09/12/21

Tutorial #2:

Discuss: “Print media is the first step towards your media journey.”

As the actual discussion couldn’t be completed due to technical difficulties, I elected to write an op-ed for this tutorial. Format: first person, anecdotal.

17/12/21

Mouli Sharma

Teekhi Mirchi

Putting aside the royal I for a minute, print media certainly was the first step towards my media journey. Pragati Maidan Delhi Annual Book Mela circa 2014. The fair happens every year (the prefix ‘annual’ indicated otherwise, I'm sure), & it's a great, big, monstrous thing; 10s of gigantic, behemothian halls, hundreds of vendors within them & without, selling everything, from cotton candy to remote controlled helicopters to Asimovian holograms, & of course, a goddamn infinitum of books.

Target marketing setups from all the big publishing houses, smaller ones, charities, freelancers, tech start-ups, m-seal demonstrations; you name it. And in between all of it: mounds of books. Odd numbered slot a delegation, even numbered slot a pile. Unsorted & random in the truest sense of the word there is; second-hand, brand new, dog eared, pristine, brittle paged, mint conditioned, Russian, Keynesian. It’d take something of a cosmic intervention for you to actually be able to find something you were looking for there (unless it won the man booker prize, in which case it will find *you*), but what you do stumble upon, good chance it isn’t even documented anywhere else. You can buy them by the kilo. It’s fantastic.

A *fantastic* place to be, by all means. Provided you’re not miserable people.

We were miserable people.

My father was old & tired, I was a child & a stranger, & my sister was something in between. We’d spent the whole day at the fair for the sake of spending it somewhere, & right as the sun was going down & the vendors had reached the last dredges of bargains & clear-out sales (‘*5 for 300, pick any 5.*’ ‘*SEVEN for 500!*’ ‘*Just take them*.’), we made our first and only purchase of the day: two hand puppets, 1 shaped like a frog (for me), & 1 shaped like a panda (for my baby sister). This insurmountable burden i(o)n hand, we left the 2nd to final hall, in the unenthused rush that overtakes the city every evening once the office hours are over & it’s bone tired & just wants to go home, to start our trek to the parking lot & a man among many handing out fliers & ads thrust something distinctly more substantial than a pyramid scheme pamphlet into the anatomically questionable biodiversity of my hands as I fell behind.

Now, I subscribe to the accept-&-keep-walking school of response when it comes to man-to-man marketing; the person handing out fliers is just doing their job, the person being offered the flyer is just trying to mind their business, & this strategy spares the both of us excruciating pain a social interaction that neither wants to have. And if the goal is to start with a hundred & end with none, your conscience gets to be that much lighter for it. But it is an understanding, between flyer hander & handee that prerequisites the delicate ritual of their relationship, that anything that weighs less than the palm of your hand is not worth the pretence of carrying with you past 4 long strides of where you’ve parted ways, just as anything that weighs more, cannot be free.

By the time I looked up from the cover page to inform the man of my destitution (‘*It’s 15 bucks.*’ ‘*Do I look like I earn?*’), he was already halfway down the street (committing more unsolicited charity). I yelled out that I didn’t have money. He yelled back that he didn’t care. I caught up with my family.

Which is a good place for that story to end, that part of it, at least. Tragically or non-tragically, in the interest of poetry, wherever may it lay, he must’ve said something else, too. Because that magazine never did go into recycling. It accompanied me on my way back to the car, (past every single dustbin there is in a solid third of Pragati Maidan right side of the road), & it didn’t go out the window on the ride back home. Because littering is bad. And it didn’t stay forgotten in the pocket behind the driver’s seat of my dad’s Santro. (Because littering is bad.)

That magazine was [Teekhi Mirchi](https://teekhimirchi.in/), an independent news satire publication (English & Hindi) that went out of print half a decade ago, & it’s safe to say that it forms the template for at least nine tenths of my entire media consumptive identity.

There is a notion, of tangibility. The idea that the things that you can see & hear, touch & hold will last longer than the things you can’t. The notion is false. Everything you’ve ever known will leave you in the end. Some things, you think you’ll never forget. But you do. You are clenching your fist around a palmful of sand, & it doesn’t matter if your nails dig into the flesh of your hand hard enough to draw blood, it will slip through your fingers eventually. Everything disintegrates.

What matters, is what you get to keep.

The way I see it, if print media forming the first step towards people’s media journeys or acting as a steppingstone for their foray into more serious, or more *conscious* media consumption is to be postulated, then the justification for it ultimately comes down to two basic defences: accessibility & tangibility.

The first is relatively self-explanatory. Print is cheap, print is easy & print is there.

Its presence is a constant underlying current within the ecosystems of our residence, like the inner lining on a hand embroidered chikan, perhaps unseen & perhaps unacknowledged, maybe even forgotten, but there. Breakfast table, abandoned doorsteps, dentist’s office, school reception, airport stands, roadside dhabas. Beneath the faeces laden floor of a speciminal mouse’s mesh cage, wrapped snug around your bloody sanitary napkins[[1]](#footnote-1). The notion of your reality. The consensus of your normalcy. Regardless of class & caste privileges, & regardless of when & why & what & how, if there is one medium that is within reach, always & everywhere, it’s print. To be estranged from the written word in a country like India is to be estranged from personhood[[2]](#footnote-2) (& god knows plenty are, but then again, the same can be said about the rights to eat & drink & piss & shit, so the argument stands). And it is this very proximity that brings us to our second defence: touch.

The mind is a selfish instrument. It wants to make everything about you. Needs you to relate everything back to yourself, understand it the way it affects you, or understand it not at all. The only way to make sense of anything in this world is to place yourself at the centre of it, then take a look around.

Impact is bilateral. This is why media - regardless of kind - is capable of holding such power over us in the first place. Why art & primetime agendas form the ordinarily embarrassing (& embarrassingly ordinary) basis of so many people’s identities. Music & movies & stand-up & street mimes; at the end of the day we’re all Pavlov's dog & when a story rings the bell of our memories, there’s not much we can do but drool. It is man’s nature to be impressed by that onto which he can impress himself. It is human prerogative to yearn for recognition.

Both the accessibility & the essentialism of print allow people to *possess* the content within in a way that has never been quite possible with any other kind of media, even before the digital takeover & post the near obsoletion of storage hardware that exists today (a floppy just doesn’t cut, does it?). Cartooning, news reporting, op eds, serials; tabloid drama - these are art forms that bring us one degree of abstraction closer to the art itself. Issue xyz of Teekhi Mirchi crossed state borders with me & back. I still have it now, years after the print shut down & exactly ten months & nine days since the last time there was activity on the e-pub. What can't be bought can be stolen. What can be touched can be kept. Minimalism & asceticism sound good when the interior design budget is large & the quantity of the *really* good drugs small, but at the end of the day, the artless truth about fatality is this: remnants count.

The argument is simple: stories remain. Secrets & cockroaches[[3]](#footnote-3), that’s all that’ll be left in the end, yes? Yes? Yes. But they’d last longer if you wrote them down.

1. If print is the foundational stone of news media & journalism, then the newspaper is the foundational stone of print. Everyone’s seen a newspaper. Everyone’s touched a newspaper. It doesn’t matter if you’ve never bothered or been able to read one in your life, it is impossible for the modern Indian commoner to extricate the simple recycled broadsheet from the fabric of his history. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [[Indian Publishing Industry](https://drive.google.com/file/d/18dc7et0GLFP7QV8prJ_iBI2U-XlxkDfe/view?usp=sharing), 2020] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Maggie Stiefvater, 2013] [↑](#footnote-ref-3)