Content Regulation And Curation In Indian Children's Television And Online Programs: A Critical Analysis

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This research paper explores the frameworks and practices governing content regulation and curation in Indian children's television and online programs. With the rise of digital platforms, children are increasingly exposed to a wide variety of content, raising concerns about the appropriateness, quality, and impact of such material. The study examines existing policies such as the Cable Television Networks (Regulation) Act, 1995 and the IT Rules, 2021, along with the role of regulatory bodies and self-regulation practices of OTT platforms. It also investigates how content is curated for Indian children, addressing the ethical and cultural considerations involved.

Keywords Content Regulation, Content Curation, Children's Media, Indian Television, Online Platforms, Digital Media, Child Safety, Media Ethics, OTT Platforms, Content Policies, Digital Literacy, Media Consumption, Cultural Sensitivity etc.

1. Introduction

Children's television and online programs are considered to be among the most popular and significant forms of mass media, especially in India, where the number of children directly or indirectly exposed to television is hard to determine. The reason is simple. The availability of children's television and online programs, whether cartoons or general entertainment, not only maintains the interest of children but also attracts an adult audience. These children's programs are intended for the entertainment of children, and additionally, they entertain, inform, describe, and ultimately reflect our society. As such, they indulge in a part of the task of curriculum broadcasting that covers certain norms and shares knowledge and values in society. Subsequently, alongside all types of media, the public appears to be attentive toward standardized content options, with, to an increasing degree, kids in their adolescence losing interest in family television and commencing to adopt additional electronic devices and the internet as sources of leisure and study. It is for this reason that the television and online content that reaches out to kids requires an approach from a vital point of view, exploring the various and interconnected aspects of production, content creation, distribution, regulation, and viewing practices. This essay tries to examine and interlink the various streams of policies that have an impact on the content of television and online children's programs or TV shows.

The section also includes an overview of children's online TV shows, focusing on the most popular kids' shows in 2021. Most critically, it poses the question of whether children's commissions and stakeholders have assessed the long- and short-term impact of exposure to unrestricted digital content. (Dhawan et al., 2020)(Ayedee and Manocha, 2020)(Gupta et al.2022)(Rao and Lingam, 2021)(Mohan et al.2021)(Harjule et al.2021)(Gothwal et al.2022)(Agrawal et al.2022)(Sarwatay et al.2021)

1.1. Background of Children's Television and Online Programs

Children's television in India has come of age. With technological transitions and concomitant policy changes, children's television has transformed from a traditional broadcast medium to digital on-demand viewing across platforms. Children from this only-on TV era have transitioned to an internet protocol-television age, not by choice but for lack of any other option that offers a wide array of choices. From relying on limited programming for centred shows, there is now an opportunity to view and access an incredible collection of programs across concepts, themes, production quality, scale, language, and global mixed story types.

The market has evolved and offers interesting crossover concepts in the form of children's television content. The younger age-group children watch primarily 'edutainment', second-screen content in the form of nursery rhymes, cartoon shows, and learn-alphabet programs. Many of these shows offer basic skills in language, numeracy, new words, pronouns, and active vocabulary. Many of the shows are dubbed, and the scripts are adapted with local cultural references that prevail in India. The action series continues to be a popular form of animated content that children adore. Regular children's narrative series for second-screen viewing include nonfiction, fiction, localized, and international content. Indian cultural contexts and consumption have been kept in mind while producing programming for Indian children. The policy change and the IPTV channels have transcended traditional programming, shifted traditional content into digital programs, and started producing content specifically for digital use. The increase in the number of channels connotes a giant leap in the uptake of this content. Over the last decade, there has been an enormous spurt in the variety and volume of content targeted at programming for children, spearheaded by innovative commissioning ideas, reappraisal of international co-production slots, and increased financial bonuses. (Hooda, 2024)(Dhiman, 2023)(Potter and Steemers2021)(Mehta, 2021)(Kohli2020)

2. Regulatory Frameworks and Guidelines

The regulatory framework for children's television is applicable under various statutory and non-statutory provisions. Statutorily, the regulatory framework for television in India mainly includes the Cable Television Networks Act, the Policy Guidelines for Up-Linking from India, and the rules set by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, also called the Content Code. The Prasar Bharati Act has some relevance in terms of its limitations on advertising and sponsorship by private parties on television channels owned by Prasar Bharati, such as Doordarshan. While the Cable Television Networks Act at the statutory level has only limited content controls, the Policy Guidelines issued for Up-Linking from India provide in greater detail some of the restrictions with regard to content in channels up-linked in India. The

statutory provisions merely provide for certification procedures to be followed, through which the Information and Broadcasting Ministry establishes a committee for certification.

The main guidelines for regulating children's television on the online and traditional linear platforms in India emanate from the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. Nonetheless, as a non-statutory measure, the Broadcasting Content Complaints Council has established a set of guidelines for content and advertising, some of which may be relevant for children. These will be discussed in the later section on self-regulation. The Ministry guidelines rely extensively on the Cable Television Networks Act. The censoring certification procedures are often depended on for content evaluation in addition to the requirement for a channel to carry certified content only. In various places in the guidelines, the primary responsibility to ensure compliance lies with broadcasters and producers. They must be signatories to an agreement that obligates them to ensure the quality of content meant for Indians.

(Saha, 2020)(Owolabi and Ifeduba2024)(Scobie et al.2022)(Husain and Farooque)(Ramšak2022)(Vanberg2023)(Smith, 2021)(Policy and Connors)(Kreutler et al.2024)(Saurwein et al.2024)

2.1. Government Regulations

Some common laws in India are exclusively meant for the protection of children against hurtful, inappropriate, and erratic media discussions and disclosures, consequently regulating the media to make child-friendly content. Some specific national policy guidelines, law sections, and others concerning children under 18 years especially highlight child-related concerns, although these are not just laws of the child domain. In this section, we bring out the policy and guideline framings in India, figurations that regulate the contents of television and lately the OTT. These framings should not be teleological only in relation to the child, as that is innately risk-ridden. Yet we take this position here to foreground the content production process – from the creation of a concept to planning a certain look and feel of the show, to its reach and reception.

Although the above-stipulated policies, guidelines, and laws exist, keeping pace with newer ICT, platforms, and the changing communication culture, making any new or amendatory law fast is tricky. Again, many policies or sets of guidelines are framed as 'suggestions-call.' Those guiding the TV (and possibly guiding the OTT through teleologies or 'read-between-the-lines') overlook the actual content manufacturing spaces, as it is very difficult to outline all the myriad of dos and don'ts. As such, media developers can escape from the non-listed – or unseen lists of – hurtful content. There is a dire need to articulate how similar laws and guidelines – for online content platforms for children or against children – are or will be framed in the future, as the possibilities of these contents are huge. Even when an epidemic is controlled by appropriate intervention, only a fraction of the big pharmaceutical companies may be managing it. To govern and ensure regulation, it becomes important to go beyond big companies to the bottom-level content developers. There is a need for a reconceptualization of content users – no longer is the classification of child and adult useful.

Regulatory mechanisms are generally evaluated on the levels of regulation adherence. For example, in the realm of TV, content regulation authority mechanisms are discussed and evaluated. It, however, needs to be explored, the role and relevance of the child as a victim, in case the broadcast – be it content or advertising – regulation authority setups fail to adhere to. (Weiner, 2021)(Saurabh and Ranjan, 2020)(Phizacklea)

3. Curation Practices in Indian Children's Content

In general, the production of formal or official television, film, and new media content involves a number of curation practices, that is, skilful selection, arrangement, or disposition of making a show, and also circulating or broadcasting it. This text identifies and investigates a few of the practices of curation that Indian children's television and digital media exhibit. These practices include the broadcaster or producer's choices in deciding what shows will be telecast or serialized. The text also assists in examining the criteria of selection of the curator—who could be the producer or the broadcaster in the first case, the curriculum designers in the second—and what is considered suitable only for Indian children's consumption. Curation is also taken to encompass the process through which content is made available for viewing (i.e., in television program scheduling or slotting).

Curation for children in TV programming implies not just what is being shown but how such content is being made suitable for the targeted viewer. One part of the process is the development of children-centred/children-focused production values, stories, and treatments, and their currency on the one hand requires constant renewal. Moral surveillance is always central when content in any medium is being developed. With children's programming, promoting national cultural ethos is as important. Also being constantly monitored is the educative value being transmitted by such programming. In practice, it usually means that given the societal belief that film is entertaining, the educative components of children's programming are embedded through effective storytelling strategies. Children's fiction uses techniques of dissimulation and enigmatic storytelling as a means to say the unsayable, all the while doing so. When the formal film industry in India at last made peace with the audience, censorship authorities, and critics, it figured out the real weight of its income—children and families. The need to maintain and capture the attention and loyalty of the 0-14 audience became especially significant in the 2000s with the invasion of television channels and their subsequent offerings making inroads into children's lives and the subsequent virtual world of the internet giving parents and children no respite. (Johnson et al., 2024)(Mitric, 2024)

3.1. Content Categorization and Age-Appropriateness

Depending on various criteria, content can be categorized for children, and the ultimate aim is to produce the content with respect to the developmental age of children. Age-appropriate content for children is important as exposure to content that has strong emotions, heavy violence, and aggression may increase their level of fear, worries, and depression. Generally, children's programs are categorized and classified for children mainly based on age appropriateness. For children of preschool age (0–5 years), unrealistic fears and foreign places should be particularly avoided. Elementary school-age children (6–11 years) are more capable

of deriving the difference between realism and fantasy; hence, they can tolerate a moderate degree of suspense and external fears. With increasing age, children and young people have a better understanding of services and what to expect from them. (Crescenzi-Lanna, 2022)

Although the ocular age categorization would be helpful for content producers and directors, it is not standard and simple. Some countries have defined their rating and classification systems for children's programs. Although age is determined as a central factor in the categorization of content and restriction of inappropriate content to a certain age, determining especially the upper age limit is a cultural issue. The criteria vary from culture to culture, depending on parental concerns and overprotection trends. Hence, one classification cannot be a fervent standard all over the world. Because of these reasons and apart from country-based age classification systems, content rating and curation are effectively implemented in digital platforms offering children's content. Content discovery refers to the act of navigating content until the discovery of the desired piece. For children, searching to find a suitable piece of content from a library of content on the available platform among a number of services is a strange situation. Age categorization, ratings, filtering, and searching have been primarily aimed at developing new content platforms in a digital environment, although it seems easy to discover content for children. In such an environment, digital platforms have to present a wide range of content for children by ensuring that it is securely examined. These platforms, in which vast libraries are presented to the user, should be in a position to help direct users—especially parents and children intending to find age-appropriate, theme-appropriate, and content-appropriate—or guide them in the proper direction in cases of a qualm about age categorization or filtering. There are several ways to implement this process on a digital platform. Creating a feedback mechanism, using views and ratings, and providing tailored feedback based on the behavioral data gathered are the foremost of these. Overall, being able to help and find that the content is categorized accurately is also a sign that the proposed framework and classification categories are working properly. (Feller and Burroughs, 2022)

The classification and rating system for children's viewing has proven to be a political and commercial issue, with a constant battle between beliefs about freedom of expression and censoring. The existence of such a system can be a good demonstration of how society cares about children's rights and may have numerous positive psychological impacts. Aware parents feel the necessity to find out what their children are watching in order to protect them from the negative effects of media violence. Whether by choice or necessity, over the last few years, parents have been putting forth more efforts to control their kids' TV viewing, empowered by technological advancements. It is suggested that parents should not exclude themselves from the media-mediated entertainment of their children. If any content is inappropriate, children should not watch adult programs. Content that appeals to children and that adults also enjoy is ideal for the family. (Child et al., 2022)(Baker et al.2023)

4. Impact of Content on Children

Content, particularly programming meant for children, comes with a psychological impact. Information picks up things from the environment, makes imprints, and acquires habits, tastes,

and attitudes that influence their behavior for the rest of their lives. Thus, the content in the audio-visual media can affect a viewer's way of seeing the world, their aesthetic preferences, fine sensibility, and artistic abilities and proclivities. Studies reveal numerous positive aspects, including cognitive development, improved language skills, creativity, storytelling abilities, imagination, emotional intelligence, problem-solving abilities, aesthetic values, etiquette, education on moral citizenship, human rights, diversity, and social inclusion. On the contrary, adverse aspects include imitation of undesirable behaviour and values like violence, substance abuse, racial or gender discrimination, verbal and physical misbehaviour, distorted body images, and other defective values and behaviours, addiction or correlation with low physical activities, sedentary lifestyle, and fast food habits, which contribute to increased childhood obesity and shorter attention spans, being too commercial in orientation at the expense of quality and education. The television content can influence children's behaviours and cognitive, emotional, and personal-social consequences. It has the capacity to make children view the world in a slanted way, and the background knowledge and presupposition derived from television make the children watch and infer news processors to be influenced by government propaganda. Television can make children insensitive to other views and religions, entertaining equally dubious content that is almost every other way hostile and cynical towards two categories of Indians: the politicians and the poor. (Tara et al.2023)

The debate about the effects of programming in children's media tends to focus on either negative or positive outcomes. There are age-old debates about the potential harm that dangerous, distressing, and developmentally inappropriate content across most mass media can cause to young audiences. In the field of children's mass media studies, till the late '90s, substantial adverse effects and minimal positive effects on viewers were found when they saw an average of one to three hours of mass media every day. Psychological and medical research shows that violent media can increase aggression expectancy, possibly leading to real aggressive behaviours. Research links viewing violent media to declines in viewers' altruism, concern for helping others, self-restraint, empathy, moral reasoning, and intellectual achievement. However, everyday communication and cultural theories challenge the knowledge/status quo positions on effects and contextualize and emphasize the need to consider the different types of programs and children's differences, including parental interest, involvement, mediation, family rules, ambient television, and other norms and social circumstances. The paucity of Indian studies requires the present study. (Kambali2021)

4.1. Cognitive and Behavioural Effects

Children can learn from the content they view, especially when motivated. Educational content based on well-known children's programs is effective both academically and in increasing empathy when paired with specific outreach materials. From a cognitive perspective, the compelling narrative content children tend to watch can provoke careful explication of the story, accompanied by the prediction of the characters' behavior and the attempt to cope with the story's unresolved issues. Educational television shows appear to improve the development of preschool children's critical thinking and abstract representational skills, in some cases, up to four years after exposure. (Gever et al.2021)

Similarly, exposure to educational websites aimed at children's social development and learning generally enhances engagement in educational activities. Media intended to socialize children offer a compelling narrative, lead to a desired outcome, and foster the development of peer relationships. From a behavioural perspective, boys appear to engage with public counters by pointing them out faster than girls or children with oppositional defiant disorder or unspecified disruptive impulse-control and conduct disorder. In typical development, increased self-efficacy or parental intervention may ameliorate the effects of media violence. However, some 90% of the content aimed at children contains violence or commercialism that may lead to reduced cognitive complexity, more repetitive and fragmented narrative forms, more act-out by characters, and increased gender and race stereotypes and acts of violence. This is largely because children are more susceptible to the violence that occurs with little consequence on television. (Feller and Burroughs, 2022)

Children and media scholars often speak of child development theory as justification for qualitative content analyses or as a way of understanding the consequences of media experiences. Thus, as a whole cultural lens, development shapes our way of looking at the field of children and media. It is the quality of a child's experiences in the surround that is particularly influential in helping to shape the child's understanding. Newer research on child development, as informed by neuroscience, can also inform this section in a future revision. Children's choices are both informed and constrained by their beliefs. While parents can control a child's media experience, children develop at their own rates and have their own media preferences developed primarily through peer interactions and societal norms. As a child grows, his or her understandings of and responses to media content will continually evolve; a program intended for younger preschool-aged children may be perceived by school-aged children as too babyish. Similarly, a program targeting school-aged children may be perceived by younger children as intended for older viewers.

Children have many constraints on their media choices, but they do indeed have preferences developed over time, often in response to program-level factors such as narrative, affect, and institutionally mediated themes. Both the media and child development literatures suggest a need for complex and open-ended portrayals of conflict to provide children with the resources to navigate threats and risks. Various feelings regarding the right content level for a particular age range can be reconciled and/or the notion of providing children with the ability to make sense of media by not underestimating their interpretive powers and providing them with the resources they need to do so. (Gupta et al.2022)(van et al.2022)

5. Conclusion

To conclude, children's media content regulation and curation have been examined from critical feminist and media psychology perspectives. Besides scholars of media, this form of research is expected to benefit a range of stakeholders such as policymakers, parents, teachers, content creators, broadcasters, and platforms working on children's issues. Children's development is of paramount policy concern in most nations across the globe. The pervasiveness and ubiquity of children's television have been acknowledged, yet there are critical knowledge and data gaps about children's media consumption habits and their impact

in India. What counts as children's content on the OTT platforms and how viewing of such content contributes to children's development is largely unknown.

This research suggests that policymakers, broadcasters, content creators, parents, educators, paediatricians, and society at large need to start a meaningful conversation for the creation of 'safe media'. The Government of India also needs to update the policy regulating children's content on TV, which dates back to 2006. Further, we also need to develop accurate data about streaming via numerous digital devices that children have access to across different, geographically spread socio-economic sampling frames. Public awareness campaigns may help in promoting responsible content development and viewership among all the stakeholders. Developing a m-ABC for India and increasing awareness about healthy media habits can help develop ecologically safe and sustainable children's content online and on television. It is a shared responsibility and effort among all concerned, who when prompted by scientific evidence, may find it in their own best interest to change ways of curating and regulating children's content. (York Times and Lustgarten, 2020)(Quamme and Iversen, 2022)(Singh et al.2020)

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