



Television at Large in South Asia

SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE

Edited by
Aswin Punathambekar and Shanti Kumar

Television at Large in South Asia

This book explores the empirical and theoretical significance of understanding television as a dynamic technology, a creative industry, and a vibrant cultural form that is 'at large' in South Asia. Bringing together prominent scholars who have shaped television studies in South Asia, as well as emerging scholars who address new topics, this book decisively positions television as a key site in the study of South Asian history and culture. In doing so, it also positions the study of television in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora as crucial in the rethinking of global television history, and opens up new directions for the future of television studies. This volume will be essential reading for scholars and teachers of media and communication studies, media history, anthropology, and sociology, besides being of great interest to policymakers and media professionals.

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Introduction: Television at large

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All the essays in this special issue deal with the theme *Television at large* in the political, economic, cultural, and technological contexts of contemporary South Asia. In different ways, each essay outlines the empirical and theoretical significance of understanding television as a dynamic technology, a creative industry, and a vibrant cultural form that is ‘at large’ in a dual sense.

In one sense, the phrase ‘at large’ refers to television as a technology that is not bounded by the traditional borders of the modern nation-state, or by the modernist dichotomies of the public and the private, the inside and the outside, the spiritual and the material, or the home and the world. In another sense, the phrase ‘at large’ refers to the ability of television as a cultural form to represent a whole range of ideas, ideals, ideologies, images, and imaginations across time and space. After all, television unlike most other media and cultural productions, can be seen and heard 24 hours a day, 7 days a week both within and beyond the boundaries of South Asia. Thus, television, it can be argued, represents – or ought to represent – the collective imaginations of its audiences in the same way as some political representatives are deemed to represent the collective will of the people ‘at large’ rather than representing some specific state or a department or a constituency (as in a ‘minister at large’ or an ‘ambassador at large’). How then do we understand the new constellations of collective imaginations that are constantly represented (and re-presented) on South Asian television both within and beyond the traditional boundaries of South Asia?

In approaching this question, we take our cue in part from recent scholarship in Television Studies that has begun mapping and examining how television has evolved under the impact of various technological, institutional, political-economic, and cultural changes. One of the most influential formulations of television-in-transition has been ‘television after TV’, a phrase that Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson deploy to explore a media landscape that is no longer defined by the ‘technologies, industrial formations, government policies, and practices of looking that were associated with the medium in its classical public service and three-network age’ in the United States.¹ Engaging primarily with television in the United States and Europe, the essays in Spigel and Olsson’s influential anthology offer a wide-ranging account of an emerging ‘after TV’ world: new production practices, experiments with narrative and storytelling techniques, changing sponsorship models and franchising practices, media convergence and the expansion of spaces and modes of ‘watching TV’, new modes of imagining and mobilizing audiences, and so on.

If the concern is, broadly speaking, coming to terms with what constitutes ‘TV’ as an object of study in the post-broadcast era, there is no doubt that South Asia would be as

compelling a site as any. Indeed, many of the questions and concerns regarding television that have been elaborated with reference to developments in the United States and Western Europe are pertinent in the Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi contexts as well. Over the past two decades, as state-control over television has given way to a media landscape marked by an ever-expanding range of mass-market and niche channels, with organizational structures that span the range from small-scale cable channel operators to transnational media conglomerates, programmes that are as deeply rooted in South Asian storytelling traditions as they are imitations and hybrids of formats that circulate globally, and viewing practices and cultures of participation that speak to the ways in which new platforms and infrastructures of communication (the mobile phone, most prominently) have transformed the ‘television set’, there is no doubt that television in South Asia is as thoroughly inter-medial and multi-scalar as anywhere else in the world. And to be sure, we are very well positioned to map and analyse this rapidly evolving media terrain. The scholarship on television in South Asia, even if it remains predominantly India-focused, constitutes a quite formidable body of work. Moving beyond developmentalist discourses, scholars from different disciplinary backgrounds have developed sophisticated accounts of television’s role in reconfiguring postcolonial India’s political terrain, how everyday viewing practices intersect with family lives and mediate notions of gender and sexuality, the reworking of cultural identities wrought by the establishment of influential transnational networks like Star TV and translocal networks like ZEE, Sun, and Eenadu during the 1990s, generic and programming innovations, changing cultures of news production, and so on.²

However, two problems remain. On the one hand, it is clear that television remains on the margins of South Asian studies, a site that continues to be defined by well-established disciplines (including history, anthropology, sociology, and political science) that are only now beginning to take media and the question of communication into account. On the other hand, the scholarship on television in South Asia continues to be neglected within Television Studies, a disciplinary formation that remains resolutely US–UK centric. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the theoretical insights derived from South Asian contexts do not get taken up in any sustained manner by scholars of television in Anglophone Western nations. Indeed, Dipesh Chakrabarty’s trenchant observation regarding the marginal status of non-Western histories – ‘only “Europe,” the argument would appear to be, is *theoretically* knowable; all other histories are matters of empirical research that fleshes out a theoretical skeleton that is substantially “Europe” ’ – is pertinent to Television Studies as well.³ With the exception of one or two key anthologies such as Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay’s *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television the Post-Broadcast Era* and Michael Curtin and Hemant Shah’s *Reorienting Global Communication*, the historical and spatial scope of ‘television’ that is taken into consideration remains exceedingly narrow and limited to primarily Western, Anglophone locations.

The challenge, then, is to develop ways to examine and theorize television in South Asia such that we are able to locate its production, circulation, and consumption within a global context, while retaining a keen awareness of how the particularities of the South Asian context open up opportunities to generate more nuanced, and in the process, more expansive accounts of television’s impact on the world. Thus, our aim here is to move television from its status as a marginal object in studies of South Asian history and culture to the centre of analysis and, at the same time, position the study of television in South Asia and the South Asian diaspora as crucial for rethinking television history and opening up new directions for the future of Television Studies. It is with these twin goals in mind that we propose ‘television at large’ as a framework for approaching the study of television in South Asia.

Television and public culture in South Asia

Among the various theoretical frameworks that have been developed to describe transformations in South Asian public culture, and particularly where ongoing changes in media and communications are concerned, perhaps the most influential one has been Appadurai and Breckenridge's statement on public culture in India.⁴ Arguing against notions of cultural homogenization and Americanization of 'local' cultures that adherents of the media/cultural imperialism school of thought held dear, as well as the stagist conceptions of history that modernization theory rested upon, Appadurai and Breckenridge proposed beginning with the assumption that 'modernity is today a global experience'.⁵ Observing that most societies in the world brought their own, local experiences and understandings of modernity to bear on their encounters with Euro-American modernity, they declared: 'Modernity is now everywhere, it is simultaneously everywhere, and it is interactively everywhere.'⁶ Central to this reconceptualization of modernity is the concept of public culture, a term that moves past well-worn elite/popular distinctions and articulates 'the space between domestic life and the projects of the nation-state where different social groups constitute their identities by their experience of mass-mediated forms in relation to the practices of everyday life.'⁷ As electronic media bring into our homes a variety of images, ideas, ideologies, and commodities from around the world, they provide the cultural resources for collective imaginations that work like strips of reality in the everyday lives of people. Thus, imagination, Appadurai and Breckenridge argue, 'has emerged as a new force in social life, largely as a result of the spread of electronic media, in the context of rapid flows of resources, images, and persons across national boundaries'.⁸ As the territorially imagined communities of print-capitalism – such as the modern nation-state, the bourgeois public sphere, or the local neighbourhood – are transforming into the de-territorialized 'imagined worlds' of electronic capitalism, modern mass media like television are also rapidly de-territorializing in a complex constellation of digital and analog technologies, traditional arts, legacy media, and new social networks. Although modern nationalism and modern mass media may have emerged around the same time and place, their de-territorialization has been non-isomorphic, and the disjunctures and differences between and betwixt them have become the new staging ground for collective imagination and political action in modern societies around the world. As Appadurai and Breckenridge remind us, 'What is distinctive about any particular society is not the fact or extent of its modernity, but rather its distinctive debates *about* modernity, the historical and cultural trajectories that shape its appropriation of modernity, and the cultural sociology that determines who gets to play with modernity and what defines the rules of the game'.⁹

In a similar vein, we would argue that what is distinctive about television in South Asia is not so much the fact or the extent to which it is enmeshed in global circuits of production and circulation, but rather its distinctive role in shaping the terrain of public culture. As we explain below, it is television's re-mediation of the public/private distinction in the South Asian context that lies at the heart of our understanding of how television stages the modern in the postcolonial context in particular, and television's impact on the modern world in general.

Although the state-sponsored agenda of modernization through national broadcasting has been the dominant mode of defining the 'public' in South Asian media and cultures, the hegemony of national networks like Doordarshan in India, Pakistan Television (PTV), Bangladesh Television (BTV), and the Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC) has always been contested by alternative models of public broadcasting such as community radio and television, and also by demands for political, cultural, and linguistic autonomy

at the provincial state and regional levels. Ironically enough, it is only after the privatization of television and the rise of regional language networks since the late 1980s and early 1990s that the televisual landscape in South Asia has been suffused with a variety of programming catering to a diversity of cultural interests that audiences could never have dreamt of in the heyday of state-sponsored public broadcasting networks. It is important, however, to recognize that there are public spaces of television culture in South Asia that are neither dominated by statist models of broadcasting nor driven by the market logics of private commercial entities.

Further, in the South Asian context, it can be argued that the private is not the binary opposite of the public but is in fact crucial to and constitutive of what we define as public culture in our societies. One only has to flip through a few television channels in South Asia to recognize how representations of traditionally private desires of sexuality and intimacy in soap operas, reality TV shows, and music programmes are literally turning the public/private divide inside out and creating hybrid spaces of culture that are neither public nor private in the Habermasian sense of the public sphere. As many postcolonial theorists have argued, the structural transformations of the public/private divide that Habermas approvingly delineates in his study of the emergence of the public sphere in the metropolitan capitals of Western Europe, did not evolve quite the same way in colonial India.¹⁰ In the colonial world, the material domain of the 'public' was directly under the control of British colonizers, and thus Indian nationalists, religious leaders, and cultural reformers had little or no ability to structurally transform the public sphere in ways that Habermas maps out in the European context. In colonial India, the private realms of the home, the family, and other domestic relations thus became the sites where the nationalists struggled to delineate their visions of modern history, culture, and traditional reforms. In the South Asian context, then, the private sphere is not the structural opposite of the public sphere but is instead its most intimate locus where traditionally 'public' concerns of community, nationality, and solidarity are debated and resolved.

Given the historical intimacy of the public and private in colonial India, the place of television – considered the most public of media in the most private of spaces – has always been a very complex one in the postcolonial context. Surprisingly, this historically significant distinction between the evolution of public culture in colonial India and Western Europe is hardly ever seen as a crucial and constitutive difference in global histories of public broadcasting in Television Studies where the public/private divide is seen as a universal construct of (European) modernity that is equally applicable to all television industries and cultures around the world. However, what is even more surprising is how little academic attention has been paid to television in historical analyses of the relationship between the public and private in South Asian studies, given how pervasive television has been both in the traditionally private space of the home and in the public spaces of national discourse. The essays in this special issue seek to redress this dual gap in the academic literature on the place of television in South Asian Studies and the place of South Asia in Television Studies by rethinking the relationship between television and public culture, acknowledging the role that it plays in structurally transforming the intimate histories of the public and private in contemporary South Asia and the South Asian diaspora.

This collection is divided into two sections. The first section brings together five articles that address a range of media spaces, texts, genres, industry dynamics, and audience formations. Taken together, these articles focus on topics that have not received sustained scholarly attention so far – cultures of news production and circulation in India, television talk shows and political culture in Pakistan, the quiz show genre, and so on. While there are entire regions, countries, and of course, topics, and issues left unaddressed, we

hope that these articles do suggest new avenues of inquiry and present a starting point for further research. The second section is designed as a ‘roundtable’ in which scholars who have written extensively on television and other media forms in South Asia reflect on the state of television and Television Studies. Thus, in addition to identifying emerging topics of interest and concern, these essays also foreground theoretical and methodological shifts and adjustments that we need to make if we are to adequately grasp the manifold ways in which television is at large not just in South Asia but the world over.

The first two articles approach the question of television and its publics by focusing on the domain of news production and circulation. First, Paula Chakravarty and Sahana Udupa draw our attention to the culture(s) of news production in relation to the political role of the news media, particularly 24 × 7 television news, after nearly two decades of economic liberalization in India. Their ethnographic study of the Times of India (Bangalore) newsroom, which charts both the changing relationship between news media production and the state as well as the dynamic relationship between the newspaper and the city’s middle class, cosmopolitan ‘public’ that has emerged with the IT boom of the last two decades, helps situate the growing popularity of commercial television news within broader changes in the contemporary media field. Highlighting the ways in which media and political fields overlap in a city like Bangalore, their article analyses how differing conceptions of the ‘public’ that shape a news organization’s management team as opposed to the journalists does over time lead to a news stories that are more variegated. The second article by Sangeet Kumar also grapples with the production and circulation of news but asks how publics cohere around ‘live’ television. In particular, Kumar focuses on live television coverage of the terrorist attacks that took place in November 2008 in Mumbai as a way to examine the changing structures and norms of television journalism and the notion of witnessing in the context of audience participation via social media networks. Examining this specific media event as a ‘disaster marathon’, the article moves us towards a more nuanced understanding of television news’ claim of liveness. As Kumar argues, this particular instance ‘underscores the paradox that the very immediacy that live television promises to its viewers by getting as close to the event as possible in order to close the ‘veracity gap’ is undermined’ as a number of television journalists got caught up with unfolding events in ways that altered the trajectory of the event itself.

Mobina Hashmi’s article is also concerned with a changing television and media landscape, but in relation to political talk in Pakistan. The liberalization of the television industry in Pakistan in the early 2000s led to the emergence of a range of new cable channels and the proliferation of news, talk, and commentary programmes. For arguably the first time, television in Pakistan served as a space for public discussion of sensitive political, social, and cultural issues. One of the unlikely stars of this new televisual environment was Ali Saleem who, as his female alter ego, ‘Begum Nawazish’, hosted a popular interview programme, *Late Night Show with Begum Nawazish Ali*, on Aaj TV from 2005 to 2007. As Hashmi explains, although the format of the *Late Night Show* stayed well within the conventions of a talk show, it was groundbreaking for its public performance of unconventional gender, sexual, and class roles. Saleem’s gender bending was the most visible and publicized aspect of the show, but another important aspect of the show was its willingness to make public topics that had previously remained private, such as homosexuality, recreational drug use, and criticism of the army’s role in Pakistani politics. Hashmi analyses this show to map the limits of socially and culturally acceptable discourses on politics, gender, and sexuality in Pakistani media and society as well as various formal and informal regulatory structures that shape television’s emergence as an important and intimate space for public, political talk.

Sreya Mitra, concerned with television's role in mediating relations between everyday life and collective imaginations of national identity and culture, focuses on an enduring, yet largely neglected television genre – the quiz show. Mitra begins by tracing how *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (KBC) became such a cultural phenomenon in India over the past decade by examining its 'localization' and the creative ways in which the show's producers tapped into and reworked Amitabh Bachchan's star image. She goes on to argue that in contrast to the earlier model of educational quiz shows telecast on the state broadcasting network, Doordarshan, KBC did not merely celebrate the acquisition of knowledge, but rather awarded this display of acumen with monetary rewards, and thus, with its celebration of aspirational consumerism, served as a crucial site where the country's ongoing transition from a socialist ethos to consumerist ideals was mediated.

Madhavi Mallapragada's article takes the case of MTV-Desi, a niche channel targeting South Asian-American youth, as a starting point for a larger discussion about the relationship between television, new media, and South Asian-American audiences. It offers a critical perspective on the present interest in targeting a 'desi' audience through channels like MTV-Desi, American Desi, or ImaginAsian, all of which are in turn shaped by factors such as the efforts to cater to the media and cultural tastes of Asian Americans through internationalizing, multiculturalizing, and racializing the cable and satellite flows of television in the United States, the satellite invasion from India since the late 1990s, and multiple attempts over the years to use public access and international channel space to reach South Asian immigrants. Connecting the politics and discourses surrounding ethnic/immigrant markets and MTV with earlier and concurrent attempts to target South Asian-American audiences, this article explores how the successes, failures, and re-emergence of television networks/channels foreground the issues at stake in imagining the diverse community of South Asian-Americans as a television market organized along the cultural and financial logic of categories such as Asian-American youth, Asian immigrants, Indian émigrés, South Asian/Asian-American, and other racial minorities.

The 'roundtable' section of this collection opens with an essay by Anandam Kavoori and Kalyani Chadha, in which they chart the transition in Indian television from state-run Doordarshan's hegemony to a multi-channel universe that reflects the working through of forces of globalization as well as the mediating influence of a host of local factors. Offering an overview of this period of change, this essay uses the 'rhizome' as a metaphor for understanding the varied 'determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions' that characterize television in contemporary India. In a similar vein, Nalin Mehta's essay also maps the changing television landscape in India by drawing attention to a range of policy and business challenges. Beginning with an overview of changes in regulation concerning various aspects of the television industry, Mehta goes on to address two other issues that remain largely unaddressed in South Asian media scholarship – political control of regional networks and a narrowly defined ratings and advertising system that underpins the television industry's business model and content development practices.

The next two essays focus on two specific cases in Indian television as a way to outline new domains of inquiry and, at the same time, bring new theoretical frameworks to bear on the study of television. Radhika Parameswaran's essay focuses on Barkha Dutt, host of the India-based NDTV news talk show 'We the People', as a symbolic portal into the rise of television news celebrity culture in India's rapidly evolving television culture. The essay begins by tracing Dutt's emergence as a news reporter and talk show host in relation to the role played by television journalism in reconfiguring the political terrain, and then goes on to explore Dutt's celebrity status in relation to her gender and class positionality in the culture of television news. This case study of Barkha Dutt suggests that

paying greater attention to ongoing changes in the journalism industry in India from a range of perspectives – star personalities, political economy, the talk show that claims to represent ‘the people’, and audiences – will revitalize and enrich the evolving trajectories of Television Studies. Following this, Purnima Mankekar examines lifestyle programming as a way to understand the role played by television in creating new aspirational subjects in contemporary India. Bringing an anthropological perspective to bear on the production and circulation of programmes on the NDTV Good Times channel, Mankekar’s analysis moves beyond ideological interpellation, a problematic that has dominated Television Studies for well over three decades now. While retaining a focus on issues of power and ideology, this essay invites us to consider how we might acknowledge and analyse the ‘non-ideological ways in which media move us, enrage us, drive us to tears, make us laugh uproariously, arouse us sexually, or seduce us into traveling through spaces and times distant from us’. Bringing recent theorizations of affect and embodiment to bear on lifestyle programming, Mankekar compels us to rethink our understanding of the relationship between television and audiences.

The final two essays step back from the specificities of this or that channel, genre, programme, or audience formation to reflect more broadly on the pasts and futures of Television Studies. John Hutnyk takes as his starting point the rapid proliferation of screens – television everywhere, so to speak – and asks how we might go beyond simply approaching television as woven into the fabric of culture, politics, and the economy everywhere. Pointing to the ways in which television, and to a certain extent, Television Studies, is caught up in a largely market-driven and neoliberal framework, Hutnyk challenges us to imagine ‘television’ differently and come up with other frameworks for understanding how television is in the world. Abhijit Roy also takes up the question of rethinking Television Studies, engaging with a broader debate sparked by Charlotte Brunson’s comment: ‘In some senses, television is too important to be left to television scholars; but at the same time, television scholars can show something of how we might understand this importance.’¹¹ For Roy, this rethinking of Television Studies in relation to History raises a key question: what implications does such a ‘shift in the academic aspiration of a discipline’ hold for scholars studying non-Western contexts? Building on two major essays that grapple with the question of rethinking the universalizing assumptions in disciplinary formations – one by Dipesh Chakrabarty (History) and the other by Shanti Kumar (Global Television Studies) – Roy traces the ‘necessary but impossible’ nature of the strategy that both Chakrabarty and Kumar outline. Suggesting that the impossibility should be seen as posing a creative challenge and not restriction, the essay ends by asking: Can Television Studies *as a whole* smoothly inscribe itself into History? (original emphasis). Given the goal we have set ourselves in this special issue – to reposition television in South Asian studies and South Asia in Television Studies through the framework of ‘Television At Large’ – it seems appropriate to close with Roy’s provocation for Television Studies at large.

Notes

1. Spigel, *Television after TV*, 2.
2. Rajagopal, *Politics After Television*; Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics*; Kumar, *Gandhi Meets Primetime*; Roy, “Television News and Democratic Change in India”; and Mehta, *India on Television*.
3. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 29. For a detailed consideration of the politics of knowledge production within the institutional site that has come to be designated ‘TV studies’. Also see Shanti Kumar, ‘Is There Anything Called Global Television Studies?’.

4. Appadurai and Breckenridge, 'Public Modernity in India'.
5. Ibid., 1.
6. Ibid., 2.
7. Ibid., 5.
8. Ibid., 14.
9. Ibid., 16.
10. See for instance, Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*; Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*; Mani, *Contentious Traditions*; Rajagopal, *Indian Public Sphere*.
11. Brunsdon, 'Is Television Studies History?'

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