

The Role of Visibility Politics in Determining the Prime Time Content on Television

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Abstract – The content delivered to audiences through the television, especially the news, is mostly orchestrated to suit the commercial objectives and political affiliations of the media houses. There are complex political forces at play in defining what information should be visible to the public. This mediated visibility favours the powerful and restricts the diversity of information in general. In spite of how robust political reporting has evolved to be in the present times, most of it is skewed towards a particular kind of opinion or the image the media want to form. The notion of ‘what is visible is crucial’ has resulted in the formulation of explicit strategies that conveniently ignore the narratives of the powerless while prioritizing what is shown in the prime-time. Besides, complex algorithms are used to determine what is currently “trending”, based on which the content to be featured on the television is determined.

A review of the available literature was conducted to obtain an idea of what has hitherto been studied regarding the political factors influencing the visibility on television. Literature from various sources such as Google Scholar, EBSCOHost, ProQuest, Scopus, JSTOR, etc., were collected, compiled in order, and examined in order to understand the relationship between the politics of power and television visibility. This paper is expected to help in understanding understand how the visibility politics decides what makes it to the prime-time on television. This review is also expected to examine the issue of selective reporting of news and what are the political forces that cause the same. Further, the paper also attempts to point out the further research work to be conducted explore how a just and objective portrayal of facts on the television can be achieved.

Keywords: Television, Visibility, Commercial Objectives, Mediated Visibility, Prime Time, Trending, Political Affiliations

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1. INTRODUCTION

‘Prime Time’ on the television refers to the time slot during which there is a considerably high audience viewership. Prime time is that time of the day when the average audience is back home from work and watching television shows (Gitlin, 1979). In India, the time between 8:00 to 8:30 PM is considered the prime time and the most popular programmes are aired during this period. Usually, the popular programme is broadcast at 8:00 PM followed by the news at 8:30 PM (Batabyal, et al., 2013). As most viewers tune in during the prime time, every television channel tries its best to get the viewer watch their channel by offering shows that are either popular or are expected to be popular. Daily soap operas, reality shows and news debates are the most preferred genres to be aired during the prime time (Datar, 2014). Considering the viewership rates, prime time is important for the advertisers who incur

a considerably high expenditure to run their commercial during the prime time (Sinclair, 2016).

Over time, there has been a paradigm shift in the pattern television viewership owing to technological advances. The proliferation of the internet and the popularity of mobile application based entertainment has made it difficult for the television to keep the prime time audience hooked to the television sets (Datar, 2014). In stark contrast to the earlier times when the viewers had no option but to watch the shows during its time slot or wait for the repeat telecast, app based entertainment channels, such as Netflix, Voot and Hotstar have made it possible for them to watch the shows anytime and anywhere, and the steady influx of web-series and short films, has put the television under tremendous pressure to retain its prime time audience apart from getting the advertisers to sponsor them (Halbrooks, 2017). Therefore,

television channels are turning to spur of the moment formats, such as reality shows, dance and song competitions and live debates to titillate the audience in real-time and keep them glued to their television sets (Halbrooks, 2017).

Beyond the viewership, advertisement and other commercial considerations, there are other factors that control the content aired during the prime-time (Thompson, 2005). These non-commercial factors, collectively contribute to the “politics of visibility” which determines the content broadcast by television channels, the stand a news channel takes and the public opinion the television media intends to mobilize (Batabyal et al., 2013). A simple example of this phenomenon is the reporting of national elections where all the news channels can be seen making an uninhibited attempt to promote their political views and opinions, thereby attempting to direct public opinion towards a particular political ideology (Adams and Ferber, 1977).

However, visibility politics is not necessarily related to political parties, and news channels promoting public opinion is only one of the means of determining the prime-time content. In short, the “politics of visibility” entails a complex set of activities and strategies that are associated with either promotion or restriction of content aired on the television (Thompson, 2005). This paper reviews the various forms through which visibility politics manifests itself on the television prime time.

2. STUDY OBJECTIVES

Considering the vast nature of the of the topic, it was essential to limit the scope of the study by way of specific objectives, which are as follows,

1. To obtain an understanding of visibility politics in the context of the television media.
2. To understand the nature of the relationship between the television media and prime time visibility.
3. To understand the political powers controlling the prime time television content.
4. To explore the impact of visibility politics on the portrayal of various social groups on the prime time television.
5. To appreciate the potential role of algorithms in determining the prime content.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of television and visibility politics is vast and cannot be dealt with in one go. The existing literature was reviewed to understand the nuances of visibility politics and their impact on the prime time content. Literature was collected sources, such as

Google Scholar, EBSCOHost, ProQuest, Scopus, JSTOR, etc., and was examined to understand the phenomenon in detail.

3.1 Mass Media and Visibility

In a literal sense, visibility pertains to being seen, i.e., the perception of an object through the sense of sight. Visibility is a spatial and temporal phenomena, i.e., one can see an object or an event, only if it exists where he/she is physically present and if it occurs in the time zone he/she is living in (Thompson, 2005). However, owing to the technological advancements, the invention of the television and the internet, visibility is no more a spatial and temporal construct and one can see objects and events that occur in different places and time zones (Dearings and Rogers, 1996). It is no longer required for a viewer to be present “here and now” to see an event and the communication media has made it possible for people to see events that have either already occurred or are happening at the moment (Collins, 2014).

In an elaborate study on media and visibility, Thompson (2005) explores the new forms of visibility brought about by the development of communication media. The author observes that the visibility of an event is also determined by certain social considerations, such as the priorities and the interest of the media house. Visual communication is usually accompanied by speech or written words and the cultural assumptions of the viewers, based on which the event is perceived. Thus, there can be no ‘pure visibility’ and it is possible that what one sees is not essentially what it actually is (Brown, 1997). Thompson (2005) has made this clear by examining the interaction among visibility and political power, wherein it is seen that the way in which political leaders appear to the audience has been changing with advances in the communication media. While the radio enabled the leaders to be heard by the masses, the television, initially controlled by the government, made it possible for the politicians to promote an intimate yet pre-determined image of themselves in order to remain popular and form favourable opinion (Aaldering and Vliegthart, 2016).

Further, the study also elaborates the phenomena of “Mediated Visibility”, wherein it is observed that how an occurrence is shown on television is mostly “mediated” by the media to suit their political leanings. On one hand the media might act in favour of a political party, the same media might also work against the political powers by picking agendas opposed to the popular political ideology (Adams and Ferber, 1977). However, in both the cases, the content aired on the television is interpreted according to the needs of the media house.

Another case which explores mediated visibility in the Indian context is the Jessica Lal murder case, wherein the role of the television media in ensuring visibility is evident. Alvarez (2011) examined this case of the murder of Ms. Jessica Lal by Mr. Manu Sharma, the kin of a political leader with about 300 people as witnesses. However, in the turn of events owing to political involvement, all the evidences turned hostile and the accused were acquitted citing lack evidence. This sparked off strong debates regarding the justice delivery system of the country and the news channels, pursued the matter after the verdict. Intense media coverage along with a spur of initiatives such as SMS campaigns, candlelight vigils and civic petitions, mediated by a popular news channel, forced the high court to consider a police appeal of the case and the accused were convicted for murder. This is a clear example of how visibility can form opinions and change the course of events (Samantha, 2008). While this is a positive case of mediated visibility, often, visibility politics results in misrepresentation content, which has wider social implications (Nielsen and Beim, 2004).

3.2 Prime Time and Politics

The unspoken collusion between the media and politics is not surprising. As long as print and visual media has existed, political powers have attempted to tweak the news concerning them and often media has modified the presentation of facts according to their ideology (Brown, 1997). One of the interesting cases of media backed visibility politics is the coverage of Ms. Hilary Rodham Clinton during the 2008-09 Democratic primary as studied by Uscinski and Goren (2010). From the beginning of the campaign, the television and print media coverage of Ms. Clinton was sexist, biased and pre-conceived. Ms. Clinton's depiction on the television news during the campaign was more on the basis of gender than merit, i.e., the case of mediated visibility. The male dominated nature of the television media lead to the one sided portrayal of the candidate, which was evident by addressing her by first name, misogynistic remarks, allegations of incapability, etc. The mediated portrayal of the candidate was carried out to present her as incapable for the presidential post backed by regressive opinions regarding women in power.

The television is vested with enormous power to make or break opinions, set agendas and decide the course of a country's events (McCombs, 2014). Any event that a television channel covers aggressively in the prime time is considered important by the viewers based on which their priorities change (Dearings and Rogers, 2016). Another important role played by mass media is that of political agenda setting, wherein public and political priorities are set based on mass media coverage of issues (McCombs and Shaw, 1993). A study by Walgrave and Aelst (2006) examines the political agenda setting power of mass media wherein it was observed that the

mass media exerts considerable influence on political decisions and priorities. Once the media succeeds in promoting a matter as important, public opinion gets influenced and political policy makers have no option but to vary their agendas accordingly (Beniger and Herbst, 1990).

Several studies reiterate that media has an impact on public opinion. One of the pioneering studies that reaffirm this fact is that by Adams and Ferber (1977) on the interplay between television interviews and political visibility. The authors opine that the tone adopted by television channels during interviews shapes public opinion (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010). As television shows are the only way to portray a political leader on a personal level, the way in which the interview progresses and the stand the show takes impacts the viewers' opinion about the leader (Lewis, 2004). Interviews are watched by many who believe the depiction to be unbiased and the image formed during the interview remains for a long time (Iyengar and Kinder, 2010).

3.3 Visibility Politics and Representation of Social Groups

Television news is not the mere reporting of the facts, but is a product of the joint efforts of the news makers, experts and political powers (Dixon, 2007). According to Reese et al (1994) the news aired on television is obtained from various interconnected sources which help the mediato construct a narrative favour of powerful entities. In this study, three aspects of visibility politics are dealt with, namely, the visibility of genders, socially disadvantaged groups, religious groups and political leaders. Further, the media houses also choose the content to be promoted and place them in the prime time, to garner maximum visibility. However, when the media houses push a particular ideology on television, the visibility of those with differing opinions gets suppressed (Dixon, 2007). When the television media backs the socially privileged, the issues of the underprivileged are sidelined, resulting in suppression of diverse points of view, rendering the content biased and incomplete (Frost et al., 1997).

In a pioneering study about the depiction of women in prime time during the period between 1953 and 1977, Dominick (1979), observed that women are still shown in conventional roles of housewives; however, this was found to be decreasing. It was also seen that women are under-represented, which makes it clear that visibility politics has existed from a long time. In a similar study by Martinez-Shepherd (2006) women were found to be portrayed in a positive manner as winners and achievers in reality shows, but the proportion of women from the minority communities was lesser than the majority communities. As the advertisers sponsoring the shows expect them to include women from majority communities to ensure

popularity, this is a case where the visibility of women from one community is promoted and from another community is restricted.

In a similar study by Davis (1990), the trend of the prime-time television portrayal of women during 1970 and 1980 has been examined. It was observed, that women were mostly depicted as homemakers in the television and there was no change in this overtime. However, the paper also observes a new wave of feminist shows featuring women in situations other than their conventional roles, but even there they were considered weaker than their male counterparts.

There are ample instances of restricted or mediated representation of the minority communities, such as Latinos, blacks, African-Americans and Hispanics on television (Mastro and Morawitz, 2005). In contrast to this perception, Tamborini et al (2000) observed that ethnic groups were given equal representation in crime serials. It was observed that they have been shown as court officials with positive characterization. The paper also observed that the television media significantly impacted the viewers' perception of racial characteristics.

Visibility politics entails depicting a group of people in a certain manner that suits the narrative the socially powerful want to promote (Parenti, 1997). In a study by Vanzan (2016) regarding the depiction of Muslim women in European politics after the 9/11 attacks, it is seen that in the context of European politics, it has been believed that Muslim women are being 'favoured' by providing them political opportunities. This is a result of the preconceived image propagated by the media, that Muslim women are underprivileged owing to the religious norms of Islam. This notion is impeding Muslim women's political empowerment, as they are being used to promote a "secular" image for politicians and their merit is undermined.

In a similar study by Minganti and Osterlind (2016) the shift in the perceptions about Muslim women after the 9/11 is examined in detail in Sweden. The attacks have changed the portrayal of Muslim individuals and they are portrayed them as the exact opposite of those belonging to the west. Their depiction on the TV has been that of anti-democratic, partly barbaric individuals whose actions are based on religious norms. This stereotyping is more evident in the case of Muslim women, who are depicted as helpless victims of patriarchal religious norms who need to be saved. As a result, there is an increase in the number of initiatives to liberate Muslim women from their families, such as restricting Muslim immigration, etc. which is discriminatory. As a result, Muslim women are struggling to secure their position as legitimate citizens of the country by increasing visibility in the media (MacDonald, 2006).

In a similar study on the visibility of racial and ethnic minorities on prime time television, Mastro and Morawitz (2005) explored the trends regarding Latino individuals on American television. Although people of Latin American descent have gained more visibility in prime time shows, their depiction is still not free from the stereotypes of criminals and lawbreakers. The paper also found that compared to the "real world" characters, the number of Latino characters is much lesser. This is an example of how visibility politics is controlled by those in the majority, resulting in biased depiction of minority groups. In the context of the west, the media houses are mostly controlled and populated by the whites (Entman, 1994), who are socially privileged and in majority, and their primetime shows have negligible depiction of the minority, and they are mostly shown as negative characters (Entman, 1992; Greenberg et al., 2002).

Often, media houses tend to back certain generalised moral opinions through their prime time shows (Silverstone, 2007; Selnow, 1986). As observed by Krijnen and Meijer (2005), prime time programs are planned to suit the cultural beliefs the media house considers to be superior. Most prime time television shows attempt to establish certain moral codes of conduct as ideal which impacts what the audience consider culturally superior. From quite a long time, i.e, family, civility and civilization have been the major themes and prime time shows have promoted certain "indirect" rules regarding the moral family, a moral civilian and a moral civilization. Most of these judgments are in favour of the beliefs of the dominant social class which puts the identity and morale of the less dominant and minority classes at stake (Lawrence, 1987).

3.4 Potential Role of Algorithms in Determining the Prime Time Content

Owing to the technological innovations in the previous two decades, there have been tremendous advances in broadcast media (Berker et al., 2005) one of which is big data analysis and the role of algorithms in determining the prime time content (Bollier and Firestone, 2010). Although algorithms are employed in social media and advertisements, it is only a matter of time before they become commonplace in media houses (Beer, 2017). Owing to the competition offered by mobile application based entertainment, media houses are seeking new means for retaining their prime time viewership (Halbrooks, 2017). As a result, television channels have shifted focus to real time content, such as reality shows, competitions and live debates (Beer, 2017). As every channel tries to offer fresh and relevant content to the viewers, algorithms are no doubt going to determine what content makes it to the prime time (Kim, 2015)

This development is important for this study because increased use of algorithms in determining the prime time content could possibly

redefine television visibility (Jardine et al., 2016); however, if it can result in an unbiased portrayal of events on television is debatable. Algorithms are expected to result in benefits for advertisers to design marketing strategies (Kitts and Au, 2014). However, entertainment companies, have started relying on algorithms for recommendations regarding television series and movies, which implies that soon, algorithms will be deciding the television during prime time to ensure higher viewership (Sinclair, 2016). One of the advantages of using algorithms is the reduction in human intervention in visibility and elimination of mediated portrayal of social groups. However, as most algorithms still function on human-determined parameters, they can be tweaked to suit the political and ideological biases of media houses, thereby carrying on with the politics of visibility (Uldam, 2016).

It is not practically possible to cover all the aspects of politics of visibility without deviating from the topic. Therefore, the present study has been limited to the issues of mediated visibility on prime time. Nevertheless, a list of the available literature has been provided in order to provide an idea of the studies conducted on visibility.

Table 1: List of Research Studies Dealing with Various Visibility Issues

Sl. No	Author/s	Visibility Issue
1.	Adams & Ferber, 1977; Aaldering & Vliegthart, 2016; Batabyal et al., 2013; Dearing & Rogers, 1996; McCombs & Shaw, 1993; Parry, 2015; Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000; Uldam, 2016	Media and Politics
2.	Uscinski & Goren, 2011; Vanzan, 2016; Minganti & Osterlind, 2016; Johnson, 2007; Dominik, 1979; Davis, 1990; Brown, 1997	Portrayal of Women on TV
3.	Tamborini et al., 2000; Mastro & Morawitz, 2005; Greenberg et al., 2002	Portrayal of Minorities on TV
4.	Sinclair, 2016; Kitts & Au, 2014; Beer, 2017; Collins, 2014; Shah, 2006	Media and Algorithm
5.	Cheliotis, 2010; Gambetti, 2013; Thompson, 2005	Visibility of Social Issues
7.	Gitlin, 1979; Green, 2005; Kim, 2015; Jardine et al., 2016; Reese et al., 1994; Datar, 2014; Krijnen & Meijer, 2005	Television and Primetime in general

4. CONCLUSION

Retaining prime time audiences is one of the primary business concerns of media houses. In the backdrop of the tough competition from mobile applications and online entertainment websites, television channels are under pressure to deliver gripping prime time content and there is an inflow of new kinds of television shows. The prime time content is subjected to delicate socio-political parameters which constitute the primary concern of this study. The content the audience watch on television is tailored according to the ideological and political stance of the media and the details portrayed on the screen might not completely portray the facts.

This paper reviewed existing literature on visibility politics determining prime time content. The study is

not restricted to political influence on television alone and includes various nuances of the politics of visibility. The phenomenon has been explored in terms of portrayal of women, socially disadvantaged, racial and ethnic minorities long with a review of the interplay of politics and the prime time. Besides, the study has highlighted the prominence of algorithms in determining the prime time content. In the the study, visibility politics was found to exist in various forms and has been altering prime time content to suit the views of the socioeconomically makers and consumers of content. Prime time shows were found to be tweaked to form opinions and push moral supremacy in the minds of the viewers. This has serious repercussions on the beliefs, values and opinions of the viewers who consider the content to be authentic. It was also found that algorithms will be gaining prominence in determining the prime time content owing to the media houses' need to retain audiences. However, whether algorithms will eliminate visibility politics cannot be predicted as a human role in controlling them cannot be ruled out. There is enormous scope for research on the role of visibility politics and the television media in the Indian context. The interpretations presented in the paper are neither complete nor exhaustive, but merely a limited depiction of the interplay between visibility politics and the prime time content.

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