

WIC TV

Shaina Anand

Those were the DIYs...

In 1972 Black & White TV transmission came to Bombay. My parents acquired a TV set, a few years later, I was born. Under the Wireless Telegraphy Act (1933) all apparatus capable of receiving wireless transmission needed a license, and we had to register the TV at the General Post Office, in much the same way my father had registered the first radio set that he had built (when he was 10). My father designed power amplifiers as a profession, took photographs as a hobby and tinkered with anything that could transmit, as his education. I grew up in a middle class milieu of DIY technological marvels. When I was four, he built a booster antenna which enabled us to expand our reception from one channel - DoorDarshan (the state channel, literally translated as far vision or television) to include *darshans* from the Middle East, as there was only the ocean dividing us. On holidays we would tune into the Air VHF band (100-200 MHz) and listen to pilots' converse with Air Traffic Control as they took off from Bombay airport. I had to identify the airline by looking at the logo on the tailfin as the plane would pass by our window 3 minutes after takeoff. We talked on Ham radio and Citizens Band; listened to the police communicate on the Police Band and eavesdropped on local area conversations leaked from cordless telephones. We had access to many streams. One day my father sold his vast collection of LP's to buy curtain material for our new home in Bandra, but not before he had recorded them onto metal tape. People continued to flock to him for this music, which he would copy at a modest price with liner notes and indexes neatly written on each tape.

When I was seven, the Asian games came to New Delhi and colour transmission arrived in India. Imports were heavily restricted in those days but for a short time colour TV's were allowed to be brought if they were gifted by someone abroad. TV's came to Bombay in large consignments during this 'gift economy', and were soon followed by VCR's. Official import duties were at 245% of the cost, most electronics were still restricted and smugglers were the harbingers of information and entertainment, bringing in not just hardware but bootleg video of a dazzling variety from all over the world. For Rs. 10/- from our neighbourhood lending library, we could choose what we wanted to see and copy what we wanted to keep. Even audio was recorded onto VHS tape using PCM (pulse code modulation), giving better quality sound (as the tape was thicker) and 6 hours of recording on a 180-minute tape.

Then came liberalisation, the STAR was born, and with it the cable TV cottage industry. Some locals started a network; I remember being up on the roof watching them catch an early bundle of coax cable being flung from the neighbouring terrace. Cablevision's transmission was erratic and Prime Sports was on a low frequency, irritating my father who bought a satellite receiver from Taiwan for USD 50 and an antenna for Rs.1500/- and set up his own dish on the building terrace. This worked for some time till one stormy day the dish flew off the terrace and crash-landed into the compound. We were back to cable the next morning, and saw that now we had a lot more than the five Star Channels: we had not just the BBC, but CNN too.

Almost the entire graduating class from my film and video production course (which I did alongside regular college) joined TV companies; some were startups running from small hotel rooms in Juhu. Our cable guy ran a couple of his own channels too. One showed a constant stream of Hindi movies, musical programs, and sometimes local festivities and *Dandiya Raas* marathons from gymkhanas in the neighbourhood. BBC World Service radio would be on a blue screen even when transmission or cable was down. We even had a text-only channel advertising local services where everything from information on *mehendi* classes and private tuitions to lost pets and emergency blood requirements was flashed periodically, while the latest music played in the background. I remember staying on standby for a family in Khar that needed B-negative blood. When I called, they said it wasn't so urgent anymore; I was to be on standby as they had found a few people already. Cable operators were in big business and territorial wars had already begun. The cable guy changed often, but the cables and the network, however hastily placed, have survived till today.

This was the time when Shiv Sena had virtual control over the city. There was a channel (still is) owned by the Hinduja's called IN Mumbai which was controlled by Sena goons. Soon, through might, they captured and consolidated the cable operation of most of North Bombay. Our cable operator now collected for 'them'. I remember watching an important cricket match where at the end of each over, 2 minutes of ads were 'telejammed' out, to be replaced by a long film trailer for *Agni Sakshi*, a Bollywood movie starring Nana Patekar and Manisha Koirala; produced by a Brinda Thackeray. Over and over and over again, playing well into match time. The Sangh Parivar think-tank had already proved their mastery of tactical media strategy: VHP propaganda VHS tapes in our letter boxes, VCD's inside magazines, flyers, electoral databases, and now tele-jamming.

It was 1995. Bombay had been recently burnt with state complicity. Every startup channel in Bombay had collapsed, except IN, Murdoch had bought all of STAR and Zee and He had jointly ventured into SitiCable- a cable distribution service. An NRI had invented hotmail. I stopped watching cricket for ever.

In the name of a preserving Indian culture (and the minister of culture) came IPRS raids (Indian Performing Rights Society). Local DJ's who made a living making assorted tapes for clients were raided and shutdown. All play-lists and lyrics at concerts had to be cleared before performance, and you had to say '*Vande Mataram*' before you began to sing Rage Against the Machines' "Killing in the name..." We went nuclear and then to war. Barkha Dutt got embedded into Kargil and Kargil came home. So did 'K' serials. Seattle happened, Indymedia was born. Sarai was launched with a reader called "public domain". 911 happened. Enron collapsed. There was pogrom in Gujarat. A World Social Forum in Mumbai. More conferences. And more 'K' serials. I stopped watching TV.

What would be like then, if Russell Market had its own TV channel?



In November 2004, I was asked to do a workshop at the Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore as part of their "new-media semester." Having abandoned a scholarship and dropped out of a Film and Media art MFA program in Philadelphia soon after acquiring film and video skills, I looked forward to making some sort of pedagogic intervention into the navel-gazing domain of an art student. They would have to learn requisite video making skills on the job, and their job was to offer those services with a smile to the people of Russell Market, Shivaji Nagar. A media 'utopia' was created in the microcosm of the enclosed market, and a fluid and visible process of making a TV channel for the market was set into motion. The various unions were presented with a 'manifesto' and permission to shoot and telecast was granted. Over the next fortnight footage was generated on site in the market documenting this concerted collision between 'insiders' and 'outsiders'. Confronting the content by learning to edit, led to range of serialised programming: portraiture, poetry, singing, dances and remixes, film spoofs, talent shows, an essay and photography film, short features, time-lapse, montages, promos for live events and programming, signature animations and tunes. [Rustle TV](#) was telecast for 3 days inside the market. 12 TV sets and a 2-way projection were cabled to receive feed from 2 desks; a G-3, an old 'shaadi' analog video mixer and modulator functioned as control room and studio. Programming was expanded to include live events such as checkers tournaments, quiz competitions, talk shows and open stage. Video became the canvas, container and the site for a feedback mechanism of 20 days of shared memories and experiences.

We had run into Mubarak in Russell Market. He worked for Lokesh, who was a local cable operator. We had struck a generous deal. They would cable the TVs if they got to keep the 1500 metres of coax that would be used. [Rustle TV](#) had been a runaway hit at Russell Market. In the end the market had one grouse, it was fun in the market but they wished that the films show outside to the world as well. Lokesh too had found our idea of cabling the market absurd. "Why not just show it on my channel to all of Shivaji Nagar?"



Why City TV?

Back in Bangalore almost a year later and remembering Lokesh's offer, we found our way to his front office after doing a couple of loops between Chandi Chowk and Elgin Talkies. Lokesh agreed right away to air our programming, and even suggested we give him promos for the 'channel' a week in advance. He would insert them in between prime time movies on his own channel which had a loyal viewership as it showed the latest Hindi and Tamil movies. "If its local programming, everyone will watch."

[World Information City Tele Vision or WIC TV](#) would telecast programming to 3000 homes in Shivaji Nagar, Bangalore independent of, but parallel to the World Information Conference, between 6-10 pm on Lokesh's widely watched 'channel number 2'.

It was postured as 'protest act', an intervention into an alternative international conference on information; in keeping with current trends of hosting parallel celebratory events: If WEF has a WSF and the WSF in India had MR (Mumbai Resistance) then if WSIS had a WIC, the WIC in India would have WICTV!

Beyond the tongue-in-cheek renegade moorings of the project that implicated the conference and its setting in Bangalore, WI City TVs intent was to go local and pull outwards from the conference, its themes and participants. This was in a sense in complicity with the conference as WI City TV was one of the small 'art projects' curated as part of the "World Information City Exhibition", a side event of the conference.

A week prior to the conference, an open studio was set up in the terrace room of Lawyers Collective in Tasker Town, 500 metres from Lokesh Control room in the heart of Shivaji Nagar. It had been given to us on the good faith of [ALF](#). ChitrarKarKhana's beat up old P-4 and two dual-processor P-4s donated by Srishti and a mixed bag of DV cameras, including one belonging to Ayisha Abraham curator for the exhibition and a small one lent from Waag formed the hardware resources for our studio. Sleeping mattresses and bamboo mats were found in the back room. Now we needed a crew.

From Bombay came Gaurav Chandelya, a young aspiring filmmaker who often edited with me and Sanjay Bhangar, a young and wired individual with a myriad past of indymedia (mis)deeds and demeanors. Paul Keller from Waag volunteered and said he would spend as much time as he could in the studio. The next day Sravanthi, a literature student from St Josephs College and Jayshree Reddy and Priti Prakash, fresh students enrolled in a documentary diploma course showed up. We were short on both man power and skilled labour, the crew was small and only Gaurav and I had experience in consummating the process from concept to edit. The rest of the greenhorns would have to develop on the fly.

The chaorganistion had begun. The crew was to generate programming for the 'channel'. Content would have to be about Shivaji Nagar or other parts of Bangalore and would celebrate, excavate or comment on informal economies and media and information politics. The day crunched to include long discussions and readings and 101 labs on rules and techniques of engagement with the public and camera. And promos needed to be made soon:

The winning entries from the World Information Poster Campaign were going up all over the City. Prime hoarding spaces had been rented out, on the stretch from Queens Road to Shivaji Nagar Bus Station; the outer edge of the spectrum of our cable reach. Bang opposite the Bus Station, recessed between a cluster of small hoardings offering DTP, internet, STD, language translation and match making facilities on the left and a temple on the Right, a new hoarding was being painted; a late addition, we were told. Someone had raised objection to the fact that the call for the Bangalore poster campaign competition had been open to only EU citizens. A save face late edition call had been sent out to Indians, and this was the winning entry by an NID student called Vasu Dixit.

The background was chalky pink, the stenciling was skinny. Over the course of the day, we filmed the poster reveal itself: A for (picture of) Apple, B for (picture of) ball, © for (picture of scrawny cat.) And a punch line: The Right Copy. We didn't fully get it and we decided that others wouldn't either. The work needed interpretation or else only kindergarden kids would think it cool to copy alphabets from their friend's books.

A promo was born:

EXT DAY Shivaji Nagar Bus Station

Pan to hoarding being painted; the background pink, one lone guy on the scaffolding.

Voice over girl # 1: What's going on here? Lets look...

Voice over girl # 2. What's to see, they are painting another hoarding. Come on, let's go shopping.

Montage of makeshift shops near the bus station, Close ups of clothes and wares in fake and obscure brands; A tape recorded ad plays in the background. "China bazaar, *aapke kidmat ke leeya...* for your services, China Bazaar.

Voice over girl # 1 Wow, you get everything here...

Voice over girl # 2: Come on, it's getting late. Lets go back to the station.

Montage ends.

Long Shot of finished hoarding/cut to Mid shot of hoarding.

Voice over girl # 1 A for apple

Voice over girl # 2 B for ball....what the © for?

A cheeky boys voice from the distance: C for copy cat!

Voice over girl # 1 Oh...this is the copyright symbol... we see on everything these days...

Voice over girl # 2 Copyright? What does that mean... ?

Voice over girl # 2 Thats means we can copy everything!

Copyright symbol floats over montage of books, cassettes and clothing on the street. Music begins. Copyright symbol turns into flash animation of cat, whose whiskers and smile move out to form WI ©ITY TV. A VCD cover is inserted into a Xerox machine and a copy shoots out. So do words: World, Information, City, TV.

Voice over: World Information City TV, For Shivaji Nagar only. Coming soon, November 15th -19th on this channel.

Programming had begun. Sanjay and Sravanthi chose National Market/ Majestic area as their beat. On Day 1 of their first shoot ever, they encountered an agitated group of shop owners near Burma Bazaar, who drew their attention to a demolished wall. The entire bazaar, a 3 storey building, built only 15 years ago and in good condition was going to be torn down to make way for a mall and this sudden demolition was another threat tactic, said an agitated shop owner. Jayshree and Preeti went off on their virgin shoot and filmed the entire process of making custom car number plates with vinyl stickers at a DTP facility: 'Why City TV 420' found its way into another promo on Shivaji Nagar that Gaurav edited before he went off to an old building near Russell Market called Picture House, which housed a hundred year history of photo studios. Paul kept us alive by bringing in coffee, Ayisha would replenish drinking water, and Lawrence lent us his mother's electric kettle and cellphone. Food was a repetitive diet of idlis and dosas from Sanman.



Stories were emerging. Sravanthi and Sanjay went back to Burma Bazaar and National Market and spoke with more shop owners who had been given eviction notices. Whether they wanted to or not, they would be forced to vacate; a 'compensation package' would be given to them. The chief minister's son was rumoured to have bought the bazaar. They also ventured to National Market, the grey electronics and black DVD haven with their camera to talk with shop owners and get some ambient shots. Jayshree and Preeti had decided to spend the entire weekend in Shivaji Nagar's dense warrens that comprised the Gujri market, Bangalore's oldest market for junk and recycled automobile parts and an old still thriving, lucrative grey and black economy. Gaurav made a short; a portrait of an old photo studio at Picture House which had been reborn in the 'digital moment'. The film shows documentation of a young girl and her father showing up at the photo shop with an urgent request for a photograph needed for her *madrasa* education. The phrase 'new technology' was cited 9 times as the proprietor articulated the process- posing, shooting, transferring from camera to desktop, cropping, colour correcting, tiling and printing- "without any developing". Gaurav planned to go back to other shops in the building and serialize episodes to include the range of photographic techniques and facilities; some very old, still available in that building.

Paul, in his anxiety to document the hoardings and posters plastered all over Shivaji Nagar, fell off his bicycle and broke his camera. It seemed fixable though. We called information and got the address for a Canon Authorized Service Center in Malleswaram. It was almost closing time when we got there; their office was located on the first floor of a residential building, a Canon hoarding hung on the façade and on the door, legitimizing the presence of a ‘front office’. The secretary greeted us and took us back down, through a small alleyway into another building, a ‘back office’. Epson signage adorned the walls. The technician informed Paul that the whole body part would need to be replaced, the camera would have to be sent to Delhi just for the estimate and that alone would take a week. He also hinted that it could be ‘fixed’, but left the space between his authorized service and his legitimate service in abeyance...; we were recording this interaction.

We proceeded to Majestic Bus stop, to the international market of goods and services. From the voice over in the film we learn that Paul knew about this market from a DVD bootlegger in Amsterdam from whom he had procured a copy of Maqbool (Bollywood adaptation of Macbeth) even before its release. Sales shops in most arcades had shutters down, probably because the cops had leaked out information about a routine raid; part of their ‘protection’ plan that comes at a high ‘weekly’ cost. In Bajaj arcade we were directed to a small stall, whose shelves were crowded with camera parts and cameras. We had an illuminating conversation with the proprietor, who repaired not just film cameras but digital video and still ones. He said he learned his skills at a service center in Dubai, and his brother who still lived there updated his directory of manuals, keeping his service up to date. The camera could be repaired, he said. It would cost Rs 250/- and take a couple of hours. But it wouldn’t be done today as he had a lot of pending orders to finish.

Like the voice over of the film tells us, “Paul needed his camera today. How else would he take pictures of the conference? Situated in a tiny lane between National Market and Bajaj Market, Paul met his angel”. Ajith, the eponymous proprietor of the repair shop said the job would take 15 minutes and would cost a ‘simple amount.’ “You won’t get the spare parts here and there won’t be any ‘finishing’, but it will work.” He heated the dented metal on a candle annealing it to its original shape and fixed the push button with super glue. He spent almost 45 minutes working on it and gave the camera a thorough check up before handing it back to us. “We call this Kaam Chalao”, he said. Make Do. It cost Paul two hundred rupees. (euro 3.33) Paul thanked Ajith and told him that in Amsterdam, this would have taken 4 weeks and a lot of money. While we were leaving, Ajith placed a book in my free hand, “I give you a gift”. It was a little tract printed somewhere in Africa: “Why you must be born again.”



The next day Paul re-enacted the missing parts of the story. The parts before his camera came crashing to the ground. Gaurav shot him biking down Queens road at full speed, pausing to take photographs of cows, wall signs and 'Good Question' Posters (a winning entry of the original poster campaign) that were plastered in the Elgin Talkies Lane. The faked bike fall was unconvincing as Paul was wary of dropping his camera again. Paul's Fall (the born again camera), had a descriptive Voice Over which I had written and Gaurav had recorded in a smooth one take. He was introduced as a quirky and lovable foreigner, who had come from Amsterdam's society of old and new media for the World Information Conference. Four of Sebastian Leutgert's "Good Question" posters, which were mute colour blocks in the Shivaji Nagar landscape were localized and translated, situating very everyday acts like Xeroxing pages of texts, burning CD's to share music, buying a "number 2" VCD for your children; buying a computer but not paying for software, as transgressions, misdemeanors and crimes in the face of a newer regime with stricter IP laws for the IT city.

Sravanthi went to ALF to get her facts straightened and Jagdeesh and who works on issues pertaining to PAP, (Project Affected People) grounded the realities for her and placed the demolitions in the larger context of 'development' and within the larger machineries of corrupt states. She also mapped the demolitions and the temporary closure or sealing of roads and entrances into the area that had led to less traffic of customers.



Jayshree and Priti were back after an educating weekend in the labyrinth of junk and stolen parts conversing with many Gujri owners and workers. They even arranged a round roundtable meet at the Gujri Market Members Association. "We talked with everyone for long", they said. "Only then did we shoot people at work and we were even shown photographs of the market from 100 years ago." This from the two girls whose footage from their first camera exercise only a few days ago had been rigorously questioned during group crit session and deemed 'erasable', as they had been found to appropriate a journalistic fervor. Moreover, in the enthusiasm of 'making a promo', they gone on to planting their "Why City TV 420" number plate in various locations around Shivaji Nagar, pushcarts, flower sellers and even over the body of a sleeping man.

We had 2 days worth of programming to edit. Hours of footage to be gleaned, digitized and then cut. Gaurav and I were stretched between the three computers and getting the media on the machines and teaching the basics of editing was exhausting; carving films out would take ages, no sleep and more than 2 editors.

For a while, it almost seemed like we were screwed. Then as part of the process - or divine intervention - into the studio walked Vasu Dixit, Sooraj Ravindran and Chinmaye, students from NID eager to volunteer and replete with editing skills.

Vasu Dixit nailed in on the digitized, scripted and storyboarded timeline of Paul's Fall and raced it to a smooth finish at the end of which was added a music video that Paul made by mounting a camera on his bike, which he set to the cover-super-hit Bollywood version of 'It's the time to disco.' Sooraj took on the Gujri film which wasn't easy at first, as Jayshree and Priti having immersed themselves in conversations at the Gujri were now keen to edit their presence out and instead make an analytical "talking bytes" kind of cut, where people and places would be removed from their moorings and their speech re-structured in new syntax. Their digitized list had short clips coming from nowhere and cutting off mid sentence. We went back to the tapes and watched them again. A long 24 hour edit with Sooraj and they had an upfront, dry, irreverent and revelatory 45 minute film on Shivaji Nagar's oldest and most (notoriously) famous Gujri Market.



Chinmaye, came in for one night and helped edit 'Mall Practice', Sravanthi's topical and relevant film on the passing away of yet another Bazaar. Gaurav, now free to roam as we had more editing support disappeared into Elgin Talkies for a long 12-hour shooting shift. He watched the B grade Hindi reruns by day and Tamil flicks at night. Elgin Talkies is yet another old treasure hidden under the veneer of Shivaji Nagar's perceived grime. Older than cinema itself, Elgin used to be a play house first. The proprietor Mr. Krishnamurthi still has a brittle yellowed notebook, a journey through the history of cinema; a log of every movie that played from 1907 onwards, (Bangalore was the first city in India to be electrified) including the director, country of origin, dates of run and a valuable section for 'remarks'. It chronicles the export of Silent cinema, Hollywood's growing predominance, the coming of the talkies, including India's first Alam Ara, and censored entertainment during the war...Elgin still uses carbon arc projectors and is run by a loyal staff who have grown up as Elgin has aged. Gaurav spent 3 days inside, documenting the cinema's 24 hour clock from mundane to magical and then spent a whole night editing it.



Kahani Elgin ki (Elgin’s Cinema Scope, the untold story) almost personifies the space; one that is an old familiar bosom for men in Shivaji Nagar who throng to into the light and darkness for her company and even to just drink and sleep in her trusting arms where all is an escape with the world. As Khan, who was “adopted by the theatre” and runs the space says, “When you pay Rs 100/- for a ticket, you have to sit with respect. Here, for 15 rupees, they come, eat, smoke, drink, watch ten minutes of a movie, go to sleep or get up and dance. You won’t find such facilities and safety anywhere else in all of Bangalore” “Amitabh Bachhan doesn’t run here; that’s for City #1. Here, its Mithun and Sanjay Dutt.” Untold story is told in parts by parts by the caretakers, the projectionist and Zameer, the caretaker’s son in charge of changing posters. There is a detailed account of Zameer’s commemoration of Sanjay Dutt movies and posters and passionate reasoning for his massive fan following in the ‘Black Palia’ area. The film also featured two songs; and infrared night visuals of the crowd dancing to a raunchy tune in a Tamil flick and Govinda and Kimi Katkar in Dancer as the magic and special effect of cinema leaked out into the façade and street during Ashok Sukumarans “Changes of State” electrical installation at Elgin, also part of the World Information Exhibition.

It was exactly a year since Rustle TV. As a one year anniversary special we packaged a 2-hour “Best of Russell TV” special, completing the circle of how we got here in the first place. 20 sets of double CD’s were dispersed in Russell Market to spread the news that they would be telecast soon on local cable TV.



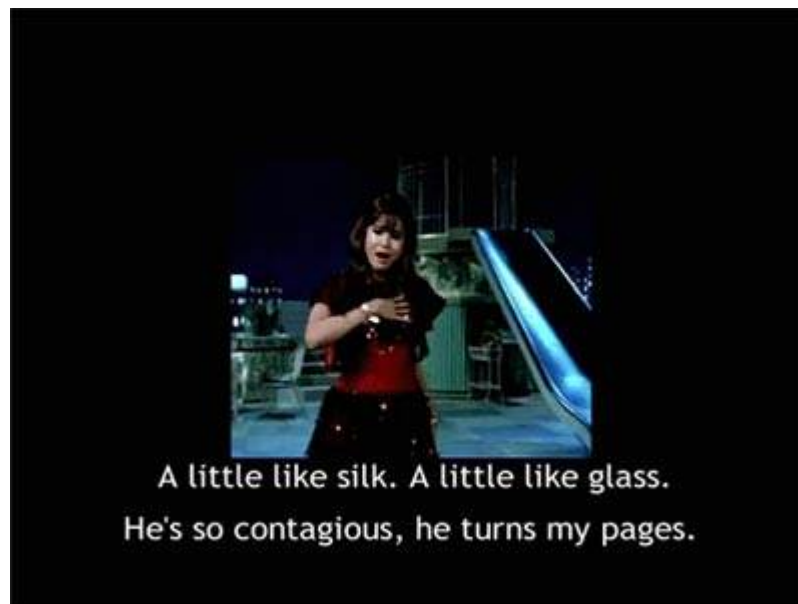
Sanjay in the mean time had been scouring all of Shivaji Nagar looking for its digital ecology. He documented numerous cybercafés, DTP's, Language translation facilities, photo studios, video studios, VCD makers, Computer classes, Software programming classes, Call center training courses. He sought a long interview with an instructor at a computer class, who succinctly gave a demographic background of computer usage, ownership and literacy. He cited examples of schools and IT colleges making use of non-legal software; this was not just inevitable, but necessary he said, so that the technology could spread homewards at least for students who could afford computers. A brilliant moment was when he spoke about the die hard spirit of the hacker, "Now days you even have hardware locks for software, but what is a lock? Nothing. It's only a code, and someone creates it or cracks it"

Another interview was with an owner of a cyber café, who at first said that he didn't support piracy and didn't allow illegal downloads or porn surfing in his café. When asked about the software on his computers, he said "to be honest, it's pirated." Sanjay also interviewed a radio jockey and musician who sourced all his music and movies from national market. In his own words, "Why would you want to go anywhere else, when a copy what you want is available at National Market for 1/10 the price. If they really and truly want to have an anti-piracy drive, they will have to arrest all of Bangalore."

Shooting at National Market had irked some of the DVD sellers. There had been more unforeseen 'crackdowns', 'protection' came at a high price and in any case, why would they trust us? More importantly, why did we need that footage? We only asked ourselves this question when we were stopped from shooting. Perhaps piracy needed advocacy at conferences and academic gatherings, and where empirical data needed to be infused with luscious examples and visuals from the everyday. Why exactly would we need to make a film on it? In India, software, audio and movie copying and piracy were so innate to our psyche, such a way of everyday life that we'd taken them for granted; forgotten about the spirit and it's linking to a larger world view. The need for such a film then was philosophical and Sanjay went off to meet Lawrence Liang, former Shivaji Nagar Boy, and IP law-breaker. He came back with a 45 minute intellectual property primer of sorts in Hindi shot on the flattest background ever and with a rather odd frame - Sanjay's first tripod shoot. Lawrence's 'lecture' would form the backbone of the film, the blank section Left of frame would play as his visual aid, alter ego, parallel movie and 'PIP' channel with a will of its own.



A gleaning of ALF's IPR database and media compilations on copyright, a selection of clips from Sanjays other interviews, and a bank of visuals from Shivaji Nagar, Forum mall, Silver Jubilee Park road, ITPL, and another 24 hour edit session with Sooraj , on the last day of the conference completed 'Copyright This', a potent speedball of a movie; a fast paced, visually provoking sideways but local view on media and technology history, Piracy, IP, censorship and the continuum of culture through copying and sharing. There is even karaoke remix of a remix of a remix thrown in for the pure interactive visual pleasure of bollywood cinema -featuring Helen vs. Truth hurts vs. Lata Mangeshkar. (*peeya tu ab to aaja vs kaliyon ka chaman vs addictive*)



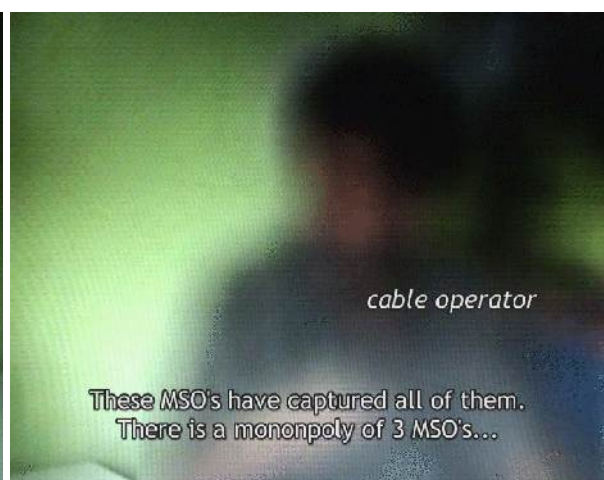
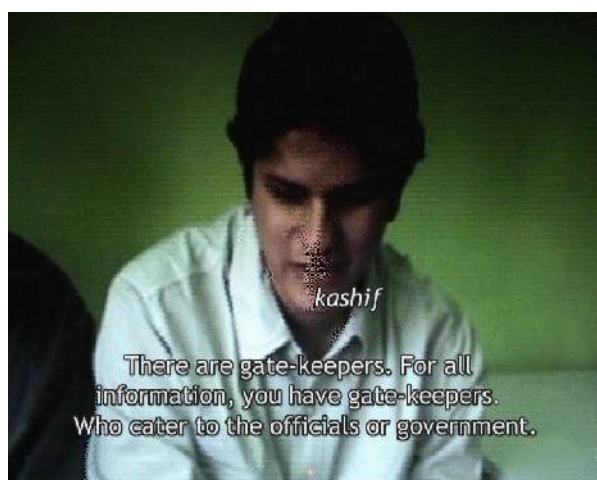
Twelve total days of communal working with shift-changing sustenance sleep, an endurance for which grew more and more with time. The loop between our studio at Tasker Town, Shivaji Nagar Bus Station, Russell Market, Police Station, Gujri and Elgin Talkies, was roughly the ambit of Lokesh's cable network spectrum. Shivaji Nagar still has small cable operators some serving 250 households. Lokesh is one of the bigger 'daddy's' who had a consolidated network of operators, ever-shrinking or growing, the total reach somewhere around 3500 homes. His collection of fees is not uniform, depending entirely on the 'income levels', and the percent or cut he collects from some smaller operators, none of which was fixed; even allegiance changes time and again. Added to that an undisclosed fee for 'police protection.' Lokesh had spoken at length about the precarious state of small and medium sized cable operator, especially the prospects of a future in the face of MSO monopoly and bullying, CAS, and an eventual strangulation of cable networks in the face to DTH (direct-to-home). The territorial fight for surviving slivers of spheres of influence ensured that local cable operators would always be in competition with each other rendering their collective bargaining and demanding power unorganized and ineffective as it was never strong to begin with. The latest cog in the wheel was the introduction of entertainment tax, which the MSO's had evaded, saying they were service providers, leaving it to fall on Cable operators, who in turn would have to increase monthly fees yet again, eventually enticing home owners to look at 'other' viable options that could be directly provided by the MSO's themselves.

Lokesh had also told us about a local Urdu channel for Bangalore, ‘Suroor TV’, a ‘free to air’ channel that a young entrepreneur had run from his home. One morning, we asked Lokesh to invite Kashif Haq to meet with us. They both ended up having a very transparent and candid conversation with us about the messy workarounds they had negotiated in order to telecast ‘Suroor TV’ in Shivaji Nagar, home to the largest Urdu and ‘Deccani’ speaking population in Bangalore. Suroor TV had run out of Kashif’s family home in COX town, which had functioned as set, editing studio and control room and had been sustained mostly by members of the family and a close knit group of actors and technicians from the area. In order to ‘air’ he had been paying a monthly carrier fee of one lakh to SitiCable, the now fully Zee owned MSO. Lokesh, however got his signal from Hathway. It was crucial that Kashif telecast to homes is Lokesh’s network as they comprised his target Urdu and Decanni speaking audience. For this, Kashif had to pay a fee to a local operator who got Suroor TV via SitiCable (a rival of Lokesh’s who operated from a building near our studio in Tasker Town) to demodulate it and send it to Lokesh. To do this, Kashif had to provide for the 700 metres of Coax. It was worth it all, as Suroor TV was on demand and very popular in Shivaji Nagar. Its popularity led to its demise as SitiCable pulled it off air. Suroor TV eventually closed down under pressure from market forces as there was little chance of an independent, low budget channel flourishing despite of or because of its success and growing viewership.

The documentation of this conversation between ‘an independent content provider and a local cable operator from Shivaji Nagar’ formed the framework for a talk show, ‘Now talking TV’ that was shot at ‘Suroor TV’ studio in front of a live audience. Safina Fazai, 22 year old sister of Kashi Haq and chief editor of Suroor TV helped us edit and author the VCD that would play at the talk show and feature clips that would lend themselves to an open discussion. Lokesh’s face was blurred out on his request as he was exposing himself to his local audience thereby risking trouble from his own MSO, Hathway. Kashif and Safina were joined by Lokesh and 2 more small cable operators from his network. Conference speakers Jawahar Raja, who had done extensive research on MSO’s monopolies in New Delhi, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Lawrence Liang were invited in to partake in the conversation that would be aired uncensored on WICTV the following evening. They were joined by a live audience comprising of other participants from the conference and Suroor TV supporters.

Here are some excerpts from the talkshow Now talking TV.

Clip #1 plays from VCD menu: Gate-keepers of information:



KASHIF: For information, there are gate-keepers, who have bought over top officials and the government. In Bangalore, there are three major cable operators.

CABLE OPERATOR: The MSO's are capturing everything. They have a Monopoly. Nobody else can survive.

KASHIF: They are INCable, SitiCable, Hathway. INCable belongs to... Rahejas or Hindujas?

CABLE OPERATOR: Hindujas.

KASHIF: Hinduja. Big construction firm. Hathway is?

CABLE OPERATOR: Hathway is Rahejas. Also big construction firm.

KASHIF: And SitiCable is Subhash Chandra's who also owns Zee. When I was starting Suroor TV- according to the TRAI, MSO's were supposed to carry my signal free of cost. They should not charge a penny from me since this was a free to air channel. But since they have the power, they all demanded a carrier fee.

KASHIF: At that time SitiCable gave us the lowest offer. I was paying them a monthly carrier fee of 1 lakh rupees. I thought I will pay it for 6 months too see what the demand for my channel was. The SitiCable people were also very devious. They carried my signal for two months, then when my channel was hitting its peak, they'd cut it.

CABLE OPERATOR: They began by cutting it on Saturdays and Sundays. Suroor TV was becoming very popular.

KASHIF: Definitely, because it was independent media.

CABLE OPERATOR: For three months that channel aired and customers were happy. When Suroor was cut, customers actually stopped paying me. They said, "Restart that channel, and we will clear your dues."

End of Video clip.



KASHIF: (to live audience and panel)

So, what do you have to say about it? How can a channel like mine, in today's atmosphere, in today's economy, survive?

JAWAHAR: The problem is not only in Bangalore. It is in other cities as well. We work in Delhi. We faced the same problem with MSO's there. They have a two-pronged strategy. Firstly, they will keep increasing the costs that you have to bear, and on the other hand, not allow you to operate on any level. They have the same strategy in all cities. This strategy is easy for them, because their monopoly is growing.

KASHIF: The cable operators that are there are neither here nor there. We are broadcasters, but we are not regulated by the Information and Broadcasting ministry. We come under TRAI. Here is the latest copy of the regulation. If you see, it clearly states here that TRAI will provide on request the signals of free to air channels on non-discriminatory terms to all distributors of TV channels or agents within 30 days. But This Cable Regulation Act, 1995 – this does nothing. It is a very cowardly law. It doesn't state what you can do, or what powers you have. It does not specify how you can take legal action if there is something wrong happening to you. There is none of that. I have no idea what the State was thinking.

They have only given guidelines, on this paper but there are no rules and regulations. There is no law. Why is that? So to register myself I have to go to the GPO. Even when these people (cable operators) need to register themselves, they go to the GPO. And we get a license. Why is that? How many cable operators do we have?

CABLE OPERATOR: There are 2000 in Bangalore.

LAWRENCE: If you see the history of this Act – Cable Television Network Regulation Act, 1995, this was a panic Act. The scenario was such that there was no law to govern cable television at the time. Cable operators were flourishing in the cities and small towns.. At this time there were two major pressures. One was by copyright holders who were afraid that their works were being aired by these operators, and the second was that the anxiety over censorship – that they are showing a blue film here, etc. The State had lost control over what people saw. This legislation was passed in a panic situation and there was no clarity at that point. The response of the State is always of a regulatory nature. It is never a facilitative logic. And the mind-set of the logic of licensing and control got fixed onto cable TV. Because there are so many controls on small cable operators, it becomes easy for large MSOs. Historically, that was the problem with this panic Act. It went into a regulatory mode instead of a facilitative one. If at that time there was a little discussion on the possible role of cable operators and local culture, perhaps the legislation would have been different. When people think about their cable supply, very rarely do they think about where it comes from and what the structures behind it are. Its important for the viewer to be aware about the impact of this monopoly structure. You are trying to run this Urdu channel that can air your local culture. You will face maximum opposition, because today's globalization scenario is built upon information monopoly. Local content is never shown. One coca-cola advertisement is circulated all over the World in a local environment and that is called "local culture". So, if you want to make a strategy, you will have to raise viewer support.

SHUDDHA: I will take Lawrence's point further, in another direction.. Firstly, let me say – I really like the name Suroor TV. It is a lovely name. Because the 'pleasure' one gets from conversation between two people – those who know Urdu will know the meaning of Suroor. We are all in the "Suroor" that we all should meet, talk, share ideas... And according to me, your channel was a very important part of this process, in the unfolding of this drama of people talking to each other. This also has a strong relationship to the right to the freedom of speech. In any city, or locality, if people meet up, whether they are friends, or family, or members of the same locality and they want to share their views with the World, any mechanism that stops them from doing this is a blow to the freedom of speech.

SHUDDHA: And according to me, in our society, there are repeated blows of this kind. And as these blows increase, society becomes more and more cowardly. It becomes, coward and indifferent. Because if there isn't the freedom of speak, there isn't the freedom to listen either. Then societies silence becomes a dangerous thing.

JAWAHAR: Before 1997, when there used to be a discussion on censorship, it used to be about the govt. The govt. gave you the right to say something or not. But now the situation is such that the Govt. hold on things has become less, its now its media companies and there are just 2-3-4 of them who decide who can say what to who and how.

LAWRENCE: The thing about cable is that it is not like other industries, where the govt. had a big role to play and there were stringent laws. When cable was starting in India, it was due to the effort by local cable operators. It was only because of this that MSOs, etc. could enter the market.

CABLE OPERATOR: We made the efforts and they are reaping the benefits of those efforts.

LAWRENCE: Absolutely.

SHUDDHA: Because you built the base.

CABLE OPERATOR: We built the base, we made the investment. And now they are making the profits.

SHUDDHA: Can you explain, this 700 metres of Coax that you were saying...

KASHIF: See, what happened was that my signal was going through CitiCable. But these cable operators all had Hathway. So how could I give them my signal? I took one wire that could go from the CitiCable operators to these operators. It was 700 metres long. And I linked them and demodulated the signal. I had to take permission for this from CitiCable. They gave it. So after demodulating, I was giving the signal to them. There was such a demand that they agreed to air a competitor's signal. But that wire was cut after two months.

KASHIF: The public was upset. We gave them the numbers of the MSO's and told them to make their demands to them. Customer's called and asked why Suroor TV was not coming any more. There were thousands of calls like that coming everyday. The MSO said that if you call demanding Suroor TV, we will shut QTV also. (QTV is a Pakistani Urdu channel.) The customer gets afraid to anymore then.

CABLE OPERATOR: Now there is only one Urdu channel running – QTV. If they shut that also, there will be a problem. They shut all the other Urdu channels. Even Saudi was cut. One customer came and roughed me up and asked me why I cut the Saudi channel. They MSO's cut this channel during the month of Ramzaan, so people were angry but there was nothing we could do. If the public had knowledge about these things, they could go to the Consumer Court and make a case.

KASHIF: We did all this. We went to the root of the problem and explained it to people. We had petitions. But MSO's are very strong. They have a very strong political influence. Ordinary people cannot fight them.

CABLE OPERATOR: Suroor TV was a local channel whose popularity was increasing. Generally, when a channel's popularity is increasing, we air it. But Hathway, SitiCable, etc, they don't consult ask. They don't ask whether we want this channel or not. Whether people in our localities would have an interest for this or not. A channel just released, for example Toon Disney, by Zee- they don't tell us the cost or what the rate is so that we can decide whether we want this channel or not. If it is profitable for them, they switch on that channel and we have to make the payment. In such a situation, the public has no freedom. The public wants channels like Suroor TV, but they do not provide these channels.

CABLE OPERATOR: They air whatever is profitable for them, even if the public does not want it and does not like it, they impose it on people. There is something called Prime Band in Cable. Prime Band, mid-Band and UHF. Now what these people should do is put the channels that the public wants most in the Prime Band, but they do not do this. Now what they are doing is that they air the channels which pay them money to be put on Prime Band. For example, Aaj Tak will pay them some money, and then if Aaj Tak gives money, NDTV won't be far behind. They also give cash and get put on Prime Band. So now Prime Band is full of only news channels and cartoon networks.

(laughter)

SHUDDHA: The issue that you raise is very interesting. Because the question is that the public wants to watch Suroor TV, but the MSO wants to air channels that are profitable to them. For example we had a spate of "K" serials, we still do. Then reality TV, now cartoon channels. If you ask any television producer behind these shows, they will tell you they are created because the public wants them. But what you are saying paints a different picture. You are saying that the public also wants to watch Suroor TV. This means that in deciding television programming, public interest does not figure. And there is something else involved. Through cartoon network, you can advertise toys. Through news channels, you can propagate a certain political view and type of advertising. Through sports channels, you can get advertising. So, you will see that when this 1995 judgement came out, people thought that if the spectrum went beyond the ambit of law, then there will be diversity. We thought that the different colours of the rainbow could be expressed. If 50 homes in a locality each wanted to watch a different show, they could. That diversity will perhaps come. But the opposite has happened. Channels have cloned each other. There are 2 sports channels that both show the same thing. So that rainbow that could have been never got formed. So my question to you is that when you started Suroor TV, you must have idea of who your audience is and what they wanted. You must have had some calculation and some relationship with that public. Otherwise you would not have invested so much capital and labour. So, I would like to know more about that picture that you have of your audience.

KASHIF: See, I don't want to know what is happening in America. I want to know what my neighbour is eating. This is our mentality.

SHUDDHA: Or we might want to know both.

KASHIF: But you are more interested in your neighbour because you can go to his house to eat. You can't go pay a visit to Bush.

SHUDDHA: And you shouldn't, even.

(Laughter)

KASHIF: So, when we started, our main aim was to promote awareness amongst our people. There was no media here. Here there is a large muslim population of 16-17 lakhs, 13 lakhs according to the census. Govt. policies, agendas, etc. were not reaching this area at all and we found out that there was this need to know in our society. So, we thought about how to bring about an awakening in these people, when right now they know nothing.

SHUDDHA: And you were seeing a demand for this.

KASHIF: There was a strong demand coming from the public. We have an Urdu press. But how many people can read and write Urdu? So we collected ourselves. People wanted to see their own taste and actors and poems from their own localities. We calculated all this and realized that there is definitely a need for this amongst the people. Even for local-level leadership to develop.

KASHIF: And we thought about this, and this was the best kind of media to do because it was alternative media. So we conducted surveys and found out that some people are interested in *Qawwalis*, some in poetry, some in Islamic religious talks. Lots of Sardars told us that they had migrated from Pakistan and that their culture was different and they got to see no programming relevant to their culture. People's culture was not being represented.

SAFINA: Each individual wishes to spend a moment in his own environment. For example, if I am seeing Suroor TV, or any channel, I will change it. But if I find out that something is being aired about my local culture, I will be very happy and definitely watch it, because I will understand what is going on and I will do it. So information is transmitted the most to people, not when it's in English but in a language that they understand.

SHUDDHA: Even the Hindi that comes on TV these days I do not understand at all.

KASHIF: What we kept in mind here is to use the type of Urdu that is commonly spoken in South India. Because, for a regular person, it is not possible to understand high-standard Lucknowi Urdu. He will only understand if we speak in the local Deccani dialect.

Programming from WICTV was telecast to 3000 homes in Shivaji Nagar from November 17th -20th. The modest production budget given to the exhibiting artist, in this case Shaina Anand/ChitraKarkhana, was used to provide irregular meals for the crew. We had one added cost for a rented camera. The crew worked as volunteers without talk of pay. At the end, Alternative Law Forum gave each of them each same the honorarium that had been set for volunteers at the conference.

The films can be downloaded from chittrakarkhana.net/whycitytv.htm.

WICTV crew: Gaurav Chandelya, Sanjay Bhangar, Sooraj Ravindran, Jayshree Reddy, Priti Prakash, Vasu Dixit, Paul Keller, Shaina Anand.

DH Lokesh, (Sugandha cable vision), Lawyers Collective, Kashif Haq and Safina Fazai (suroor TV) Lawrence Liang and Alternative Law Forum. Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology. Benjamin Solly and Rajan. Ashok Sukumaran, Namita Malhotra and Ayisha Abraham.

Chittrakarkhana.net (image workshop/artist food) is a non-funded fully independent unit for experimental media. It was initiated by Shaina Anand, filmmaker and media artist.

This article first appeared in "In the Shade of the Commons: Towards a Culture of Open Networks (ISBN-90-806-4523-0) and is published under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 2.5 Netherlands License.