Interview Starts

Host

it's actually interesting what you have done all these years, because very few people have managed to, you know, marry technology with media. Right. So, I would be keen to understand where and how did you get onto this journey?

Tarun Katial

So about2010 and whereabouts that. When I was running big FM, we realized that having a diverse radio station across so many cities, and so many towns, was a challenge. And we realized that unless we relied on automation, and technology, our service delivery, our quality of content, our ability to be able to both localize as well as provide for differentiation and to be able to train our teams, in some minimum standards of, of storytelling or content generation will not happen. And so, way back in 2010, me and the team and the team and me at that time, we decided to automate our entire content delivery pipeline, and that was my first commitment to technology in the way that you see today, right? What we really did was, we created what you know, only the US had seen the theory of network stations, where we were able to deliver some content, which through pipes, nationally, and some content within that content locally and so we would have a national Breakfast Show, which was interjected by local RJs, in a handoff way, across many, many markets. So local markets will also get good quality content from, you know, cities like Bombay and Delhi and others, you know, where we would pipe in stuff like the financial markets, and Bollywood, and so on, and so forth. And we Bhawana Somaaya, and Simon, some of the other specialists who would actually go LIVE in many, many markets with many, many artists at the same time. So, you know, I realized that, you know, we've got to have technology intervention. And we also, at that time, started to do far more with modelling, on music playout, call AI and ML today on on optimizing curation, then optimizing platforms started way back then in building models around what should be the burnout on music, what should be the burnout on content? And how should we really use technology, machine learning data, in being able to provide both variety, as well as a certain amount of depth of music content to our users. And that really made me realize that, that content into technology into communities was the way forward. And I paired a fair amount of opportunities to continue to optimize the network then. But in in mid-2000, in the mid-2010, decade, about 2014-2015, I got fairly, fairly committed to creating digital content, which is where, you know, we actually had our first brush with podcasting. We started to deliver stories, through Neelesh Mishra, both on social as well as on radio together. And we saw a serious of take of, you know, the Facebook pages for Yadoon Ka Idiot box, and our ability to deliver that content into so many markets outside of where we own radio stations actually encouraged us to go digital. And so that was our first brush with digital content deployed in a fairly, mass scale. And that really worked out which, which led me to believe that, the next logical step would be to be able to personalize content at an equal to one level, both in an audio and video format. And I got the opportunity to then transition into ZEE to be the Founder CEO of ZEE 5, were really the key aspect of convenience video on demand, a personalization, diversity of content, and so on and so forth, started to play out and scale.

Host

that brings me to two other questions, one is that what made you believe in so much of customization of you know content particularly in language

Tarun Katial

So, let me take one step back, right, my own career started with television, in the early 2000, when we did KBC, and, and Kyunki and some of the other shows, and we realize that, at that point in time itself that, you know, geographic segmentation was the key to success and Kyunki was the first show that got set up with

.

Gujarat as its background, right. And, and we then realized that we needed to do shows which had different geographic SCR level customization or background so to be able to build a fairly good base of users across the country and so, then we did Kasauti, that had a Bengali backdrop, and, you know, so on and so forth, right. And over the years, that trick really, really worked for us from being metro centric, to being geographic geography centric, to being able to build really to, to understanding that we needed to make sure that we had even characters within shows which had different SCR, socio cultural region backdrops. I understood very clearly that India lived in its languages, right. And India was not one country but many countries within one country, I got the opportunity then to launch big FM, which was 60 stations across the country, and right from the northeast in Guwahati to, you know, to Trivandrum in Kerala, to Srinagar at one end and to, you know, a small town, in, in Tamil Nadu, we had really, really locally thoughts in whatever we were creating. That really gave me the impetus and the encouragement to understand that, you know, if you had to be, try to appeal to the soul of this country, then as I move to ZEE through the AccuHire, the two things that are common between me and the culture regime was their belief in languages. So ZEE also had expanded very beautifully, their regional language network. And it was one of the most powerful networks that they had. So, they had a commitment to content creation in so many languages. And I had a great background in languages across big FM. We then also build the UI and UX in those many languages. So, our three wheels used to be vernacular, video and voice, and so on vernacular was, and we realized that being in languages will give us the kind of width and depth of growth that we needed. So that rarely was our starting point. We started the platform itself in 12, to 14 languages, which was really a first time in India, even Google and Facebook and the others were only in three to, five to, six languages. And that really gave us you know, a quick hockey stick growth in the marketplace.

Host

the other thing that you had mentioned in your earlier response, Tarun was that, you know, bringing technology into everything that you were do you see media organizations using technology and digital platform effectively to you know, cross sell their content? Do you see them, you know, having robust analytics, for example, or consumer insights to be able to customize more and more content

Tarun Katial

I think there is still a lot of room of, you know, the role of AI and ML into content creation, for sure and you have spoken about a subject that's very close to my heart, I have invest in developing a platform just very recently, which will allow content creators to be able to use AI, it's called serendipity-media.tech, do take a look at it. It's really about making sure that you can get inspiration for diverse stories across the country, and the world, and you're able to write and get feedback on your stories, real time so that you're able to build out a content ecosystem that has consumer as well as critics feedback at the core of it. But it's also inspired by true stories that happen in our environment, the stories are relevant, the stories are distinct and the stories have resonance to the average Indians or your average consumers life.

Host

do you see that, you know, large media, as we know, may not exist, let's say, five years down the line, 10 years down the line, the way it exists today,

Tarun Katial

It's definitely not going to exist, the way it exists today, both print as well as television will have to become extremely personalized. And in the process of being personalized, they will have to bring in diversity, they will have to build in multi content format, they will have to bring it content discovery, they will have to convey,

invest in building communities. So I think content is not going to be content alone, content is going to be personalized content in communities, and also now increasingly into commerce.

Host

Yes. That's true and, you know, you, you have always managed to get technology and consumer insights, you know, beautifully together. Now, how do you, how do you marry the two?

Tarun Katial

I think, you know, instinctively, you got to have faith in data. Most of us love data. But when we want to apply data into our day-to-day work, we look away from it, we tend to believe that our, our knowledge and understanding of users is better than the data we see. I think you've got to break that wall, the third wall that exists between you and data. And, you know, like in all religion, why do you believe in religion is because you have some level of faith in it, right?

Tarun Katial

You've got to put faith in in numbers, you've got to put some faith in consumer and user insights, to be able to adopt them in your day-to-day work. And if you do that, then you will see that your resonance with your audiences or your user base, will start to grow very well. Also, give yourself an opportunity to fail, give yourself an opportunity to experiment through data, you know, maybe testing is much cheaper, your ability to be able to deploy content in the digital world is much easier. But you're all but also that lends to your ability to learn and learn quickly and fail and fail fast.

Host

The data in for many people is like, you know, antithesis to cut field, right because a lot of people go with a certain amount of, you know, instinct and gut feel.

Tarun Katial

And what is your gut built up of, your gut is generally built up of your past experiences, right?

Host-Yes, yes.

Tarun Katial

If you give visible to data to your day-to-day experiences your gut will start to build better intuition and better instinct, right. Your intuitive sense or your instinct as they call it in and there are many books on the gut feeling. It's all built on your paradigms of years of experience, right. To feel a certain way, because over the years, your subconscious has learned from a lot of your experiences. Now, if you let your subconscious learn over a period of time, from the data nuggets, from the data insights that you see, your subconscious will start to become more and more intuitive, towards, you know, being analytical.

Host

some of the things that one talks about in terms of customizing content in terms of using technology, using digital resources, these are not going to, you know, this requires a certain amount of investment, and they're not going to be free. Right. So, do you see, you know, customers, consumers paying for content at any point in time? I mean, how will that change significantly?

Tarun Katial

You know, we also believe the same thing but look at what has happened to Hotstar, from a base of 2 million two years ago, they're at a base of 30 million. It's incredible how many people are paying for content, and to believe people are not paying for content, people have always paid for content. People have paid for newspapers, people have paid for cable, people have paid for traditional media also, right. Are they going to pay for digital media? Yes, they're going to, why because they're going to see value in digital media? Are they going to be able to measure what they get out of digital media? Yes. Only digital media gives them personalization and exclusivity. The problem is that with as digital content creators, we need to take a choice, right. Are we confident about our product and are we going to keep it exclusive and just promote it on social media or are we going to give it away on social media non exclusively? If you give it away or non-exclusively social media don't expect people to pay for it? The value of your content is how you define it, right. All along users have paid for content, you never got your newspaper free, you've never got your TV channels free, for you know, your cable operator or your DTH operator far more than what you're paying for OTT platforms, you're paying for, you know, and I was looking at this right yesterday, I wanted to watch a show, which was on Lionsgate, it's a lovely show. Yeah. And I don't have the Lionsgate subscription and I went and bought it, it was, um, 600 bucks a year. Now think about it. It was a Sunday night, in another day, I would have gone to a theatre to watch a movie for an evening, right? In the good old days two years ago, that would have cost me far more than 600 bucks. I am paying for media and media consumption. I'm watching this at home for 600 bucks a year now.

Host

thanks a lot. Tarun, it was great talking to you.

Tarun Katial

I think you know, you've asked me some very pertinent questions, very few people go so deep into the theory of, you know, user behaviour, and why people do what they do. So, thank you so much for, you know, prodding me on and nudging me to think like this. Every interview also is enriching to me because I'm able to articulate my own thoughts better to myself and, you know, submerge them into my own subconscious.