



Keyboards of Desire

Where Identities are Carefully Concealed, Attitudes are More Plainly Revealed

○ Ashwin Mahesh

Editors have a keen interest in understanding how readers receive their publications, and how they respond to things printed in them. This information can be difficult to obtain; the steps leading up to decision to fill out a subscription form, or the whims of a passerby at his local news-stand, are nearly impossible to know for certain. How quickly someone flips through the magazine is anybody's guess. In the online world, by contrast, the connection between the publisher and the reader is tighter, and consequently much more revealing.

As an editor at *India Together*, I have the opportunity to observe the click-through activities that bring people to our stories. And probably because nearly an eighth of the online publication is devoted to Women's Issues (WI) - including the online version of *Manushi* - there is plenty of scope to see what attracts readers to stories of women's experiences and aspirations. Nearly every day, I spend a half hour or more simply monitoring readers as they access the website, browse through it to varying degrees of interest, and eventually depart to other online locations.

Response to Women's Issues

From the visits themselves, one can glean much. The Women's Issues (W.I) pages are fairly popular; *India Together's* growing archive of content in this area, and links to various resources for women throughout the country, provide value to people looking for very specific information. Stories of empowerment and success often generate emails evincing great satisfaction, and tales of continuing oppression bring out women's deep resentment at the second class status to which they are still subjected. Nearly every story, I now tell myself, will tap into the hearts and minds of thousands of people, and simply being able to witness their reactions is a fine civics lesson.

Each month, the editors look through the visitor logs created by the website's hosting service to determine which portions of the site are most popular, which ones are rarely visited, which links are broken, and many other little pieces of information. One especially useful statistic is the list of pages most visited by the readers. What is surprising has been the regular presence of a single story - Syeda Hameed's report of violence against women in Gujarat during the riots

of 2002. *India Together* published this story in May 2002, and the article has since remained on the list of most visited pages on the website ever since.

Why would a single article attract as much attention as some entire sections of *India Together*? Partly, and especially immediately after the riots in Gujarat, an incredible amount of media attention was focused on happenings in that part of the nation, and some of the readership can be explained by this. But now, long removed from the events, there is only one explanation that makes sense to me - Hameed's story is graphic in its description of violence against women that occurred during the riots, and it is this bestial conduct that draws readers.

Prurient Interest

Any online publication attracts at least two kinds of readers. Besides the regular ones, and those seeking very specific information they expect to find at the particular domain, are others I call the "stumblers". These are people who simply enter a search phrase into an online search engine, and are directed to a particular site (in this case, *India Together*) by the engine because the keywords in their search phrases were found in the

documents pointed to. There are various ways in which search engines decide which pages to bring up in response to a query, as well as number of different search engines that netizens use. The likelihood of any page being visited, therefore, is a function of the popularity of various search engines, and the index that each engine maintains for its own customers.

In this case, *Google*, the dominant search engine, is responsible, directing 3-5 visitors daily to this page through its search results. Typically, about 200 people read this page during an entire month; so clearly a substantial contribution to the overall readership of this page is from Googlers. And the terms they are looking for are only rarely related to the content itself, such as 'rape of Muslim women in riots in Gujarat'. More common are others like these examples: 'naked sister-in-law rape stories', or 'stories of girls being raped hard'.

Tracking the stumblers has been a reminder that in the privacy of their own spaces, or when they believe themselves to be unobserved, people can be very different from the persons they would appear to be at other times. It is unimaginable to me that anyone would, in the real world, engage in a request for such stories. But behind the Internet's walls of anonymity the world can be a very different place. The battle against the prurient interest in sexual brutality toward women is an enormously difficult one, precisely because it must be fought and won in these recesses.

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