

From Indiafm.com to Radio Ceylon: new media and the making of the Bombay film industry

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How did Bombay emerge and maintain its position as the pre-eminent media capital in India? Focusing on the film industry in particular, scholars have identified a number of key factors: the city's position as a center of trade and commerce, and the influx, through the decades, of mercantile capital into film-making; its status as a vibrant cultural center, with established theater movements initially providing the film industry with a range of creative personnel; the use of Hindi which accorded the Bombay-based film industry (located in a multi-lingual city and in a state where the official language is Marathi) 'national' status whereas film industries in cities like Madras and Hyderabad were ascribed 'regional' status; and the impact of India's partition on other centers of film production, most notably Calcutta and Lahore, and the migration of a number of producers, directors, actors and technicians to Bombay during this period (Ganti, 2004; Rajadhyaksha, 1999; Thorner and Patel, 1995).

In this article, I seek to add another important factor that might account for why Bombay has managed to maintain its position as a national media capital and claim 'global' status in ways that no other center of media production has been able to: the role played by new media – radio, television, the internet and the mobile phone – in enabling the Bombay film industry to consistently imagine and mobilize a 'national' and now, 'transnational audience'. Specifically, this article provides a case study of Indiafm.com, one of the most popular and successful film websites, to illustrate the role played by dot.com companies in the film industry's construction of an overseas market over the past decade. From being ignored as a medium that a majority of Indians could not access, how did dot.com companies become an integral part of the film industry within a brief span of two or three years? How did these websites become key

nodes in the circuit of marketing and promotions? How did professionals in the film and digital media sectors forge relationships, and how did these relationships reconfigure the Bombay film industry's geographic reach?

I tackle these questions by utilizing what John Caldwell has called an 'integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis' (2008: 4). The analysis that follows draws on in-depth interviews with a range of industry professionals, trade/worker artifacts such as press kits and brochures, and articles gathered from newspapers and trade magazines. I read these materials critically and in relation to one another, attentive to the relationship between press kits and media journalists (particularly writers at trade magazines), and aware of the risks and limitations of interviews with industry professionals, particularly high-level executives.¹ This involves, as Caldwell writes, keeping these different research materials 'in check' by 'placing the discourses and results of any one register in critical tension or dialogue with the others' (2008: 4). Employing a critical and reflexive approach, this article demonstrates how dot.com companies enabled the film industry to reconfigure a geographically vast yet vaguely understood overseas territory into a well-defined 'Non-Resident Indian (NRI) audience'.

In doing so, this article participates in scholarly debates in two major areas of scholarship: media and public culture in the Indian context, and media globalization. First, it focuses attention on the largely neglected issue of relationships between media industries in India. Scholars have tended to approach film in isolation, despite broadcasting and digital media shaping the circulation and reception of films and film music in fundamental ways. Surprisingly, even those adopting a political economy approach have not paid close attention to the ways in which relationships between media industries have shaped circuits of capital, production cultures and policy decisions.² In conversation with recent efforts to look beyond the film text and the space of the cinema hall (Govil, 2005; Singh, 2003; Vasudevan, 2003), I see this article as a step towards documenting and analysing the influence that the film industry has exerted on the development of radio, television and the internet and, conversely, how technological, business and creative developments in the broadcasting and new media industries have shaped different domains of the film industry.

Second, I seek to contribute to discussions of media globalization by building on Michael Curtin's (2007) analysis of how certain cities become important sites of cultural production and shape directions and patterns of global media flows. Pointing out that dominant approaches to studying global flows of media fail to account for the influence that media capitals such as Hong Kong and Bombay wield, Curtin posits a 'logic of accumulation' as central to the emergence and dominance of media capitals. Even if a film or television corporation is established with the goal of catering to national cultures, he writes: 'it must over time redeploy its creative resources and reshape its terrain of operations if it is to survive competition and enhance profitability' (2007: 11). In the Indian context, not only has this logic of seeking and developing new markets been highly visible over the past decade, it has been central

to the ongoing and contested transformation of the ‘national’ Bombay film industry into ‘Bollywood Inc.’ Building on shifts in state policy and broader political and economic changes, a number of prominent production companies and studios based in Bombay have invested considerable effort in imagining and institutionalizing an overseas box-office (particularly in the US and UK). While scholars have analysed relationships between popular Hindi films and overseas audiences through critical readings of films and ethnographic studies of audiences in different diasporic locations (Mehta, 2005; Srinivas, 2005), they are yet to pay close attention to how exactly this spatial expansion is being achieved and what business practices and strategies underpin the creation of a new terrain of operations. In other words, how do producers, directors, stars, marketing executives, film journalists and other professionals working primarily out of Bombay re-imagine their geographic reach? Although this article approaches these issues by focusing on relations between film and digital media, it also highlights the importance of examining how other ‘new media’ technologies and institutions – radio, state-regulated television (Doordarshan), VCRs and the video business, cable and satellite television – have shaped the cultural geography of Hindi cinema and Bombay’s status as a media capital at different historical conjunctures. Consider, for instance, the relationship between Radio Ceylon and the Bombay film industry during the 1950s.

As the story goes, B.V. Keskar, Minister of Information and Broadcasting from 1950 to 1962, deemed film songs ‘cheap and vulgar’ and banned them from All India Radio (Awasthy, 1965; Lelyveld, 1995). Spotting an opportunity, Radio Ceylon established an agency in Bombay – Radio Advertising Services – in order to attract advertising revenue and recruit professional broadcasters who could record both commercials and programs. It was through this agency, set up in 1951 in downtown Bombay, that a small group of producers and writers created a number of film-based radio programs including *Binaca Geet Mala*. While Keskar attempted to create ‘light music’, with lyrics of ‘high literary and moral quality’ and music that would steer away from the ‘tendency to combine western and eastern music as was done in Hindi films’ (*The Hindu*, 1957), listeners across India began tuning in to Radio Ceylon for film songs (Awasthy, 1965: 51). For nearly six years, until Keskar relented and announced the launch of *Vividh Bharati*, a new variety programme on All India Radio that would include film music, Radio Ceylon programs such as *Binaca Geet Mala*, a ‘hit parade’ sponsored by a Swiss company called CIBA, were instrumental in forging a ‘national audience’ around the songs and stars of Bombay cinema. Each week’s show, recorded in Bombay and dispatched to Colombo, was broadcast from 8:00–9:00pm. on Wednesday and as Ameen Sayani, the legendary producer, recalled: ‘Wednesday came to be known as *Geet Mala day*’ (personal interview, July 2008). While the relationship between radio programs, the routines of daily life in independent India and ongoing struggles to define ‘national culture’ certainly merits in-depth

analysis (see Scannell, 1988), I wish to draw attention here to the ways in which the film industry became involved with the operations of the overseas service of Radio Ceylon.

The overwhelming popularity of *Geet Mala* led to complaints from producers and music directors when their songs did not feature in the weekly countdown, and, as Sayani explained: 'some came to CIBA to say that something fishy was going on and they were losing business'. In response, CIBA's representatives invited film producers and music directors to go through the sales figures and registers, and Ameen Sayani suggested appointing an ombudsman from the film industry who would check the countdown list. With established figures like G.P. Sippy and B.R. Chopra assuming this role, producers and music directors seemed satisfied with the process and, according to Sayani, information regarding record sales and popularity among audiences in different parts of the country began circulating in the film industry. In addition, *Geet Mala* producers also set up radio fan clubs across the country as a 'popular' counterweight. Each week, representatives from CIBA would collect sales figures and fan letters and develop a countdown that Ameen Sayani would use to produce a show. By the mid 1950s, directors and stars from the film industry were participating in weekly sponsored shows on Radio Ceylon and film publicity quickly became a central aspect of Radio Ceylon's programs. Radio, one might argue, made the films, songs and stars of Bombay cinema a part of the rhythms of daily life of listeners across India, created a shared space for listeners in diverse locations, bound together the nation-as-audience and enabled the film industry to imagine a 'national audience'.

Although a comprehensive analysis of this period of broadcasting and Radio Ceylon's relationship with the Bombay film industry is beyond the scope of this article, hopefully this brief account points towards the importance of situating contemporary developments in the media industries in Bombay within a comparative and historical framework. More broadly, this article suggests that historically informed analyses of inter-media relations will help us develop more complex and textured cultural genealogies of the Bombay film industry's 'global' flows and influences.

Diasporic foundations of Indiafm.com

In order to understand how professionals in the film and dot.com sectors forged relationships, I will begin with an examination of how American NRIs influenced the development of the dot.com economy in India. The role played by American NRIs in shaping the discourse of globalization and, more specifically, articulating the successes of the Information Technology (IT) sector to the adoption of neoliberal economic policies by successive Indian governments during the 1990s, has been well documented (Chakravarty, 2004). By the late 1990s, not only were transnational connections between the government,

the IT industry in India, and the NRI 'techie' community well-established, the idea that success in IT would enable India to assert its influence at a global level defined the political and cultural imaginary of India. Where the development of the dot.com sector was concerned, these transnational links and imaginaries were played out in three important ways.

First, it is difficult to exaggerate the extent to which diasporic 'cyber-heroes' like Sabeer Bhatia (creator of Hotmail.com) and Vinod Khosla (co-founder of Sun Microsystems), and networks of Indian IT professionals such as the Indus Entrepreneurs captured the imaginations of dot.com entrepreneurs in India. Not only did newspapers and magazines write extensively about NRI successes in Silicon Valley, these cyber-heroes' influence was felt more directly at major trade conventions such as India Internet World. The first India Internet World convention was held in August 1998 in New Delhi and attracted over 40,000 web designers, software developers and a number of internet evangelists, futurists and consultants (Viswanathan, 1999). While the first edition featured speakers from major IT companies, in 1999 every session was led by prominent NRIs who recounted their experiences building successful internet companies in Silicon Valley and proceeded to put themselves forward as consultants to aspiring dot.com entrepreneurs in India. Second, these NRIs facilitated access to venture capital, cutting-edge technical expertise and the latest managerial know-how for dot.com professionals in India (cf. Upadhyaya, 2004). Initial waves of NRI funding also led to the creation of venture capital firms within India and the launch of initiatives such as 'India Venture 2000' by the global consulting firm McKinsey and Co. (Padmanabhan, 2000). These transnational flows and alliances were of critical importance for fledgling dot.com companies in India because their association with industry leaders in the US gave them the credibility and symbolic capital that, in turn, led to more contacts and sources of funding. Furthermore, between 1999 and 2001, several prominent NRI venture capitalists and entrepreneurs were directly involved in incubating internet businesses and India-specific websites (Silicon India, 2000). A third important variable that lent the dot.com sector a diasporic bias was the business model that defined valuations and venture capital funding on the basis of a 'user commodity' constructed using a set of metrics including page views and the number of unique visitors to a website. The highly publicized acquisition of Indiaworld.co.in by Satyam Infoway (Sify) is illustrative of how this narrowly defined 'user commodity' shaped the business logics and identities of 'Indian' dot.com companies.

On 29 November 1999, Sify announced a \$500 million acquisition of Indiaworld.co.in (Sharma, 2000), which helped Sify consolidate its position as a powerful internet corporation and made the NRI community the most sought-after 'user commodity' for dot.com companies. Even as speculation raged in business circles about Indiaworld being overvalued, with many raising the question of how 'NRI eyeballs' would actually translate into dollars,

it was clear that Sify's investors were attracted by Indiaworld's position as a leading NRI-focused portal that included 22 India-related 'channels'. As the CEO Rajesh Jain explained: 'Indiaworld has secured a unique position with overseas Indians. On an average, it generates 13 million page-views per month. And that was the basis for the valuation and the price paid for it' (in Sharma, 2000). Continuing problems with connectivity and low rates of credit card usage in India were also cited as key reasons for dot.com companies to focus their efforts on NRIs.

Sify's acquisition of Indiaworld was followed by a dramatic period of growth and, according to a NASSCOM report (National Association of Software and Services Companies), by April 2000 three new India-centric websites were being launched everyday and close to 23,000 domain names with Indian addresses had been registered (Padmanabhan, 2000). This boom lasted just over a year and in May 2001, *Business World* reported that only six dot.com companies could report profits and 15 others appeared to be 'on the path to profitability' (Dhawan, 2001). Among these survivors were two prominent India-based companies, Rediff.com and Indiatimes.com, that went on to define themselves as portals targeting Indians worldwide and particularly those who resided in the US. In March 2001, Rediff acquired a US-based portal, Thinkindia.com, and shortly thereafter, launched its US edition. In August that year, Rediff went on to acquire two more US-based companies – a long-distance telecom company that enabled NRIs to call India (Valuecom Communications Corporation), and *India Abroad*, one of the oldest and most profitable Indian-American publications (Shankar, 2002). As Rediff's CEO Ajit Balakrishnan explained:

It is our mission to make rediff.com the online portal of choice for Indians worldwide. We will do this by helping all Indians living outside India to connect with their community, both in India and in the countries in which they live. (Shankar, 2000)

Competing with Rediff for NRI eyeballs, executives at Indiatimes also went on to frame their website as a portal for 'global Indians'. On 15 August 2001, Indiatimes proclaimed its goal of reaching out to American NRIs in full-page advertisements in India's leading newspapers, with the slogan: 'Quit USA, Enter India' (Daga, 2001). This diasporic bias of the dot.com sector and, specifically, the construction of the American NRI community as the prized user commodity of the internet, was a crucial factor in enabling websites such as Indiafm to imagine and represent themselves as uniquely positioned to reconfigure the vaguely understood overseas territory of diasporic Indians into a well-defined 'NRI audience'. To illustrate how Indiafm was framed as a company that could forge an 'NRI audience', let me turn to my interview with its co-founder, Saleem Mobhani.

Towards the end of an hour-long conversation about various aspects of Indiafm – relationships with film studios, content production processes, film

journalism, etc. – Mobhani opened a folder and pulled out a press kit. ‘Here, let me show you a couple of things,’ he urged and handed me a brochure which explained how Indiafm had, since its launch in 1997, emerged as the ‘only site trusted by the Entertainment Industry and consumers’. On the very first page, titled ‘HUM: About Us,’ is this information: ‘Every month ... over 10.1 million unique visitors ... 127 countries ... 107 million page views ... drawing 4.2 Terrabyte bandwidth per month ... 849 sites linking to IndiaFM including MSN and Yahoo!’ The textbox placed below this reads: ‘IndiaFM weekly Bollywood Newsletter has over 1 million validated subscribers. No other Bollywood portal has as wide a reach internationally as IndiaFM.’ And in the box adjacent to this, a ‘distribution of surfers’ indicates that 49.2 percent of Indiafm’s traffic comes from the US. Pointing to the text beneath the various percentages, showing that ‘overall, overseas territories constitute 77% of the total visitors to Indiafm.com’, Mobhani asserted:

More than 70 percent of the traffic base is outside India and the key market is North America, followed by EU about 10 percent, UK about 7 percent, Middle East about 6 percent, and the Far East about 7 percent. If you look at the span, as a global map of sorts, practically every place in the world there are Indians, Indiafm is accessed. Every month, more than 6 million wallpapers are downloaded by fans around the world. 3 million odd screensavers are downloaded and consumed every month. In fact, you’ll find that Indiafm will be the logo most often seen on an NRI’s desktop if it has a Bollywood wallpaper. That’s the extent of our reach, and that’s why we have become the industry leader.

At one level, press kits are a part of any media company’s publicity efforts and such declarations by industry executives do not necessarily offer any deep insights. In fact, Mobhani’s statement does sound like a ‘corporate script’ that he delivers on a regular basis at different venues. It is instructive to note, however, that this scenario was played out in interviews I conducted with professionals in other prominent dot.com companies such as Indiatimes and Rediff, with every executive and content-producer asserting that ‘NRI eyeballs’ were what mattered the most. Omar Qureshi, who headed the team of journalists, web designers and software engineers at Indiatimes’ movies division, offered his own spin:

When a producer comes to Indiatimes, what does he expect? From the producer’s perspective, audiences within India get all their Bollywood news through print, radio and television. So if you lived in India, especially when internet usage hadn’t taken off, when you had crappy connections or you had to sit in a dingy cybercafé, naturally you wouldn’t go online to read about a Bollywood film or the latest scandal. Things might be changing now, but the fact is, NRIs were the ones who were visiting our site the most and this holds true today also.

What seem like well-rehearsed soundbites do lead to an important question that, in turn, points to other shifts in the media landscape in Bombay: if an

NRI 'user commodity' was all that was required to convince filmmakers in Bollywood of the importance of the Internet, why did it take a few more years for film industry professionals to forge ties with dot.com companies? For we must note that the emergence of commercial Bollywood-focused websites can be traced back to 1996 when *Filmfare*, one of the oldest and most reputable fanzines, was launched online. Owned by the Bennett Coleman Company Ltd (BCCL) and part of a family of prestigious publications including the *Times of India* and the *Economic Times*, filmfare.com was designed by a company named Pure Tech India Ltd and hosted on an internet server in Vancouver, Canada (*Times of India*, 1996). During the late 1990s, numerous other websites were leveraging Bollywood content to attract traffic and, thereby, generate advertising revenue and even venture capital. In spite of these websites' success in attracting 'NRI eyeballs', and the growing interest shown by prominent film stars, who participated in online chat sessions with fans from around the world, the film industry did not regard the internet as an important new medium that would influence their business in any way. Success stories revolving around the promotion of films like *Kaante* (dir. Sanjay Gupta, 2002) or Aamir Khan's highly publicized tie-in with Indiatimes to promote the Oscar-nominated film *Lagaan* (dir. Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001), made little impact. In fact, the dot.com boom during 1999–2000 only made matters worse for companies like Indiafm. As Mobhani explained:

some websites set up during the boom began offering money to film producers for content for their site and suddenly there was a perception in the film industry that this is another revenue stream. Instead of thinking about the web as a medium for promotion and publicity, the film industry began expecting us to pay them for the content they were giving us.

During this phase, filmmakers and stars in Bollywood continued to regard print (*Bombay Times*, for example) and television (STAR Plus, ZEE, etc.) as the most important sites for marketing and promotions, and dot.com companies were burdened with the challenge of convincing the film industry that the internet would affect their fortunes. As Archana Sadanand, who heads a prominent marketing and promotions company (Buzz Entertainment), explained:

A few years back, not many producers were interested in the web. Billboards, print and TV channels would be more than enough. People like Subhash Ghai, who encouraged us to use the web to promote *Taal*, were exceptions. Most people in the industry didn't take the internet seriously and were skeptical about spending money for online promotions. These days, when we come up with a campaign for a film, we automatically include the web, we send a press kit to dot.coms just as we send it to *Bombay Times* or *Dainik Jagran*. Now things are different.

By late 2005, things were indeed different. In fact, within two years of the dot.com crash and the subsequent stabilization of the dot.com sector during

2002–3, companies like Indiafm had emerged as important nodes in the circuit of marketing and promotions and were shaping the flow of Bollywood content worldwide. The diasporic bias that defined the development of the dot.com sector in India, then, was only one of the factors that shaped Bollywood's relationship with dot.com companies. This relationship would also hinge on how well dot.com companies could position themselves as key marketing vehicles for the overseas market and, more broadly, as knowledge brokers who could help Bollywood stars and filmmakers imagine and understand the 'NRI audience'.³ And dot.com companies' ability to establish themselves in Bollywood, in turn, would depend on how well they capitalized on two key developments: (a) corporatization and the growing importance of marketing and market research in the film industry, and (b) changes in the realm of film distribution, particularly where the overseas territory was concerned.⁴

Knowing the NRI

Indiafm serves as a particularly compelling case to examine how dot.com executives participated in and shaped discussions of the film industry's 'corporatization' and in doing so, carved out a space for new media companies in Bombay. It is important to recognize at the very outset that Indiafm's identity as a marketing company was never in question. Since January 2000, when Indiafm was acquired by Hungama.com, a highly successful Bombay-based e-promotions portal, it has been positioned as an 'entertainment marketing' company that could assist Bollywood with in-film branding, co-sponsorship, movie promotions and designing a movie website. Saleem Mobhani and others at Indiafm recognized that, in the long run, their success in forging ties with Bollywood would depend on how well they could establish the idea that Bollywood's ability to corporatize itself and 'go global' rested on the industry's willingness to match Hollywood in every domain, including the use of innovative new media strategies to promote films. To illustrate how critical this issue was and how Indiafm tackled the challenge, let us return to the company's press kit.

In addition to the brochure which explained why 'Indiafm.com is the No. 1 Bollywood portal', the press kit contained 13 issues of a trade-focused magazine published by Indiafm called *70 MM: Movie Marketing at its best!* In the first issue, the editor, Venetia Fernandes, explains (December 2003):

Through *70MM*, we endeavour to provide you with a sneak peek into various facets of the world of movie marketing globally, right from the official websites of the latest Bollywood and Hollywood films, to promotions on the mobile platform and inventive marketing case studies.

Neatly positioning Bollywood and Hollywood in the same frame, Fernandes continues:

A movie release today goes beyond mere promos and eye-catching hoardings. Marketing a movie today is all about an amalgamation of online and offline activities. Hollywood has been a pioneer in the movie marketing arena showcasing a trend in film tie-ups with prominent brands...*back home, we are also witnessing a greater shift towards in-film branding and use of new media platforms* (my emphasis).

Every issue of *70MM* includes 'case studies' of film marketing and branding in Hollywood, featured alongside reports of Indiafm's innovations in promoting and marketing Bollywood films. For instance, the November 2004 issue begins with a 'spotlight' section that explains how Hollywood films like *The Incredibles* and *Madagascar* invited audience participation through innovative online contests and other branding exercises. Following this is a two-page spread that details Indiafm's efforts at bringing the same 'global' level of innovation to Bollywood. Framed by case studies of movie websites created by Indiafm, the text in the center of this page reads:

With the Indian Internet Usage projected to go up to 100 million by 2007 even as the Indian Film Industry is estimated to boom, the Internet just cannot be ignored in the movie marketing mix. Internet surveys conducted abroad are clearly indicative of the trend towards users logging on purely to seek entertainment. With a whole slew of Bollywood movies due for release, along with some big launches, we at Hungama-Indiafm have been busy doing our bit to *put Indian entertainment on the world (digital) map*. (my emphasis)

70MM also includes interviews with a diverse array of industry professionals who comment on the growing importance of marketing and promotions, the value of working with companies like Indiafm, and the importance of the internet in the long run. Carefully produced, *70MM* is very much a part of Indiafm's PR efforts. However, it needs to be seen first as a trade artifact that addresses a range of professionals in the film, television, advertising and marketing sectors in Bombay and only then as publicity material that seeks to promote Indiafm to internet users in India and abroad. *70MM* invites producers, directors, marketing executives and stars in Bollywood to imagine and understand the web as an index of globality and vital to the larger process of re-imagining Bombay cinema as 'Bollywood Inc.' Thus, *70MM* serves as an important cultural-industrial artifact – in Caldwell's terms, a 'semi-embedded deep text' (2008: 346) – in at least two ways. First, it reveals how Indiafm and other new media companies went about negotiating and forging relationships in the media world of Bombay. Second, it alerts us to the changing business practices and identities of film companies in Bombay that are grappling with the challenges of re-imagining themselves as 'global', 'corporatized' companies.

Further, the circulation of trade artifacts like *70MM* were not isolated efforts and must be seen in relation to the normalization of the overseas territory, particularly the 'dollar and pound' markets of the US and the UK as Bollywood's route to the global. Consider the two-day marketing summit organized by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) in November 2003.

Panels and speeches at this summit – dubbed ‘CineMint’ – were focused on the theme of ‘making and marketing Indian content to overseas markets’ (Chandran, 2003). Chaired by Shравan Shroff, CEO of the distribution and exhibition company FAME, the conference brought together producers, directors and media executives from film, television and advertising companies in an effort to ‘brainstorm with international marketing experts, and look at case studies of movies successfully marketed globally to pick up lessons and insights’ (Dey, 2003). Dot.com companies used such events to further reinforce the idea that web-marketing would play an important role in targeting NRI audiences worldwide. ‘Some filmmakers get this’, remarked Omar Qureshi of Indiatimes. ‘If you want to get NRIs interested in your film, how do you do it? You go online and generate buzz. NRIs use the web a lot, they’re used to Hollywood, and they have certain standards,’ Qureshi explained. Echoing the many articles in business and current affairs magazines that provided ‘tips from marketers in the know about overseas Indians’, Mobhani too asserted that web-promotions were what NRIs, who had been exposed to ‘global brands and service standards’, expected. As he understood it:

for NRIs, Bollywood is important, but it is also important to recognize that Bollywood is part of a larger entertainment environment. Especially when you think about youngsters, they have grown up with Tom Cruise and Shahrukh Khan. So for this audience, we have to speak a language they get. (Kohli, 1999)

In fact, by 2003–4, this line of reasoning was being employed by producers, directors, stars, and publicity and marketing executives across Bollywood. Explaining the film industry’s interest in using the web as a platform to ‘tap NRIs’, Rajesh Sawhney, CEO of Indiatimes, reiterated Qureshi and Mobhani’s observations and the larger goal of adapting Hollywood’s ‘best practices’ to shape ‘Bollywood Inc.’:

Although a new concept in India, online movie trailers have been widely used abroad. For instance, in the U.S. – which has the biggest film industry of the world – 68% of moviegoers do not generally watch a movie unless they have seen a trailer. And 85% of those who prefer watching trailers to decide which movie to watch, watch movie trailers online. (Saha, 2004)

The third crucial factor that dot.com companies capitalized on during this time was a shift in the domain of film distribution. Until the late 1990s, the most common distribution arrangement for the overseas territories was what is known as an ‘outright sale’. An outright sale refers to a transaction whereby a distributor buys a film on an outright basis, paying the producer for the rights to distribute the film overseas over a period of time. In this arrangement, the distributor takes on all the costs associated with marketing and exhibiting the film, and is under no obligation to share revenues with the producer (Ganti, 2004). To a dot.com company like Indiafm, this method of distribution offered no advantages and in fact, posed a major obstacle. As Mobhani explained:

Outside India, the market was completely controlled by one or two players who would buy interests outright. And it was in their interests to be non-transparent. Producers never showed any interest in doing any marketing outside. Why should I spend any more, was the logic at work there. Whatever money is to be made, the distributor has taken that.

This situation began to change during the late 1990s and the early part of this century as established production banners like Yash Raj Films and newer entrants like UTV recognized the need to control overseas distribution and reduce losses. Yash Raj Films' experience with *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*DDLJ*, dir. Aditya Chopra, 1995) was, in many ways, a significant turning point. Aditya Chopra's debut film, *DDLJ* went on to earn Rs 200 million abroad and Rs 500 million in India, but was sold for just Rs 6–7.5 million per territory (Kohli, 1999). Anxious not to repeat this mistake, by the time their next film was ready for release in 1997 (*Dil To Pagal Hai*, dir. Yash Chopra, 1997), Yash Raj Films had established several distribution offices in India, and offices in the US, UK and UAE (Dwyer, 2002; Kohli, 1999). The growing financial importance of the overseas territories – by the year 2006, Bollywood films were expected to earn close to \$100 million in the US, for instance (Bamzai, 2006) – has led other influential companies including UTV and Adlabs to follow Yashraj's example (Kohli, 2006).

This ongoing shift in the practice of film distribution, which allowed Bombay-based companies to target the lucrative overseas market in a more organized fashion, led to a demand for web-promotions and, more crucially, created a need for 'knowledge' about NRI audiences that marketing executives and public relations agents working in Bombay were in no position to provide. 'At the end of the day, every producer, director, and star in Bombay wants to get a sense of the buzz,' explained Parul Gossain, a well-known public relations agent in Bollywood. 'In Bombay, when I travel around, I get a sense of whether people are talking about a certain promo, a film's music, the stars, etc. and I convey that to different people in the industry,' she elaborated. We were in the lobby area of the Marriott Hotel in Juhu, a northern suburb of Bombay, waiting for a press conference to begin. A few minutes after she had made this point, a popular Bollywood star entered the hotel. Waving to Gossain as he walked towards a throng of photographers and journalists, he raised his hand to his ear, saying 'Call me.' 'See,' exclaimed Gossain, turning back to me, 'I can call him to talk about an upcoming film, to give him my take on how well the publicity is working. And I can do the same for a producer who takes me on for a film's publicity.' However, professionals like Gossain had no basis to talk about the 'buzz' in London, New York or other lucrative overseas markets. It is this space, defined by intermediaries like Parul Gossain and marketing executives at television corporations and advertising agencies, which dot.com companies sought to occupy. As Lokesh Dhar, who oversees UTV's operations in the US, confirmed:

The way we gauge the buzz in the market here is through online sources. You can watch an ad on Zee TV, but I don't know what your thoughts and feelings are ... with the web, I follow user comments and I can feel the buzz ... so it's extremely important for us in the overseas market. In India, you are seeing it in print, on TV, radio, and you are talking to people. Out here, given the geographic scattering, online is the only way to go.

Companies like Indiafm seized this opportunity to position themselves as powerful knowledge brokers who could help filmmakers and stars in Bollywood 'get a sense of the buzz' among overseas audiences and imagine the vast and vaguely defined overseas audience of NRIs in more concrete terms. Charles, who monitors web traffic for Indiatimes, offered this explanation:

Every Bollywood producer or director or star wants their film to do well in the NRI market. And they will all tell reporters why their film will be a hit with NRIs. But each year, only a few films do well abroad. The question I would ask them is, 'Do you know your NRI?'

It is this problem of 'knowing the NRI' that dot.com companies offered to solve by presenting Bollywood with a range of metrics – page hits, downloads, subscriptions, number of minutes spent on a page, and so on – that indicated how well a film was likely to do among NRI audiences and following that up by tracking films' overseas earnings. As Omar Qureshi, waving his hand at the computers in the Indiatimes office, said to me: 'See, the beauty of the Web is, we can track interest in every article, every photograph.' Showing me around the office, he went on to explain:

so we track interests, we get feedback, and the industry knows this. On an hourly basis, not even a daily basis, we track web trends. We refresh those pages every three minutes. If I'm going home now, its early morning in New York, then London, and so on.

Pausing for a moment in front of one computer screen, Qureshi turned to me with a smile and declared: 'There is always an Indian online.'

For a particularly telling instance of dot.com companies leveraging their technical ability to 'measure' audience response worldwide, let us turn once again to Indiafm's trade magazine, *70MM*. The July 2004 issue offered industry insiders an 'IndiaFM.com Research Exclusive' that promised to chart which movies were 'likely to be the biggest blockbusters of them all'. The two-page spotlight begins by explaining that Indiafm's analysis was based on an extensive 14-day survey that brought in 621,793 responses. The results, tabulated to present an 'India rank' and an 'overseas rank', 'were based on votes from 67 countries – countries which constitute about 98% of revenue towards Bollywood releases'. This poll, we are told: 'threw up several interesting results, generating quite a buzz in the industry'. Evidence of this industry

buzz is presented in the form of pithy quotes from media executives. For instance, the Vice President of Eros Multimedia, Kumar Ahuja, commends the survey saying:

IndiaFM research forms one of the key inputs in our strategic planning for promotion of movies in each of the key overseas markets. IndiaFM has always been, and continues to remain, an important reference for the Bollywood trade, especially overseas.

This survey, furthermore, was part of a larger shift whereby Indiafm positioned the 'NRI audience' within a weekly ritual of considerable importance in Bollywood – tallying box office earnings. As Rajeev Masand, entertainment editor at the television channel CNN-IBN, reflected:

back in 2002, when I was writing for *Indian Express*, I wrote about the Naaz Building being the Bollywood Barometer. If you wanted numbers, the distributors and others who had offices in the building had the numbers at their fingertips. But now those numbers are online and yeah, when it came to the overseas market, these guys had no way of knowing.

Since 2004, the 'trade' section of Indiafm, where reputed film journalist and trade analyst Taran Adarsh compiles films' earnings in the US, UK and other markets on a weekly basis, has emerged as the virtual equivalent of the Naaz Building, where knowledge regarding the 'NRI audience' is generated and circulated.

My goal here is not to point out sociological inaccuracies or the problematic tendency of such rankings to flatten a diverse terrain of reception and cultural production into one broad and homogeneous 'NRI audience' category. In fact, industry professionals continue to regard box office figures as unreliable and view exhibitors' and distributors' reporting practices with suspicion. Rather, I would argue that such surveys and statistics served as immensely useful tactics in forging a vast and uncharted terrain of overseas viewers into a more imaginable 'NRI audience'. As Davila reminds us, the logic of marketing research: 'serves more to legitimize its practitioners in the eyes of their corporate clients than to make consumers any less imaginary' (2001: 66). Thus, asserting their value in both aspirational (the web as an index of globality) and strategic terms (the need to know NRIs), dot.com companies played a crucial role in the broader project of re-shaping Bollywood's 'terrain of operations' by positioning Bollywood as a cultural industry capable of imagining and institutionalizing a 'transnational audience'.

Conclusion

Tracing the relationship between film and dot.com companies in Bombay, this article highlights the role played by 'new media' in shaping the imaginations

and practices of film industry professionals for whom overseas markets have come to constitute an increasingly important source of revenue. Further, this case study of Indiafm is built on the understanding that industry professionals who are reckoning with a global audience-base play a central role in shaping both everyday practices and the larger project of re-fashioning the Bombay film industry into 'Bollywood', a transnational cultural industry. This is not to say that scholars writing about cinema in India have not addressed these questions. Madhava Prasad (1998), for instance, has analysed how relations of production shape the film form by examining the fragmented nature of the production apparatus, the centrality of kinship loyalties within the industry, the reliance on merchant capital, the influence that distributors wield in every aspect of the filmmaking process and so on (see 'The Economics of Ideology', in Prasad, 1998: 29–51). However, as Tejaswini Ganti has pointed out, such analyses: 'that try to "read" or infer production practices from the finished film cannot access or do justice to the complexity, the negotiations, the idiosyncrasies and frequent chaos that characterizes filmmaking' (Ganti, 2000: 24). This article thus joins a growing body of scholarship that examines the realm of media production in media capitals like Bombay, Hong Kong and LA (Caldwell, 2008; Curtin, 2007; Ganti, 2000; Govil, 2005).

Further, by focusing on the role played by new media companies in shaping Bombay's status as a media capital, it also draws our attention to the fortunes of other major centers of media production within India, particularly the two southern cities of Chennai and Hyderabad. While limitations of space do not allow for an account of developments in the Tamil and Telugu film and television industries, an analysis of Bombay's position as a media capital does point towards the politics of media globalization and the continued use the term 'regional' or at best, 'translocal', to mark Chennai and Hyderabad in the Indian mediascape (see Kumar, 2006).

Finally, unlike previous scholarship that examined film in isolation, this study invites us to consider to how various 'new media' have, historically, reconfigured the cultural geography of Bombay cinema and Bombay's status as a media capital. Considering the case of Radio Ceylon, which broadcast a range of film-based programs that reached audiences across the Indian subcontinent and even parts of east Africa, encourages us to ponder how other developments in media and communications – satellite television, for example, and the emergence of powerful media companies such as the London-based Eros International – influenced the circulation of films and film music, reconfiguring the Bombay film industry's spatial coordinates and engendering new sites and forms of consumption. This does not necessarily mean that we think only about continuities from the 1950s to the present. Rather, the case study presented here opens up a space for more grounded explorations of the interwoven histories of different media technologies and institutions.

Notes

1. Interviews with industry professionals were open-ended and followed an emergent approach. While I did have a set of questions for each industry professional regarding their business practices, the interviews would often spiral outward into a conversation about broader changes in the media industries in Bombay. Further, interviews were conducted not only with high-level executives but also with on-the-ground professionals, including marketing executives, public relations agents, film journalists, web analysts, and those involved in various aspects of production and distribution in film, television and dot.com companies. Unless otherwise noted, all quotes from industry professionals are from personal interviews.

2. The notable exception here is Peter Manuel's (1993) study of cassette culture in north India, in which he examines how the emergence of cassettes altered the landscape of music production and circulation.

3. My use of the term 'knowledge brokers' draws on Mazzarella's (2003) analysis of how advertising and marketing professionals in Bombay assumed the role of 'cultural brokers' who could help global brands navigate the terrain of 'Indian' consumer culture.

4. 'Corporatization' refers to the increasing emphasis on corporate accountability in the notoriously chaotic film industry, initiated by the Indian government's decision to grant 'industry' status to the Bombay film industry and economic liberalization that completely altered the landscape of the television and advertising industries in India during the 1990s (see Govil, 2005).

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