

***Peepli Live and No One Killed Jessica:*
Remediating the “Bollywoodization” of Indian TV News**

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Introduction: Evolution of “Bollywoodization” in Indian TV news

In the third edition of her pioneering book on the Indian media business, Vanita Kohli-Khandekar makes the following observation:

There are two media segments that define the contour, body and tastes of the Indian market. Television is one of them, the other being film. Both have a mesmerising hold over Indian audiences—and even over investors and advertisers.¹

This article begins with this note because of the increasingly central place occupied by television in the Indian media sphere and the uniquely Indian context of the mutual interdependence of the television and film industries. While television has appropriated Hollywood film genres since its inception,² in India, popular film culture is increasingly drawing on the pre-eminence of satellite television.

A grasp of these facets of the subcontinent’s television story is essential before examining how TV news has taken on discursive and practice-based elements of the nation’s popular film culture, Bollywood. This will be undertaken through a close textual analysis of two recent Bollywood films, *Peepli Live* (2010) and *No One Killed Jessica* (2011). Both feature television journalism as an important narrative catalyst, or a mediator for the socio-political issues faced by the protagonist(s). In doing this, the films themselves turn into a remediation device for the Bollywoodization of news on

Indian television. The definition of “remediation” being employed throughout this article is in line with Bolter and Grusin’s usage, who view it as the refashioning of older media by new media and vice versa. As they describe it, “Media are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other.”³ Just as *Sex and the City* arguably remediates the familiar forms of the television sitcom and the glossy women’s magazine,⁴ the two film texts under consideration here perform a remediation of contemporary television news in India. They do so in two ways: First, they comment on TV news’s “Bollywoodization” or trend toward infotainment as demonstrated by its privileging of immediacy over context, its preference for spectacle and sound bites over substance, and its promotion of nationalism through narrative drama. Second, they refashion and re-deploy the narrative and aesthetic strategies of both film and television to establish their own textual genre—namely that of a *non*-Bollywoodized, socially pertinent film culture. This film culture departs from formulaic Bollywood films that are usually action blockbusters with elements of romance and melodrama. Instead it examines contemporary socio-political issues in Indian society through narrative themes like the politics of pity, the heroic but poor underdog against a villainous establishment, newspaper journalism versus TV infotainment, and the overall decline of journalism standards.

In short, this account of Bollywoodization and remediation runs in two directions: a) formulaic Bollywood’s influence on Indian television news; and b) two non-formulaic film texts that remediate Bollywoodized news, with one offering a negative and the other a positive perspective on the socio-political impact of such news practices. This is important to study not just in light of post-globalization changes in the Indian media industries, but also because considering both directions at once helps shed light on the broader evolution of media forms and content through remediation.

The Indian Media Context

Before mapping the history of the evolution of Bollywoodization, it is useful to underscore the uniqueness of the Indian media context vis-à-vis the post-globalization developments in the rest of the world. As we step into the second decade of the 21st century, we are continuing to witness an online communication phenomenon unfold that is threatening to make traditional journalism redundant, while also undermining the value of the foreign and investigative journalism budgets of news organizations across the world. In dramatic defiance of this transnational trend, India has experienced unprecedented growth in both television and print media since the sector was opened up to overseas ownership in the 1990s. According to data obtained from Television Audience Measurement (TAM), the total number of Indian channels increased from 307 in 2006 to 388 in 2008.⁵ Moreover, in contrast to the situation in much of the West, Indian news channels appear to be attracting advertising at a faster rate than entertainment channels, thereby contributing to their proliferation.⁶ Feeding the increase in the sheer number of news outlets is the seemingly insatiable appetite for news among the expanding urban middle class. The sheer power of India's television-fuelled formation of middle-class opinion underlines what has been described as "the centrality of 24-hour private satellite news as a new factor in the Indian political and social matrix."⁷ However, there is so far little research on the impact of this centrality on other cultural forms, such as film.

The story of television and television news in India begins with the public broadcasting company Doordarshan that had been known for its utilitarian and state-centered approach to both news and non-news content. This changed in the satellite age when local players such as ZeeTV entered the market. According to Athique, it was the latter network's importation of Bollywood (through screening of films and use of film-

based content in music and chat shows) that led to both its unprecedented success and its development of a new lower middle-class audience for satellite television in India.⁸ This not only held true for Hindi-language television content, but also for the nation's regional language channels, which, according to Amos Owen Thomas, had "existed only in the five languages in which 80% of Indian movies were made."⁹ Moreover, after Zee's partnership with Rupert Murdoch's Star TV was dissolved, Star—which had previously been reliant on imported shows—also began to draw upon Bollywood material and personalities. According to Thussu, this turnaround was most clearly manifested in Star TV's use of Bollywood superstar Amitabh Bachchan as the host of *Kaun Banega Crorepati* (the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*), which dramatically changed the network's fortunes in India.¹⁰ While examples of film-based TV programming abound in other parts of the world, especially in the U.S.,¹¹ this seems to be especially pronounced in the Indian case. This leads Chadha and Kavoori to argue that "even though [television in India] comprises the most successful component of the country's media and entertainment sector in economic terms, at a conceptual level it seems unable to break free of film-related personalities and content and continues to be dominated by the master narrative of the film industry in a manner that is both unusual and unprecedented globally."¹²

As is evident from the Star TV example, local film content and star power is often mixed with global television formats, producing a hybrid that is again reminiscent of the form and theatrical tone of contemporary Bollywood cinema. According to Vijay Mishra's detailed study on the emergence of Bollywood as a culture industry (as opposed to merely a film industry), the hybridity of form and content is historically rooted in Parsi theatre and local languages.¹³ Recognizing a similar mix of influences in Indian television, Athique notes that "Indian television today is not the dutiful daughter

of developmental pedagogy, but rather the love-child of the brash Indian cinema and the seductive fashions of the trade in international TV formats.”¹⁴ These influences are evident not just in the case of reality TV genres, but also in news and current affairs programming and practices. The story of the Bollywoodization of television news in India may have begun with locally-owned ZeeTV and subsequently been adopted by Murdoch’s Star network, but it is now also impacting “serious news” producers such as NDTV. This was evident in the 2007 launch of an entertainment channel, NDTV Imagine, which is managed by well-known Bollywood director Karan Johar.¹⁵ While questioning the journalistic credibility of this move, Thussu also makes note of its local and global implications for the network:

Such a metamorphosis [in NDTV] is likely to be on the basis of entertainment and lifestyle output, raising the concern that one of the most professional and politically liberal news networks may also be veering towards infotainment to retain its position—not only domestically but globally as an emerging powerhouse of English-language television.¹⁶

This is not dissimilar to Bollywood’s own attempt to appeal to domestic, diasporic, and Western audiences through a simultaneous localization and corporatization of content and form.¹⁷

The term “Bollywoodization” was first applied to Indian television by Thussu in his study of the rise of global infotainment.¹⁸ However, this initial application was largely confined to noting the presence of Bollywood-related news and Bollywood celebrities on local and foreign-owned channels. In a later version of his thesis on “Bollywoodization,” Thussu recognized its impact on public discourse at large, noting that it dominated the coverage of the Mumbai terrorist attacks on November 26, 2008.¹⁹ However, while it is not hard to detect how political and non-political news content is increasingly reliant on Bollywood, it is less clear how the very form of news (especially

breaking news) reflects Bollywood film, or how the production practices of the film and television industries have become progressively more interlinked.

Peepli Live and *No One Killed Jessica* are two recent Hindi-language films that a) depart from formulaic Bollywood in content and form, and b) shed light on the practice and reception of television journalism in contemporary urban India. These two films have been chosen not just because they manifest two distinctive outcomes of the Bollywoodization of news content and practices, but also because they are exemplary of a new brand of Indian cinema that is remediated so as to co-exist with the pre-eminence of television. On the one hand, they represent different aspects of TV journalism in present-day India. On the other hand, they also comment on and critique TV news's machinations through the narrative devices available in the cinematic form. It is important to unpack this instance of remediation not just because of the cross-pollination of film and television content and practices in contemporary India, but also to highlight how remediated film is carving its own niche by deriving from and at the same time critiquing both conventional Bollywood and ratings-oriented, Bollywoodized news television. This paper begins with a close textual analysis of the films and then traces the attributes of the Bollywoodization of television news in India. Finally, the paper will show how the films both manifest and remediate this discourse of Bollywoodization.

***Peepli Live* (2010)**

Directed by Anusha Rizvi and produced by Aamir Khan Productions and UTV Motion Pictures, *Peepli Live* is a political satire based on the post-industrialization issue of farmer suicide in many parts of rural India.²⁰ Although the film is not directly about the Indian media, it shows the response of the major TV news networks (including the

fictional “ITVN”) to the plan of Natha Das (Omkar Das Manikpuri) to commit suicide to help his family pay their debt with the subsequent government compensation. The film provides multi-layered insight into the state of ratings-based television channels as well as the people who watch such channels. Beginning with several rural scenes that establish the financial dilemma faced by Natha and his brother, the tense dynamics between various members of his family, and the uneasy cloud of gloom over the village as a whole, the film then moves to the urbanized spaces of the television networks. At first the networks sanitize the issues faced by their rural-based fellow citizens through sound bites from politicians, but eventually ITVN assigns a city journalist to the rural story. It is this rural-urban interaction and the resulting spectacle and melodrama that constitute the essence of *Peepli Live* as a film that remediates Bollywoodized news.

Plot, Narrative Themes, and Cinematic Techniques

One noteworthy device is using documentary aesthetics in a feature film to create immediacy and mood for the viewer. Noting the use of “realism” in both the Indian-made *Rang De Basanti* and the British-made *Slumdog Millionaire*, Vidhu Aggarwal opines, “‘Realistic’ modes (however ‘unrealistic’) become representative of the real India.”²¹ In the same way, the use of a rural setting, a relatively unknown cast (reminiscent of *Slumdog*), and documentary filmmaking aesthetics give *Peepli Live* a realistic feel. This lends a sense of immediacy to the film (and the news items in it), even as the underlying satire hypes up the drama of the so-called “reality” and turns it into a spectacle.

Although the film begins as a slow-paced depiction of rural life, the chaotic build-up of a television media circus in Natha’s house and in his home village of Peepli eventually sets the pace for the film and mirrors the frenzy of the media outlets it sets out to satirize. Boris Tribic makes note of the director’s critique of the media’s role in

promoting commercial goals over humane ones: “The subtlety of [director] Rizvi’s political commentary gives way to fast-paced farce, exposing the media as the driving force behind the promotion of emerging ‘values’: the unbridled materialism, selfishness and two-faced arrogance that are tied in with prosperity, technological progress and urbanisation.”²² This is reminiscent of the formulaic melodrama and in-your-face ideology that characterize the mainstream Hindi cinema of Bollywood. According to anthropologist and film scholar Tejaswini Ganti, the emphasis on stars and spectacle is not merely characteristic of Bollywood as an industry, but also marks it as a specific style of filmmaking.²³ The film suggests that India’s television media is appropriating Bollywood’s distinctive narrative and aesthetic form, namely that of the melodrama and the spectacle.

Even as it is critiquing the spectacle of the Indian television media as well as popular Indian cinema, the film manages to adapt its independent status to the needs of both the audience and the industry. In his review of *Peepli Live* for *The Hindu*, Sudhish Kamath notes that there have been other films that are critical of the performance of the media. However, Kamath adds, the filmmakers seem to have realized that people can now “relate to competing channels doing the Breaking News/Exclusive and trying hard to make you think that journalists actually give a damn about what they report,” and it is this realization that makes the film tick.²⁴ It appears in this case that filmmakers like Rizvi (who is a former journalist) have their finger on the pulse of Indian society. This is not just a society that is ready for films that incorporate socio-political critique into a medium traditionally known for mass entertainment, but also one that looks to a section of screen culture for the remediation of news and democratic discourses.

In addition, Rizvi is successful in translating her media industry experience for the big screen and is thus able to convincingly depict the behavior of the media even as

she criticizes it. There is a complex ongoing relationship between the two media industries concerned—film and television. This is evident in the very production of the film as the opening credits explicitly thank Radhika and Prannoy Roy (CEOs of NDTV), as well as NDTV itself. It is not clear in what way the film production team made use of NDTV expertise or infrastructure as there are no visible logos of the network within the diegesis of *Peepli Live*. However, given that large sections of the film were shot in television studios and newsrooms and with TV equipment in various remote locations, it is likely that this reliance would have been substantial.



ITVN anchors interviewing the Minister for Agriculture in *Peepli Live*.

In the very first scene of the film shot in a television studio, we encounter news content that derives from Bollywood as well as news practices and production values that privilege spectacle and drama over context and analysis. Additionally, it is evident that Indian television news in English is as subject to tabloidization and the influence of Bollywood as are the Hindi and regional language channels. This parallels the

localization of foreign-owned channels such as Star TV, which now not only mixes English with Hindi, but also localizes content and promotes itself to the audiences as “your own” channel.²⁵ In line with this, the film shows the “ITVN” newscast beginning with a piece of gossip about Bollywood star Shilpa Shetty (she is denying an alleged affair with Prince William), followed by news on state elections, and then a farmer suicide story. The scene at the rival Hindi channel “Bharat Live” is only marginally different as they curse the English channel for being the first to interview the Minister for Agriculture, and then go on to discuss a seemingly trivial story about a Bollywood actor. Shortly after, a reporter from the channel is seen trying to obtain an exclusive sound bite from a local politician by assuring him that he will win the by-election.

In comparison with the Bollywoodized content and frenzied activity of the urban television channels, the ambience at a regional newspaper office in Peepli is relatively relaxed, which underscores the hyper-reality of the TV setting. When asked by his boss to cover the election, Rakesh (Nawazuddin Siddiqui) says that nothing has changed in Peepli. This rural somnolence contrasts with the next scene at the ITVN office where Nandita (Malaika Shenoy) is arguing with the head of her channel about the relevance of TRPs (television ratings). When he asks her to get “more eyeballs,” she sarcastically comments that perhaps she will need to kill herself to do that. This remark anticipates the subsequent matter of Natha’s planned death becoming a major source of ratings for the nation’s television news media. In this way, the very site and practice of urban newsgathering become the Bollywoodized source for the emergence of Bollywoodized content.

When Nandita gets a call from Rakesh after he has written about Natha’s dilemma in his local paper, she is initially reluctant to run the story because, as she puts it, “Farmer kind of stories are not exactly my forte.” However, she eventually heads to

Peepli and there's a very intrusive shot of a television camera zooming in on Natha's nostrils. Natha's elderly and bed-ridden mother (Farookh Zafar) asks the TV crew if they are representing the government, thereby signalling not just political failure but also its co-existence with the heightened power of the Fourth Estate. Nandita's narration of Natha's story evokes emotions such as despair and desperation and is rather theatrical in both tone and content. At the same time, the Hindi channel decides to pick up the story on the grounds that it would be the first "live suicide story" and no one would miss watching it. This illustrates that work practices in the Indian television news industry, as well as decisions as to what constitutes news, are often fuelled by the commercial need to attain high ratings via stories that are novel, melodramatic, and spectacular. At the same time, the desire to imitate other channels belies novelty and is akin to the formulaic studio practices of the Bollywood film industry.

The rest of the scenes of the television channels' "live" presence in Peepli, although seemingly indicative of real-life footage in their aesthetics, actually constitute a large degree of staging and theatrics. A montage of such media buffoonery begins with Nandita asking Natha to feed the goats, and is followed by an interview with Natha's childhood friend, a journalist commenting on the pots and clothes in a house, a reporter asking school kids about their mid-day meal, and another journalist deducing the sign made by Natha's mother when asking for a smoke. These scenes mirror Anuja Jain's research into Indian TV coverage of the 2002 Gujarat riots as she writes that despite differing ideologies, the reportage of both the English-language Star News and the Hindi-language Zee News featured "montages composed of grainy fast paced images of the mayhem continuously drawing attention to their live-ness, self-referentiality and spectacular gore."²⁶ She adds that the emphasis on spectacle and immediacy over in-depth-coverage of issues creates a binary of "fortunate us" and

“unfortunate them” for the consumer-spectator, thereby feeding into a “politics of pity.”²⁷ In the case of Natha’s story, the politics of pity is strongly evoked by the very presence of TV cameras and crews in a technologically backward village setting. The nature and tone of the stories emerging from this rural-urban interaction fuel the pity, and also play into simplistic Bollywood cinematic tropes that pit the heroic but poor underdog against the villainous establishment.



Natha receiving a television set from a local politician in *Peepli Live*.

The histrionics of the situation in *Peepli* become ironic when the political representative of the lower castes visits the village and gives Natha a television set for his forthcoming self-sacrifice. It appears as though the director is not merely creating a spectacle that critiques the Bollywood-derived melodramatic form in Indian television news, but also questioning the industry practices that enable and reinforce a media-politics nexus (not unlike the long history of film-politics connections in Bollywood and miscellaneous regional film industries in India).²⁸ While there are no direct political ownership arrangements evident in the networks inhabiting the world of *Peepli Live*,

there does appear to be a degree of behind-the-scenes wheeling and dealing with particular politicians favoring particular channels to propagate the politicians' unquestioned claims. As the wheeling and dealing goes on, the very theatricality of the reportage reaches a fevered pitch in the days leading up to the live suicide. The story of the film keeps shifting over whether Natha will actually kill himself, with each shift not only marked as a "headline," but also as worthy of the loaded and ill-defined term "breaking news." This again is evidence of the spectacle, melodrama and corporatization characteristic of contemporary Bollywood.

Meanwhile, the contrast between the ideologies of the savvy urban television journalist Nandita and the idealistic regional newspaper reporter Rakesh start to become more visible. This contrast also exemplifies remediation in that rural and urban journalism are shown to coexist and re-fashion one another in contemporary India, even if urban news now occupies a more prominent place in the cultural imagination of a nation undergoing transformation.

When Rakesh passes on his CV to Nandita, she reprimands him for being more interested in his career prospects than the immediate story. Later, he notices a villager digging a hole and discovers that the man is a starving farmer who is selling the soil. When there is a further media ruckus in the wake of Natha's disappearance and all the media channels are speculating on its cause, Rakesh finds out that the digger he met has died of starvation, and he reports that fact to Nandita. He also asks her why Natha is so important to them, especially given that there are plenty of other desperate farmers in the village. She again rebukes him for his inability to understand what she sees as the routine work of a journalist, and adds that research has shown the audience is only interested in Natha by virtue of the novelty of his live suicide.

Again, the assumptions of the television news industry about the infotainment-

related expectations of its audience come to the fore. In addition, the preference for stories that are easily digestible and based on events rather than on long-term social issues such as farmer suicide is also made apparent. Thussu notes this bias: “The alarming absence of rural and developmental issues on television news demonstrates that such themes do not translate into ratings for urban, Westernized viewers and are displaced by the diversion of Bollywood-driven infotainment.”²⁹ Such an industry-audience relationship provides the rationale for Nandita’s preference for a live suicide story over just another harrowing farmer’s tale. The underlying satirical commentary that so far has merely been implicit for the viewer becomes explicit in the two journalists’ conversations. It is as though we have been jolted out of our spectacular Bollywoodized reverie into an exposition of how and why the farce was created.

When Rakesh finds out that Natha is being held hostage by rural headmen (i.e., village leaders) in a local warehouse to obtain ransom from the state opposition, he tips Nandita off. Further chaos ensues as media representatives gather for a press conference, Rakesh and Nandita try to find and interview Natha, and the warehouse is set on fire as a result of a spillage from a gas lamp. We later find out that there has been one casualty during the incident. While most believe it is Natha who has died in this unfortunate way, he is later seen working at a city construction site. As the story eventually dies out and media vans depart *Peepli*, Nandita is looking for Rakesh. Perhaps he was the only casualty of the incident, with both his body and his idealism being consumed by the embers of a spectacle created by television news and fueled by politicians. It is clear that the grassroots print journalist is now both the victim and the sacrificial hero; the television journalist (while commanding much more cultural and economic capital) has none of the same personal and value-based credentials. This decline in the standards of Indian journalism is evident in another remediated film,

Page 3, which according to media scholar Radhika Parameswaran “attempts to serve the public interest in a deeply divided India by revealing the extent to which newspapers are in hot pursuit of ‘feel good’ lifestyle and entertainment stories that cater to middle class readers and affirm their desire for upward mobility.”³⁰ Therefore, it appears that it is remediated film rather than television or print news media that is seen as being able to comment on and critique the Bollywoodization of journalism itself.

No One Killed Jessica (2011)

Similar to *Peepli Live*, *No One Killed Jessica* centers on a social issue that is mediated through television news. However, its narrative offers a different view of the remediation of formulaic Bollywood performed by television news in that the journalist in question becomes a catalyst for positive change rather than a source of further chaos and conflict. While this is an important distinction, it is noteworthy that the constructive resolution is nonetheless brought about after a series of investigative and exposé stories that reflect Bollywoodized news forms and practices. What is on offer here, therefore, is a remediation that suggests that India’s television news is a follower and creator of drama and spectacle, yet is still enterprising enough to employ the same means in the cause of social and legal justice if it desires to do so.

Plot, Narrative Themes, and Cinematic Devices

Directed by Raj Kumar Gupta and produced by UTV Spotboy, *No One Killed Jessica* is based on the true story of the highly publicized murder of model Jessica Lal in New Delhi in 1999. After the primary person accused of the crime (Manu Sharma, the son of a state politician) was acquitted due to witnesses turning hostile during the course of legal proceedings, there was widespread media and public outrage that eventually led the case to be re-considered. While no single journalist appeared to

champion the cause in real life, media outlets such as NDTV and the *Hindustan Times* were pivotal in mobilizing public opinion. In creating a fictional journalist protagonist named Meera (Rani Mukerjee) who spearheads the Jessica Lal campaign, the film performs a remediation of the factual news story at the same time that Meera herself mediates the story of the murder case through Bollywoodized news practices. It is through such Bollywoodization that what could have been a routine journalistic piece turns into an important chapter in the history of post-independence mass mobilization in India.

No One Killed Jessica begins with a disclaimer before the opening credits declaring that although it is based on true events, the film is a hybrid of fact and fiction. Film critic Manjari Kaul picks up on this, and adds that through such a marking of its territory, the film is “clearly making space for frequent slippage into Bollywood melodrama.”³¹ While a discussion of the history and evolution of “docudrama” as a genre is beyond the scope of this article, it is crucial here to the extent that the *No One Killed Jessica* filmmaking team found it necessary to employ dramatic content and aesthetics in a narrative that could have easily been a factual documentary of the Jessica Lal murder case. This is in line with the cross-pollination (and consequent re-fashioning) of themes, genres, and industry practices in contemporary Indian film and television.

The opening credits are a testament to this cross-pollination as they use newspaper iconography to frame particular landmarks and street scenes in the nation’s capital, New Delhi. This is followed by NDTV journalist Meera’s voiceover about her inability to understand the city where she grew up as it is widely known to be obsessed with power. She adds that at the time of the film’s events (the late 1990s), thousands of TV sets were being purchased for the upcoming cricket World Cup, and subsequently the nation came together during the war in Kargil (which pitted India against Pakistan in

the state of Kashmir).

There are two points of significance regarding the opening of the film. First, the streets of New Delhi are used not merely to establish the story, but also to locate the film in new India. In other words, the assumed audience is urban and middle class and familiar with both the crowds and the consumables afforded by access to the city streets.³² Second, the opening narration and framing of the story by a television reporter, the reference to television sets being purchased during a major cricket event, and the mention of the Kargil War (the first widely televised war in India) also all point to an urban middle class audience. In addition, it is assumed that this group of people, however diverse, is a community huddled around a television set and often united by what is shown on it. It is literally the voice of the television anchor or reporter that structures and frames the everyday lives of the contemporary urban Indian consumer-spectator.



Meera in the NDTV studio in *No One Killed Jessica*.

Meera is no ordinary reporter, as she is shown on the battlefield in Kargil, interviewing soldiers in khaki gear and asking if the war was necessary. While this is a less obviously nationalistic stance for a media organization than that suggested by Bollywood films in the early and mid 1990s, it is also more indicative of the mood of the nation at the time (particularly in relation to India-Pakistan affairs). On the flight back to Delhi, she rebukes a fellow male passenger for comparing the war to an action film. This comment is reminiscent of the invoking of spectacle by television news, as seen in the case of *Peepli Live*. In telling off this man, Meera does not critique her medium's mode of representation, but rather the viewer's mode of looking, thereby claiming higher moral ground. We are invited to share this ground with her and exhibit the same sense of political correctness that smacks more of activism than journalism and that is again reminiscent of the Bollywood melodramatic genre. It is due to such a tone that Kaul concludes that the movie is singing an ode to "media and film, its political possibilities and its efficacy as a tool for activism."³³

Taking Kaul's conclusion a step further, one suggestion is that *No One Killed Jessica* not only derives its content from the power of media and film, but also is itself deeply entrenched in the crossovers of the film and television news industries and cultures. This is evident in the cult of celebrity now surrounding Indian media personalities, especially those who "break" stories or report from difficult war-like situations. Meera is certainly accorded this status as her colleagues give her a standing ovation when she enters her NDTV office in Delhi after the Kargil stint. It appears therefore that not only is news more Bollywoodized in terms of appropriating the melodramatic genre and deriving content from Bollywood films and celebrities, but also with regard to taking on an industry culture that turns certain journalists with high public profiles into celebrities.

In his well-known study of the spectacle, Guy Debord opines that “media stars are spectacular representations of living human beings.”³⁴ Thus, the Indian television news media’s own celebrity culture feeds into the spectacle of the news produced by them.



Meera receiving a standing ovation from her colleagues in *No One Killed Jessica*.

Meera’s celebrity status confers both the power to refuse what she considers to be routine news stories, as well as the privilege to provide greater publicity to issues that may not register much interest with the public without Bollywoodized packaging. Telling Meera that she has become a celebrity, her boss Gaurav (Satyadeep Mishra) assigns her the Jessica Lal story. Meera contemptuously calls it a crime beat piece and adds that she deserves a bigger and better story. She adds that her rationale for not taking up the Jessica Lal case is that it has too many high-profile witnesses not to have

justice served. This is followed by her retrospective voiceover reflecting on how she was wrong in thinking that it was just another piece of news, given that it became a milestone in India's story.

Meera's reflections and her characterization in *No One Killed Jessica* mark a significant shift for narrative devices and female representations in mainstream Hindi cinema. This shows the influence of India's television news culture and signals that news is Bollywoodized in its reception by being as powerful a trendsetter as Bollywood cinema itself.

Meera's character appears to be based on NDTV journalist Barkha Dutt, who is known for her fearless reporting and who, like Meera, also reported live from the trenches during the Kargil War.³⁵ Moreover, despite being beset by scandal, Dutt remains a household name. Parameswaran attributes this to the simultaneous growth of television news and the continuity of elite class and gender formations.³⁶ Meera, like Dutt, projects herself as an empowered middle-class woman whose class status is only enhanced by India's recent economic might. Her voiceover may mark a break from conventional masculine Bollywood narration, but it also acknowledges audience familiarity with authoritative female journalist voices on their living room television sets. Additionally, not only is Meera successful in the public sphere, but she also asserts her independence in her personal life by living on her own, rebuking her father's pleas to see her married, and leaving a man in the middle of lovemaking to report a breaking story. Such a depiction of the assertive female journalist is more characteristic of the world of Indian television news that now regularly features celebrity female journalists like Barkha Dutt than of formulaic Bollywood with its history of women cast in supporting roles.³⁷ At the same time, it accords Bollywood-like stature to both television news and successful news journalists.³⁸

When witnesses turn hostile in the Jessica Lal murder case, Meera realizes her folly and exercises her celebrity status by pleading with Gaurav to let her take up the story. In the discussion that follows, he suggests that her wanting to take up the story now is more a case of activism than journalism. While activist tendencies can also be seen in journalist characters in older non-formulaic Bollywood films such as *Bombay* and *Page 3*, there seems to be a more public (and more Bollywoodized) role for the contemporary television journalist in *No One Killed Jessica*. Meera espouses the cause of justice in the Jessica Lal case by openly challenging the justice system and also mobilizing public sentiment as though she were an “angry young man” type battling against the establishment in a Bollywood film from the 1970s or 1980s³⁹ as opposed to being a professional journalist. She also plays with journalistic ethics by recording interviews with prime witnesses without their knowledge and then replaying these on national television. Her rationale that bending these ethics is necessary for what she calls “the sake of justice and truth” is again a departure from previous depictions of Indian journalists, but it is also in line with actual contemporary Indian journalism practices that are often simultaneously considered sensational yet justifiable.

These efforts lead to a television Short Message Service (SMS) or texting campaign demanding “Justice for Jessica,” and subsequently a citizen-initiated viral campaign to gather for a candlelight vigil for the cause. It is worth noting that the ordinary citizen depicted as initiating the vigil is inspired to do so after watching the Bollywood film *Rang De Basanti* that has acquired cult status among Indian youth and is also activist in its tone and content. In a thesis on the reception of the film, Dilip notes that “images from *Rang De Basanti* (although mediated by the market) not only touched audiences but also encouraged them to form communities, discuss the film and finally moved them to act on various social issues.”⁴⁰ Therefore, the mention of the film in *No*

One Killed Jessica is not just an intertextual reference that its presumably middle-class audience can recognize or a mere homage to *Rang De Basanti*. It is also a demonstration of the way in which an emerging non-formulaic Bollywood form that is activist yet mainstream is also remediating the social issues deemed worthy of coverage by television news media (alongside remediating the form of television news itself).

When the “Justice for Jessica” campaigns pick up, Meera convinces Sabrina (Jessica Lal’s sister, played by Vidya Balan) to join the vigil, reasoning that she should not give up now that the entire nation is with her. By taking the SMSs and emails received from viewers to the president of India, she and her organization become the voice of the masses and put pressure on the establishment to re-open the Jessica Lal murder case.

In a similar vein to *Peepli Live*, but with a different slant on journalistic intent, it appears that it is the television news media rather than political representatives who are seen as being more proximate to the lives of ordinary citizens. *No One Killed Jessica* takes a particularly celebratory view of this proximity and seems to suggest that television news now has as much power as Bollywood cinema to effect change and mobilize the masses. This is evident in the closing credits that thank Tehelka, an online and now cross-media phenomenon, for its “breakthrough journalism.” The television news practices presented within the film appear to appropriate elements of Bollywood’s melodramatic form and celebrity culture, yet they do not let the Jessica Lal story get lost in the ephemera of “breaking news.” In this sense, it remediates the efficacy of India’s Bollywoodized TV news, even if only for a middle-class urban audience.

Bollywoodization as a Discourse of Remediation

The discussion of major themes and narrative devices in *Peepli Live* and *No One*

Killed Jessica clearly establishes the Bollywoodized remediation of socio-political issues by the content and practices of television journalism featured in the films. Indian television news is appropriating Bollywood content, genres, and practices as manifested in the growing emphasis on melodrama, spectacle, and celebrity culture. In addition, the films themselves appear to remediate India's Bollywoodized television news culture. This demonstrates that Bollywoodization is not merely a moniker for Bollywood-influenced content in the news, but in fact a discourse of remediation that impacts the very making, composition, and reception of national television news. Three specific themes constitute this discourse; with examples from the films as well as pertinent real-life news coverage, they also constitute a critique of the prevalent standards and practices of TV news journalism in contemporary India.

Immediacy Over Context

Creating a sense of immediacy is more important than providing contextual information about the issue of farmer suicide in *Peepli Live*. As television ratings in India represent only urban markets, the channels represented in the film appear to be serving the assumed needs of these markets alone. Hence, immediacy is used as a tool to validate the reporter's authority and create curiosity about a subject that normally is of little interest to the city-based viewer. While Meera's voiceover in *No One Killed Jessica* tries to supply contextual information about the state of the nation, this is done only in retrospect, and does not appear to be a feature of her regular journalism practice. Through this absence of context in the news, both films critique the media industry's reliance on closed-ended Bollywood-style stories with clear beginnings, middles, and ends to generate ratings. As is to be expected, this is usually at the expense of providing the background for relevant stories and risks public amnesia.

In his examination of media representations of the Kargil War and the Gujarat

riots, Subarno Chattarji observes the immediate nature of the reportage:

Reportage, by its very nature, focuses on the immediate, the event that is “news-worthy” due to its political, ideological, or dramatic nature. It is in the concentration beyond the immediate, the analysis of news and events in newspapers and newsmagazines as well as television, that one might expect more considered and in-depth coverage. Quite often, this has been facile and inadequate. . . . In short, crucial links between socio-political structures and events are not made.⁴¹

This lack of linking events to macro socio-political structures is particularly evident in the frequency and superficiality of content of the breaking news items that characterize the latter half of *Peepli Live*. As the story of Natha’s suicide plan changes in line with political machinations, the channels cover it without any reference to either the broader issue of a changing economy or the level of government and bureaucratic malfunctioning.

In *No One Killed Jessica*, Meera’s voiceover attempts to link democracy and nationalism (while situating them at a particular time and place in Delhi) almost throughout the film. She tries to understand her city and the mood of the nation, and does not hesitate to note different kinds of national fervor during large-scale national events such as the Kargil War as compared with seemingly less important “crime stories” like the Jessica Lal case. At the same time, she calls India a “soft state” after reporting on the real-life IC-184 episode in which an alleged terrorist was freed to save the lives of hundreds of Indian citizens held hostage in a plane that hijackers forced to land at Kandahar in Afghanistan.

Meera’s comment appears to be at odds with her questioning of the necessity of the Kargil conflict, but it is significant that her “soft state” remark is not made on camera. In other words, while Meera the private citizen may be linking various national crises into a broader social and political context, her journalistic self is mostly mired in routine and formulaic practice until she takes up the Jessica Lal case. According to

Arundhati Roy, the vast majority of crisis reporting “isolates the crisis [and] unmoors it from the particularities of the history, the geography and the culture that produced it,”⁴² and Meera’s initial reporting is not significantly different from this Bollywoodized, immediacy-over-context paradigm.

Spectacle and Sound Bites Over Substance

Both films under consideration critique the television industry’s over-reliance on the spectacular, even as they re-create and remediate such a spectacle within their own diegesis. While the Kargil War is turned into a spectacle in *No One Killed Jessica*, this corresponds with the Bollywoodized real-life coverage of the event in the nation’s mainstream media. According to Chattarji, “Star News projected Kargil as a just and necessary war against intransigent intruders. It also contributed spectacularly to the spectacle and glamorization of war.”⁴³ In addition, according to Thussu, it is significant that this was labelled India’s first “live war” in the information age, and it created a sense of “tele-jingoism” through the “almost daily footage of coffins coming home—the grief-stricken family members of the killed soldiers and officers and emotional crowds at the funerals.”⁴⁴

While it could be argued that the Bollywoodized excess of such spectacles exposes more people to the horrors of war, there are others like Arundhati Roy who believe that “Crisis as Spectacle . . . is gradually becoming an instrument of resistance that is more symbolic than real.”⁴⁵ The symbolic nature of the resistance of the so-called common man, as represented by the television news media, is certainly evident in *Peepli Live* in which pleas to evoke the pity of urban viewers toward farmers and village folk appear to be a ratings ploy rather than demonstrative of a substantial grasp of the relevant issues. Such a spectacle-oriented approach to television news seems to have parallels in real-time ratings. According to L. V. Krishnan of Television Audience

Measurement (TAM), “The more surprising the news, the more eyeballs it gets.”⁴⁶

In a bid to get higher ratings, the TV channels in *Peepli Live* also resort to sound bites from the politicians whom they may openly or discreetly support. This provides only superficial detail and contributes to a sense of Bollywoodized content and practice. According to Nalin Mehta’s research on the politics of television in the 2002 Gujarat riots, then-Chief Minister Narendra Modi manipulated television to “remain in the news by constantly issuing controversial statements.”⁴⁷

It appears as though the media-politics nexus propagating a certain vision of the sectarian state (as well as advancing election-based goals of particular political groups) has been a hallmark of Indian television news since the beginning of the 21st century. Moreover, the emergence of television channels solely owned by political parties or their representatives has enhanced this nexus, and is again reminiscent of the lack of regulation that continues to be a feature of the Indian film and television industries. According to Raman and Tata, despite the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India’s (TRAI) recommendation that political parties be kept out of the news channel business, “there are close to 40 channels that are either funded by parties or are directly owned by politicians.”⁴⁸ In short, substantial reportage and analysis is marred by Bollywoodized industry practices that promote visual spectacle and sound bites and that enter into commercial and editorial deals with political interests.

Nationalism Through Narrative Drama

The ideology of nationalism as well as uncritical patriotic fervor is promoted through particular Bollywoodized narrative tropes that create melodrama. In *No One Killed Jessica*, Meera refers to the nation coming together during the Kargil conflict, but also appears critical of both the means and the end. While she is dressed in khaki and therefore seemingly embedded with the soldiers on the battlefield, her questioning if the

war was necessary indicates personal rather than institutional ambivalence toward violent expressions of nationalism. At the time of the war in real life, mainstream television networks such as Star News were noted as using dramatic tropes both to cast the Indian nation in a favorable light and adhere to global tabloid formats. According to Chattarji, “The internationalization of infotainment was most evident in the obvious attempts that Star News made to present a modern India fighting a medieval, Islamist mindset over the border.”⁴⁹

Additionally, as shown by her taking up of the difficult Jessica Lal murder story later in the film, Meera is more interested in fighting the internal threat of injustice than a faceless foreign enemy. The means of doing this, however (through hidden cameras, SMS campaigns, and staged conversations with witnesses) appear to be seeped in Bollywood-inspired infotainment. This is not merely a case of a non-fiction genre adopting elements of melodrama usually associated with fiction, but it is also reflective of changing practices in an increasingly Bollywoodized television news industry in India. According to Joshi, the industry justifies this trend through the rationale that viewers want a mix of hard news and entertainment, hence leading to the “diversification of the news genre.”⁵⁰

Television scholars like Nalin Mehta are of the opinion that while the objective of such commercial television networks has been to make money, “their efforts have led to the creation of newer modes of public action and publicness.”⁵¹ This certainly appears to be the case in *No One Killed Jessica*, as Meera’s journalistic endeavors may be theatrical, but also prove to be effective in mobilizing public support to the extent that the judiciary is forced to re-open the case and ensure a speedy trial.

In contrast to the effective national mobilization in *No One Killed Jessica*, the melodrama created by the media channels in *Peepli Live* only worsens the dilemma

faced by Natha's family and eventually claims the life of an idealistic print journalist. Given this point of difference, the remediation of television news offered by the latter film establishes the national media as engaging in what has been described as a "crises endgame" discourse.⁵² In this discourse, the only interpretation of the series of events leading up to Natha's disappearance is that of political failure leading to his accidental death. Not only is this a mistaken conclusion, but it also proves that the mobilization of national sentiment based on an exploitative premise is likely to fail. Perhaps Bollywoodized news discourse can only work in the interests of democracy and social and legal justice when remediated through an amalgamation of melodrama and well-meaning activist mobilization, as seen in *No One Killed Jessica*. However, both films are testament to the survival of Indian film (as an industry and a form) by virtue of its remediation of the growth of television journalism.

Conclusion

Both film texts under consideration in this article critique the Bollywoodized content and practices of contemporary television journalism in India even as they perform a remediation of the televisual medium that ensures that Bollywood film itself is re-fashioned to be less formulaic. In the case of *Peepli Live*, we witness one extreme of the impacts of such Bollywoodization of TV journalism in that a print journalist loses his life while the grave issues of agricultural debt and farmer suicides continue unabated (and without adequate, contextualized coverage in the urban media). *No One Killed Jessica*, on the other hand, presents the positive extreme of the possible outcomes of Bollywoodization by remediating the real-life case of the Jessica Lal murder that set a precedent in terms of media mobilization of middle-class support in the interest of justice. While non-formulaic Bollywood seems to have found its own niche in terms of

content and reception in the wake of the popularity of commercial television in India, it remains to be seen whether television itself will evolve to remediate film and other media forms in ways that are both self-reflexive and less reliant on entertainment formats.

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