

Evil Media

Conversation · Shaina Anand
and Erika Balsom

Erika Balsom: How did you come to be interested in the phenomenon of the data leak?

Shaina Anand: It was new terrain for our practice. Until we began working with leaks, we had never looked at mainstream news media phenomena—quite the contrary. Our interest had been in looking at imaging systems, such as surveillance systems, and finding parallels between documentary or artists' film and supposedly objective methods of image making. The leak called us, invited us. It

is a cogent media form that disrupts certain circuits. It breaches the chain of command or the power flow of information. We experienced this directly during the first installments of Wikileaks. And then three years ago we had a scene-changing leak in India known as the Radia Tapes.

What are the Radia Tapes?

The Radia Tap(e)s were originally phone taps done by the government between May and August of 2009. Niira Radia, the target of the

tapping, was a lobbyist for many big corporations and a regional political party. Her phones were tapped as part of an income tax investigation. Her clients included the two biggest companies in India, Tata and Reliance. The first of the 184 recordings that leaked is from 1 a.m. on the night after the 2009 general elections. The counting of votes has begun, and Niira calls the incumbent telecom minister, offering him information she received from a senior broadcast journalist. The first week of the taps documents her lobbying during this period of horse-trading and cabinet formation.

We hear that this incumbent telecom minister wishes to become telecom minister again. Two years later we realize why, when these conversations become part of what is called the 2G spectrum scam, one of the largest corruption scandals in India to date. In 2007–08, wireless spectrum was allocated to both old and upstart telecom companies below market value, with many irregularities and millions of rupees taken in bribes. The telecom minister, his aides, another member of his political party, and the head of a real-estate-turned-telecom company were arrested soon after the phone leaks.

The tapes contain mundane but insidious details. With a new cabinet of ministers in power, the lobbyist uses journalists to broker public-private partnerships and manage political crises big and small. Since the leak of the tapes, we now know of the coal mining scam, the natural gas scam, the airline scam, etc. The spectrum of people Niira Radia speaks to includes some of the most influential journalists, editors of almost all major broadsheets, corporate head honchos, and politicians across Indian cities.

When these tapes came out, there were calls on blogs and independent media portals in India like *kafila.org* to crowdsourcing the transcription of these recordings. We run an online footage archive—a lot of our practice is linked to it—and it seemed quite logical for us to work on these tapes. Inside the archive, the material could have better metadata, transcripts to time-code, and so on. It was the first time that sound-only material entered our video portal. This curious media was entering our lives. We talked a lot about it in that year of the leaks, and listened to them extensively. There was something compelling and exciting about the phenomenon, and these tapes in particular, in relation to the networks and material infrastructures that have been central to our work—but at the same time it's inherently evil media.

When things leak, there is a rupture in hidden networks of espionage, diplomacy, policy-making, "public speech," or whatever it might be. Through the hole, data leaks in great quantity, and hopefully a listener can catch or grasp some of it. Where does it come from? With the Radia Tapes, in the first instance you feel like a voyeur, and you question the untrammelled surveillance of the state. Anybody's phone can and will be tapped. Slowly, a broader ecology can be sensed: that between the (unknown) whistle-blower's big data dump and the mainstream media partner that exclusively breaks "the story" lies a garden of many materials and experiences. I think the formal question we asked was: how to feel a leak?

One of our ways of working with the Radia Tapes was first to listen to them in strict chronological order. We were then not listening to them by person, issue, or keyword, but to understand the unfolding of events as much as possible. But even this chronology was completely fractured, as the protagonist talked to different people on unrelated subjects. Any line through this material would thus be a kind of fiction. So, we borrowed from film. We took the transcripts and tried to give them the shape of a film treatment. Act One was a screenplay. It begins with the election results and ends with the swearing-in of the cabinet. The dialogue comes from these phone taps, but yet it's somewhat of a thrilling read with locations, times of day, scenography. It is the threat of making a film.

Act Two followed, both in the leaks' chronology and ours. The new cabinet has formed and now the lobbyist calls to seal her deals and broker new partnerships. The language changes. We borrowed again from film, this time from editing. Editing was also an issue for the veracity of the "raw" tapes. For example, a top newspaper editor who was in them sent some of the leaked recordings for forensic analysis to an outfit in Los Angeles that does sound work for Hollywood, but also forensic work for the FBI. They did some spectral analysis to prove that the recording had been spliced and pasted in places. The top journalist then claimed, "I've been exonerated because the tapes were altered." He and others declared them as "fakes." We decided that we would see what further editing could do. So the affective question of how to feel a leak is then explored through film narrative, in a work called *Hum Logos*, which we made by splicing variously through the "tapes."

Out of this work with the Radia Tapes, you've also developed an interest in videotaped sting operations taking place in India.

Before the leaks, there were stings. In the last decade, investigative journalists conducted hidden camera sting operations. There were some very sensationalized cases including politicians and businessmen “caught on camera.” At the same time, enforcement agencies and the police were using an array of technologies. People were heavily drugged, questioned while subjected to “truth serum,” and were watched and judged by all. These forensic fantasy videos preceded leaks and were part of a set of technologized strategies for trying to get at a “hidden” truth.

And the third media form you are working with is the citizen vigilante video.

We have general elections in a few weeks. As a time-frame, that is quite interesting because the Radia Tap(s) tell us about the results of the last election five years ago. Now, just before Berlin Documentary Forum, we will have come five years, almost to the day. Within these years, while the world has had the Arab Spring and Occupy, we’ve also had some very powerful general assemblies related to India’s campaign against corruption. This mostly middle-class movement said: we suffer due to petty corruption at each level, up to the big corrupt state, and we want this changed. Activists and citizens who were coordinating in different cities eventually formed a political party, stood for state elections in January in Delhi, and won. They actually got 29 of 80-odd seats in the Delhi government, became one of the largest parties, and were invited to form the government. People were stunned in the country; there was a complete euphoria. A failed left and a middle class suddenly had new hope.

Amidst many populist measures such as free water supply, reduced electricity tariffs, and the transfer of “corrupt officials,” the new chief minister fulfilled another one of his poll promises by announcing an anti-corruption grievances hotline. They said, “Dear citizen, if you want to report a corrupt official, all you must do is call this number—but we would like to have audio-video evidence of the corruption, and if you like we will help you conduct a sting.” Suddenly participatory democracy becomes a strange monster and it’s the citizen vigilante who turns on his neighbor and everyone else. The state government is saying that people need to have audio-visual proof, even though our courts have in the last few years made conflicting judgements over the use of this sort of material as evidence. It’s a really strange escalation of the image.

A major fallout then happened about twelve or thirteen days later, when citizen vigilantes in a particular neighbourhood in Delhi started filming members of the African community. They told the police, “We have undercover video showing drugs and prostitution. You need to raid their homes.” They were accompanied one night by the law minister of the newly elected party. The cop in charge says, “I’m sorry, you may be the law minister, but without a warrant I can’t do this.” The citizens then themselves went and raided these homes.

These videos are very curious objects because the audio sometimes cuts off midway and there’s silence. They’ve been edited, and they are being put up on YouTube, on Dropbox accounts, and on the “Common Man Party” website. They are being used as proof to vindicate “resident” or “citizen” positions, when actually if you watch the videos, they are so dubious. They warrant multiple readings. Our intention of charting a through-line across these particular media forms—stings, leaks, and the vigilante videos—is to think about how these things are evolving and how we receive them as audiences. We thought one way of doing this is through the idea of the unreliable narrator.

Can you say a little bit more about your interest in the unreliable narrator? I think we can say that the very concept of reliable narration has come under assaillment in recent years. Every narrator now is to some degree an unreliable narrator, which I think makes this a very interesting and productive concept to work with.

That’s where it comes from, from the struggles to narrate. The second reason the unreliable narrator is a useful concept for us is that it allows us to borrow richly from fiction. At some level, what binds the stings, the leaks, and the citizen vigilante videos together is technology, and their claims to the production of documentary evidence and evidentiary truth. These things are for us already dubious enough. We are interested in troubling this kind of techno-judicial truth. We like to work within these systems as a parasite, pirate, or plumber, all of whom produce new fictions. That’s the position from which we’d like to narrate and produce new articulations: from the back end. The unreliable narrator is biased, capricious, and speaks mainly not to substance but to form. The unreliable narrator is thus always pushing the boundaries of its genre, making these boundaries unstable, and showing us the new

cognitive strategies readers or listeners must deploy to make sense of the story being told.

How would you describe this figure of the plumber that you mention?

He's a guy who somehow has keys. He didn't engineer the building, so he's not the main player, but someone who has a key and who often comes in when there is crisis—but sometimes he's the one who produces the crisis. The network of pipes is something that's quite interesting to us: the water that comes from the rain, to the dam, to the reservoir, to the water coming into the city, and then into our homes, briefly touching our lips, then back out as wastewater, sewage, back into the rivers, the sea. These are not just speculative or conceptual frameworks; the plumber often has to actually enter the system. We also like get our hands dirty or wet. Ashok couldn't be here, but he wrote me a note this morning:

"The plumber-narrator creates a different image from the idea of narrator as author, editor, etc. The plumber-narrator manages flows and protocols, all along a certain map. Such a narrator works inside and with the affordances of systems, but is not limited to them. Leaks can stretch and overflow any map."

Orienting ourselves towards such a figure makes us think of the primacy of control, flow and the protocological aspects of media today. It's a starting point at which certain agents can propagate or inhibit leaks, and produce entry-points and exit strategies, stories, or noise. As the material propagates through different networks, other kinds of agents appear and struggle with each other: "Broken Telephone" narrators, forensic narrators, database parsers, pressure groups, specialist craftspersons, metaphor mongers, etc.

This discussion of flow and protocological concerns of media today is very interesting as a way of looking at your practice as a whole. Though you deal with many different geographical locations and different media forms, the thing that seems to connect a lot of your various projects is an interest in circulation, whether of images, people, capital, or data. Why do you think that networks of circulation are such a kind of key site of intervention today?

We think the word "network" is one of the most abused in recent times, particularly in relation to the assumption that the network is rhizomatic,

multidirectional, allows porosity, and resists capture. We've always been critical of the late capitalist notion that everything has to somehow be a network. We think we need new locations, new metaphors. We like looking at the chinks, the cracks, the closures, the crowd. The reassemblage of these elements, along with a recognition of what we may lose in these networks, is where art can be possible again.

The idea of the parasite is quite important in this regard. In internet security and software, you have a thing called "privilege escalation." If I am the spambot or hacker-bot who enters a system because I had access to certain passwords, I can escalate privileges and cause a hackacide or leak; I can recognize a system flaw and exploit the software in ways not originally intended. This escalation is something that interests us. We want to explore what artists can do with their privilege, especially as it links to circulation and redistribution. Distribution is a preoccupation for us. In addition to acting like a parasite, we also create our own autonomous infrastructures to enable escalation. That's where we work through this whole idea of network hierarchies and their slippages in a hands-on way. For example, the design of Pad.ma went through days and nights of thinking and debating at a very metaphorical level, an ideological level, a political level, an aesthetic level, and then also at the level of the software.

Can you say a little more about your online archive, Pad.ma, and how you see it as relating to the work that you will present in Berlin?

We started Pad.ma in 2008. It's a collaboration between CAMP, Alternative Law Forum, and 0x2620—Jan Gerber and Sebastian Lütgert—who are based in Berlin. When we started, we asked four simple questions. First, if we are to make a non-state archive, where would it reside? And, of course, the answer was the internet. The second question was, if it is to be an archive of the present and the recent past, what medium could it be? The answer was video, since we felt that over the last twenty years, with the DV revolution, the figures of the independent documentary filmmaker and the serious amateur videographer had come into their prime. But there were and still are all those MiniDV tapes (including our own) tucked away in shoeboxes. Third, who would the contributors be? They would be artists, cultural practitioners, filmmakers who had a vision of how things were, but also

how they might be different. Lastly, what kind of video would we archive? We looked at the economy of video-making and decided it would be an archive not of finished films, but of footage. This is one of the main ideas of Pad.ma. With digitization, the economy of filmmaking changed and you had, say, 100 hours of footage for a sixty-minute film. Does that mean that the other ninety-nine hours were junk? To be polemical, one could say that perhaps they are more important than the sixty-minutes that go into a film, which are driven by certain predictable conventions of editing, authors, and agendas. We thought that raw footage could make an interesting non-state archive. It would also be an archive of the marginal, the not-dominant, the hard to narrate.

In design, there were certain things that we wanted to emphasize. This again posed many questions. One was: what kind of precedent do we have for a commons archive? Of course, there is Wikipedia, but it has a collaborative writing and editing process that is meant to lead to better and better texts. With Pad.ma, we have quite the opposite idea: it's an interpretative archive of time-based annotations in which many people can have different points of view and jostle for space.

We also have a sister website now called Indiancine.ma, which is a cinema archive. We are interested in experimenting with how time-based annotation might be relevant to film studies. But you asked me how Pad.ma relates to our presentation at Berlin Documentary Forum.

One of the connections that came to my mind was the fact that both Pad.ma and your work on leaks, stings, and vigilante videos deal with massive amounts of data that are not normally sifted through. Both try to somehow create narrative structures to work through them, even if just in a provisional way.

Yes, this is how we work. We put these videos into Pad.ma, and as we play them in Pad.ma we make notes and annotate them. Then their plumbing and circuitry can be looked at. This is really how the work on the Radia Tap(e)s happened: when they were given a different organizational form in the archive, one began to see what was possible as a leap outside the archive. The multiple annotation functionality of Pad.ma is very much about allowing for unreliable narrators to breed; it makes visible the various ways of reading a film text or reading an image.

Can I push you a little on the idea that leaks are inherently evil media? Some might say there is a utopian possibility in the leak, as developments in networked media technologies have made it possible to reveal the workings of formerly covert power structures. According to this position, there's nothing evil at all about the leak; rather, it emerges as something of a moral imperative.

I don't disagree with that at all, but it's evil in the moment of leaking, it's evil in the moment of reception, and evil things will be done with it. If the NSA's data leaks, it's going to be evil, right? We have to ask whether or not such leaks end up being empowering and liberating. In our text, *Ten Theses on the Archive*, one of the theses says that the archive is not a scene of redemption. So it is with leaks. We see an evil world in the way that we are surveilled and managed through ubiquitous databases. I'm borrowing media theorist Matthew Fuller's use of the term "evil media."

When we first asked contributors to share their footage on Pad.ma, they said, "You really want me to put this in the public domain? The right wing will misuse it." We kept getting this answer. We actually began to feel that if there is a space for hate speech or such things, it is probably in an archive like Pad.ma. Part of the censorship debate is about not letting this kind of stuff circulate. It's already censored because it is considered offensive or blasphemous, and there is really no debate around it. We began to realize that inherently "evil media" need to be archived as well—be it leaks, hate speech, or these citizen vigilante videos.

In addition to circulation, collaboration seems to be a really important part of your practice, whether we consider your collaboration within CAMP, or collaborations that CAMP has done with other people, such as Gujarati sailors, families in Jerusalem, or inhabitants of Manchester. What value do you attach to collaboration as a mode of production?

At CAMP we like to say that we're not a collective because for some reason in the art world that word has begun to mean the exact opposite.

The collective becomes a brand.

Yes, we want to produce a different location of intervention, and not in name only. We are bratty

enough to say that we're an organization, and therein lies some of the ambition of being able to create and work with structures, to organize, even as a completely amorphous, non-local group of friends. People come in and out, sometimes being itinerant, sometimes parasiting us and then flying away. There are emotional moments where someone worked so hard or you shared a lot with someone, and then they just leave. It's all taken in the spirit of the ongoing experiment that is CAMP. Working collaboratively allows you to do larger projects and to do them over time. It complicates things and challenges us as authors because we are constantly critiquing each other and ourselves. You do this when you're in a group. In the utter chaos of arguing and figuring things out, often something productive happens.

Filmmaking has always been a hugely collaborative way of working. It's already what Badiou calls "the impure assemblage of many things." We particularly like it when the relationships within the triangular diagram of subject/author/technology are troubled. We like to change these roles around. We also know that collaboration can also mean collaborating with the "enemy," or people who don't always want what you want.

Can you give an example?

One does it at almost every step. You are working for a biennial such as the Sharjah Biennial and you have to collaborate with curators, state agencies, and expected audiences in certain ways. But it has to be calibrated and then escalated in an interesting way.

We are doing it with our Indian cinema archive, <https://indiancine.ma>. In that case, we are doing what the government is really supposed to do, but will never manage. So we assume for ourselves a certain role and the ability to speak to government agencies, such as national film archives.

For the 2009 *Wharfage* book, we accessed state customs records in order to show that something that was perceived as a complete "black" economy was in fact perfectly legal. The common attitude was, "Oh this is going to Iran and Somalia on a wooden boat, so this has to be smuggling." But no, this was the year of the global financial crisis, and these port records showed how vital and robust this trade was. And it's not that just printing out records makes things black and white; there's a new kind of grey or unknown that gets produced in that way,

but we need our collaborations to feel for it, to light it up.

A friend of mine is writing a book about strategies of parasitism. She has a nice phrase: to be a parasite is to make inhospitable use of hospitality. That sounds kind of like the relationship that you're describing here. You participate with organizations or power structures and work from within them to turn them against themselves in some way.

Not only against themselves, but to turn them towards the unexpected. If the state puts their material on a platform we run, they set themselves up. They open a Pandora's box, because now this material will be placed in the public domain, used differently than before, and interesting cultures will be formed. If the parasite who makes use of things inhospitably is doing so in a sharp, intuitive, and precise way—as artists like to think of themselves—some incredible things can happen. Of course, the parasite metaphor works best if the parasite is also parasited in turn.