How Two Socio-Political Debate Shows in India Emblemize the Culture Industry Thesis

Prashant Deepak Waikar, U1230743A

Total Word Count: 3,522 words
**Introduction**

This paper seeks to analyse the ways in which two Indian TV news socio-political debate shows, *The Newshour* (Times Now) and *The Buck Stops Here* (NDTV) are emblematic of the Culture Industry thesis. To achieve this, three episodes were viewed; two from the former, and one from the latter. Anchored by Arnab Goswami, the two episodes from *The Newshour* debated (1)\(^1\) Bollywood actor Salman Khan’s sentencing for his involvement in a hit-and-run accident, and (2)\(^2\) convicted terrorist Yakub Memon’s death sentencing. Anchored by Barkha Dutt, the debate\(^3\) from *The Buck Stops Here* discussed the religious intolerance directed towards Bollywood actor Shah Rukh Khan. This paper shall proceed by giving an overview of the Culture Industry thesis, before presenting the relevant arguments.

**The Culture Industry Thesis**

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s (1972) Culture Industry thesis is an unforgiving analysis of mass cultural products under capitalism. The two neo-marxists argue that, under the capitalist ideology and the concomittant industrial mode of production, the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture has collapsed, culminating into, as they term it, mass culture. Here, Horkheimer and Adorno do not refer to the sociological definition of culture, or, the norms, values and beliefs of groups or societies (Griswold, 2013). Rather, it is a reference to various cultural elements, such as art, music, and the sciences. Rooted in the capitalist mode of production, mass culture is consequent of the banalization of the different cultural elements into mass produced commodities; from ascetic rigour and self-discipline, to aesthetic obsession and indulgence-based consumption (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Horkheimer and Adorno lambast this as a perversion of culture. To them, culture should ‘operate’ as a ballast against the subversiencing of critical inquiry that is deemed to occur under capitalism. Though the term, industry, in the Culture Industry does not refer to a single institution or business enterprise, Horkheimer and Adorno give special attention to the
institutions of the media, and oft cite their dismay at the film, music, and television industries. The media produces and reproduces “sameness”, insofar “that nothing can appear which is not marked at birth” (p. 128). With the sheer volume of mass cultural products, consumers genuinely believe they have a plethora of choices available to them. However, the synonymity of mass cultural products in effect results ‘choice’ being illusionary.

In relation to the two Indian socio-political debate shows, this paper shall deconstruct and analyze the principle of ‘sameness’ that underpins the Culture Industry thesis into three arguments. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) describe three such tropes to be of style (or effect), predictability, and pseudoindividuality. Relating these themes to the debate shows, this paper shall first focus upon the prioritization of ‘style’ (clips, graphics, ‘catchy’ headlines), and how the shows place the presentation of ‘aesthetic style’ on a pedestal. Secondly, this paper shall peer into the predictable trajectories of both shows. Related to the Culture Industry thesis and the banal predictability of mass cultural products, this paper shall articulate how both shows perpetually erupt into chaos. Finally, this paper shall discuss the pseudoindividuality of both shows presenters. Pseudoindividuality refers to the appropriation and subjugation of individualism “into the generality.” such that any notion of individuality becomes mass-produced (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972, p. 155). To elaborate on this last point, this paper shall analyze the similarities of the two presenters’ roles.

‘Style’

Right off the bat, the opening scene of The Newshour introduces the episode with the phrase, ‘Super Primetime’, before repeatedly flashing the graphic throughout the show. Typically, ‘primetime’ is a broadcasting term referring to specific time periods in the evening, when the largest audience size is tuned in to the programmes airing (Pariera, Hether, Murphy, Buffington, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2014). Arguably, the use of the additional ‘super’,
functions as a self-serving hyperbole to construct the perception that viewers are watching the crème de la crème of Indian news. Though it has been stated that ‘super primetime’ does refer to a specific timeslot within the ‘primetime’ bracket that has an even higher viewership (Achalapathi & Ramana Murthy, 2008), the show’s need to superlatively and unendingly ‘remind’ viewers of their own ‘super primetime-ness’ warrants rigid questioning. First, the extent to which the layman is aware of the definitions broadcast jargon is certainly debatable. Rationally, individuals, even avid followers of news, cannot be expected to ‘know’ everything. Thus, any claims (if made) that the objective definition of ‘super primetime’ genuinely resonates with viewers should be be taken with a grain of salt. Secondly, repetition also functions as an advertising strategy that attempts to construct positive beliefs towards brands (Lee, Ahn, & Park, 2015). Essentially, these two arguments suggest that the (over)active use of the ‘super primetime’ label functions primarily as a marketing gimmick.

Repetition, however, is not limited to mere branding strategies. Here, the principle of repetition permeates into the production of very specific snippets of the larger context of news events. For instance, The Newshour episode on Salman Khan’s verdict repeatedly showed looped clips of Salman Khan’s journey to and from the court. The clips were accompanied with statements (also on repeat), including (1) ‘Salman’s Defence: Many Fault Lines’, (2) ‘Family By Him Throughout’, (3) ‘He Did Not Breakdown’, and (4) ‘He Asked Sisters Not To Cry’. At the corner of the screen, perhaps for good measure, an additional ‘Detailed Coverage’ graphic was included. The Buck Stop’s Here debate on the allegations of religious intolerance towards Shah Rukh Khan included a more flamboyant range of repetitive statements. Two of these included (1) ‘Indian Icon In The Line Of Hate Fire’, and (2) Icon Hunting: BJP Motormouths Target SRK. In the course of criticizing BJP’s Yogi Adityanath’s equating of Shah Rukh Khan with terrorist Hafiz Saeed, one panelist commented that ‘he would like to have what he (Adityanath) is smoking’. This sarcastic jab implied Adityanath’s comments
could have only been made in the state of euphoric illusion that follows from smoking marijuana. While the comment was made in jest, the channel was quick to flash the statement on the occasions that panelist spoke again.

The repetitious mundanity of *The Newshour’s* ‘detailed coverage’ and *The Buck Stops Here’s* deliberate choice of draconian terms does less to inform, and more to dramatise the significance of both events as ‘newsworthy’. Indeed, *The Newshour* topped it off with, literally, a minute-by-minute (throughout the 54-minute debate) visual update of the number of Twitter ‘tweets’ viewers were sending in. The final count stood at 15,592. Intriguingly, the debate on Yakub Memon’s execution received a paltry 2,392 ‘tweets’ in comparison. *Ceteris paribus*, the disparity in ‘tweets’ likely suggests a mirroring disparity in viewer interest. This, it appears, is symbolic of the larger trend towards the “Bollywoodization in TV news”, in which Bollywood-related events receive more interest than most others (Thussu, 2007, p. 104). Though the specific issues debated were meant to be related to judicial processes and religious intolerance, both shows consientiously introduced their segments with coverage of the actors. *The Newshour* spared no effort in offering a ‘play-by-play’ summary of Salman Khan’s court date, detailing the arrival of each sibling to his house, the ‘worried looks’ on their faces, Salman Khan hugging his parents, waving to his supporters, the time he reached the court, and subsequently left for home. This ‘commentary’ spanned four minutes. Similary, *The Buck Stops Here* introduced the show with a five minute snippet of a prior interview Dutt had conducted with Shah Rukh Khan. The interview was in conjunction with his 50th birthday, within which discussions of religious tolerance crept up. Thussu (2007) points out that this Bollywoodization trend owes its success to the fact that this approach of news coverage seems to propel viewer ratings. It, of course, helps that both these actors are among India’s biggest film stars.
Relating to style, Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) state, “the style of the culture industry, which no longer has to test itself against any refractory material, is also the negation of style.” (p. 129-130). The privilege of functioning within (effective) monopolies, which has been the case since the industry began deregulation in the 1990s (Thussu, 2007), allows the respective shows to regurgitate each other’s stylistic methods, insofar that it results in a bland concoction of ubiquity. Regardless of which channel one chooses to watch, it becomes inevitable that they will be greeted with hyperboles, and attempts at twisting mundane occurrences - who would not have a worried look if they had a court date? – into news items that somehow warrant debates on socio-political platforms. Particularly, this process involves constructing the incidents that affect the lives of celebrities into melodramatic events that, suddenly, ‘deserve’ to occupy the national headlines. While it may be argued that the Bollywoodization trend is embedded within TV journalism partially because of viewers’ affinity and demand for Bollywood related news (Thussu, 2007), the Culture Industry thesis dismisses such an argument as naïve. Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) rip apart similar ‘concessions’ by arguing that the ideological stronghold that mass culture products have over ‘the masses’ rests in the ability of monopolies to leverage on their economic advantages and, thus, institute ideological dominance over society. In other words, the consumers’ ability to choose is ‘always already’ predisposed and dominated by the “hegemonic process” that manufactures their consent (Ahmed, 2008, p. 81). Though this is a fatalistic argument, and assumes that both producers and consumers of cultural products are passive actors (Tzanelli, 2008), the reality of the close networks of power between politicians, corporations, and the media moguls in India (Saeed, 2015) renders this hegemony palpable.

**Predictability and Permanency in Chaos**

Central to the Culture Industry thesis’ proposition of standardization is the predictable thematic trajectories these mass cultural products are imbued with (Horkheimer & Adorno,
In describing Hollywood, they state that “As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end,” (p. 125). Implicit, then, is the inevitability that characterizes the expectations one may have when consuming these products. The two debate shows exemplify a similar idea in their seemingly inevitable eruption into tonally aggressive chaos. The Newshour debate on Yakub Memon’s execution involved seven panelists with different political allegiances. The show was rampant with interruptions from the panelists and Goswami alike. The sheer magnitude incidents made it impractical to keep track of them. Qualitatively, however, there were a few ‘key’ examples. Tasleem Ahmed Rehmani, the solitary Muslim on the panel, and head of the Muslim Political Council, appeared to be interrupted the most. He voiced some opposition against the death penalty on the grounds that it was not applied to the individuals involved in the demolition of the Babri Masjid. He was repeatedly accused by Goswami, Rakesh Sinha (RSS) and Susahant Sareen for attempting to communalise the issue, of being a ‘Jihadi sympathiser’, and it was suggested that he should move to Pakistan. Rehmani understandably took great offence to these statements.

Furthermore, the Communist Party of India’s (CPI) representative, Atul Kumar Anjan attempted to state the importance of all political parties coming together to effectively discuss volatile issues. Sareen interrupted him and mockingly questioned the communists interest in nation-building. Similarly, John Dayal of the All India Christian Council, was repeatedly attacked verbally by Goswami for his opposition to the death penalty, and was continuously accused of being part of a larger demographic of activists who cry foul play only when the rights of ‘terrorists’ and ‘rapists’ are violated. R. Rajagopalan, a journalist, continually interrupted the Congress spokesperson, Ajoy Kumar. The latter was visibly annoyed by this, and though Rajagopalan eased off, at a later stage he loudly questioned the competence of the Congress Party during the collapse of the 1993 Mumbai blasts. Finally, in at least 12 moments,
four or more panelists were attempting to shout over each other. Essentially, the consequence of this was that the overarching debate question was left utterly unanswered.

To their credit, *The Buck Stops Here* attempted to allow panelists to air their views. Though this author did not track the numbers, the proportion of interruptions in this 32-minute long debate appeared significantly lower than in *The Newshour*. However, the ‘semantics’ of the interruptions were no less vigorous in tone and content. Ajoy Kumar, who happened to feature in this debate as well, repeatedly insisted that the BJP and RSS have been responsible for spreading intolerant messages throughout the ranks, insofar that being intolerant is a prerequisite to being a BJP member. Similarly, journalist Rana Ayyub repeatedly clashed with Rakesh Sinha (RSS). She accused the RSS of having a history of *Hindutva*-based intolerance, likened them to being the ‘Hindu-version’ of ISIS, and reminded Sinha of his group’s assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Expectedly, Sinha took offence at Ayyub’s words, and accused her of being an immature ‘RSS-hater’. He ended off by demanding Ayyub issue a public apology. If none was given, he threatened to file lawsuit against her. Finally, like with *The Newshour*, the overarching debate question was left unanswered.

The ensuing chaos from first minute of the debates sets the tone for what one might expect from the ‘discussions’. Thussu (2007) terms the Indian TV news media as a *tamasha*, which translates from Hindi approximately to ‘show’, and also connotatively implies melodrama. Another term she uses to describe the TV news media is “infotainment” (p. 91). Essentially, Thussu postulates that journalism in the Indian TV news media has fallen victim to oversimplification. With respect to the two debate shows, it appears that there is no method of oversimplification more effective than to keep the public uninformed by keeping the shows perpetually chaotic. Doing so even enables the shows to air issues that are ‘worthy’ of debate, and maintain the guise of upholding the ethos of journalism. Undoubtedly, much of this
tendency towards producing ‘digestible’ cultural products rests in the fact that mainstream Indian news media organisations function as conglomerates, with ownership being concentrated amongst small numbers (Rao & Wasserman, 2015). Indeed, if journalism in principle intends to be objective, the far-flung accusations, direct threats, and overpowering shouting duels commonplace in the debate shows renders them a caricature of the journalistic discipline. Essentially, the permanency of *tamasha* in the two shows emblamatizes the trope of the Culture Industry thesis that seeks to argue mass cultural products as one and the same, and thus, intellectually unstimulating (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972). Though the shows may certainly differ in semantics, the inevitability of frantic chaos and aggressive shouting overtly keeps viewers as uninformed as before. Finally, though only three episodes were analyzed, it would be of little surprise if virtually every episode was a ‘repeat telecast’ of previous ones.

**The Pseudoindividuality of the Presenters**

The final trope of the Culture Industry thesis, psuedoindividuality, is an analytical continuation of the previous section. Indeed, from the chaos, it is the moderator’s voice that cuts through and appears to ‘come out’ triumphant. This occurred in both shows analyzed, though more so in *The Newshour*. Halfway through the debate on Salman Khan’s sentencing, Goswami introduced two experienced lawyers, Mahesh Jethmalani and Satish Maneshinde. The purpose, he explained, was to enrich the debate with ‘legal expertise’. Throughout the show, Goswami had already dogmatically insisted that the 5-year sentencing Salman Khan received was fair, and should not be disputed. As the lawyers stated the importance of legal precedence in any court case, Goswami interrupted and insisted that should not be the central issue. Furthermore, at one stage of the debate, he went on to insist that the ‘facts’ of a separate case Maneshinde was citing were categorically false. Maneshinde, of course, denied this and mentioned that he even had the legal dossier on hand with him. Similarly, in the Yakob Memon debate, Goswami regularly and abruptly interrupted panelists with an opposing view (Dayal,
Rehmani and Anjan) mid-sentence. As this incessantly continued, Dayal and Anjan question why they were invited to the show if their arguments would not be heard. In her show, however, Dutt appeared less dogmatic and generally allowed panelists to speak. However, like Goswami, she tended to rigidly question the two panelists she opposed far more frequently than the rest. They were from the BJP and RSS. When asked to pose her questions fairly, Dutt deflected and insisted that ‘she does’, and that it is her ‘job’ to criticise everyone. She did not, however, change her approach to the debate.

Pseudoindividuality is rooted within the larger framework of the Culture Industry, in that it is an attempt at constructing beliefs that individuality, or ‘uniqueness’, is objectively real. Yet, as Horkheimer and Adorno (1972) argue, any sense of individuality is superficial, and subsumed within the larger framework of the Culture Industry. As such, any characteristic of individuality that one might think to be unique is instead “mass-produced like Yale locks, whose only difference can be measured in fractions of millimeters.” (p. 154). When relating these ideas to the debate shows, two points become clear. First, any sense of individuality that might ‘belong’ to Goswami and Dutt are appropriated, subjugated, and re-constructed into the roles of moderators within their respective shows. As such, their roles become virtually synonymous, with neither moderator deviating radically from the other. As the Culture Industry thesis necessitates, the development of these roles were not ‘unique’ processes either. Rather, these roles were modelled after established anchors in the US (Ohm, 2014). More recently, Goswami’s and Dutt’s roles have also been used as the ‘gold standard’ for the various Indian-language channels in their attempt to develop debate shows of their own (Muneer, 2014). Secondly, the net effects of incessantly interrupting, chastising, continually giving one’s own arguments (i.e. no longer moderating), challenge experts, and of course, speaking the loudest, would inevitably shape the debate’s dominant narrative. In other words, the moderator’s role is constructed and made responsible for actively enabling a single narrative to reach viewers.
Keeping to the traditions of the Culture Industry thesis, such a narrative would be one that is in service to the capitalist logic of maximum profit (Horkheimer & Adorno, 1972) which, in this case, is represented by coming out victorious in TV ratings war. In other words, the objective of framing narratives is to keep as many viewers as possible tuning in as frequently as possible. It should be noted, however, that the extent to which viewers buy into a single narrative is not a given. Regardless of how hegemonic certain ideologies may be, there will always be counter-narratives. Stuart Hall (1980), for instance, argues that the extent to which hegemonic positions are ‘bought into’ depends heavily on the social position one occupies within society. Nonetheless, that the shows are still airing daily with little hint of backing down suggest there to be sufficient success in their production of dominant narratives.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, this paper has analyzed and discussed how the two socio-political debate shows, *The Newshour* and *The Buck Stops Here* are emblematic of the Culture Industry. The paper’s three arguments are rooted in the central idea of ‘sameness’. Specifically, they have been deconstructed to articulate the concepts of ‘style’, ‘predictability’, and ‘pseudoindividuality. In all, three episodes were analyzed, two from *The Newshour*, and one from *The Buck Stops Here*. On the whole, this paper’s affirmative stance is that both shows are exceptionally emblematic of the Culture Industry thesis.
Works Cited


---

i The Salman Khan debate is viewable at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeBbJnhB0jM
ii The Yakub Memon debate is viewable at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j52qMVvgqdc