From Networks to Netflix

A Guide to Changing Channels

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East India Comedy

Channeling the Public Sphere in Online Satire

Subin Paul

After the inauguration of Donald Trump as the 45th president of the United States, a group of young stand-up comedians thousands of miles away in India—going by the name "East India Comedy"—uploaded a musical parody on their YouTube channel. Titled "The Donald Trump Song," the parody altered the lyrics of a popular American song to add references to gun control and heightened sexism in the US, as the comedians sang: "We have no gun control, so you men can enjoy. Just don't make out with any boys" (East India Comedy 2017a). Within a few weeks, the two-minute video had more than a million views. Such playful engagement with politics is a growing trend among the English-speaking, middle- and upper-class population living in the metropolitan cities of India, and such YouTube channels are enabling them to participate in a global "political public sphere" (Habermas 2012) not confined to national boundaries.

In fact, several comedy collectives in addition to East India Comedy such as All India Bakchod and The Viral Fever have recently launched YouTube channels to cater to a thriving online audience with political satire. The popularity of these channels comes at a time of declining credibility for traditional news media in India because of growing interference from corporate and government institutions (Punathambekar 2015). Traditional media certainly persist in India, with more than 100 million print newspapers sold every day (Biswas 2012). Television outlets, too, remain plentiful; from only one television channel prior to the early 1980s, India now has more than 700 television channels ("Give" 2015). However, Internet penetration is 35% ("Internet" 2016), and by 2020 India is estimated to overtake the US in terms of the absolute number of online users (PTI 2016). It is in spaces like YouTube, therefore, that we might look to see this transformation from traditional media institutions to emerging forms of cultural production unfold, where the "channel" structures of existing media adapt and evolve to serve new media logics. This is a question not only of industry, but also of politics, as this transformation enables cultural genres such as comedy to support public dialogue, deliberation, and debate in ways that the channels of previous media institutions could not. Yet the phenomenal prospects of the Internet to expand the public sphere, and specifically the accompanying potential of YouTube channels to foster democratic dialogue and political critique, remain little explored in academic literature.

One of the functions of a channel is to differentiate one industry player from others and create loyalty among the audience in an increasingly competitive market. A channel, in a sense, depends on boundaries that define what their interior contents will be, and perhaps more importantly, what they will not be, demarcating that content from that of other content creators in the market (at least in principle). Channels seek to maximize what Faye Woods (2014) in the context of British television called the "distinguishing difference" in order to develop and grow their niche audiences. In this chapter, thus, I seek to interrogate how and why the distinguishing difference of YouTube channels has become instrumental in contributing to the public sphere in a multi-channel environment. In other words, how have digital entrepreneurs and audiences leveraged these new channels as a way to distinguish themselves from each other as well as to critically discuss politics and culture in contemporary India? In what follows, I will briefly review the historical development of video channels in India, from the sole, state-owned "DD National" to myriad private channels, and then demonstrate how the emergence of digital channels has created new possibilities for the public sphere with a case study of East India Comedy's (EIC) YouTube channel.

FROM ALL INDIA "SERIALS" TO EAST INDIA COMEDY

The shift from a single television channel, DD National, to multiple television and Internet-based channels is one of the most significant developments in the media industry since India's independence in 1947. The government-owned Doordarshan launched India's first television channel, DD National or DD1, in 1959. Broadly, the emergence and development of the national television channel can be traced in three distinct yet interconnected phases (Kumar 2006). The first phase began with the establishment of a preliminary broadcasting center in New Delhi and consisted largely of experimentation with educational programming as well as the technical evaluation of the broadcast equipment. In this phase, television played a subordinate role to radio, which was the preferred medium for mass communication to foster national identity in the newly independent country.

The demands of a developing nation made agriculture, animal husbandry, poultry farming, education, literacy, and family welfare prime agendas for television programming. With the goals of national development clearly taking precedence on Indian television, there was little impetus to promote Doordarshan (DD) either as a commercial medium for entertainment or as a public enterprise free from government control. In 1982, however, India's decision to host the Asian Games and the growing popularity of color television encouraged a realignment of goals. After two years, DD launched another channel, DD2 (or DD Metro) in Delhi and was later telecast to other metropolitan cities of India. Thus, the second phase of television development spawned an era of entertainment programing in India. This phase also saw a marked increase in the reach of television as the potential coverage of DD grew from 23% to 70% of the population (Kumar 2006).

The telecast of family serials, including *Hum Log, Buniyad* and *Nukkad*, on DD National provided a fillip to commercialization of television as private advertisers entered into sponsorship agreements with DD. At the same time, to sustain the political agenda of transcending the diversities of language, religion, region, ethnicity, class, caste, and gender in the modern nation-state, the political elites became so preoccupied with the genre of national programing—family serials telecast across the country showcasing a unified, "Indian" culture—that they overlooked the increasing commercialization of what was heralded as a public medium at its inception. Because the prime goal of the state-owned DD was to create a shared sense of Indian nationality, the two television channels rarely became spaces for political criticism. On the contrary, by the late 1980s, with the production of two prime-time Hindu epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, Hinduism started to exert a greater push both in television content and ideology—which has only become more prominent in contemporary India, leading to an aggressive form of religious nationalism that to some extent has curtailed media freedom, as will be explained later.

In 1991, however, the state-owned media monopoly came to an end with the liberalization of the economy. The government opened the media market to private corporations including foreign players. This third phase, which continues to this day, saw the rise of Rupert Murdoch–owned Star TV and Indian-owned Zee TV satellite services. The national satellite reach once monopolized by DD and dedicated to the building of national unity through its channels, DD1 and DD2, now allowed channels in "regional" languages from outside the Hindi belt of states in the northwest to be delivered throughout the nation (Sinclair and Harrison 2004). DD's financial status, moreover, slowly started to worsen. With these initial ruptures in the hegemonic dominance of state-sponsored broadcaster DD, Indian audiences went from a single-channel environment to a world of numerous choices.

Starting in the early 2000s, there was also a marked increase in the penetration of the Internet and mobile phones (Jeffrey and Doron 2013). Within five years of the dot-com boom and bust, which played out from 1998 to 2004 in the Indian context, the digital media economy was integrated into the rest of advertising, marketing, and media industries across the country (Punathambekar 2015). Digital entrepreneurs, ranging from independent artists to formal groups of commercial content creators, started channels on YouTube. Most notable among these was The Viral Fever (TVF), launched in 2010. Labeled as an "online digital entertainment channel," TVF sought to reach out to the "young generation" that seldom watched television ("About TVFPlay" n.d.). Three years later, another collective called the All India Bakchod (AIB) began its YouTube channel, and in a short time, it became one of the most popular digital channels in India ("About Us" n.d.). With more than one billion users visiting YouTube globally every month ("Video" 2015), YouTube channels have also become central to digital comedy production and marketing.

EIC entered this landscape in 2012 as a two-person stand-up act on YouTube (later expanded to seven members) providing various type of comedy, including stand-up acts, workshops, corporate events, as well as television and movie scripting. Asserting the significance of the YouTube channel to EIC's operations, its co-founder, Kunal Rao, explained in an email message to the author on April 19, 2017:

> It is the era of digital content, and people consume content online quite voraciously. So for a bunch of stand-up comedians, it is easier to reach people in different cities and countries through the internet, than to travel and perform shows for them to let them know we exist. So YouTube has helped EIC get popular quicker than if we did not have a channel.

Speaking to that desire for popularity, EIC claims to be India's "busiest" comedy company ("What We Do" n.d.). Its YouTube oeuvre largely targets young, urban Indians with live comedy videos and theme-based shows. The latter include *Comedy News Network* (satirical commentary on 24/7 news and traditional news media), *EIC vs. Bollywood* (commentary on Bollywood controversies and spoofs), *Men Are From Bars* (a show on romantic relationships), *Backbenchers* (comedic commentary on college life), *The Illiterates* (stand-up acts on literary culture in India), *Pant on Fire* (co-founder Sorabh Pant's stand-up acts), *It's Not Okay* (co-founder Kunal Rao's comedic sketches on Indian society and culture), and *Cometh the Hour* (Azeem Banatwalla's stand-up comedy). In addition, EIC hosts an annual award show called "Ghanta Awards," which showcases the "worst" actors and movies of Bollywood in a given year. EIC also produces musical comedies and sketches that explicitly engage with politics—a role that requires us to consider the YouTube channel's role in supporting public dialogue and debate beyond that which traditional news media currently permit.

PLAYFUL POLITICS AND THE ONLINE PUBLIC SPHERE

Aside from growing interest in online platforms more generally, one reason why YouTube channels such as EIC have become popular among the Indian population is because of increasing censorship in news media. The votaries of the government enact this censorship both directly and indirectly. While the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which assumed power in 2014 through a landslide electoral victory (Chakravartty and Roy 2015), has come under scrutiny for its crackdown on journalists who are critical of its policies, Internet trolls following the right-wing Hindutva ideology have been quick to attack any online commentary critical of the BJP or Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Mohan 2015). In addition, as Arvind Rajagopal (2009) notes, traditional media negotiate new, more informal forms of censorship and control via the mechanisms of business practice, including judgments about audience taste that use ratings, and the need to advance advertising revenues as the sole justification for the presentation of programing.

Given these constraints, online channels for comedic satire can support, at least to some extent, criticism of the ruling government and talk about politics in the constructive and adversarial way required of citizens in a democracy but increasingly prohibited by traditional media institutions. In this way, satirical YouTube channels, such as

EIC, have allowed the Indian public sphere to persist as well as expand despite forces working to limit it. This notion of a public sphere typically refers to a common space, in principle accessible to all, which anyone could enter with views on the common good realized wholly or partially. As Rajeev Bhargava (2005) noted, such public spaces could include the *maidan* ("playground"), the coffeehouse, the exhibition hall, the roadside *paan* ("tobacco") shop, or the sweetshop in the neighborhood, as well as the discursive and representational space available in newspapers, magazines, radio, and television. In contemporary times, the Internet has emerged as a public space where the critical dialogue and debate integral to a democratic society is carried out (Papacharissi 2010), and satirical YouTube channels, I argue, are important sites in this process.

With more than half a million subscribers, EIC's YouTube channel is a prime venue to cultivate an audience. According to EIC's co-founder, Sorabh Pant (2014), the YouTube channel is central to any comedian's success: "One of the first steps for a comedian today has to be setting up a YouTube channel—the 10,000 people who follow you there would also be your audience offline." Yet in marshaling audiences for groups like EIC, these digital channels might also be said to produce publics. Although bounded and differentiated from one another, channels nevertheless support communication between online content creators and the audiences whose opinions, as recorded through surveys and YouTube comment boards, are occasionally incorporated while producing new digital content. In supporting the formation of a specific audience, the channel that distinguishes EIC in a multi-channel environment also relates to the function of comedy in the public sphere. For example, EIC occasionally invites members from the audience to be a part of its stand-up acts, which makes the public performance and, by extension, the public sphere a little more inclusive. This drive for "distinguishing difference" thus helps EIC's YouTube comedy channel make the public sphere function in a more participatory manner as compared to AIB and TVF channels, which have only studio-produced and studio-edited shows.

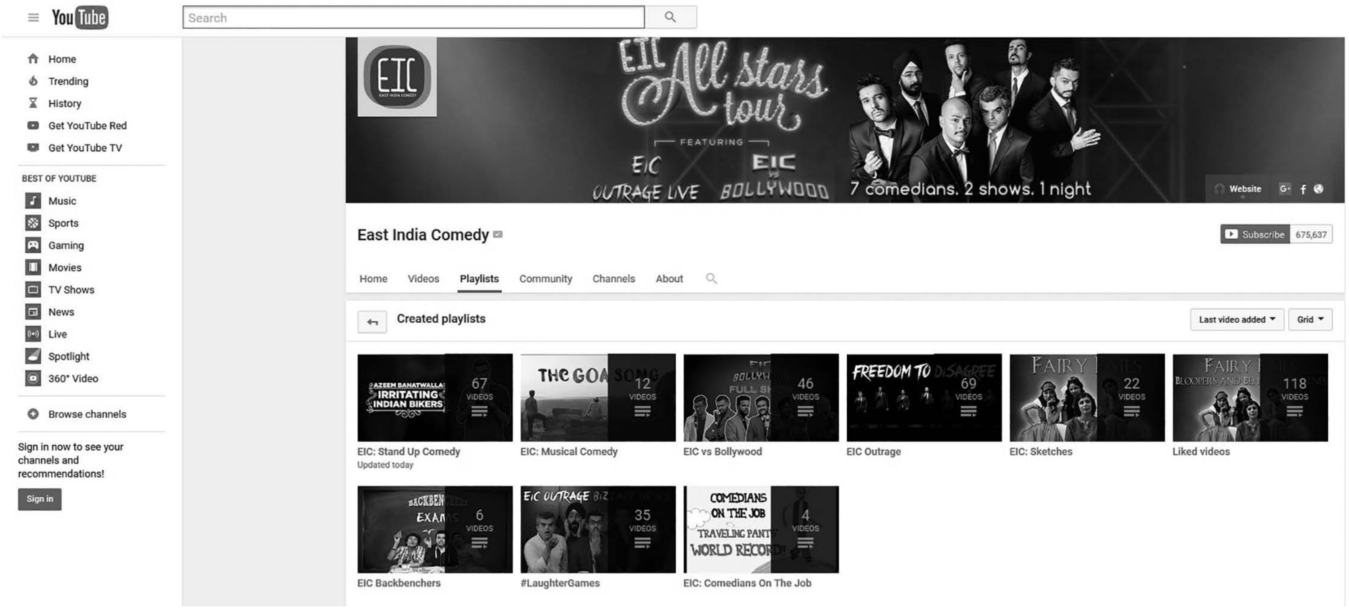
To illustrate the support for this political public sphere provided by EIC's YouTube channel, I turn to a live musical parody that the group uploaded on YouTube after the Modi-led Indian government undertook banknote demonetization in November 2016. One of the purported goals of the demonetization process, which annulled old 500 and 1000 rupee currency notes, was to crack down on illicit cash used to fund terrorism and illegal activities. Given the sudden—and rather unplanned—implementation of demonetization, countless Indians faced hardships as they stood in front of vending machines for hours, sometimes days, to obtain new currency notes. In the music parody titled "The Modi Song," the seven members of EIC satirized Modi's demonetization decision (East India Comedy 2017b). The video clip received about 1.2 million views and 1,673 comments on the YouTube message board. Without directly referencing Modi in the song (thus leaving things open to interpretation), the EIC comedians critically commented on the effect of demonetization on the public.

Borrowing a tune from a popular 1990s Bollywood song and code-switching to English in between, the EIC members sang: "*ATM hai sab khali. Sab de rahe hain gali. Sutta khareedne ke liye. Maine cheque diya*" ("Vending machines are empty. Everyone is swearing. In order to buy cigarettes. I gave a check") (East India Comedy 2017b). They complained that they had to use a check to buy cigarettes—juxtaposing a mundane act with a serious issue and thus imparting humor (Paul 2017). Further, they accused that although the idea behind demonetization was good, the process was not planned meticulously, and they suggested that the government recall the former governor of the Reserve Bank of India, Raghu Ram Rajan, under whom the Indian economy had ostensibly prospered. Later in the video, the comedians resented, "*Mere bank account pe nasbandi kiya*" ("My bank account was sterilized"), connecting the present to the authoritarian times of the mid-1970s, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a National Emergency under which millions of Indians were forcibly sterilized and freedom of expression was curbed. Moreover, demonetization duped the common man as represented by the voices of the EIC comedians: "*Aur ham sabka kat gaya chutiyaaa*" ("And we all were fooled"); yet millionaire businessman Vijay Mallya, who amassed a lot of illegal money, escaped the country scot-free. Thus, through this "personalization of politics" (Highfield 2016), the EIC collective not only generated humor, but also vividly portrayed the plight of citizens in light of demonetization.

Beyond the ability of these performative techniques to produce political humor, what is notable here is the manner in which such videos contribute to the online public sphere in the context of their YouTube channel. Just as playgrounds, shops, and news media have the public sphere potential, a YouTube channel, too, is an important site where public sphere energy is circulated and supported. Through this two-minute video hosted on EIC's persistent channel space, the comedians were able to spawn debates and discussion on demonetization among the Internet public. The video as well as its YouTube message board produced a discursive space where class, caste, and religious nationalism were foregrounded and placed in critical tension with each other. For example, in a comment posted to YouTube, one YouTube user noted that "Indian GDP grew at 7 percent" during the quarter in which demonetization was undertaken. In response to this comment, another user pointed to the fact that the standard of living in the country remained poor, inequality between rich and poor had increased, and the growth figures "hardly had any effect on a layman's life."

As Gray, Jones, and Thompson (2009) have suggested, parody and satire work especially well during periods of social and political "rupture" and offer sharp critiques of established political orders. Furthermore, it can be argued that satire, as shown in the demonetization video, can help us estrange and distance ourselves from the ongoing political moment in order to reflect on and reconnect with historic episodes when government actions had an adverse effect on the lives of the public. Such critiques of the establishment are becoming less common in other, more traditional media outlets, as EIC's co-founder Kunal Rao commented: "Growing censorship on TV channels is a key reason why they [comedians] are moving to the online platform for satire and commentary" (Rathore and Khosla 2014). In other words, because EIC's channel allows the comedians to engage in a critical, political commentary without the fear of censorship, the YouTube channel creates a "distinguishing difference" vis-à-vis television channels.

YouTube channels, such as that of EIC, seem to maintain the formality of a television channel, yet at the same time they are less moderated than their television counterparts, making the former a secure and increasingly popular venue to engage in playful politics.


YouTube
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Last video added
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67 VIDEOS
EIC: Stand Up Comedy
Updated today
12 VIDEOS
EIC: Musical Comedy
46 VIDEOS
EIC vs Bollywood
69 VIDEOS
EIC Outrage
22 VIDEOS
EIC: Sketches
118 VIDEOS
Liked videos
6 VIDEOS
EIC Backbenchers
35 VIDEOS
#LaughterGames
4 VIDEOS
EIC: Comedians On The Job

FIGURE 25.1 *On YouTube, East India Comedy presents a channel for public sphere participation.*

In fact, several channels and web series on YouTube have contributed immensely to YouTube India's revenue, especially in the past two years. According to Satya Raghavan, head of content operations at YouTube India, 2016 was the "year of the web series," and so they created "an umbrella of content under the Laughter Games" initiative that year (John 2016). This move helped multiple members of the EIC collective collaborate with advertisers, subscribers, YouTube India staff, and other content partners such as Only Much Louder and Culture Machine. In turn, this collaboration enabled EIC and other comedy collectives to create, promote, and monetize their videos on YouTube and other platforms.

In the final analysis, it can be argued that YouTube channels, including that of EIC, have contributed to the development and maturation of the online public sphere in India. These channels have constructed what Aswin Punathambekar (2015) called an "intertextual field," in which national and international politics are contested and deliberated through direct linkage to the common problems of the citizenry and their participation with digital media. However, this online public sphere at present is far from inclusive in practice. Because Internet penetration is still low compared to other countries, and inequalities based on gender, class, and caste further exacerbate this digital divide, participation in the online public sphere is stratified and mainly limited to middle- and upper-class Indians living in urban regions. Despite these limitations—or perhaps in part because of them—digital and television channels in India are at crossroads today: while state-owned DD National aimed for decades to unify the nation based on Bollywood music and serialized Hindu epics (engineering a singular Indian identity reinvented by the government), there are now numerous smaller channels emerging in the digital space that develop niche audiences and talk back to those in power through playful, comedic melodies.

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