

“Not in the Margin Anymore”: The Transnational Turn in Contemporary TV

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“Informationalism, ” is according to Manuel Castells “the technological paradigm that constitutes the material basis of early twenty-first century societies.” As information becomes the central constituent of social structures and processes, it plays an increasingly important role in shaping specific domains of civil society: community, art, business and politics. In order to explore how television responds to this informational turn, I consider the hit Indian talk show *Satyamev Jayate* (Truth Alone Prevails) to argue that the global South is witnessing a new kind of programming that is both information-based and transnational in scope and nature.

Satyamev Jayate debuted in 2012, and is currently on its second season. Hosted by the Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan, the show’s intent is to highlight pressing social problems that plague contemporary Indian society. It has an Oprah Winfrey-like format: an introduction to the issue by the host, interviews with “victims, ” analyses by experts and calls for donations and action directed to the viewing public. Simulcast on seven channels including the State-run Doordarshan, the show has covered a range of sensitive topics including female feticide, child abuse, dowry, rape, pesticide poisoning, casteism, corruption and the criminalization of politics. In spite of its “serious” content, the show has struck a chord with the Indian audience and gathered very impressive ratings as well as a high online presence.

I want to argue that *Satyamev* breaks ground not only through its coverage of taboo topics but by simultaneously instituting a new mode of non-fiction programming. Aamir Khan appears before the audience in two garbs: the sensitive male interviewer unafraid to hug and cry, as well as the hardheaded statistician and data scientist extolling the explanatory and generative powers of information. In spite of the show’s hyper-emotional pitch, its ultimate appeal lies in the way it operates at the informational level. Every episode is replete with charts, figures and info-graphics, and Khan buttresses every humanitarian angle with hard data and quantitative analysis. The show’s website confirms its informational bias: histograms show how regions of the country responded to a particular episode, a global social footprint map pinpoints areas of the world where the show had an impact, a word cloud graphic highlights memes and buzzwords currently at play, live running totals indicate donations made by the audience, online impressions and actions taken in response to *Satyamev*’s interventions.

Satyamev signals the advent of a new style of entertainment that utilizes media power in the interests of grassroots activism. It is certainly not a coincidence that Aamir Khan’s earlier work (specifically the hit Bollywood film *Rang de Basanti*) was singled out for praise by Arvind Kejriwal, the leader of the Aam Admi Party that quite unexpectedly came to power in the Union territory of Delhi earlier this year. The AAP (and its predecessor India Against Corruption) changed the nature Indian politics by pitting “civil society” against the democratically elected government and Parliament while agitating for the ordinary citizen’s right to information. *Satyamev* is in some senses an extension

of AAP type organizations that have been arguing for transparency and accountability in governance. It is, I suggest, an instance of info-politics – that is of political action that is driven by an information-theoretic understanding of society and culture. Access to information, control of information, distribution of information, the proper implementation of information, building community through information – these are the building blocks of this new mode of political thought and action that replaces ideology with efficient problem-solving.

The info-political is at the same time a mode of pleasure and hence of aesthetics. *Satyamev* (and, it could be argued, many types of reality television as well) works with information to produce affects that go beyond the effects of news coverage and investigative journalism. The use of information produces an alliance between television and politics that is certainly very new in the Indian context. Given the crucial role of the information economy throughout the global South, such a televisual form is not restricted to one region. At a time when American television criticism has retreated into the parochial enclosure of “quality television” a consideration of *Satyamev* affords us the opportunity to theorize emergent modes of television in the transnational order.