

Sarai-Waag Workshop
at Sarai-CSDS, Delhi
March 3-5, 2003

*"The hottest place in hell is reserved for those
who tried to stay neutral in times of crisis..."*

The Inferno, Dante Alighieri

The 'Crisis/Media' Workshop at Sarai opens framed by the memory of one crisis, and the anticipation of another. Exactly a year ago, at the end of February and the beginning of March 2002, we witnessed a pogrom in Gujarat, in western India. Today, as we write this statement, the world stands a hair's trigger away from a war in Iraq, the consequences of which, on a global scale seem too difficult to even imagine. These are times for sober reflection, and that, precisely, is what we often find missing, as we open the newspaper, listen to the radio, or continue to be lobotomised by television. Yet, a variety of different, dissident, passionate and sane voices are also making themselves heard, through combinations of new and old media, as never before. The 'Paid For' news of the mainstream media is often exposed for what it is, even before it appears, by an increasingly vigilant network of independent local-global media initiatives. The numbers that turn out on the streets of the world's major capitals to protest against the plans for war against Iraq seem to suggest that despite huge propaganda efforts, 'the spin' isn't working, at least not all of the time. We live, as the Chinese curse, has it, in 'interesting times'.

Ever since the events of September 11, the image of a world in crisis is something that we have grown accustomed to. It is not as if crises have not had global dimensions before. Perhaps all that is different is the frequency, intensity and reiteration of the reportage of crises, an epidemic of images and data of a world out of sorts with itself, which marks and distinguishes the contemporary moment on a global scale. In times like this to attempt to be 'objective' or 'neutral' is to become a mercenary of power, a purveyor of platitudes. At the same time, we have little understanding of the complex professional and ethical dilemmas that bedevil the act of the media's bearing witness to our world. The crises in the media are the crises of the media.

The rise of new information technologies has ensured that crises are reported and commented upon even as they unfold on our television screens, radio programmes, newspaper pages and computer monitors. The trailers advertising news programmes have made images of war, violence, terrorism and disaster the staple diet of the twenty-first century's quotidian sense of the world. Each bulletin anticipates tomorrow's, or the next bulletin's crisis, the very next crisis. So that the breaking news may break even, all day, everyday. And yet, often, they are relinquished to the oblivion from which they emerged, as rapidly as they emerged.

If the spectacle of the crisis becomes quotidian, banal and commonplace, does it make sense to speak of a 'crisis' any more, as a temporally distinct phenomenon, a time apart from the rhythms of normal time? Or does this overproduction of crises give us an opportunity to reflect on the making and unmaking of crises, their announcement and forgetting?

Does it allow us to ask questions about media in crisis with themselves, about their offerings of uncertain truths to shadowy audiences. In what way do emerging alternative paradigms of reporting and commenting on crises, like the Indymedia Network, themselves become the raw material for mainstream news processing. Where do the lines between the mainstream and the alternative harden, and where do they blur? Has the 'broadcast' model, which was the mainstay of big media business, proved to be too bulky and too conservative in a world in which things change by the minute? Has the Internet really made it possible for correspondents to be co-correspondents to the realities of a changing world?

This workshop is an opportunity to reflect on both the ways in which media cover/create/manage spectacular crisis events and also how they deal with the aftermath of crises. One of the aims of our discussions will be to shift the focus of reflection away from simply looking at the 'event' of the crisis to looking at the structural processes that anchor what gets reported as 'the crisis', in everyday life. We are not only interested in the spectacles of political crises, but want to examine what does or does not get reported about our bodies, our houses, our forests, our jobs, and about the water we drink and the air we breathe. We will also look at the ways in which the truth becomes part of the collateral damage in the route marches of the war against terror, here, and elsewhere.

Typically, the media crews arrive instantly whenever a 'Crisis' hits the surface of what is constructed as 'Global Consciousness'. Usually, by the time this happens, the locally available human, cultural and intellectual resources of that society have been severely depleted. This means that the 'crisis' is interpreted and made intelligible mainly by 'experts'. This also means that the global media fails very often to recognise the varied approaches to 'living' the crisis that exists on the ground, it also makes the crisis a unique event, unrelated to what might be linking it to events and processes elsewhere. The 'crisis' then gets reported away as an instance of that happens to 'other' people and 'other' spaces whose realities are fundamentally different from that of those who view the crisis from outside. Typically, the crisis is treated as something that no one, not even the people the media crews interview can make sense of, almost as if it had no history. Finally, the media brings in celebrity intellectuals and pop figures to ethically salvage the event for the viewers as a cathartic experience and offer redemption as a therapeutic act. Of course no one asks the question as to why no one was paying attention to the situation when there were people trying to make sense of it before journalists, cultural workers, intellectuals, activists, human rights groups and other interlocutors succumbed to the crisis that, retrospectively, seems unfathomable.

The problem cannot of course be posed simply in terms of 'local voices' versus 'external reportage'. Local voices may be implicated in the crisis itself, and may be either acting to fuel it, or be silenced by it - just as the reporter who flies in from elsewhere may either seek to turn the crisis into a unique spectacle, bereft of context and history, or be the 'necessary outsider', who can be trusted to listen and report in a manner that is true to the facts on the grounds without fear or prejudice.

The imperative of critical, analytical reportage that tries to weave together a complex pattern of voices, motivations, facts and processes is a function of sympathy, intelligence, curiosity and a commitment to the freedom of information that is neither reducible to 'local knowledge' nor to the 'universal' agendas of freedom and justice, but is in each case a unique combination of distance as well as intimacy. Each situation engenders its own vantage points which can be identified as the centres towards which the truth about the crisis tends to gravitate. The conference will seek to understand this dynamic of the shifting dynamic of truth and its relation to the tensions between closeness and distance, the local and the global, the mainstream and the alternative versions of the crisis and how it unfolds,

as event and as representation.

The conference will bring together media professionals, activists and scholars, media practitioners, critics and activists, from India, Sri Lanka, USA, South Africa, Argentina, Russia, ex-Yugoslavia and the Netherlands in order to create a dialogue between different kinds of approaches and spaces. We hope to learn from different crises about processes that were similar. We will learn from Kosovo about Gujarat, and from Kargil about Iraq. We will examine structural similarities in the restrictions on civil liberties after 9/11 across the world, we will also assess how the media makes sense of the continuing economic crisis in Argentina. We will examine how popular cultures 'memorialise' crisis situations, or create the conditions for selective amnesia. We will view riots in relation to the degeneration of everyday life, and see unfolding unreported crises in realities that have to do with water, housing, health and the environment.

Crisis Media will, first of all, recognise that there is a crisis in and of the media, and this cannot be addressed simply by calling for less reportage and more analysis. Instead we will argue for analysis in the reportage, and a disruption of the apparatus of centralised and centralising information networks. We need to break down the same images that everyone sees, worldwide, in many different ways. And we need to find new ways to tell stories, and to distribute the untold story. The problem of critical media analysis of global crises so far has been to deconstruct the ownership of media and its ideological agenda, attempting to uncover a 'truth' of state and corporate control behind the news. The conference takes this for granted, and seeks instead to ask how we may go beyond it, and how alternative media too can stop looking and feeling like cheaply produced versions of mainstream media production.

As we said at the outset, Crisis/Media will be taking place exactly one year after the events of Gujarat 2002, a crisis that was extensively reported and could be either memorialised or passed over in silence by the media as the year rolled past. Perhaps a question that will need to be asked is how the dispensation that orchestrated the violence could so easily be normalised in the media, especially in the wake of the elections that followed the riots. It has become customary in situations of extreme violence to try and make sense of terror in terms of atavistic and primordial passions, in terms well rehearsed in the Huntingtonian theses of the 'Clash of Civilisations'. In a peculiar sense, this 'normalises' the crisis more than anything else, so the eruption of the crisis is seen in terms of irreconcilable differences, and the return to normality is seen in terms of generous 'cultural' accommodation and reconciliation. Both these explanatory moves, of the eruption and of the return to normality, offer a way out of a critical analysis of the situations that turn into crises. They also offer a way of returning to the 'business as usual' attitude that eventually papers over the crisis as preparations are made to unravel the 'next' crisis on the world stage. The workshop will search for paradigms other than the vaguely cultural to understand situations of crisis, so that crises can be encountered intellectually on concrete and material terms. In doing so it sets itself the task of modestly benchmarking the state of thinking about media practice in complex and difficult times.

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