante justice. There is a general disregard for human values and human dignity.

Advertising and its role

One of the objectives of the research study was also to establish the extent of advertising support available to serials on television. There were 3181 ads shown during the period under study during the selected programmes. Out of these, 1228 (38.6%) were shown on Maa, followed by 811 (25.4%) on Zee Telugu, 730 (22.9%) on ETV, and 412 (12.9%) on Gemini.

The largest number of advertisements (1302 – 40.9%) is of cosmetics and personal products. The second largest category with 781 (24.5%) is food and beverages. Consumer products figure third with 423 (13.2%) ads.

In terms of duration, Zee TV leads with 325.55 minutes (28.6%) of the total duration of 1135.57 minutes of ads shown during this period. Maa with 309.04 (27.2%), ETV with 287.34 (25.3%), Gemini with 213.24 (18.7%) follow.

When the origin of the ads is examined, ETV carried 319 (34.1%) ads of international brands as opposed to 411 (18.2%) national brands. All the other channels, Maa with 890 (39.6%) international to 338 (36.1%) national, Zee with 610 (27.1%) national to 210 (21.5%) international and Gemini with 336 (14.9%) national to 75 (8.1%) international ads, carried more ads of national brands than international brands.

Gemini carried the largest number (127 – 30.9%) of in-house promos with Zee TV (111 – 27%), ETV (90 – 21.8%), Maa (83 – 20.1%) following.

Discussion: The role of advertising

It is said, advertising drives the business of entertainment television. It is also said that advertisements are the primary content for commercial entertainment television. Programmes are just the frames within which the advertising content is conveyed to the audiences. Two contrary things seem to be happening.

Gemini, which seems to have the least amount of violence, also airs the least number of ads on prime time serials. While the general norm is 6 minutes per half hour, three of the four channels were found to carry an average of 8 to 9.12 minutes of advertising on these programme slots. This is excluding scrolls and other advertising that cluttered the screens during viewing time, other than ad breaks. Only Gemini carried 3.35 minutes of ads. Gemini also had more programme promos for its own programmes.

The data of the study shows that the least violent programming on Gemini has both the fewest ads and also the least duration of ads. Interestingly, Gemini has

also been the market leader among entertainment channels in Telugu. According to the ratings in August, September and October, Gemini retained its top position among Telugu channels with Maa coming up second. ETV and Zee Telugu alternated between the 3rd and 4th positions.

The serial Mogilirekulu, aired on Gemini at 8.30 was consistently logging more than 7 to 8 TVR percentage points, while Chandramukhi, Bharyamani, Manasu Mamatha, Muddubidda, Pasupu Kumkuma managed 3 or a little over 3 points. Several of the serials studied do not even figure in the top ten programmes of the channels, though they are sitting in prime time slot for months. Maa channel interestingly, does not have a single serial among its top 10 programmes. All the top ten programmes in the three months studied are Telugu films and game shows. But Maa attracted the largest number of ads on its serials.

One reason for the heavy violent content on prime time serials could be their desire to attract more audience by imitating films, since it is the film and film-based programming and game shows that seem to be getting better ratings. However, the economics of the serial production does not allow them to rise above mediocrity in acting, production values and the storylines. The channels seem to get advertisement support on prime time irrespective of the TRPs and the quality of the content they show, creating “cultural slums” on prime time television.

The business aspect of this paradox is unclear as the major national and international ads are not only crowding less popular channels, they are crowding heavily violent programming. One possible explanation could be that because of its market leadership, Gemini is able to command better advertising prices while the other channels sell their time for far less and therefore also take many more ads for the same time slots to recover revenues.

If this is true, this undermines the consumer interests in two ways. One, there are too many ads per half hour in clear violation of norms. Two, violent, poor quality programming is sustained because of the media buyers looking for the cheapest prime time slots, without bothering about the anti-social content they are helping support. This remains an unresolved marketing paradox of Telugu general entertainment television – advertisers seem to be willing to associate with, if not reward, programmes/channels that peddle high levels of violence.

Standardization and transparency of tariffs, perhaps needs to be the next important issue before the regulators. Especially, since neither the channels nor the advertisers seem to be fully accounting for and paying the taxes on their advertising transactions as it became evident during the net billing controversy between the agencies and the channels.

Sex and violence don't sell products

Media researchers (Kraus) have for long recognized that content developers tend to exaggerate events for dramatic effect, which can be overwhelming ... (and) long-term exposure to such programmes can cause the viewers to overestimate the danger of the real world and experience feelings of fear and anxiety. This is called *the mean world syndrome* (Shanahan, Morgan, 1999). Social scientists have also pointed out that media effects are rather indirect, subtle and cumulative, and

compare this cumulative aspect of violent media effects to the way cigarette smoking undermines a smoker's health, over time.

If we observe what is served to us on Telugu commercial television networks in the name of entertainment, we can see that the only feel good part of the 30-minute package is the 8 or 9 minutes of advertising. The ads entertain you. They allow you to fantasize great things about yourself (cosmetics and personal care products predominate). They show a world of escapist luxury one could aspire for. One rarely sees rude or unpleasant behaviour on ads. They are all attempting to charm you into being a willing consumer of whatever they are selling. One would think that their wit and the charm-offensive is a relief and help us escape the mean world that is on display in the serials.

However, this logic for heavy advertising support for the gratuitous violence on Telugu television serials may require a rethink as there is mounting evidence in advertising research that advertising on programmes with excessive depiction of sex and violence may have an adverse impact on sales. Several studies have found that violence and sex on television might impair memory for advertised products (Bushman 2005). The advertisers do not appear to realize that they are losing potential customers not just through the ad clutter resulting from the low tariffs negotiated with the channels, they are also losing potential customers because the violent content takes away the attention of the consumer from the advertised products, if research is to be believed.

In conclusion, the data from this study indicates that TRAI's recent restrictions on the number of minutes of advertising per hour of programming seems wholly justified to control the menace of channels taking in more ads to increase falling revenues that are a consequence of poor programming. There is perhaps also a need to bring in standardization and transparency to the advertising tariffs and accounting practices of channels as well as the media buyers and ad agencies.

If the advertising industry wakes up to its responsibility to support healthier television entertainment, it will benefit the ad industry, the channels and the consumers of entertainment.

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