



Beyond the big screen: how OTT platforms are shaping the future of independent filmmaking

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Abstract

The launch of global OTT platforms, such as Netflix, in India in January 2016 has sparked widespread interest, particularly among independent filmmakers. These subscription-based streaming services are transforming the traditional cinematic experience, moving it from large theatre screens to the intimate personal space of mobile devices. As the reach of cinema becomes more individualized and accessible, OTT is democratizing filmmaking by enabling low-budget independent films to find viable audiences. Creative control over cinema remained concentrated in a few hands, often prioritizing profitability over expression. OTT platforms now promise a shift, aligning with Denis McQuail's theory of democratic-participant media suggesting a decentralized, inclusive media landscape [1]. Through a focus group of emerging filmmakers from Madhya Pradesh, this study explores how OTT is redefining access, expression, and opportunity in Indian independent cinema.

Keywords: OTT, Democratic Participation, Independent Filmmakers

Introduction

Historically, filmmaking has been an elitist domain. The high cost of production equipment, film stock, and the distribution ecosystem restricted access to a select few. The democratization of media, as advocated by communication theorist Denis McQuail in 1983, emphasized the need for diverse representation and participation in media production to reflect societal diversity and reduce centralized control [2]. OTT platforms have emerged as a promising solution, offering a platform that bypasses traditional gatekeepers and enables filmmakers to reach global audiences directly.

The digital revolution, however, initiated the first wave of democratization, replacing analog cameras with digital chips and expensive labs with home computers. The second wave was catalyzed by

high-speed internet and cheap data plans, which led to the rise of Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms. These platforms now allow filmmakers to bypass traditional distribution channels and directly reach global audiences.

OTT platforms like Netflix and Hotstar have shifted the paradigm from communal theatrical experiences to individual, on-demand viewing. This has led to a diversification of themes and narratives, empowering creators to tell stories without the commercial constraints of mass appeal.

The first OTT platform in India, BIGFlix, launched in 2008 by Reliance Entertainment, was followed by nexGTV in 2010 and SonyLIV and Hotstar by mid-decade. [3]. The entry of global players like Netflix this year further accelerated the evolution of the Indian digital media landscape.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the current state of democratization in the film industry through the evolving infrastructure of OTT platforms and to identify future directions.
2. To understand the diverse social impacts of OTT platforms on content creation and consumption.
3. To explore opportunities for emerging filmmakers from small towns and non-urban areas to participate in filmmaking through OTT platforms.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to assess how emerging filmmakers from small towns are using OTT platforms commercially and explores strategies to make these platforms more inclusive and accessible.

Review of Literature

The global rise of OTT has disrupted traditional media ecosystems. Baccarne explored how OTT platforms challenge the dominance of cable TV, emphasizing user control and diverse content [4]. Baldry discussed the need for updated regulatory frameworks in response to the rise of OTT, suggesting convergence-focused policies [5]. Wu raised concerns around net neutrality and consumer rights in the context of OTT's disruptive innovations. These discussions underpin the relevance of OTT as both a technological and policy frontier [6].

Methodology

The study employs qualitative research using focus group discussions (FGD) comprising seven independent filmmakers from Madhya Pradesh cities, including Hoshangabad, Morena, Satna, GanjBasoda, and Bhopal. Focus group discussions provide rich insights into participant perspectives through interactive dialogue and group dynamics [7] [8]. The entire conversation took place in Hindi language but to make the whole world aware of the research findings, this research paper has been presented in English.

Discussion

The focus group discussions yielded rich insights into the role of OTT platforms in shaping independent filmmaking. The responses to five key questions are summarized below.

Question 1: How has the reduction in equipment size and cost due to technological advancements impacted filmmaking?

- Respondent 1: Technological advancements and reduced equipment costs have empowered filmmakers by providing access to affordable, high-quality tools, enabling greater creative freedom.
- Respondent 2: New equipment options have expanded creative possibilities, allowing filmmakers to experiment with innovative techniques.
- Respondent 3: Affordable technology has made professional-grade equipment, such as aerial video tools, widely available, which was previously unattainable.
- Respondent 4: The rapid growth of young filmmakers and new production houses is directly linked to affordable technology.
- Respondent 5: Access to DSLR cameras has made filmmaking a viable career option for those who previously could not afford it.
- Respondent 6: Lower costs have democratized filmmaking, but increased competition has created pressure to stand out.
- Respondent 7: Platforms like YouTube have enabled individuals to showcase their work, driven by accessible technology.

Question 2: Do filmmakers consider the availability of affordable internet data and high-quality video content creation on smartphones a boon?

- Respondent 1: Affordable internet has made video content creation and consumption more accessible, significantly increasing viewership.
- Respondent 2: The pressure to produce frequent, high-quality content has intensified due to audience expectations.
- Respondent 3: Platforms like YouTube have simplified content creation and distribution, making it easier to reach audiences.
- Respondent 4: The ease of uploading and downloading content ensures reliable distribution, enhancing visibility.
- Respondent 5: Audiences now expect constant online availability, driving demand for video content across platforms.
- Respondent 6: The ubiquity of smartphones has created a vast market for video content, with high demand for diverse formats.
- Respondent 7: Increased demand for video content is a boon, but it also heightens competition among creators.

Question 3: What are the experiences of content creators with the freemium model of video streaming platforms like YouTube?

- Respondent 1: The freemium model is not a sustainable source of income for most creators.
- Respondent 2: Limited monetization opportunities restrict the financial viability of freemium platforms.
- Respondent 4: Freemium platforms primarily serve as promotional tools rather than revenue-generating mediums.
- Respondent 5: While initial excitement about sharing content was high, the freemium model's limitations became evident over time.
- Respondent 6: Freemium platforms offer visibility and recognition, encouraging creators to explore alternative revenue models.
- Respondent 7: Many creators use freemium platforms for promotion rather than full content releases, highlighting their marketing potential.

Question 4: Are premium paid streaming platforms like Netflix accessible to filmmakers from small towns or emerging creators?

- Respondent 1: Exceptional ideas can attract opportunities on premium platforms, which increasingly produce their own content.
- Respondent 2: Premium platforms are still dominated by established players, posing barriers for new entrants from small towns.
- Respondent 3: Unlike social media, premium platforms require structured processes, but they offer opportunities for talented newcomers.
- Respondent 4: Major production houses and OTT platforms are beginning to explore talent from smaller cities, a positive trend.
- Respondent 5: Premium platforms are often controlled by large corporations, making access challenging for new filmmakers.
- Respondent 6: Talent and perseverance can lead to opportunities, regardless of geographic location, in a globally competitive market.

Question 5: What future changes in cinema production and exhibition can be expected, and what regulations should be established for OTT platforms to benefit society?

- Respondent 1: OTT currently comes under the IT Ministry by its nature. Content like web series, serials is shown on this platform, so it should come under the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
- Respondent 2: OTT platforms are ideal for smaller films, but theatrical releases remain essential for big-budget productions. A hybrid release model may emerge.
- Respondent 3: Digital release of films will provide great relief to filmmakers. Till now, only theatre owners had a monopoly over the release of films. It was their decision as to which film would get screened and which would not, but now with digital release, they will no longer have monopoly. Theatre owners used to charge separately for showing promos of films in theatres, even for poster display.
- Respondent 4: The OTT platform is continuously strengthening its position in the market. There are strong possibilities of its growth in the future. In such a situation, this platform cannot be left open without

any monitoring. The government should make rules in this direction so that this platform is used properly keeping in mind the local culture, local employment etc. The government should not delay.

- Respondent 5: OTT mediums collect data or specific information about the likes and dislikes of every viewer. By obtaining such confidential information about the behavior, likes and preferences of any person, OTT is able to take balanced decisions related to their profit. It is necessary to worry so that this system is not misused.
- Respondent 6: OTT platforms will reduce the monopoly of theaters, but clear policies are needed to support independent filmmakers effectively.
- Respondent 7: There is an urgent need to form a legal committee and prepare a code of conduct. Efforts can also be initiated to link crowdfunding methods with OTT platforms.

Findings

1. Impact of Technological Advancements on Film Production

Participants unanimously agreed that affordable, portable filmmaking tools have made independent production more feasible. Respondent #3 cited drones as now commonplace for aerial shots. Respondent #6 raised concerns about reduced seriousness among new entrants due to the lowered barriers.

2. Access to Content Creation via Smartphones and Data Plans

The consensus was that high-speed internet and smartphones have transformed accessibility. However, creators also noted increased pressure to maintain relevance and quality amid growing competition (Respondent #2, #6).

3. Viability of Free Streaming Platforms (e.g., YouTube)

Most participants viewed YouTube as a great platform for initial visibility but unsustainable for income generation. Respondent #4 stressed its role as an advertising tool rather than a monetization model. Respondent #6 acknowledged its value in gaining recognition, if not immediate revenue.

4. Opportunities on Paid Premium Platforms (e.g., Netflix)

Opinions were mixed. While Respondent #1 and #3 believed talent and unique ideas could break through, others like Respondent #5 felt established networks still hold an advantage. Respondent #4 noted

that OTT is beginning to look towards smaller towns for fresh content, indicating a slow but encouraging shift.

5. Future Prospects and the Need for Regulation

Respondents emphasized the need for hybrid release models and regulatory frameworks that encourage local talent and prevent monopolistic practices. Suggestions included a content grading system similar to that used by All India Radio (Respondent #2), promotion of crowdfunding (Respondent #7), and privacy protection for user data (Respondent #5).

Conclusion

The findings from the focus group discussions affirm that OTT platforms are key enablers of the democratization of filmmaking in India. Participants highlighted that while technological access has been widely democratized, economic access and professional exposure remain largely concentrated. Independent creators in non-urban areas now possess the tools and platforms to showcase their work; however, sustainability continues to be a challenge due to revenue model limitations and intense competition.

Based on participant insights, the paper concludes that a hybrid regulatory approach is necessary—one that supports independent creators through subsidies, ensures quotas for educational and regional content, and offers transparent access mechanisms for new entrants. OTT platforms must evolve from being gatekeepers to becoming incubators for diverse voices.

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