29/11/21

Essay #1: On the Responsibility of Media to Society

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A Shared Delusion

Draft #1

Sunday morning on the 1st of July 2018, eleven people were found dead in their home in a middle-class Delhi neighbourhood [[1]](https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/11-bright-people-with-one-dark-secret/article24428709.ece) in one of the most captivating instances of mass suicide the nation has ever seen. Two of them were 15-year-old children. The case had everything: black magic, psychological horror, the stink of conspiracy, lies, gore, secrecy; drama. It dominated the front pages of local & national dailies for a short but intense period of time from from x date to y date, then settled into developments beside the page 4 tail enders & paid adverts, before retiring from relevance & from interest like any sensationalist news story worth its salt does: quietly, privately, & without resistance. Three years later, on the 8th of October, 2021, Netflix released a three part docu series [[2]](https://gadgets.ndtv.com/entertainment/news/netflix-searching-for-sheela-burari-deaths-indian-predator-crime-stories-india-detectives-documentaries-2382219) compiling the truths, the lies & the inbetweens of the case into one, cohesive, consumable, spectacular multimedia experience, & suddenly, the nation’s attention was recaptured. More than a month later still, & the world has again moved on to better (worse) things.

The Burari kand was one that slipped away from the nation’s consciousness just as quickly as it had settled in, & now, three years later, it’s managed to do it a second time. The question worth asking - & isn’t it always - is why.

The media is a powerful institution (note: since the word ‘media’ in it’s semantic origins & usage is too wide ranging to be relevant or efficiently discussed here, in the context of this essay it shall apply strictly to public as well as private production houses that operate as ‘producers’ as well as ‘distributors’ of information in the economic senses of the terms). Naturally, it follows that it must also be a liable institution (*‘With great power, comes great responsibility,’ & all that jazz*). It stands to reason, that with the amount of power & influence that the media possesses in regards to society, by it, a responsibility is owed, if not to the individual viewer/consumer, then to the society at large. In this essay I will attempt to quantify precisely what this responsibility is, which form of media it befalls, & why it might ultimately be redundant.

Coming back to the 2018 Burari deaths, one could argue that the second coming of the gruesome image of 10 people hanging from the mesh grill of their typical Santnagar home courtyard, limbs bound, heads covered with no new development or breakthrough in the case, is not a noteworthy media phenomenon at all. And one would be correct to do so. Mostly.

True crime is a nonfiction media genre that examines an actual crime & details the actions of real people, & it’s been around for centuries. It gained considerable popularity in the mid 20th & has since expanded exponentially as the resource pool for amature analysts & criminal enthusiasts did & does continue to widen. A projected 44% of the US population engages with true crime through some means or the other [[3]](https://civicscience.com/true-crime-viewers-would-kill-for-more-streaming-content/). Speaking of India specifically, the market for non fiction crime related media in the country is huge (think afternoon reruns, Raman Raghav fanatics, podcasts). Even Biopics, arguably a fictional sister genre of true crime for its attraction to sensationalism, conspiracy, & emotional appeal, have saturated the Indian film market unrelentingly for the last decade, & understandably so; they make a shit ton of money.

There is a reason why Crime Patrol, Savdhaan India & Code Red once ran simultaneously on three different networks at the primetime TV weekend spot for over nine months. The same reason why Buzzfeed Unsolved, CID & Crime Alert were the shows that drew the largest audience out of the hundreds aired in the tenure of each of their networks. It is because in the stagnated eccentricities of these formulaic, unambitious productions motivated by little more than simple morbid curiosity, the very idea of true crime, they’ve managed to commodify perhaps the one thing that is more human than crime itself: spectacle.

The 2008 double murder case has been the subject of a documentary & a feature film. The 2012 Delhi gang rape has been the subject of a documentary & a Netflix series. The murder of social media star Qandeel baloch has been the subject of a documentary, a book, *&* a webseries. Jessica Lal, Neerja Bhanot, Paul Bernardo, Vikram Batra, Harshad Mehta. Murder, rape, war, scam; it’s all fair game when it comes to entertainment. House of Secrets is not a renegade. All but for one key difference.

Timing.

Taking a look at the release patterns of commercially successful mishap based media, the aforementioned (& the not) can broadly be divided into two categories:

1. Those produced & released extremely close to the time of occurrence of the actual event, often parallel to trial & investigation (eg. *Baaghi, BBC’s documentary on Qandeel Baloch, The Jinx, Uri*). Such a release takes place when public investment & emotion runs high, & the target audience is the same as the one that is engaged with the event in real time.
2. Those produced & released significantly past the period of relevance, either marking an anniversary, hoping to cash in on a sense of nostalgia, or simply having been under work for a long time (eg. *Talvar, Shershaah, No One Killed Jessica, Delhi Crime, Scam 1992*). Such a release typically follows a more thoroughly researched & arguably less exploitative (‘less’ being key) production, & the target is to rope in both previously invested adults as well as introduce a new generation to an old time classic.

House of Secrets falls under neither the first category, nor the second. It makes target an audience of gore loving, nihilistic teenagers (so, just teeangers) & adolescent adults, which would make sense if it weren’t for the fact that it was these same people that saw the case unfold, wide-eyed & open mouthed firsthand not three years ago for the exact same reason, making it some kind of negative unity of both categories’ audiences. Plus, its advertised appeal was to make revelations, which it did a grand total of none. Which is not to say that it’s not a good watch, hell, it’s a great one. It is well made & palatable. Engaging yet convenient. Personal but dissonant. It’s credence falls on it’s quality.

It’s ratings do not.

Unlike the house it took place in, the timeline of public interest in the Burari case holds no secrets. Entertainment is escapism. The average Indian will choose to spend his end of the month cash on a streaming service as opposed to a Guardian subscription & his weekend time on a Sunil Shetty movie instead of a paper on the plight of sanitation workers in the covid pandemic not because he’s stupid, but because he is tired. House of secrets did not work because it was well made, it worked because it was well marketed. It’s a coincidence, plain & simple, that’s landed a headline’s expected resurgence smack dab in the middle of two trend cycles, & it changes absolutely nothing. But it does provide a unique opportunity for perspective.

There is something so uncanny about being able to put on a netflix miniseries for your Sunday night horror fix with regard to a case that is still in progress. Police filed for closure claiming ‘no foul play’ back in June 2021, with the court hearing scheduled for ‘november’, which has come & gone. Incidentally, this closure report was only covered by the national & local press on or after the 21st of October, after the release of House of Secrets. It is possible that the closure report merely didn’t break into the media until then, but it is also possible, & considerably more likely, that it simply wasn’t worth reporting before.

How do you convince a generation that it is hearing something for the first time that it most certainly is not? Why does an audience of over 500 million tune in to watch a ‘mystery bygone’ when it has yet to be put to rest? Most ironic, perhaps, is the fact that a case very similar to the Burari kand occurred in Bengaluru a mere week before the trailer for House of Secrets came out, two weeks before its official release. Instead of any more attention being drawn to it in the media, the case was covered up in an avalanche of updates & summaries of the original case, so as to let people play catchup with what they were bound to be more interested in. Why? Because of the ground breaking mental health commentary? Because the editing was slick? Because AR Rehman did the score?

Just how much control does the media have over what you pay attention to? How much over what you don’t?

The success of House of Secrets makes obvious what was already true, allows us to draw unequivocally two conclusions that have been there the whole time:

1. If we cannot hold it against the average overworked middle class man to put more effort into selecting his weekend binge item than to click on the very first thumbnail Netflix shoves in his face, then neither can we hold it against the average labour class cable owner to listen to the nonsensical news items that play on his screen 24/7 on the local & national networks. The argument for dual responsibility with regard to consumption being a two way street falls; you do not choose what you are going to watch, it chooses you.\*
2. A system of media that operates as a monopolistic economic competition [[4]](https://www.economicsdiscussion.net/monopolistic-competition/notes-on-monopolistic-competition-meaning-and-characteristics/17111) has the capacity to control not only what we are & are not interested in, but to an extent, also what we think.

\*(Moreover, despite the fact that neither entertainment nor news media under an economic dissemination structure described in [4] truly has room for choice, it is certainly  only the entertainment media that at least pretends to offer it. And yet it is television where we see this incessant demand for critical thinking & active content rejection from the viewers crop up repeatedly in the debate about accountability.)

The point is, you do not decide what you are going to learn. Netflix’s library is an illusion of choice. And if tomorrow Zee News runs a story about the secret to Narendra Modi’s endless energy in the details of his exotic mushroom diet, it will not be because the nation wants to know.

It can be tempting here to want to separate the news from the entertainment; to draw a distinction between the reporting & the creativity, the tabloid & the broadsheet; the hard & the soft. A less than fine line between say, a Netflix & an NDTV, & to say that so long as one of these media is answerable in what it publishes & what it does not, what the other does is irrelevant. But this argument fails for three reasons:

1. The distinction is utopian. It only stands in an environment where the press is awarded the financial & the administrative independence to be in a position to choose what it publishes. A news outlet that is publicly owned is under direct financial *&* administrative control of the state. A crowdfunded publication like the Wire is under constant threats of defamation & sedition lawsuits so long as its journalistic licence is overshadowed by “reasonable restrictions”. A news outlet that is owned *privately* & depends on ratings & investments to keep itself running *is* a business, one that breathes if it makes money & dies without it. To hold it to a different standard than a movie production house or the fictional media market is ostentatious & meaningless. Put simply, journalistic integrity cannot be a reasonable expectation from the press, until the press is free.
2. Hard media *is* influenced by soft media. News & art do not exist in relative vacuum, one is affected by the other, & stupid as it sounds, objectivity is subjective. This is particularly visible with regard to documentaries & long form journalism, where the line between *document* & drawing starts to blur (consider Khushboo Ranka & Vinay Shukla’s 2016 crowdfunded work, *An Insignificant Man*, & novular investigative journalists like Sanam Maher & Pooja Changoiwala). An opinion that disregards this intersectionality can, at most, be only partially accurate.
3. While legalese & general convention, though merely nominal, disallow news media from exhibiting certain creative liberties that fall well under the jurisdiction of ‘artistic license’ held by non-news media in theory, there is nothing preventing creative media from pursuing & distributing news media itself, providing a resource that is as, if not more, credible than so called formal journalism. New examples of this can be seen in freelance news analysts & videographers like Dhruv Rathee or Mohak Mangal.

It should be acknowledged that there *are* differences between creative & non creative media; the dictated format, conventional ethics, IP laws, & perhaps most importantly, the legal obligation for informational credibility. A newspaper crime report may form court admissible evidence in its or future cases of similar precedence, a dramatized animatic of the same may not. Naturally, legal & professional responsibilities of both differ & do so considerably, but to disregard the impact that one has & the sheer power that it can & does utilize over society in favour of placing the entire onus of “consciousness” onto the other based on defunct idealist standards is disingenuous.

It is a long standing point of contention with regard to the principles of media production whether an ethical responsibility is owed to the society (think censorship laws, reasonable restrictions under the subsection of ‘morality’) by merely non creative media as opposed to creative media, or both. I argue that it is owed by neither.

Ultimately, the only duty the media needs to have to society, be it trash or technical, revolutionary or frivolous, hard *or soft*, is the same as its duty to itself: to be free. Autonomous, self administered, uncensored. And till such a point where it gets to be all those things (which ideally, is never), difficult.

What the media owes to us is this: dissent. May it never cooperate.

(More references may be added.)