

Publicity, Transparency, and the Circulation Engine

The Media Sting in India

by Ravi Sundaram

Since the turn of the century, India has witnessed a growing number of entrapment events or media “stings” in which private, secret, and unknown events, relationships, acts, and structures are publicly revealed. Aided by the rapid spread of technological modernity and low-cost media gadgets such as mobile phones, the media sting has been carried out by print, TV, and new media; transparency campaigners; NGOs; political parties; social movements; and ordinary individuals. As entrapment expands from a police technique to a generalized technology of transparency, it has produced great strains in existing control systems and traumatic disruptions at all levels. The video object produced by the sting is part of a circulation engine as it attaches to multiple environments: the political spectacle, the judicial review, and the online archive. I connect debates in infrastructures, media theory, and law to reflect on the implications of these new truth strategies for contemporary thought.

From the turn of the century, new media and low-cost infrastructures have begun to alter the relationship between power, cognition, and secrecy so central to the modern state. Nowhere is this more apparent than in postcolonial regimes. Confronted by media-enabled populations for which it had no place, the postcolonial design has been subjected to great strains and fissures. In India, paper-based systems in government offices have been subjected to thousands of requests under a Right to Information (RTI) Act, and digitally gathered information has leaked regularly into the public realm. In India's postcolonial model, the political and the social were clearly distinguished from the domain of media, which existed in carefully regulated institutional sites such as print, cinema, and radio. With the rise of new informal media, media institutions, once seen by the regime as pedagogic institutions meant to nurture postcolonial populations into a national citizenship, have long lost their monopoly. After the spread of low-cost media devices and mobile phones, unregulated forms of media (audio, video, images) began to rapidly circulate from a population hitherto seen solely as social and political actors within India's postcolonial design.¹ As low-cost media spread through inexpensive cellular phones and populations became producers and proliferators of media, the postcolonial boundaries of the social and the political went through considerable

turmoil. The resultant production of a turbulent technomaterial space began to affect many in the country. Across India, journalists, participants in social movements, NGOs, whistleblowers, and ordinary citizens angry at corruption began using concealed media gadgets to record and entrap those they considered responsible. At the same time, transparency activists joined this circulation engine; official paper documents, once kept secret or controlled through statutory rules of access, are now readily sourced through the RTI act and moved into the public realm. These results circulated via national, local, and global media and appeared as evidence in court cases and enquiry commissions. These interventions operated alongside an expanded and often chaotic governmental surveillance regime and a visceral media archive that emerged from the private collections of accident witnesses, estranged lovers, paramilitary torturers, and ordinary citizens with camera-equipped phones. Many of these fragments moved between the mundane and the dramatic, accelerating the pace of the media event and then moving to the painfully slower temporality of the legal review. This unanticipated media ecology has affected, even disoriented, just about every sphere of life in India.²

Entrapment is a controversial police technique whereby law enforcement officials induce people to commit criminal

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1. The circulation of privately collected media is not specific to India. From prisons to schools, streets, and hospitals, privately produced videos have emerged to make their way into public events and court battles worldwide.

2. This essay is part of a larger book project that examines the consequences of this shift in the postcolonial world.

acts that might result in a conviction. This includes recording with hidden media devices staged encounters in which the target is induced to commit an incriminating act. In sting operations, undercover law enforcement officials may gather evidence to record illegal acts but not actually provoke criminal acts. The lines between entrapment and stings are often blurred and settled by case law in countries where such operations are legal. The modulation of a police technology by private individuals in India (and across the world) significantly transformed this act: it initiated new fields of circulation and opened larger questions of the “public interest” and sovereignty as systems of secrecy, censorship, and control faced new challenges. In numerous cases, the audio/video material gathered in sting operations ended up in a judicial review, a court case, or an administrative tribunal, sometimes making its way to online storage portals such as YouTube; more often, the material would be attached to an offline judicial archive. But this movement of information—material collected, presented, shared, and stored—suggests a complex set of fields: the staged moment of entrapment, the affect-charged moment of publicity when the media is released in the public domain, and the quieter, longer stretch of the judicial review.

Michael Warner (2002) points to the “fruitful perversity” of all acts of modern publicity. Once initiated, these acts abandon intended audiences and face the risk of dispersal, misuse, and escape. In the treatment of contemporary entrapment as an ethnographic field, we need to address a complex set of forces: a dynamic *mise-en-scène* where new actors enter and fade away and where the noise of public debate is filtered through forensic expertise, which validates material as authoritative judicial evidence.

In the first section of this essay, I briefly map out the expansion of media infrastructures in India and the erosion of old systems of information control and secrecy. I then look at the generative implications of this new media constellation by examining a selection of technologically aided exposures of public life by activist media, transparency campaigners, and individuals using hidden cameras and cell phone videos. Often clustered under the shorthand of the media “sting,”³ these new technologies are connected to new expanded regimes of publicity: the 24-hour news cycle and YouTube videos. I switch between media and legal archives to open up questions about these new strategies, their sensorial-political charge, and the movements between exposure, rapid circulation, and the courtroom. I examine the video as an authorizing yet unstable document of this new constellation as it moves from a public event to the media archive, stored in online platforms and media devices. Video and audio are joined by paper media documents that are extracted from the regime through RTI requests and then remediated via publicity and activist campaigns. Given that rendering secrets

3. The “sting” has slowly come to stand in for diverse forms of media entrapment: political, sexual, personal, and activist.

public has become one of the main drivers of media modernity, I look at populist movements, transparency technologies, paper files, and the sting.

Media Infrastructures and the Puzzles of Proliferation

Unlike societies in the 1970s, our social body is defined by leaks; everything leaks, from surveillance tapes, wire taps, nudity on a remote beach, books, music, medicinal drugs and lives. Secrets and leaks are no longer governed by the state; there is an egalitarianism of secrets. (Mohammed and Mohan 2011:13–15)

The late Friedrich Kittler (1999) began his classic *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* with the sentence “Media determine our situation, which—in spite of, or because of it deserves an explanation” (xxxix). With this, Kittler sets up media as the infrastructural condition of all experience rather than a technological supplement to a human condition (Mitchell and Hansen 2010). Newer approaches have opened the way by seeing media as hybrids that have evolved alongside a larger process of mediation (Kember and Zylinska 2012); recent techniques suggest media archaeologies of sensory and object worlds (Elsaesser and Hagen 2010; Parikka 2012). Media objects materialize through differing cycles of inscription, transmission, and storage, in the process intervening in and performatively rearranging the social. This is dramatized by contemporary media events, which often seek to cut through and capture normal news cycles, albeit temporarily. Debates on media events have focused on their illusionism (Baudrillard 1993) and their disclosure of mediation by appearing anomalous (van Loon 2010). In their widely circulated book *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*, Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992) have pointed to the disruptive nature of events, where media “actively create realities” rather than just report them. Beyond an event’s artifactuality, it would be useful to examine how events are part of a generative loop or movement, where practices, objects, and people attach themselves to changing assemblages. This assemblage is a dynamic media ecology, which is not a stable arrangement of technologies and environments but rather is productive, resulting in new interventions or “space-times” (Deleuze 1990:176). As Parikka (2011) also puts it, “Media are an action of folding time, space and agencies; media are not the substance, or the form through which mediated actions take place but an environment of relations in which time, space and agency emerge” (35). As we examine the changing environments of entrapment actions, we witness different combinations of people and technologies as the initial event gives way to a constant redistribution of forces. Igor Kopytoff (1986) had spoken of the many “lives” of commodities as they move in and out of circulation. Media objects such as audio and video also take on multiple lives as they move in diverse time-space configurations. In events linked to media entrapment, a premium is placed on the moment of liveness: the burst of affect-

tive energy when the video or audio is released in the public domain, designed to multiply the political effects of the act. This is often not the end of the story, as video moves to other environments, including the long judicial review, with new protagonists.

Infrastructures are at the center of media circulation by way of entangling people, objects, knowledges, and technologies. Following the cassette boom in the 1980s, media infrastructures expanded rapidly in the postcolonial world in the context of a large informal economy (Larkin 2008; Sundaram 2009). Media platforms proliferated along with an endless profusion of personalized media gadgets, from expensive smartphones to low-cost models used by the poor. The transformation of postcolonial life into a dynamic technological culture is wide ranging, affecting all sections of the population. The majority of India's citizens now have cellular phones where they have access to audio, video, and still images (Doron and Jeffrey 2013). After the cellular phone, a growing section of the population is now the source of new media output, linking them in turn to online social networks, mainstream television, and peer-to-peer exchanges of text, music, and video. More and more people access and circulate technological media (video, music, print, images) through new online and offline networks. Initially limited by affordability and indifferent technological infrastructures, media networks are now spread across the country, in both rural and urban areas, with mobile phones bringing connectivity and intermittent broadband services. In India and across the postcolonial world, the media experience is now an integral part of everyday life.

These expanding media infrastructures have come in the wake of fragile postcolonial sovereignties and informal economies of circulation. This process has linked up to new subaltern expansions of existing infrastructure, which are redeployed for creative uses (Simone 2004). Indifferent to property regimes that come with upscale technological culture, subaltern populations mobilize low-cost and mobile technologies for horizontal networks that bypass state and corporate power (Sundaram 2009). Simultaneously, we witness the expansion of informal networks of commodification and spatial transformation. This loop shapes much of contemporary media circulation, wherein media objects move in and out of infrastructures, attach themselves to new platforms of political-aesthetic action, and are drawn to or depart from the spectacular time of media events. This drive marks the turbulent, dynamic ecology of entrapment, with changing combinations of protagonists, technologies, and spaces: television newsrooms, online platforms, police stations, government offices, courts, enquiry commissions, demonstrations, and activist forums.

As state authority weakens either through economic crisis, neoliberal reforms, or war, infrastructures also perform a kind of "doubling" role. Two decades ago, an essay by Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman intimated this churning.

Fraudulent identity cards; fake policemen dressed in official uniform; . . . forged enrollment for exams; illegal with-

drawal of money orders; fake banknotes; the circulation and sale of falsified school reports, medical certificates and damaged commodities. . . . It is also a manifestation of the fact that, here, things no longer exist without their parallel. Every law enacted is submerged by an ensemble of techniques of avoidance, circumvention and envelopment which in the end, neutralize and invert the legislation. There is hardly a reality here without its double. (Mbembe and Roitman 1995:340)

This doubling of infrastructures may also produce a poetics (Larkin 2013) with aesthetic and political possibilities. These may range from sensorial-political strategies of NGOs, anti-government movements (Maclagan 2012), and transparency groups. This has been accompanied by thousands of everyday acts by a media-enabled population.⁴

Today the cellular phone has become a transmitter and media production device: activists capture police brutality and protests; media-enabled populations enter the world of mass photography and share images with their friends. The archive fever of digital modernity, where we capture, store, and recirculate images, inflects both states and populations. In a situation of media porosity, the information "leak" from the state is regular and widespread. Not unlike other governments around the world, the Indian government has resorted to digital storage systems to hold information, including audio surveillance and text documents. Once digitally stored, governmental information periodically emerges in the public domain or is deployed in political and business wars.⁵

Secrecy and Sovereignty

In his book *Defacement*, Michael Taussig (1999) suggests that secrecy is "an invention that comes out of the public secret" (7). Following Elias Canneti, Taussig (1999) suggests that the public secret is "that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated" (5). If the public secret is a "known-unknown," almost demanding defacement, at some point all these public secrets erupt despite great strategies of concealment. In a re-

4. The Canadian scholar Steven Mann formulated the notion of *sousveillance*, or watching from below, to suggest that media-enabled populations could provide a critical counterforce to governmental surveillance systems (Mann and Ferenbok 2013). Technologically aided exposures of everyday life include citizen media, WikiLeaks-style disclosures of state documents, and a flood of bystander images and videos that make their way into newscasts and social media. While there may be a dangerous proximity of *sousveillance* to decentralized technologies of national security, there is little doubt the terms of the political are being shifted today.

5. Among the first of these was the audio recording of a conversation by Amar Singh, a North Indian politician who was variously heard fixing high court judges and managing sexual and financial favors for sections of the Indian elite. Though the Supreme Court initially stayed the circulation of the tapes, the contents are now accessible to all. See <http://www.ndtv.com/article/india/amar-singh-tapes-deals-with-anil-ambani-105308> (accessed July 28, 2014).

cent case, audio surveillance tapes of Nira Radia, a Delhi-based lobbyist attempting to fix a multibillion-dollar telecom contract, made their way to local news magazines, exposing a stunning trail involving India's major companies, the telecom minister, and local journalists. One hundred hours of audio are now available online, providing the public a dramatic entry into the corridors of political and social power. The movement of the Radia tapes is instructive of new modulations in power today. The tapes (containing 5,851 conversations) were from wiretaps ordered by the income tax department against Nira Radia in 2009 (Bal and Jha 2010). The tapes emerged as part of evidence in a court case, and a selection of their contents came out in news magazines in Delhi (*Outlook* 2010) and in an art project by the Mumbai collective Camp.⁶ This constant resignification of legal documents is indicative of the loop discussed earlier.⁷ The traffic involves the multiplying of networks, sharing practices, legal-paralegal circulation, and an affect-driven political culture.

What do these changes mean for older forms of cultural control? Nationalist anticolonial mobilizations in India had produced powerful affective settings through innovative combinations of politics and culture. Postcolonial India was an equally charged universe, accentuated by political mobilization, religious and cultural spectacle, and an expanding commodity culture. Cinema and media cultures also presented dangers to postcolonial sovereignty; the perceived public disorder of subaltern crowds was seen as susceptible to film's sensuous, provocative pleasures. The great challenge for postcolonial governance was to try to regulate public passions in a media-saturated culture while preserving the affect intensity of democratic and cultural politics in postindependence India.

William Mazzarella (2013) argues that censorship in India was constitutive of the performance of postcolonial sovereignty. Given the difficulties involved in instituting standardized mechanisms for the regulation of "sensuous provocation" after widespread mediatization, the police function of sovereignty is to manage the world of public affect, notably, the "emergent potential that arises between the sensuous resonances of mass mediated images and the competing ways in which they get harnessed to social and cultural projects of value" (Mazzarella 2013:40). This was the gray zone between what Warner calls the "fruitful perversity" of all media forms and their potential for overflow into unknown, dangerous zones. Censorship's "performative dispensation" was to play both police and patron in a chronic state of cultural emergency that is the condition of mass publicity. This was a foundational transaction between the unstable "open edge" of mass publicity and the assertion of sovereign power,

whose authority was periodically evoked to filter authorized and unauthorized practices.

This model of postcolonial affect management has been thrown into turmoil after the rise of media-enabled practices, transforming relations between sovereignty and a population always seen as susceptible to the sensorial powers of celluloid. Media has become the infrastructural condition of life rather than enclosed in distinct, regulated sites such as the cinema.⁸ What we see is a new condition of affect-driven media modernity in most parts of the world today (Berlant 2011). The older police function of postcolonial government was to privilege particular (legal) sites of media exhibition and consumption. Today new forms of unauthorized publicity have actively destabilized this regime and fed into new loops of circulation.⁹ Blurring and confusing the distinctions between legal/nonlegal, private/public, fact/artifact, and governmental/nongovernmental, the new interventions span homes, governmental offices, political parties, individuals, industrialists, and just about all walks of life. At the center of this traffic is the media-enabled entrapment, or the "sting."

The Ecology of Entrapment

During his brief, first tenure as the chief minister of Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal invited each citizen equipped with a mobile phone to "sting" corrupt public officials. "Each citizen of Delhi will be an anti-corruption inspector. Your phone will be your biggest weapon. . . . Do the sting there and then, and let our anti-corruption department know. We will lay a trap and arrest them. You can use audio or video to perform a sting" (Kaushika 2014). Kejriwal's cabinet colleague Manish Sisodia went even further, suggesting that for postcolonial Indians, the "right to sting" had an equal place along with the right to vote and RTI (Apurva 2014). Significantly, Sisodia and Kejriwal elevated the newer technologies of visibility into the domain of public policy.¹⁰ By 2013, sting or entrapment operations were increasingly routinized as the corporeal edge of public life. Sting operations became part of anticorruption exposés, political battles, domestic battles, sexual blackmail, small neighborhood conflicts, torture cases, the exposure of anti-Muslim rioters in Gujarat, and legal cover-ups. An unending, visceral stream of videos have now circulated in the public domain for over a decade, materializing

8. Rajadhyaksa (2009:7) suggests that "containment" was the marker of celluloid, along with the social stabilization of the cinema. Cinema's instability had different public consequences from its successors.

9. There is little doubt that some of the older anxieties about media and public excitability described by Mazzarella (2013) continue in the digital era, with cellular phone images held as reasons for social disturbances in various parts of India.

10. Kejriwal and Sisodia were also activists, and the advocacy of sting operations by ordinary citizens for exposing corrupt state officials is a new shift in terms of political discourse.

6. "Pad.ma," *Pad.ma*, <https://pad.ma/> (accessed July 27, 2014).

7. In *Files: Law and Media Technology* (2008), Cornelia Vismann subjects the legal archive to a media archeology; law is many ways an expression of a media condition of transmission, storage, and recall.

in times of major political events, parliament debates, corruption scandals, law courts, and forensic labs.

For decades, media-enabled entrapment cases were the monopoly of the police. Audio technology was introduced in the 1950s.¹¹ Early discussions in courts centered on the admissibility of secretly recorded audio in the body of evidence through its ability to maintain the integrity of recording and via comparisons with photography. "In principle no difference can be made between a tape recording and a photograph," declared a judge in 1965.¹² Later judgements also described the recorder as a storage and capture device similar to that of photography.¹³ From the 1980s, the state's monopoly over media infrastructures started to recede, and low-cost recording devices became available in local markets for widespread use. But the turning point was the role of a news magazine appropriately called *Tehelka* (Sensational). The magazine pulled off a major video sting that entrapped military officials, bureaucrats, and politicians in an arms deal with a fictitious company in exchange for sums of money. Causing a national storm and debate in the press over journalistic techniques, operation Westend led to the resignation and conviction of various officials.¹⁴ Deploying a shorthand for transparency, *Tehelka's* editor Tarun Tejpal claimed that for many in rural India who "did not understand the medium," the magazine functioned as an "x-ray machine," exposing all who came in its way (Tejpal 2001).

Operation Westend set up a model for entrapment of hidden media devices and video technology. There was an effort to channel the burst of sensory acceleration toward particular ends, such as live media events, public debates, a court case, and an official inquiry. In more spectacular cases, the video attached itself to live television, a key player in such public dramaturgies. For television, the sting was primarily a vehicle for capturing time, making it "stand out" amid thousands of competing news stories. As the video played seemingly endlessly in a loop, the main drive was to multiply the effects of the sting, such as public debates, online social commentary, and the initiation of a judicial review.

Following Westend, established and upcoming television companies quickly added the sting to the prime feature of

the nightly broadcast. A class of "investigators," detectives, and public-interest lawyers emerged over the decade, as stings were mounted against political parties, individuals, and companies. The *Tehelka* team of journalists who carried out Westend went on to carry out a host of sensational stings, including exposures of right-wing groups involved in the anti-Muslim riots of 2002 in the state of Gujarat and the entrapment of members of Parliament (MPs) offering cash for votes.

Removed from the media glare of the live national event, local entrapment operations were playing out across India in area courts and in local political and ecological battles. Once initiated, entrapment joined expanded loops of circulation and sensory mobilization, with distinct political effects. Even government departments joined in. In India's central state of Madhya Pradesh, health officials in 2008 offered rewards to ordinary citizens to carry out sting operations against illegal sex-determination clinics that helped parents wanting a male child abort female fetuses. An official circular stated blandly, "Before the operation is conducted, the female decoy will have to give a written declaration that she is doing it for humanity and *in public interest*, and helping the competent authority voluntarily, without any prejudice" (Ghatwai 2008, emphasis mine).

Media entrapment emerged as a major technique with which to initiate and inhabit an event within a larger culture of circulation after digital media. The sting video is not (simply) a "representation" of a staged event; rather, it is a takeoff point within an ongoing process of mediation involving many actors whose outcomes and temporal cycles are often unknown.

Public Interest, the Sting, and the Legal Event

In September 2010, Delhi High Court judge S. N. Dhingra heard a petition by journalist Aniruddha Bahal, who had pioneered the sting in India, including the Westend operation for *Tehelka*. Bahal asked for the quashing of criminal cases against him, initiated when he had conducted a sting operation against MPs to expose the practice of asking questions in return for sums of money. Instead of investigating the MPs, the police filed criminal cases against the journalists. Bahal claimed the sting to be in the "public interest," and the judge ruled that the journalists were only performing their "constitutional" duty: "I consider that the duties prescribed by the Constitution of India for the citizens of this country do permit citizens to act as agent provocateurs to bring out and expose and uproot the corruption" (*Aniruddha Bahal v. State*, September 24, 2010).

After 2000, a rapidly increasing number of audio and video documents from private sting operations began appearing in court cases. At every level, the admissibility of media material was contested under existing evidence law; all cases were filtered through the noise of the real: political struggles, forms of publicity, and civil rights battles. In one well-known case, a fabricated sting operation by a local media company accused a local Delhi schoolteacher of running a prostitution racket (*Times of India* 2007). This led to violent demonstrations by

11. Among the earliest legal cases was *Dr. Partap Singh v. The State of Punjab*, April 4, 1962 (AIR 1963 P H 298), which allowed the use of tape-recorded material.

12. *Rex v. Maqsood*, 1965(2) All ER, 461.

13. "The process of tape-recording offers an accurate method of storing and later reproducing sounds. The imprint on the magnetic tape is the direct effect of the relevant sounds. Like a photograph of a relevant incident, a contemporaneous tape-record of a relevant conversation is a relevant fact and is admissible under Sec. 7 of the Indian Evidence Act" (*Yusfalli Esmail Nagree v. State of Maharashtra*, AIR 1968 SC 147).

14. See the mostly sympathetic account of this event in Trehan (2009).

parents. The legal ruling on the event captured confusions on the status of the video in the courtroom: “Sting operations showing acts and facts as they are truly and actually happening may be necessary in public interest and as a tool for justice, but a hidden camera cannot be allowed to depict something which is not true, correct and is not happening but has happened because of inducement by entrapping a person.”¹⁵

All entrapment cases generated a forensic theater that stretched from the initial blur of the media event to the lab-based analysis of the court case. Forensics, says Eyal Weizman (2011), mobilizes rhetorical techniques where objects are translated in a forum by observers. This involves two interrelated relationships.

The first is the relation between an event and the object in which traces of that event are registered. The second is a relation between the object and the forum that assembles around it and to which its “speech” is addressed. Forensics is therefore as concerned with the materialization of the event as with the construction of a forum and the performance of objects and interpreters within it. (Weizman 2011:105)

As Weizman points out, in recent years an object-oriented juridical culture creates the space where divisions between material evidence in objects and the human testimony blur; objects take on an expanded, expressive role that was once attributed to human witnesses. In sting cases this problematic is starkly posed when courts decide on the consequences of an event that is over. Whose voice should the court hold as primary? The audio/video object or the accused person at the scene of the crime whose life and career is under review? In high-profile entrapment cases, there is often an insistence in demonstrating the irreducible “true” core of the audio/video document by examining “raw” footage and original hardware. When the object is made to “speak” via the technical language of the lab, counterclaims and parallel forensic analyses are presented by lawyers, not unlike spoken witness testimony. However, lab-based forensic analysis is rare for most sting cases. The traces of the event are mobilized not through expertise but through placement of the sting media contents as a parallel rhetorical voice in the trial to be corroborated or contradicted in the courtroom.¹⁶

The arrival of privately supplied entrapment video in case law suggests a rearrangement of the police power of sov-

eignty in a user-saturated media environment. Control over the circulation of legal paper documents has defined this regime. Mathew Hull (2012) points to the stabilizing role of documents in postcolonial South Asia: within the office, corporate authority is produced not via indexicality but through circulation. Endless circulation disperses responsibility and collectivizes bureaucratic power. Governmental documentary power is often addressed by citizens through petitions that circulate within the governmental regime of documents. From the late 1970s, petitions for justice began to address courts through public-interest litigations, abbreviated in public discourse as PIL. Here the petition became a form of public address via the court rather than the state. By the 1990s, PIL had become highly publicized dramaturgies with live media coverage.

For many activists and ordinary people who carried out stings, the technology was a new petitioning strategy to disrupt the order of things and a way to opportunistically attach themselves to the viral flow of media culture.¹⁷ The outcomes were diverse: conviction of the accused in anti-Muslim riots, anticorruption campaigns in a local school, and domestic or office disputes. The sting’s petitioning form was primarily the visceral platform of mass publicity—a performative disruption premised on maximum effect. The judicial review emerged later as a productive surplus of this cycle. This could take the shape of a court case, a governmental enquiry, and suspension of officials caught in the sting. But in many of the smaller cases, there was no final conviction based on the sting.¹⁸

The Sensory Vortex

Operation Westend initiated a certain aesthetic of the entrapment video that was repeated endlessly on live television. The blurred, grainy images of the video became the established citation of the event as viewers adjusted their vision to make sense of the document. This was a moment of public forensics with less than audible sound, shoddy camera work, and barely visible individuals on screen (Teheka TV 2012).

The artist and film theorist Hito Steyerl (2012) has analyzed a new culture of “poor images” that have emerged

17. I am indebted to Lawrence Liang, who was the first to point this out in a conversation in March 2014 (L. Liang, “Of Hidden Cameras and Hidden Truths: Law and Visual Evidence in an Era of Digital Uncertainty,” unpublished manuscript).

18. For larger media organizations, the judicial review was just a component in a larger repertoire of performative effects: in many cases judicial action finally collapsed because the reporters lost interest and never submitted forensic evidence. After the sting of sales tax and jail officials, reporters of the television channel Aaj Tak lost interest in the case and did not appear before the tribunal or submit credible evidence. The government officials whose jobs were terminated were put back on the rolls, though still subject to departmental due process. See the ruling of the Central Administrative Tribunal in *A. K. Jain S/O P. R. Jain v. Government of National Capital Territory (NCT) of Delhi*, August 31, 2009.

15. *Court on Its Own Motion v. State*, December 14, 2007, 146 (2008) DLT 429, emphasis mine.

16. *Delhi High Court, W. P. (C) 1323/2010 v. Workmen & Anr*, July 31, 2013, was a case that pitted workers against management. The management carried out a sting by a private detective agency to gather evidence against the workers. There was no forensic analysis of the CD, yet the court admitted the CD “irrespective of the method used,” contrasting and comparing it with the statements of the workers (see also *Aniruddha Bahal v. State*, September 24, 2010, where the judge held in favor of the journalists).

from the confluence of pirate culture, data compression, and network mobility. The poor image recalls the “compromised visuality” of earlier concepts of imperfect cinema—amateurish, blurred, and filled with artifacts. The contemporary traffic in poor images is more ambivalent and affect driven, and it operates within a contested zone of commercial and common interests. Artistic, pornographic, and “paranoid” material are all part of this constellation of poor images and present a combustible, almost moving snapshot of the contemporary crowd, “its neurosis, paranoia, and fear, as well as its craving for intensity, fun, and distraction” (Steyerl 2012:41). The sting video is similar to the economy of poor images, floating, as Steyerl says, on the surface of “temporary and dubious data pools” (Steyerl 2012:42). As these videos move along different platforms—prime-time television, inexpensive cellular phone screens in working-class areas, online archives, the space of the court room—they become players in changing environments, producing sensational, pornographic, and disruptive political effects.

The Recirculation of Paper and Transparency Activism

Video and audio documents were the preferred media of user-initiated sting operations. At the same time as the promotion of the video sting, a remarkable recirculation of paper documents originating from the Indian government was underway, initiated by transparency activists. As a media form, paper and its place in governmental authority was an important player in both neoliberal audit culture and populist transparency campaigns. If neoliberal transparency attacked paper-based governance as inefficient and opaque, populist movements deployed a new media politics to move government paper documents to a larger engine of circulation. In recent years scholars have been drawing attention to paper’s media materiality (Gitelman 2014; Kafka 2012; Krajewski 2011). Paper media and their materialities tend to be overlooked in the context of the growing hegemony of digital media.

From the days of the East India Company, colonial power in South Asia was based on the multiplication of writing genres as means of authentication. Constant authentication and verification through elaborate official procedure materialized colonial writing practices (Ogborn 2007). As Hull (2012) demonstrates, anxieties about noncorrespondence between words and things pervaded colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies, leading to multiple systems of authentication such as stamps, countersignatures, and paper genres. Document systems render bureaucratic authority distinct from the public, but this power can be diluted by constant circulation of files and overwriting by multiple officials (Gupta 2012; Hull 2012). Colonial power was based on an extensive deployment of these paper-based information systems for routine policing as well as managing migrants, epidemics, and cross-border movements. After independence, the postco-

lonial regime drew significantly from this system, although aligning it to republican democratic politics. Paper-based databases (electoral rolls, ration cards, land lists) produced by state functionaries intersected with political mobilizations at local and city levels, and these played a dual role: they allowed the regime to manage urban residents through systems of exclusion and inclusion while for political groups entry into the database constituted an important vector of everyday life (Sriraman 2013). Such political strategies could range from strategic entry into some databases (electoral rolls, ration cards) with fuzzy land ownership patterns and paralegal access to informal systems of electricity and water. In this constellation, an entry into one information system could coexist with tactical invisibility in another. Small traders, residents of squatter settlements, and internal migrants moved in this shifting information ecology. The porosity of the paper information system became perceived as a crippling problem for India’s globalization, condemned by neoliberal modernizers as opaque and leak prone (Nilekani 2009).

Scholars have explored the materiality of bureaucratic documents as they circulate and intersect with neoliberal doctrines, NGOs, and political claim making (Hetherington 2011; Riles 2006). From the late 1990s, transparency began to emerge as a significant component of regime modernization and infrastructural design in India. Transparency discourses sought to reform the paper-based documentation system of the regime, seen as corrupt and complicit with political elites. Contemporary documentary government became the target of transparency and audit cultures, which set in motion new hierarchies while delegitimizing existing practices (Strathern 2000). As neoliberal elites deployed audit cultures and models of e-governance, biometric identification drives sought to bypass postcolonial modes of embodiment that were seen as characteristic of paper-based enumeration systems. In the new technocratic update after neoliberalism, biometric enumeration and real-time visibility became a significant component of reinventing both infrastructural systems and urban populations without the problems of porosity. In this infrastructural design, populations are positioned in a clean, direct relationship to a transparent state, uncluttered by corrupt local intermediaries and the venalities of traditional politics. Transparency initiatives are aporetic: even as they seek to evacuate governance from the corporeal sites of the political/material, they are implicated in local conflicts and techno-material issues. Transparency documentary strategies may multiply authority and displace existing practices, producing a state of “documentary disorder” (McKay 2012).

Beyond the infrastructural turn, citations of transparency began to show up in urban populist movements from 2005. In that year a landmark RTI law was passed by Parliament following years of activist pressure.¹⁹ The act mandated a “time-bound” response to requests for government infor-

19. For a copy of the act, see <http://righttoinformation.gov.in/> (accessed May 1, 2010).

mation, usually 30 days, beyond which responsible officials would face salary cuts. Although the original act had caveats on national security, an activist Central Information Commission expanded the scope of RTI requests. The entire governmental system has been deluged with RTI requests from every walk of life. RTI requests articulate a range of impulses—ordinary desires for justice, anticorruption activism, and rivalry amid the state bureaucracy and corporate classes. RTI movements in India draw from what Birchall (2011) calls the “transparency effect,” where unhindered access to information is held up as a positive value against the corruption of old-style politics. However, in contrast to the infrastructural turn that set up transparency as a technical solution to service delivery, social movements have sought to embed transparency in a new theory of populist sovereignty (Hetherington 2011). A good example is the book *Swaraj* (Kejriwal 2012), in which Arvind Kejriwal, drawing variously from Gandhi’s village government, citizen’s budgeting in Porto Alegre, and Swiss self-government, argues for a decentralized democracy of self-governing councils. In *Swaraj*, a failed, corrupt, postcolonial regime had to be replaced by a self-governing republic. In his work on populism, Ernesto Laclau (2005) speaks of how populist empty/floating signifiers generate an equivalential chain,²⁰ which “has an anti-institutional character: it subverts the particularistic, differential character of the demands” (38). The “internal frontier” of populism reproduces an us-versus-them discourse, a model of constant extension. Populism’s strength (and vulnerability) lies in this political model of extension. Laclau’s model tends to have a broad explanatory sweep; contemporary populist mobilization in India embeds this extensive model in specific informational strategies.

These tactics include the aggressive petitioning of the state through RTI applications, of which thousands are periodically filed to expose corruption in land deals, contracts, and public/private infrastructure. In contrast to liberal technocratic models that see transparency as state modernization, populist campaigns seek to aggressively attack state and corporate information monopolies and to circulate documents in the public domain. “Paper” documents from information campaigns emerge as digital copies online, in court evidence, and in television shows. This model of publicity remediated paper within a larger infrastructural condition of media circulation common to audio and video documents. Documents that have emerged from RTI campaigns often attach themselves to the familiar loop of exposé culture: the public unveiling of the scandals of state secrecy, the live media event, the political storm, the judicial process, all components of entrapment ecology.

20. Laclau (2005) explains this in the following words: “This means that each individual demand is constitutively split: on the one hand it is its own particularised self; on the other it points, through equivalential links, to the totality of the other demands” (37).

The elective affinity between the sting and the tactics of populist transparency are apparent. Both are driven by a relentless drive to technologically unmask authority and accelerate circulation through media networks. Once evacuated from the domain of state secrecy, the paper document gains speed and texture in the accelerated cycle of the media event, mapping the trajectory of the sting video. If the barely coherent audiovisuals of the video become the reference for the initial velocity of the sting, the paper documents unearthed by populist campaigns function within a regime of spectrality. As Gupta-Nigam (2013) suggests, this is a forensic moment that is affective rather than infrastructural: “Even as documents are leaked, exposed and held up in front of television screens, on no occasion can viewers actually identify the authorizing marks for themselves, they have to trust those relaying the information to them—news anchors or activists” (89). The document functions as an affirmation of a trace; the evidence is performative.²¹

Conclusion

In the past few years, sting videos have documented events that range from corruption to police atrocities. These videos are also an archive of destroyed lives, blackmail, and exploitation aesthetics. As a field, entrapment suggests a shifting set of forces, a world where we witness what the philosopher Keith Ansell Pearson refers to as “experience enlarged and gone beyond” (Pearson 2002:8). In this milieu, the sting becomes a vehicle to enter a larger forensic laboratory, be it the palpable, visceral mood of the media event or the minor theater of the courtroom. As I have argued, entrapment inhabits a range of dynamic connections, including the informal infrastructures of contemporary media and the rearrangement of the postcolonial sovereignty as new media-enabled actors produce new forms of publicity. The sting’s primal moment of publicity was the affect-intensive live media event when the secret was exposed. This was connected to a larger chain of circulation, which welcomed new protagonists as older ones faded away.

Michael Warner (2002) suggests that when public discourse abandons the security of given audiences, it also “puts at risk the concrete world that constitutes its condition of possibility” (109). The sting reflects this tension between acts of publicity and their possibility as media-enabled actors deploy police technologies for sensory-political acts, joining a larger engine of circulation. The movement between critical exposé and destabilizing the powerful by informal actors and large governmental surveillance infrastructures highlights the key challenge for an ethnographic understanding of the political increasingly challenged by media modernity. The provisional, always unfinished nature of contemporary

21. In the more high-profile cases, the RTI document would function as evidence in judicial proceedings not unlike sting video.

media offers promise and danger to insurgent populations and institutional power at the same time and suggests urgent new questions for scholars of public life.

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