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A Critical Political Economy Perspective on Indian Television: STAR, Hotstar, and Live Sports Streaming

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Abstract: The Indian television industry is transforming via an increasing number of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms. This shift from broadcast to OTT has given rise to research assessing the impact on the television ecosystem. With the case of Star Network, this study examines how the emergence of live sports streaming has affected the power dynamics in the sports broadcasting ecosphere. This study employs the Critical Political Economy framework to address the following question: How do television-based media conglomerates – and by extension television itself – negotiate the challenge of Internet-based digital media in India? Keeping the focus on sports live-streaming services, we study the transition from Star television network to Disney+ Hotstar, its corresponding OTT platform. We however argue that the Political Economy of Communication holds its ground despite the apparently disruptive promise of web-based platforms. Despite the Internet posing new challenges in terms of distribution networks, media conglomerates find a way to convert their dominance of the television industry into the OTT space.

Keywords: Star, Hotstar, OTT platforms, Critical Political Economy, live sports streaming, television, Indian capitalism

1. Introduction

Television in India has experienced a great transition from its early years of being under the state monopoly to private media conglomerates, ranging from a tool for development to an instrument for leisure. In the last three decades, television has gone from offering soap operas on a TV box to individual smartphone viewership. Much of this churning occurred when television began to be confronted by the Internet, both in terms of new horizons that could be co-opted and emergent challenges which had to be tackled otherwise. The foremost shift in approaching the category of 'the audience' posed by the Internet has been audience-optimization via demographic and psychographic metrics relentlessly harvested by the digitalized media economy (Kumar 2018). Television has not only co-opted this tactical modality but has also been significantly reorganized over the last decade. Channels and networks are therefore designed to address identified demographic clusters in different slots. However, television cannot possibly compete with the Internet concerning integrated audience metadata since web browsers, apps, and operating systems have unleashed insidious tracking systems in coalition with third-party applications, which define Internet capitalism.

The emergence of Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms has therefore opened a vital middle ground. Little original content is made for OTT platforms, which still mainly distribute content made for either television or the box-office. Nevertheless, it is also true that OTTs have been consistently gaining prominence, especially since COVID-19 lockdowns across the world. Indeed, to begin with, they have also split open the question of whether these platforms should be considered television or a different medium. There are two related fields of scholarly literature to investigate OTT platforms

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(Lobato 2019). The first derives from the perspective of new media theory, Internet studies, and platform studies. This approach needs to be revised to analyse OTT platforms concerning television and its evolution. The second way to examine OTT platforms is through television studies that include research on TV's digital and post-broadcast transformations. OTT platforms Like Hotstar, ALTBalaji, and many others "collect, curate, and distribute television programming via Internet distribution"; as such, Amanda Lotz describes them as portals (Lotz 2017). Portals, according to her, are the web-based equivalent of channels (ibid.). However, unlike channels, portals engage in curation rather than scheduling, allowing viewers to choose from various program offerings via complex interfaces. Lotz and Johnson attribute the distinctiveness of portals to their nonlinear capacity (Lotz 2014; Johnson 2019). Thus, OTT platforms encourage consumers to watch anything, anytime, allowing numerous paths through the television experience.

The rise of OTT platforms has also resulted in a shift in Indian sports broadcasting, with live sports streaming[1] emerging as a new way to watch sports events. There is a symbiotic relationship between sports and media (Jhally 1989). On the one hand, sports provide a great source of quality programs for media institutions; on the other hand, media assure them of the most reliable revenue stream. Live sports streaming has therefore translated sports into routine mega-media events (Tamir & Lehman-Wilzig 2022). Hotstar too has tapped into live sports streaming to establish its dominance in the online media market. Over 300 million viewers watched the Indian Premier League (IPL) 2019 final on Disney+ Hotstar, with a 74% increase in watch time compared to last year. Disney+ Hotstar earned more than 16.7 billion Indian rupees in revenue for the fiscal year 2021 (The Economic Times 2021b). Moreover, apart from cricket, Disney+ Hotstar also holds broadcasting rights for two other vital Indian leagues, the Pro Kabaddi League (PKL) and Indian Super League (ISL), which contributed to the Star's hegemony in live sports streaming.

Hence, live sports streaming has been a crucial way for television content and practices to escape the confines of broadcast media. However, they are neither innocent of the techno-politics of control instrumentalized by Internet capitalism, nor should we overlook their particular facilitation of economic and cultural hegemony in broadcast industries (Bouquillion & Ithurbide 2022). Therefore, we show that while changes in the television ecosystem have occurred due to the launch of OTT platforms, television's political economy's fundamental structure has remained resilient. Despite the challenges posed by Internet distribution, legacy media conglomerates like Star continue to hold significant advantages that act as a barrier to diversity, particularly in sports broadcasting. This study attempts to answer the following question: How do television-based media conglomerates – and by extension, television itself – negotiate the challenge of Internet-based digital media in India? The first section of the study critically analyzes Indian capitalism and how its changes affect the broadcasting industry. The second section describes how technological and economic advancements affected sports broadcasting in India and how Star dominated the industry. Finally, the third section discusses how traditional players use new tactics to rule the market, mainly live sports streaming, and how OTT platforms pose new challenges to the established structure of broadcasting.

[1] "Live streaming" refers to video transmission over the Internet in real-time without being recorded and saved first.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study employs the Critical Political Economy (CPE) approach to examine how television encounters the challenges posed by internet media and the resulting shifts in power dynamics in sports broadcasting (Hardy 2014). Moreover, CPE refers to approaches emphasizing unequal power-sharing and is critical of the systems that maintain and replicate those inequalities. Its roots lie in the 1930s and 1940s assessment of the capitalist and authoritarian political systems varying from fascist to parliamentary. Therefore, this critical tradition is influenced by Marxist scholarship, but this approach is not limited to Marxism; the tradition remains "committed to political enfranchisement, freedom of speech and intellectual inquiry, and social justice" (McChesney 2004, 47). While debates on Political Economy contributed significantly to our knowledge of conventional media, the continuities between old and new media capitalism have also been pointed out (McChesney 2007). Consequently, even though the Internet appears to be a radical disruption, digital media industries amplify twentieth-century capitalism's tendencies while facilitating the transactions of audience metadata.

Critics of CPE incriminate it of reductionism and economism. According to them, it lowers the complexity of influences shaping communication to a rudimentary economic rationale emanating from the predominant forces and relations of production. Reductionism implies attributing "complex cultural events and processes" – such as a film or television program – "to a single political, economic cause, such as the interests of the social class that controls the means of production" (Hesmondhalgh 2007, 47). Yet, pluralism by itself does not yield a substantive analysis because very often it is a way of disregarding, or at least downplaying, class analysis. As Fuchs argues, what we need is "to relate the notion of communication to the study of society, class, capitalism and the commons" (Fuchs 2019, 19). By focusing on communication as the very process of *communing,* Fuchs reminds us how the economic and non-economic are entangled in any cultural-political analysis, since the social totality is bound together in a conjunction (see Fuchs 2020). Since the sports-media conjunction has emerged as a powerful constellation in captivating public attention, it needs to be analyzed via the CPE approach to assess how the disruptive and reconciliatory forces have shaped this transition of the media economy.

The winning recipes of twenty-first-century television, at least in India, have been liveness (as in pageants, award ceremonies, tournaments, campaign extravaganzas, and breaking news) and reality television (Kumar 2015). Both emanated from running licensed franchises and official coverage contracts. Sports broadcasting follows from this cocktail of live coverage, recaps, highlights, and talk shows. Its transition to more intrusive Internet platforms available via more personalized devices makes it an acceptable instrument of bridging television and the Internet – precisely the trajectory we try to capture in this paper via Star television's transition to Disney+ Hotstar. However, in doing so, we also ask how the techno-politics of control changes between television and digital media.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

The primary research question guiding this study is: *How do television-based media conglomerates* – and by extension, television itself – *negotiate the challenge of Internet-based digital media in India?*

This question is bisected around the two key variables around which this paper builds its case – Star television and live sports streaming:

1. After the liberalization of the Indian economy and the emergence of cable and satellite television, how did channel ownership consolidate, allowing Star to become a dominant broadcaster?
2. What part does live sports streaming play in television broadcasters, i) leveraging their position to transit into OTT platforms, or ii) finding their expansive zeal obstructed by the Internet's "democratic dividend"?

3.1. Selection and Analysis of New Challenges in Sports Broadcasting

The ownership concentration in the sports media economy is a part of the more significant issue of ownership concentration in the Indian broadcast industry. It is evident from Tables 1, 2, and 3 that Star Network has been a dominant player in sports broadcasting since 2015, particularly in cricket. 2015 was a watershed moment in sports broadcasting history in India, as Star launched Hotstar, whose primary agenda was establishing its position in the online media market through streaming sports content. It dominates the Indian sports broadcasting business by investing vast capital in buying broadcasting rights. Besides cricket, Star has secured broadcasting rights for Pro Kabaddi League for $111 million for five seasons. Moreover, ISL, India's football league, has sold broadcasting rights to Star which is one of the league's organizers.

Years	Broadcast Rights	Value	Digital Rights	Value
2012- 2018	Star Network (Star Sports)	$750 million	-	-
2018- 2023	Star Network	$944 million	Star Network	Inclusive

Table 3.1 The ownership of television rights for Indian cricket

(Home matches of the national team)

Years	Broadcast Rights	Value	Digital Rights	Value
2018- 2022	Star Network	$2.40 billion	Star Network	Inclusive
2023- 2027	Star Network	$3.05 billion	Viacom 18	$3.02 billion

Table 3.2 The ownership of television rights for IPL

Years	Broadcast Rights	Value	Digital Rights	Value
2015- 2023	Star Network	$ 1.9 billion (appx)	-	-
2024- 2027	Star Network	$ 3 billion (appx)	Star Network	Inclusive

Table 3.3 The ownership of television rights for ICC Matches

This paper summarizes the patterns of ownership concentration in the broadcast industry before examining how Star has acquired its dominance using the case study method. According to Stake, "Case study is the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances" (1995). Hence, the case study method is best suited to analyze the significance of Star in the sports broadcasting market. The case of Star's expansion towards Hotstar in this paper is essentially predicated on live sports streaming, which constitutes the key focus area of our analysis.

In addition, the study uses secondary sources to collect qualitative data like government documents, official websites of sports organizations, and national news portals. For analysis, this study finds out with the literature review that the streaming market has four major challenges in live sports streaming that pose challenges to the incumbents, including new players, new intermediaries, illegal sports streaming, and shifts in broadcast rights (Bilton 2019; Evens et al. 2013; Hardy 2014; Strangelove 2015). After examining how Star became a dominant player, this study analyzes how these four challenges affect incumbents in maintaining their dominating position. Furthermore, in the last part, the study discusses how Hotstar has overcome these issues to become a dominant player in the streaming market and keep its dominant position in the sports broadcasting business.

4. Political Economy of the Indian Broadcasting Industry

In theory, capitalist economies allow free trade with equal opportunities, while in practice, they promote disparities of access and concentration of power in the hands of a few intermediaries (Dasgupta et al. 2021; McChesney 2013). The CPE theory focuses on such disparities and is critical of structures that support and recreate unequal power allocation (Hardy 2014). Hence, it is vital to look at Indian capitalism through the lens of the CPE framework to analyse how there have been disparities in power-sharing in the economic system since independence. India chose the path of centrally planned development and regulated economic policies following independence. The broadcast industry's expansion was also sluggish following this period (Rajagopal 1993). The scenario changed in 1991, when Prime Minister Narasimha Rao's government, with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, began de-regulating the economy. The reforms aimed to increase private and foreign investment functions and drive the economy to be more market-oriented. Therefore, several foreign and domestic companies launched their TV channel in India soon after. The broadcast industry has benefited from liberalization in two ways: viewers can now access over 40 TV channels, at least in urban areas, and TV programs are of higher quality (Manchanda 1998). However, the reforms were primarily aimed at the formal economy, with the agriculture industry and the urban informal sector remaining unaffected. As a result, there was unequal economic development and capital distribution. In addition, there was a concentration of economic power across several industries, including the broadcast sector, where the top five broadcasters controlled a sizable portion of the revenue.

Economic power is concentrated due to ineffective regulatory measures that deter anti-competitive behaviours like horizontal integration and cross-media holdings. However, capitalism took a new turn after the advent of the digital economy. In its early stages, digital capitalism in India, as elsewhere, allowed relatively free access to more information. It also encouraged many start-up businesses, particularly in the platform economy, like Flipkart, Uber, and Zomato. Later on, however, James Curran (2012) claims that capitalism influences the Internet far more than the other way around. Big conglomerates have succeeded in making the market less competitive and establishing their monopolistic power in the market. It is questionable whether India is witnessing a hegemonic nation's upsurge that fully supports big enterprises' interests (Thomas 2019).

The neoliberal Indian economy is being shaped by a close partnership of public and private capital to build a vital digital infrastructure that selected players in the privileged position could harness. For example, the Indian government's Digital India project is based on a public-private partnership (PPP) in which private companies are heavily engaged in forming the country's digital future (Thomas 2019). It sought financial support, which Jio's 2,50,000 crore rupee ($300 billion) investment in next-generation wireless Internet connectivity was set to provide (Mukherjee 2019). In exchange, Reliance got support from the government to establish Jio's 4G services, guaranteeing free voice calls and unlimited data. In addition, Reliance accomplished this through unprecedented leverage of loans from public sector banks. The government assisted Jio in avoiding many regulations and allowing it to dominate the market fast. Jio's free services have predictably disrupted the Indian telecom industry, with other cellular operators losing their revenue and customer base (ibid.).

Therefore, Indian capitalism endorses already powerful corporations gaining further prominence. The media economy is no exception, where incumbents have a stranglehold over distribution rights. However, incumbent media players like Hotstar face a challenge from large conglomerates like Reliance, which have begun to harness their powerful legacy businesses into the platform economy[2] (Athique & Parthasarathi, 2020). Due to India's poor regulatory policies, several large conglomerates, Star and Reliance, are making it difficult for new and small players to survive in the market, particularly in the media industry. Therefore, it has become vital to look at the history of concentration in the media economy. Towards this aim, this paper charts the trajectory of sports streaming, which has been vital in consolidating the value of at least one major media player, Hotstar.

5. Star and Sports Broadcasting in the Cable & Satellite Era

This section examines how sports broadcasting evolved in India with the changes in technology and economic policies and how Star became a dominant player in TV broadcasting, particularly sports. Cricket is unquestionably the most celebrated sport in India. Although other sports, such as kabaddi and football, are also popular in India, the commercial importance of cricket rights far outweighs those of any other sport. For example, the IPL media rights for the forthcoming five years were auctioned for a record $6.02 billion (Gollapudi 2022). In contrast, Star secured the media rights for PKL, the second most popular league in India, for $111 million for the same duration (Gupta 2021). Therefore, given the widespread appeal of cricket, it is perhaps unsurprising that it has been closely intertwined with the advancement of Indian sports broadcasting.

However, the situation was quite different in the early days of sports broadcasting. In the 1980s, Doordarshan had a monopoly in broadcasting due to its access to requisite capital, infrastructure, and capacity to broadcast live sports. It would thus take advantage and impose conditions on sports event organizers, often refusing to pay for the rights to show their games. In some instances, it charged sports organizations like the Board of Control for Cricket in India (BCCI) for broadcasting their events (Evens 2014). After liberalization, the television landscape changed dramatically following the establishment of Rupert Murdoch’s Star Network and subsequent foreign and local television networks. Indian television viewers can watch various programs on Star channels for a nominal monthly fee, including the US Open, WWF wrestlers, music videos, American soap operas, morning cartoon shows, and news. Moreover, the arrival of satellite television networks and the Indian government’s deregulatory policy helped BCCI dismantle Doordarshan’s monopoly on cricket broadcasting. For

[2] Reliance has launched its Jio mobile network with Jio TV and Jio Music (Mukherjee 2019). It has al-ready started acquiring start-ups or small-scale businesses. For instance, it has acquired a majority stake in Saavn, an online music streaming platform.

England's 1992-93 tour of India, BCCI sold global telecast rights to Trans World International (TWI) (Evens et al. 2013) . TWI then sold the broadcasting rights of the event in India to Doordarshan for an estimated 1 million US Dollars price (ibid.). The BCCI gained nearly 600,000 US Dollars, labelling the exchange as the BCCI's first substantial revenue from a broadcasting contract, with about 1 billion USD in net profits. Therefore, the Doordarshan monopoly broke after liberalization, and the media market became more diverse and plural.

However, there is no evidence that the concentration level in Indian industries has decreased since neoliberal reforms. After liberalization, the new regulatory policies accompanied an easing of controls that restricted natural tendencies toward ownership concentration, as evident from the establishment of a more lenient system for mergers and acquisitions. By leveraging such a lenient regulatory regime, the conglomerates have used anti-competitive practices to dominate the market. Here, the main focus is on horizontal concentration and cross-media ownership strategies. The issue of whether these strategies are anti-competitive has been widely debated. On the one hand, these strategies allow companies to provide better products and services to their consumer with minimal expenses. On the other hand, the market has become concentrated due to these strategies. Following liberalization, there was a sharp rise in mergers and acquisitions, especially of the horizontal variety across a wide range of sectors, including broadcasting. Star has a long history of horizontal concentration through acquisitions and mergers with competitors. It has produced several successful programs by integrating with other firms since its inception. For instance, Star and ESPN started a new sports channel, Prime Sports (later renamed Star Sports), in collaboration in 1996, which obtained the television rights to Indian cricket (home matches of the national team) from 1995 to 1999. According to several studies, horizontally integrated distributors may acquire enormous power and participate in monopoly pricing, reducing the interests of consumers in terms of cost and variety (Evens & Donders 2016).

Moreover, several research findings on price evolution have discovered positive relationships between ownership concentration and cost rise (Goolsbee & Petrin 2004). Due to horizontal concentration, only a few media conglomerates have controlled the Indian sports broadcasting industry, leaving little space for new entries. Moreover, in India, many media organizations are trying to merge vertically to market cross-media, acquiring or developing multimedia platforms. Star, ZEE TV, and other media conglomerates have business in broadcasting (TV channels, FM radio station) and distribution platforms (DTH and MSO). TRAI asserts that companies with cross-media ownership holding dominant positions in various media sectors may impact media pluralism negatively (TRAI 2013). Hence, Star established its supremacy in the television industry through anti-competitive practices such as horizontal integration and cross-media ownership, which enabled Star to purchase the broadcast rights to the IPL for an exorbitant fee.

Star spent an enormous fee of $2.55 billion on the IPL's five-year television and digital rights in late 2017 (Reuters 2017). The reason for buying IPL's rights for a vast amount is not because it is a cash-rich cricket league in India but because its significance is beyond cricket. The symbiotic relationship between IPL and Bollywood established India as the new "cricket capital", with its massive business capable of attracting viewers and increasing profitability (Gupta 2011; Rasul & Proffitt 2011). In four years since Hotstar began streaming the IPL live, the league's viewership has grown from 41 million (in 2015) to 110 million (in 2016) and from 130 million (in 2017) to 202 million (in 2018). That is a 55.3 percent rise in one year alone. These investments in the sports industry have helped Hotstar attract more viewers through live sports streaming. However, as live sports streaming has grown in popularity, the dynamics of the sports economy have shifted dramatically.

6. Live Sport Streaming

Over the last two decades, Indian governments have invested substantial capital in digital empowerment (Thomas 2012). In this series, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the "Digital India" campaign on 1 July 2015 to ensure citizens can access government services online by enhancing digital infrastructure and advancing Internet connectivity. The key player in this campaign has been Reliance Jio, which began offering mobile subscribers free calls and Internet plans at a fraction of the market price. It has been argued that India's platform ecosystem has been shaped not so much by private enterprise as by the license of the Indian state (Athique and Kumar 2022). Jio's success has been marked by its facelift as a "national champion" under the state-capital relationship, which has fostered an "Indian Gilded Age" (Fitzgerald 2020), best manifested in the disruptive prowess of its predatory data plans (Mukherjee 2019). OTT platforms have, however, seen a significant upsurge since 2015 precisely because of the above, aiding the projected revenues from sports streaming. Of course, this would suggest that widespread access to the Internet, and by extension to streaming services, was made available almost by a "public-private" decree. Television itself, and live sports streaming in particular, has benefitted from the Internet as a distribution system, where television content could be available in perpetuity on OTT platforms. However, new challenges have also emerged in conflict (see Hutchins, Li, & Rowe 2019).

6.1. New Players

Before streaming, traditional players had enjoyed several decades of relatively prosperous and uncontested control in the sports media, thereby thriving on scarcity in the sports content economy, which had high entry barriers, making it hard for new enterprises to enter the industry. Economic policies frequently created local monopolies or oligopolies, pre-existing contractual agreements impeded competition, and companies faced exorbitant start-up expenses (ibid.). After 2015, many start-ups entered the platform economy due to improved digital infrastructure and government support. Indian governments have raised substantial political capital on India's "global positioning" as a digital power (Thomas 2012). The government has worked arduously to build the infrastructure needed with the help of the "Digital India" programme. Many entrepreneurs have been creating platform brands across various marketplaces and services, for example, Ola, Flipkart, and PayTM (Athique & Parthasarathi 2020). This holds true for sports streaming as well. Sports streaming is another area where there is digital plenitude. According to Hutchins and Rowe, digital plenitude refers to lower barriers to access and costs, which have increased the number of media organizations, clubs, and even individual athletes who can generate and distribute content for Internet consumption (2009). More significant users can now access and distribute live sports content (ibid.). It is argued that digital plenitude has enabled new sports broadcasting players, increasing the tension for traditional influential players. For instance, multi-sports aggregator FanCode, a homegrown Indian brand, has broadcasting rights for international cricket in West Indies, Ireland, Zimbabwe, and Bangladesh.

6.2. New Intermediaries

The new intermediaries, mainly technology firms, have become relevant by regulating consumption rather than controlling content (Bilton 2019). Search engines, social media platforms, and Internet service providers do not create or produce content but allow access to content for a little fee or for free, and they make money by selling ads or user data. Their marketing strategy does not necessitate investment in content production, primarily if content can be obtained from consumers or procured at a low cost. (Hesmondhalgh 2010; Keen 2007). Amazon Prime Video has evolved from a distribution platform to a proprietary content producer. It has also won broadcast rights in New Zealand for international cricket. In addition, Reliance Jio launched 4G services in 2016, promising unlimited Internet data and free calls. Through such schemes, it sought to acquire a wide range of customers and offer an e-commerce platform and various services that included cloud computing, OTT platforms, and an online payment system to perform data analytics and mining (Mukherjee 2019). This shift in the media business, from production to consumption, has created a new challenge for the dominant players (Bilton 2019). New intermediaries have also shown significant attention in producing on-demand content in recent years. They have made free content more widely available, and many customers try to access it for free, whether legally or illegally. On the other hand, this free material can create ad revenues, user data collection, analysis, and highly profitable predicted customer profiles (ibid.). For instance, Facebook's failed bid for IPL in 2017 shows it is already looking into live sports streaming to challenge the dominance of incumbents.

6.3. Illegal Sports Streaming

Another issue in sports broadcasting after the commencement of live sports streaming is illegal sports streaming. Illegal sports streaming has become a widespread problem, assisted by free distribution software that allows almost everyone on the Internet to record a program and stream that to others for little or no expense. A TV tuner card can be purchased for as little as $50 to become a do-it-yourself web broadcaster. Illegal sports and other broadcast content streaming has become common due to low entry fees, minimal technical skills, and freely accessible software (Strangelove 2015). The incumbent company's authentication service is becoming more popular, but it struggles to compete with piracy's far more expansive library, ease of use, and openness.

Due to online piracy, most TV shows, films, and sports events are now free. According to illegal sports streaming research, viewers do not demand a high-quality copy of their sport. Immediacy is more important than video quality (Sakthivel 2011). Across the world, unauthorized sports streaming is on the increase. Around 20 million people watched the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil for 32 days on an illegal streaming platform (Mann 2014). Thousands of unauthorized broadcasts from illegal websites providing viewers with free live retransmission over the web are generated every year during significant sporting events. There are very few effective legal remedies for the illicit streaming of sports. In India, there are no definitive laws regarding the liability of OTT platforms for copyright violations. It is a big issue for incumbents along with new intermediaries.

6.4. Shifts in Broadcast Rights

Another challenge faced by Hotstar is a shift in broadcast rights. A couple of years back, traditional broadcasting rights were sold alongside digital rights for streaming on OTT platforms and sometimes to the same company. Digital rights, on the other hand, are now sold separately due to their exponentially increasing value. BCCI believes that the value of digital rights will increase in the coming years and hence will not enter into any long-term agreements. As a result of this shift, many large corporations not in the broadcast business can enter the market to acquire the digital rights of sports.

These four major shifts in live sports streaming play a crucial role in transforming the sports broadcasting ecosystem by providing opportunities for other players to acquire cricket broadcast rights. However other media companies have digital rights to various sporting events, but Hotstar currently has the highest bidding broadcast rights. Therefore, it is vital to look at, despite challenges such as new entrants, new intermediaries, illegal sports streaming, and a shift in broadcast rights, how Hotstar retains most broadcast rights in India, particularly cricket.

7. Hotstar and the Concentration of Economic Power

The Internet was long expected to be at the forefront of democratizing the mass communications market. YouTube is also cited as an enabler of a wide variety of independent “YouTubers” on its platform. Media conglomerates preserve dominant market positions through capital, branding, cross-media promotion, and advertising partnerships (McChesney 2008). Television has been shaped by this contest between democratization and technopolitical control while subsuming within the battleground of corporate power and technologies emergent with the Internet.

Star invested in the technology that powers its video app to support the discrepancies in bandwidth, operating systems, and viewing devices. Its programming could run over 7000 operating systems and screen sizes, which is impossible for new entrants to acquire. Moreover, mergers and acquisitions have become a trend in the Indian television ecosystem with the expansion of OTT platforms. The substantial expense of keeping up with emerging technologies also contributes to increased mergers. Companies frequently form alliances or merge with competitors to share the cost risks of new initiatives. As a result of greater concentration, partnerships may negatively affect critical markets and create competition issues. The increasing mergers and acquisitions have impeded media pluralism and diversity (Iosifidis 2014). Disney launched its OTT platform Disney+ in November 2019 in the United States and expanded it rapidly to several other countries, including India. In India, Disney acquired Star's parent company, 21st Century Fox, and therefore, Disney+ was integrated with Hotstar as Disney+ Hotstar in April 2020. This merger is noteworthy because, after this agreement, Disney India became India's most prominent television broadcaster with its most extensive content library. The merger of Disney+ Hotstar benefits from economies of scale, which lowers costs and allows for more competitive pricing. It can also engage in anti-competitive practices such as temporarily cutting prices and leveraging marketing and other assets to cripple under-resourced competitors. Large companies benefit from economies of scale because they may utilize shared resources to cut costs and take advantage of multimedia holdings, such as cross-promotion (Hardy 2010). Furthermore, Hotstar has kept its price low compared to other OTT platforms, giving other OTT platforms great difficulty.

The challenge posed by new players is insignificant in the live sports streaming market as, despite low-cost content distribution supported by the Internet, there is no digital plurality in the sports streaming market. Only a few companies hold broadcast rights, and Star controls most of it, including all International Cricket Council events. Moreover, economies of scale strengthen the dominance of larger businesses over newcomers to the market. Technological advancement has removed scarcity-based monopolies, but “the natural monopoly of economies of scale” still exists (Graham et al. 1999, 24). The assumption that new network companies will compete with existing power players ignored the cost benefits of large-scale production. They also try to control gateways to services, intellectual property rights, and sources through surveillance and data mining to track and target users (Turow 2011). Therefore, it is still hard for new players in the sports streaming business to acquire a significant position.

New intermediaries have started to acquire some broadcast rights for cricket series. However, incumbents still dominate because new intermediaries can make high-risk production or broadcast rights investments, but incumbents also have the advantage of having a cable television channel. Because the streaming industry is still in its early stages, it is volatile and unpredictable. As a result, new intermediaries cannot take considerable financial risk. In addition, because Internet distribution is cost-effective, incumbents can offset it with their cable distribution. In the issue of illegal sports streaming, incumbents have the advantage of having a considerable portion of overall viewers who still choose to watch sports on television, where they can watch the tournament on their already paid cable subscription. From the cable broadcast, the incumbents can balance the loss from illegal sports streaming. But this is the case when the broadcaster has the license for both television and online streaming. Moreover, Star is currently leading the sports media market. It has secured all domestic cricket's television broadcast and streaming rights under BCCI for a massive $944 million for the next five years, outbidding competitors including Sony Pictures Networks India and Reliance Jio in 2018. Recently, the broadcaster monopoly in the IPL ended when Disney+ Hotstar lost IPL digital rights for the Indian subcontinent from 2023-27 to Viacom18. Reliance Industries Limited, on the other hand, owns Viacom18 (India Today 2022). As a result, IPL digital rights have shifted from one conglomerate to another, perpetuating the concentration in the live-streaming market.

Media conglomerates are, therefore, adept at leveraging their position in one segment across technological and demographic barriers. They could exploit their established relationships with advertisers, for instance, by offering cross-platform promotional packages. Owing to easier access to large capital, they can invest in web-based businesses to conduct research and development and use their financial muscle to outspend rivals and outlast the competition.

8. Conclusion

The rise of OTT platforms has enforced a reconfiguration of the equilibrium upon which the television industry flourished, especially concerning sports broadcasting. This paper has outlined the historical trajectory of media's initially reluctant and later wholehearted uptake of sports broadcasting as a lucrative programming item. It began by employing the CPE framework to address the question: How do television-based media conglomerates – and by extension, television itself – negotiate the challenge of Internet-based digital media in India? It, therefore, assessed the significance of the Internet challenge for Indian television by paying particular attention to the role played by live sports streaming. We identify the challenges television-based conglomerates face in the streaming market, mainly since OTT platforms provide a low-cost direct distribution channel. However, media conglomerates transitioned to the Internet offering lucrative economies of scale, lowering costs, and enabling more competitive pricing. Indeed, they also use anti-competitive strategies, such as temporarily reducing prices and leveraging marketing and other advantages to disable under-resourced competitors. Nevertheless, a formulation such as digital plenitude mystifies the power of the Internet. The CPE perspective shows that incumbent conglomerates benefit from branding, cross-promotion, and economies of scale, which are reinforced by mergers and acquisitions that assist their streaming business.

As it turns out, the Internet is no universally identifiable force but one mediated and shaped strategically by the dynamics of state-capital relations. The Indian state has championed Reliance Jio to facilitate the "disruptive" spread of the Indian Internet, partly to barricade "digital sovereignty" against Silicon Valley monopolies[3]. However, as we have shown, this protectionist Political Economy against monopolistic corporate control does not translate to media ecosystems within the national boundaries. Media conglomerates have not only ruled the Indian media space before the spread of streaming services, but they also continue to dominate even afterward, of which Hotstar has been a key example. Much is often made of both – the shift from broadcast infrastructure as a public technology to satellite television's multiplicity of private enterprises and the emergence of web-based platforms to bypass television. However, as we shift focus from media as public infrastructure toward media as curative platforms, the techno-politics of control, which is at the heart of the Political Economy of Communication, has not changed in proportion to the rhetoric.

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[3] After Reliance launched the discourse of data sovereignty and Meta-owned WhatsApp's payment services were held up for approval by the Indian government, the Silicon Valley giants sensed the weather and made substantial investments into Jio Platforms. Facebook bought a 9.99% stake in Jio, while Google followed it with a 7.73% stake (The Economic Times 2021a). Jio's parent company, Reliance Industries Ltd., is also involved in an ongoing legal battle with Amazon over supremacy in the retail business.

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