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Unmuted: A Digital Dilemma Inspired by Forum Theatre

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Cover Page Footnote

About the Author Akhila Khanna is an applied theatre practitioner from New Delhi, India, currently pursuing her MA in Drama Therapy at New York University. She designs and facilitates theatre-based interventions for corporates, government bodies, non-profits, schools and universities in India, the U.S and Canada. Akhila's practice – which she blogs about regularly– stems from her training in the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology and her love for playing games. Contributing Writers and Acknowledgements Vandana Asha is an applied theatre practitioner and founder of Rang Karwan. She is a journalist by education with an M.A. in Broadcast journalism. With her passion being music and dance since childhood, she enjoys working with adolescents and youth. Her interests and practice lies in creating spaces for communities and using arts in learning and pedagogy. She and her organization are currently working to set up an arts- based community learning space in rural areas of Uttarakhand, India. Devika Bedi is an arts practitioner, educator and facilitator from India. She is currently in the UK pursuing an MA in Applied Anthropology & Community Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London. She works with children and young people in community and education settings, with the intention of exploring, understanding and creating compassionate spaces. She is interested in understanding how arts pedagogy can be used in diverse spaces to facilitate a better awareness of self, leading to more deliberate and conscious action. Shubham Ojha has been working in formal as well as informal education spaces. He works with adolescents and young people to create democratic learning spaces. He has an interest in theatre, farming, sustainable living and exploring various art based pedagogies. Vajid Ali is a trained theater/film actor and psychology practitioner, who has learnt theatre under the guidance of several critically acclaimed artists and workshops by National School of Drama, New Delhi. He has facilitated many theatre workshops and directed performances on several social issues in schools, colleges, universities and some mental health organisations. This project was part of the 25 x 25 Initiative by India Foundation for the Arts, supported by lead donor Kshirsagar-Apte Foundation, and philanthropy partners Titan Company Limited, and Priya Paul and Sethu Vaidyanathan. The full project can be viewed on the website: <https://sites.google.com/view/unmuted>



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Unmuted: A Digital Dilemma Inspired by Forum Theatre

Akhila Khanna¹ and Contributing Authors²

This report describes the purpose, process and reflections of a Forum Theatre video project, titled Unmuted, created to investigate increased online harassment faced by women during the pandemic. Led by an arts and community education based initiative in New Delhi, India - [Rang Karwan](#) - and supported by the [25 x 25 Initiative by India Foundation for the Arts](#) grant, Unmuted included a series of surveys and Forum scenes that were screen-recorded and distributed among 100+ digital spect-actors across the country. This report by one of the facilitators of the project evaluates the nine-month-long rehearsal and research process. With insights from the Rang Karwan team and the spect-actors, the report outlines several ways in which a collective practice of Forum Theatre was modified for the digital stage.

¹ **Akhila Khanna** is an applied theatre practitioner from New Delhi, India, currently pursuing her MA in Drama Therapy at New York University. She designs and facilitates theatre-based interventions for corporations, government bodies, non-profits, schools and universities in India and the U.S. Akhila's practice — which she blogs about regularly— stems from her training in the Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology and her love for playing games. This project was part of the 25 x 25 Initiative by India Foundation for the Arts, supported by lead donor Kshirsagar-Apte Foundation, and philanthropy partners Titan Company Limited, and Priya Paul and Sethu Vaidyanathan. The full project can be viewed on the website: <https://sites.google.com/view/unmuted>.

² **Contributing Writers and Acknowledgements:** **Vandana Asha** is an applied theatre practitioner and founder of Rang Karwan. She is a journalist by education with an M.A. in Broadcast journalism. With her passion being music and dance since childhood, she enjoys working with adolescents and youth. Her interests and practice lie in creating spaces for communities and using arts in learning and pedagogy. She and her organization are currently working to set up an arts-based community learning space in rural areas of Uttarakhand, India. **Devika Bedi** is an arts practitioner, educator, and facilitator from India. She is currently in the UK pursuing an MA in Applied Anthropology & Community Arts at Goldsmiths, University of London. She works with children and young people in community and education settings, with the intention of exploring, understanding, and creating compassionate spaces. She is interested in understanding how arts pedagogy can be used in diverse spaces to facilitate a better awareness of self, leading to more deliberate and conscious action. **Shubham Ojha** has been working in formal as well as informal education spaces. He works with adolescents and young people to create democratic learning spaces. He has an interest in theatre, farming, sustainable living and exploring various art-based pedagogies. **Vajid Ali** is a trained theater/film actor and psychology practitioner, who has learned theatre under the guidance of several critically acclaimed artists and workshops by National School of Drama, New Delhi. He has facilitated many theatre workshops and directed performances on several social issues in schools, colleges, universities, and mental health organizations.

Concept Note

The pandemic led to a startling increase in cybercrime against women all over the world. India's National Commission for Women received fifty-four cybercrime complaints online in April 2020 compared to less than twenty complaints in February earlier in the year (Pakrasi, 2020). While the internet increased accessibility and freedom for many during the pandemic, it also gave a false sense of power and security to some of its users. The 'Bois Locker Room' incident in India in the summer of 2020 revealed one of the nation's many Instagram scandals, allegedly involving a chat room of teenage boys who were sharing morphed images of underage girls (Sidharth, 2020). The India Child Protection Fund's 2020 report found a ninety-five per cent spike in consumption of sexual abuse content amid lockdown, supporting the assertion that this abuse of power is manifesting itself through digital chatter (Sheth, 2020).

The internet is a constantly fluctuating public and private space that can be claimed and reclaimed. Easily share-able memes, videos, images, links, cryptic text messages and emojis across WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and now Zoom can become visible platforms of oppression as well as tools for harassers to continue reinforcing these oppressions. Can we also use these online modalities to mirror, problematize, and find possible interventions into the communications that occur over this new-age, free-for-all internet, especially for women?

About Us

In early May 2020, I met members of Rang Karwan – applied art practitioners Vandana, Shubham, Devika and Vajid. Rang Karwan is an arts-education based initiative that uses theatre-based pedagogies to create learning spaces in communities across India. While I had formally trained in Theatre of the Oppressed

(TO)³ and applied the form across multiple short-term projects, the Rang Karwan team had been conducting long-term TO projects with specific communities in India. When we met online, we realized we shared a mutual curiosity to digitize TO since online work had shaped all our personal and community practices. Our introductions to each other began with us playing non-verbal Image Theatre games together on Zoom and then discussing how our lives as applied art practitioners had transformed in the lockdown.⁴ Through the games we explored themes that had surfaced in front of our eyes during the prolonged lockdown: online-education, gender-based harassment, mental-health, and social inequities.

In July 2020, the India Foundation for Arts – an independent, not-for-profit organization that implements projects across research, practice, and education in the arts across India – put out a call for grants titled ‘25 X 25.’ This initiative was to mark their 25th anniversary of grantmaking and the 25-year long history of the internet in India. As creative professionals plugged in online, this grant piqued our interests.

I decided to collaborate with the members of Rang Karwan to apply for this grant by centering our ongoing Zoom-based TO explorations of various topics around the internet. We responded to stimuli from newspaper headlines with stories from our own lives, and gradually opened-up to each other about the various oppressions we had either directly or indirectly experienced, witnessed, or even reinforced online. Questions emerged, such as: how do we ask for consent online? Is it okay for our team members to contact us late at night? Should we respond right away? How comfortable are we communicating our need for safety when we are being watched by others across our screen? Where is our need for safety emerging

³ Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) uses participatory theatre techniques first elaborated by Brazilian theatre practitioner Augusto Boal in the 1970's as a means of promoting social and political change. In TO, the audience becomes active; spectators become "spect-actors" as they explore, show, and transform the reality in which they are living. (Boal, 1979)

⁴ Image Theatre is a series of exercises designed to uncover essential truths about societies and cultures initially without spoken language. The participants in Image Theatre make still images of their lives, feelings, experiences, oppressions; groups suggest titles or themes, and then individuals 'sculpt' three-dimensional images under these titles, using their own and others' bodies as the 'clay' (Boal, 1992).

from? We were inspired to weave our real-life dilemmas into a TO-based digital interaction through Forum Theatre.

The Form

Forum Theatre is a format under TO in which a problem is shown in an unsolved form by the 'actors' on a stage. The audience, as 'spect-actors,' are invited by a mediator or 'joker' on to the stage to suggest and enact solutions. These spect-actors not only witness a creative act but participate in the drama by questioning the actors in-the-role and by acting out the alternative responses themselves. These responses are termed 'interventions.' A Forum Theatre scene ends with a protagonist unable to successfully solve the problem to stimulate dialogue amongst the 'spect-actors' in the form of possible interventions. The spect-actors are also the real stakeholders of the unsolved problem. Role-playing their decisions through Forum Theatre ensures a higher chance of them replicating those actions in their own lives.

As Vandana, the founding member of Rang Karwan, and I had both joked and performed Forum Theatre in physical spaces, we were convinced of its power to explore oppressive narratives in the virtual space. Can digital tools aid possible Forum Theatre interventions to an unsolved problem taking place online? What would an online Forum Theatre script and stage look like? Who would be our spect-actors and actors and how would they virtually embody and assert their agency? Guided by these questions we wrote our concept note, received the grant in September 2020, and began creating a digital Forum play *Unmuted*, which explored our realities of online safety and harassment.

The Process

Phase 1: Research and Development

The first phase of our project included investigating and discovering our own relationship with harassment in physical spaces and then with harassment online. Hearing perspectives around oppression and safety from the different identities present in the room (three of us identify as female and two of us as male, all of

us are from cities) allowed us to question what role *intention* and *impact* play in our gendered and geographical experiences of harassment. All of us currently reside in metropolitan areas that give us easy access to 3G/4G data and Wi-Fi. How does this fast accessibility to the online medium impact why and how often we check our phones, scroll, post, and send messages? When do we feel safe sharing details of our personal lives on social media and when do we not? Considering the asymmetrical power balance in our urban workplaces, how can those of us who identify as women communicate our need for safety and boundaries online?

We then interviewed experts in the field of gender-sensitization, cyber and work-place harassment. This included participating in an online conversation about ethical and legal issues related to patriarchy, misogyny and sexual harassment with a diversity and inclusion advisor in India. We became familiar with some of the frameworks for recognizing and calling out harassment articulated in the Indian government handbook issued by the Ministry of Women and Child Development. This helped us challenge the limitations of these definitions and redressal mechanisms. Who is holding informal and smaller organizations accountable for creating an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC)? Where are the gaps between having a Data Protection Policy Act and implementing it in everyday virtual communication?

In the background of our personal stories and discoveries of these policy loopholes, news headlines on cyber-abuse and sexualized comments and images targeting women on social media were rampant. We channeled our individual and collective unease into scripting and screen-recording a five-minute Forum Theatre scene that revealed the oppressive nature of online harassment. What systems were enabling this harassment? Who were the harassers? Where was the accountability? Since the oppression was taking place online, we wanted to script the scene and create opportunities for interventions using phone or web-based technology applications. After many iterations, the final script was set in the Zoom meeting room of a fictional non-profit arts organization: Shiksha Samvaad Foundation (SSF):

Scene 1: SSF is a two-year-old non-profit arts education organization, founded by Karan Sethi (played by Shubham). It strives to create inclusive learning spaces for children by imparting life-skills education through the arts. SSF has a small team – Saquib – a graphic designer (played by Vajid), Ruhi – the lead facilitator (protagonist of the Forum, played by Vandana) and Aastha – the social media intern (played by me). Scene 1 is a Zoom meeting between Karan, Ruhi, Saquib and Aastha to discuss an upcoming online workshop. From the very beginning Karan is lauding Ruhi for her commitment and energy towards her work. These comments soon begin to allude to her physical appearance on the call. Ruhi becomes self-conscious. Karan then privately messages his compliments about Ruhi to her during the meeting. Ruhi freezes but Karan continues to facilitate the meeting as if nothing has happened. Karan then sends Ruhi a picture on WhatsApp of his Zoom screen where he has pinned Ruhi's image. The meeting ends with Karan assigning tasks to everyone before next week's Zoom call.

Since we were exploring how virtual tools can enable oppression, we integrated them into our rehearsal process. To understand the background of our characters and their relationships with each other, we created their social media accounts. Before our rehearsals, we posted selfies, wrote bios, and even interacted with each other as our characters on these platforms. We sent each other emojis via DMs, posted comments, 'liked' and 'disliked' each other's posts to have fun and explore the nuances of each character and their mindset. How does our character's social media persona differ or reinforce behavior patterns that they exhibit with each other at SSF? How are these power dynamics then reflected in Zoom meetings? We took screenshots of our social media fictional profiles so we could share them with our potential spect-actors through a blog at the end of the project. (These images and the link to the blog can be found in Appendix A.)

Phase 2: Rehearsing and Screen-Recording

To create a play about online safety, we had to first ensure that we were practicing the same within our virtual rehearsals. Initially we would spend quite a while catching up with each other at the beginning of our call and then delay our work. This would affect the quality of our scenes and lead to Zoom fatigue – not to

mention the constant connectivity issues that made high quality screen-recordings of our Forum scenes such a challenge!

Moreover, there were several moments in rehearsal when we would address each other as our characters' names, instead of our real names (when we were not improvising). Initially we didn't feel there was any issue with these unconscious slip ups. We were talking about our own characters and their world so deeply that it was quite natural for us to sometimes get confused! But then, during a rehearsal Vandana shared her experience of how these boundaries were blurring for her and leaving her frustrated:

After rehearsing Scene 1 as Ruhi I became really self-conscious. How do I, as Vandana, sit during my Zoom calls? Am I fiddling too much with my hair? Am I sounding too unprofessional? I had begun to take Karan's behaviour towards me in the scene, personally. There were even times while improvising scenes when I wouldn't really know if it is Ruhi reacting to the stimulus or Vandana. I would feel a strong sense of dislike for Karan (the character) and it would reflect in my interactions with Shubham (the person).

We realized soon enough that the emotions of our characters in the scene were leaking into the reality of our interactions. This caused miscommunication and misunderstandings which impacted our relationships with each other in this project. There was a need to create some distance between our own realities and the characters' worlds. Moreover, there was a need for some ground rules that we could abide by as a group and that could hold the virtual space more safely (ironically the same issue we were also dealing with in the Forum!). Here are a few guidelines we developed along the way:

- Each of us agreed to do an individual warm-up before joining the Zoom call. This warm-up helped us clear our minds, transition out of whatever was happening in our personal lives and enter the headspace of our character.
- When we met on Zoom, we did a group warm-up for our bodies and voices. The intention of this was to build a collective energy so that our improvisations didn't feel physically restricted in any way (even though we were online).
- Before we began any improvisations, we set small sensorial rituals like holding objects, wearing costumes, or using music cues to mark transitions between ourselves and our characters. After emerging from our

Phase 3: Distributing and Surveying

Once the first scene was ready, through our social media networks we shared a sign-up form (Figure 2) that invited individuals who identified as women or organizations who worked in the intersection of gender sensitization, gender-based education, violence against women, cybercrime, and workplace-harassment in India to be our participatory audience or 'digital spect-actors'. Within two weeks we had over a hundred sign ups from professionals across industries including mental health, education, performing arts and film, corporate training, consulting, and the non-profit/development sector. These signs ups were mostly from metropolitan cities of New Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, Chennai, and Hyderabad.

The sign-up form articulated the purpose and process of our project. The spect-actors would be given three days to watch a video of Scene 1 (described above) and to suggest interventions for Ruhi's character through an anonymous online survey. Their responses from the survey would inform Ruhi's actions in the succeeding scene (Scene 2) which would be disseminated after two weeks.



Inviting Digital Spect-actors!

Be Our Digital Spect-actor!

How do we identify and combat online harassment, especially when personal and professional boundaries are blurred? When working online from the safety of our homes, what oppressive forces from the outside world are acting upon us?

With support from the 25 x 25 Initiative by India Foundation for the Arts and inspired by the interactive elements of Forum Theatre, Rang Karwan has created a video story that captures the dilemmas faced by women who are plugged in - working and existing with the world online. We invite anyone who identifies as a woman or organizations who work with women in the workplace, gender sensitization and education, violence against women, cybercrime, harassment or their intersections to be our participatory audience or 'Digital Spect-actors.' This project is India specific.

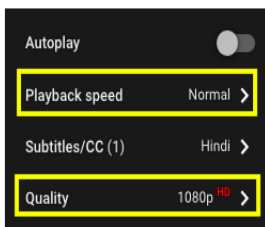
As our Digital Spect-actors, you will view short video scenes of our story and participate in an anonymous survey that would help script the succeeding scenes.

Fig. 2: Screenshot of the sign-up form. The full form link can be accessed [here](#).

When we distributed the first video and survey, we communicated the importance of watching the scene in a quiet place, on a laptop, and answering the survey right after watching the video (Figure 3). The first few questions on the survey were multiple choice to elicit spontaneous responses. The last two questions were open-ended, for the spect-actors to expand on any of their answers. The survey articulated that these anonymous responses would be used to script the succeeding scene and be part of a larger research paper. The majority answers that emerged at the end of the first survey then actually became the intervention that Ruhi attempts in the next scene!

YouTube Accessibility:

- The actors in the video speak in Hindi and English. In case you're not comfortable with one of the languages, we have provided subtitles. An option labelled "CC" is available on the bottom right corner of the video, which will allow you to view the subtitles.



- YouTube settings give you an option to adjust 'playback speed'. We recommend you watch the video on 'normal' speed but feel free to adjust the pace as per your liking.
- You also have the option to adjust the quality of the video. We recommend that you change the settings to 1080p (HD) and watch on fullscreen.

Watch Scene 1 Here

Then Answer the Anonymous Survey Here

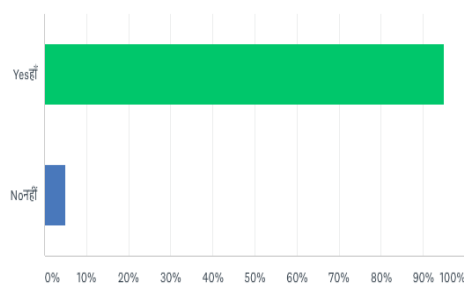
Fig 3: Screenshot of our email communications to the digital spect-actors. An example of our emailers for Scene 1 can be accessed [here](#).

All communication with our spect-actors (through Google Forms, emails, SurveyMonkey links or YouTube videos) was disseminated in both English and Hindi. Over the span of two months, we released four videos of Forum scenes (with English and Hindi subtitles) and three surveys that built on each other, the videos scripted using the answers of spect-actors to progress the complexity of the narrative.

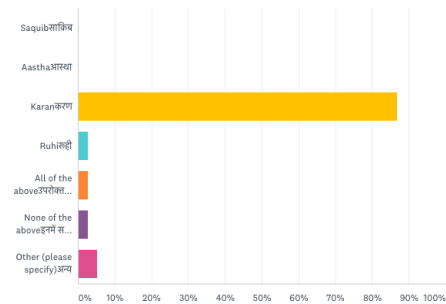
Phase 4: Analyzing and Improvising

One hundred and eighteen spect-actors signed up to participate in our project. After sending them each scene with its corresponding survey, we analyzed the responses we received and problematized them in the succeeding scene through improvisations. As an example, here are the survey results of Scene 1 (Figures 4-8).

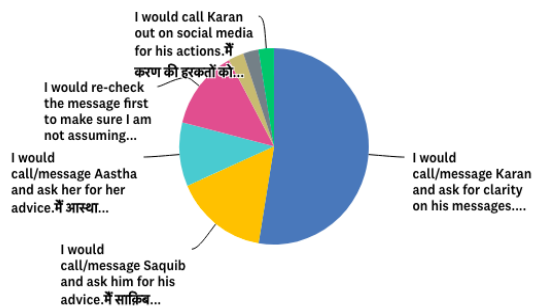
Do you see a problem (or oppression) in the scene? क्या आप इस दृश्य में एक समस्या (या उत्पीड़न) देखते हैं?



If yes, who is creating the problem? यदि हाँ, तो समस्या कौन पैदा कर रहा है?



If you were Ruhi, what would you do next? यदि आप रूही की जगह पर होते, तो आपका अगला कदम क्या होगा?



Figs. 4-6: Survey results in response to Scene 1.

IF I WERE RUHI, I WOULD...

"let my colleagues know that I have mailed/called Karan about his inappropriate messages."
 "ask Saquib and Aastha what they noticed." "ask him to stop these advances as I don't like it."
"speak to Karan in the presence of others"
 "ask Karan in the meeting itself about his actions and intentions."
 "confront Karan in the next call for sure but till then be only businesslike with him."
"share my discomfort."
 "only intervene if Karan does something a second time and then teach him a lesson."
 "message Karan and ask him to stop this kind of sweet talk, and focus only on the project."
"express that I did not consent to the picture."
 "ask him to delete my photo and not do such things again." "give Karan the benefit of doubt and ask what was going on."

Fig. 7: Word cloud of responses to the question: "If you feel like the above responses are not sufficient, write a response of what you think should happen next."

Questions for..

RUHI	What's holding you back?	What is your dynamic with Aastha?	Can you confide in Saquib?	What is your relationship status with Karan? Are you both seeing someone outside or at the workplace?	What stopped you from calling out loudly in the meeting itself about the private message Karan sent to you via whatsapp?	What made you write 'no' and then 'yup' when Saquib checked with you?	Is this your first job?
KARAN	Are you taking liberty on your post? Is this the first time you are making these inappropriate comments about Ruhi or have you done this to her or other female colleagues in the past?				Is this the first time you are making these inappropriate comments about Ruhi or have you done this to her or other female colleagues in the past?		
SAQUIB & AASTHA	Aastha, why did you dislike Karan posting your pictures on social media?					Aastha do you get paid?	
S.S.F	How old is S.S.F. and the tenure of each person in the organization?	What age group is the population that S.S.F. works with?	Is this a paid job or voluntary work?	Is it a formal organization or an informal kind of set up?	Are the people at S.S.F migrants to the city or are they in their hometown? Do they live on their own, or live with family or friends - what is their support system?		Does the organization have an ICC or SHC?

Fig. 8: Responses to the question: "Is there anything you would like to know about our characters?"

These above results influenced the direction of Scene 2 – Ruhi asks Karan for clarity on his actions.

However, we also wanted to problematize this chosen intervention to further investigate If Ruhi asks Karan

for clarity his actions, would the oppression be solved? The comments that the spect-actors posed at the end of our survey of Scene 1 were used in dialogue that the characters played back verbatim in Scene 2. The questions the spect-actors asked each character also informed and further complicated the relationship dynamics of Scene 2. A majority of the spect-actors answered that Karan is solely responsible for the oppression in Scene 1. Hence in Scene 2 we tried to demonstrate that the oppression is not because of Karan alone, but because of the power dynamics that exist between all four characters and the informal systems of working at SSF (that reinforce Karan's actions.)

You can watch the entire compilation of Unmuted Scene 1, Scene 2, Scene 3 and Scene 4 created using interventions by the digital spect-actors at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTEr2VEMehc>.

Observations and Reflections

In his body of research, Augusto Boal defines aesthetic distance as “the gap that exists whenever there is a separation between the space of the actor and that of the spect-actor, or when there is dissociation between the two” (Boal, 1990). In a live Forum the aesthetic distance between actor and spect-actor is reduced because the spect-actors are witnessing their own social realities unfurl in front of them. Spect-actors can then spontaneously intervene and embody the protagonists' dilemma within seconds, thus transforming a shared physical space into a literal space where a theatrical action is occurring.

In our process neither the Forum actors nor the spect-actors were in the same physical space. What were the implications of this virtual aesthetic distance between actor and co-actor, and actor and spect-actor considering everyone was existing in different physical spaces? How could the Forum give agency to the spect-actors digitally? Could the spect-actors truly identify and embody the protagonist's role digitally, spontaneously, and empathetically? Most importantly, could a digital Forum yield effective interventions that stimulate constructive dialogue?

These questions led us to consciously diverge from a live physical Forum in the following ways:

1. The stage and setting of the unsolved problem are online.

As actors creating a Forum play, we knew that our script had to be true to our current reality and so Zoom became the location of our shared stories and dilemmas. We were afraid that if our performance was set in a physical space (e.g., a house or a school classroom) but we were acting out those same proximities on Zoom, our spect-actors would struggle to suspend their disbelief. This would increase their distance to the struggles of the protagonist and the possibility of realistic interventions would be reduced.

In Forum Theatre dramaturgy, the term *oppression* is used to define a systematic abuse of power and of individual power (Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2002). The more time we spent together on Zoom, we realized how online modalities of communication – be they private chats, images, or screenshots – reinforce systematic oppressions like cyber harassment. Only by depicting a Forum performance online could we demonstrate how harassers take advantage of the power and freedom of the internet to target minority groups.

The question we reflected on then was, should we perform a live Forum online or pre-record a Forum? If we conducted a live Forum online, we could invite spect-actors to watch our play on Zoom and have them replace the protagonist in that moment, thus eliciting spontaneous interventions. With a pre-recorded Forum we could control external disruptions (shaky internet connections of the actors, constant muting or unmuting of spect-actors) and create a video documentation of our interventions. Pre-recorded Forum videos could also be a bite-sized way of sharing this complex story across communities more widely; however, in which format would the spect-actors feel closest to the struggle of our protagonist?

We decided to pre-record only because we realized that screen-recordings can be a very inventive way to reduce aesthetic distance between the actor and the spect-actor. By having the protagonist of our Forum play record her screen, all her real-time actions on screen – including her online meetings, private chats, and the clicks of her mouse – could be captured. These actions would not have been as effective if

'performed' live (unless we had giant screens and major technological support). Moreover, these on-screen-movements represented the protagonist's point-of-view, highlighting her internal and external struggle. It is essential for a Forum play to emphasize a protagonist's desire for change and a pre-recorded virtual space provided us with tools to showcase that visually.

In a live Forum, initially the scene is performed once. For the spect-actors to intervene, the actors then perform the scene a second time. When seeing the exact same performance twice, the spect-actor is stimulated to change the vision of the world *as it is* into a world *as it could be* (Boal, 1992). But what if the spect-actors miss out on important dialogue or gestures, even during the rerun? While the script remains the same, can two physical performances ever be the same? In *Unmuted*, since the Forum scenes were pre-recorded videos, our spect-actors could watch the exact scene multiple times. They could fast-forward, rewind, or pause by simply pressing a button. This digital power could have ensured that the spect-actor did not miss out any of the dialogue. What was the implication of this?

Maybe having the flexibility to watch the same scene multiple times at their own convenience allowed the spect-actor to hone into Ruhi's conflict. Some of the detailed questions toward our characters and their actions, including "*Karan, why are you asking Ruhi why she isn't on your screen? It sounds inappropriate,*" "*Ruhi, why are you playing with your hair?*" and "*Ruhi, what made you type 'yes' and then 'no' when Saquib asked if you were okay?*", made us believe that this format might have aided investment and clarity in these important details of the story.

2. The spect-actors interventions take place digitally.

Even though the Forum performance was depicted via screen-recordings we were still worried that the presence of a screen might increase the aesthetic distance between the actor and spect-actor. What if the spect-actor viewed the scene from a location that was very noisy or full of distractions? What if the spect-actor viewed the video on a small screen, like a phone, versus their laptop? Would they be able to focus

and relate to the protagonist's problem? Usually before a Forum demonstration, the joker conducts a few games that warm-up the spect-actors to the themes of the performance. Since we would be communicating with our spect-actors virtually, what if they are not in the right headspace to witness a scene about harassment, and as a result do not feel compelled to suggest interventions? Or moreover, what if they get so overwhelmed by the entire virtual process that they take out their frustrations by suggesting interventions that might antagonize the protagonist?

In anticipation of these challenges, we made sure that the spect-actors who viewed our recordings first identified with the problem of online harassment (as specified in our sign-up form). That our spect-actors were also clear about the goals of our process when they signed up, and that they could comprehend the content of our dilemma (through English and Hindi subtitles) was important to us to arrive at an intersubjective understanding of the issue. However, despite all our efforts to reduce this aesthetic-virtual distance dilemma, the data we collected upon concluding the project revealed mixed results on online engagement.

Scene 1 tracked three-hundred and eighteen views, Scene 2 tracked two-hundred and ten views, Scene 3 tracked one hundred and twenty-six views and Scene 4 tracked ninety-six views. This gradual decline in viewership could possibly be because of the two week-long gaps between the dissemination of each scene; however, this viewership still far exceeded the number of audiences we could have possibly gathered in a physical space during the pandemic. The viewership for Scene 1 also meant that some of our hundred and eighteen spect-actors viewed the scene more than once. This initial interest in the narrative declined in the succeeding scenes when we began to problematize the answers we were receiving in the survey.

Engagement on the surveys for each scene showed a similar downward trend. Fifty-six spect-actors engaged in the survey of Scene 1, fifty of them answered the survey of Scene 2 and forty of them remained with us till the end, answering the survey of Scene 3. Despite the drop in participant engagement in the

surveys, the data we received for every survey was sufficient to move the narrative forward. The comments were long (many were over a hundred words) with rich and varied perspectives. Thus, though the number of digital spect-actors declined, the quality of engagement through the surveys improved by Scene 4.

3. 'If you were the protagonist, what would you do next?' versus 'If you were the protagonist, what would you have done differently?'

In a live Forum, after the actors perform the scene once, the joker comes on stage and explains to the spect-actors that they now have a chance to process some of their feelings about what they just saw. Through interventions, the joker invites them to break into the action of the play and enact alternatives at moments when they see the characters being oppressed or treated badly (Cohen-Cruz & Schutzman, 2002). Since our Forum was digital, we were aware that we would lose out on the momentary and embodied responses of the spect-actors. How best could we then capture their energies about the scene?

After watching the pre-recorded Forum video, instead of asking our spect-actors to rewind back to the scene and suggest an intervention on how they could have transformed a past moment, we asked them to tell us what they would do next. Had we asked them the former question, there would be no way of spontaneously replaying that intervention back to the spect-actor. Also, we were worried that since there was no scope for the spect-actor to physically replace the protagonist online, their interventions may come from an intellectualized mindset, and thus inadvertently antagonize rather than support the protagonist. Having witnessed a protagonist encounter oppression on a screen, they might not viscerally be able to feel the physical, mental, and emotional turmoil that our protagonist was encountering in that moment. We knew that our survey was increasing the distance between the story and emotional response of our spect-actors by having them click or type out an intervention anyway.

Rather than encourage the spect-actors to reflect on fleeting events of the past, we were curious to have them look for solutions at a systematic level. What can happen next? Within the current systems,

what options does the protagonist have? We consciously chose to end every scene with the possibility that the fate of the protagonist could still change. Our hope was to encourage our spect-actors to think about the chains of oppression rather than just look at harassment as existing between two people at a particular moment. How can characters who are acting oppressively in one scene be potential allies in another scene (and vice versa)? The spect-actor responses to these forward-thinking questions helped us script the succeeding scene. We tried to be as true to the democratic workings of an actual Forum by improvising all the interventions that came our way but recording and sending the majority intervention as the final next scene.

4. The absence of a physical joker.

In a live Forum, the joker mediates the debate amongst the spect-actors by probing them to change the outcome of the story they have witnessed. They ask questions like, “Do you see a problem in this scene?” “If yes, who is creating the problem?” “Do you feel it will occur again?” In a physical Forum, audiences raise their hands, nod their heads, or verbalize their response to these questions. In *Unmuted*, SurveyMonkey acted as our digital joker. Our spect-actors either clicked on one of the multiple choices or typed their responses in a comment box. In a live Forum, a joker can sense the energy in the audience after asking these questions. A simple head nod, or twitch of a shoulder or the widening of the eyes can give away so much about whether the audience member was stimulated by what they saw. The joker can accordingly change their line of questioning and probe the audience member to come up and replace the protagonist. By asking these questions digitally, we knew that we were losing out on the natural impulse of the joker to read the audience, and to invoke their unconscious responses. How would we adapt to this challenge?

In SurveyMonkey we tried to stick to a similar line of questioning as the physical joker. When we sent our email with the Forum videos and survey links, we told our spect-actors that they had only three days to watch the video and complete the survey right after. However, after completing Scene 2 as a team

we concluded that an online survey could not compensate for the physical presence of a joker. In fact, some of the survey results demonstrated responses that came from an advisory space (Figure 9).



I would want to hear what's going on in Ruhi's mind. How has the whole thing impacted her? And I would like to suggest to her that she could work on her emotions in a separate space. Here she needs to be more assertive (to make herself clear and to call Karan out) than being emotional (Anger is an emotion)



I want Ruhi to be assertive and say I do not like what you did, do not do it again and if you do, I will have to take action. She needs to be asserting her rights to privacy and not complaining. I want to hear strength in her voice and power in her action. She sounded weak in her complaint and unsure as she did not say what she wanted.



All of the above but primarily Karan and Ruhi. While what Karan is doing is inappropriate, yet if I come to think of it, he might be encouraged by Ruhi's reluctance to call it out. And I also don't know if it's the first time that this (eve) teasing is happening between them. It does seem so by Ruhi's expressions which show that she's caught off guard. Having said that, what I'm going to say next, may make you think that I'm rather old school (you already have my age on this form)! I really feel sad over the latest norms of acceptable behaviour. Etiquette has now remained limited to mobile etiquette. There's no longer anything called social etiquette – the norms of sitting, speaking, behaving. In fact, the more you feel free to do what you want to do, the more cool and modern and bindaas you are! What Ruhi was doing with her hair is no big deal. I have witnessed live – such meetings where people lie down as they would in their bedroom or on their living room couch. Lines of decency and formality are getting blurred – for better or worse – only time will tell, in fact, time is telling. We are trying not to listen because it might “curb” our freedom to do “whatever” we want to do “whenever” we want to do and “wherever” we want to do. I do believe that dignified behaviour IS a 2 way street.



Figure 9: Extended comments from the survey after Scene 2 as a response to the question: “If you feel like the above responses are not sufficient, write a response of what you think should happen next.”

On reading such comments, Vandana who played the role of Ruhi reflected:

These comments stood out to me because they made me feel as if the spect-actor hadn't understood the complexity of the situation. It also made me curious to understand what people consider 'ideal' behavior. Does the informality of a workspace justify Ruhi's harassment? There were also a few questions for Ruhi asking her why she is playing with her hair or talking so informally to Saquib. In the second survey, 5 suggestions asked Ruhi to work on her emotions, her tone and that her aggression can work against her. I felt that these comments put a lot of burden on Ruhi to 'behave properly' even while struggling through the harassment.

If we had received these responses live, a physical joker would have probed these spect-actors further.

How can someone change an entire way of working from 'informal' to 'formal'? Can they demonstrate it by replacing Ruhi? How do they talk calmly to Karan as Ruhi in this scene? Does that resolve the problem?

These physical enactments could have opened up a larger dialogue around where our conception of 'decency' and 'formal and informal workspaces' comes from. Having a virtual joker made this much-needed dialogue very difficult.

This also made us wonder whether an online survey helped reveal people's biases. Since spect-actors are typing answers behind a screen, do they feel freer to judge Ruhi and say politically incorrect statements? Does this virtual distance between the spect-actor and the story create a lack of emotional resonance with the protagonist? Does this in turn bring out these biases against her? How do we then process these biases as interventions in the following scenes without judging them?

Not having one single joker meant we all had to wear the hat of a joker. Being a joker requires finding the balance between being unbiased and at the same time not letting the public's voice overshadow the Forum (Howe, Boal & Soeiroin, 2019). Finding the balance was hard for us. If we needed to problematize an intervention, we first needed to give it a chance without judgement; however, we were each carrying our own biases around harassment as our characters and as actors. A joker has an ideological point of view which grounds their questioning (Howe, Boal & Soeiroin, 2019). Navigating a

collective ideology and at the same time being open and accepting to spect-actors' interventions was a challenge. It helped to have Devika who was outside of the story present in the room as she called us out when we were feeling triggered by the interventions and reminded us of this balance that was required.

Conclusion

Digitizing Forum in this manner expanded Boal's concept of aesthetic distance into an aesthetic-virtual distance between the actor and the spect-actor, actor and co-actor, actor and their character, and actor and joker. This distance in turn reflected how the digital spect-actors perceived the story, how we as Forum actors interacted with each other, how we embodied our characters and how we analyzed the interventions of the spect-actors. Though we could not arrive at one conclusive intervention, these perceptions met our initial goal of sparking a dialogue on online harassment and safety amongst pivotal stakeholders. In fact, we were invited by members of the Center for Community Dialogue and Change (CCDC) in Bangalore, India, to perform *Unmuted Scene 2* as an online Forum for a live audience on Zoom. That our digital-spect-actors recognized the need to attempt a live intervention and solve Ruhi's dilemma showcased a curiosity and an unmet desire to create change. After the performance, a few digital spect-actors who had engaged in our video project shared the following comments:

- The entire format of the process was very engaging and well thought about. I could feel the emotions of the characters because of well scripted and performed characters in high quality videos and share my thoughts in the survey without the fear of judgment.
- Each scene showed so many avenues for intervention--especially when you look at the two allies. The situation is relatable in the sense that it is a small but significant event--something we see so often that perhaps we stop seeing it, but still deserving of attention and discussion.
- The translating of an in-person forum into digital mode without losing much of its 'power', the thoughts and sensitivities behind the creation worked for me. The success of this digital Forum became apparent when I forgot, quite a few times, that I am witnessing it on screen and not in-person! The idea of using the script of a Zoom meeting made it very realistic. Additionally, the reel vs real issue that came up was also so very relevant in this pandemic times!

- We have so many intuitions for how to resist oppression, but so do the oppressors! They have many intuitions for how to continue to oppress.

These comments and the survey results at the end of this project led us to finally agree that digitizing Forum Theatre can work if the location of the dilemma is online and online tools are appropriately used to reinforce and express the oppressive systems and relationships; however, in terms of content and form we are still struggling with these questions:

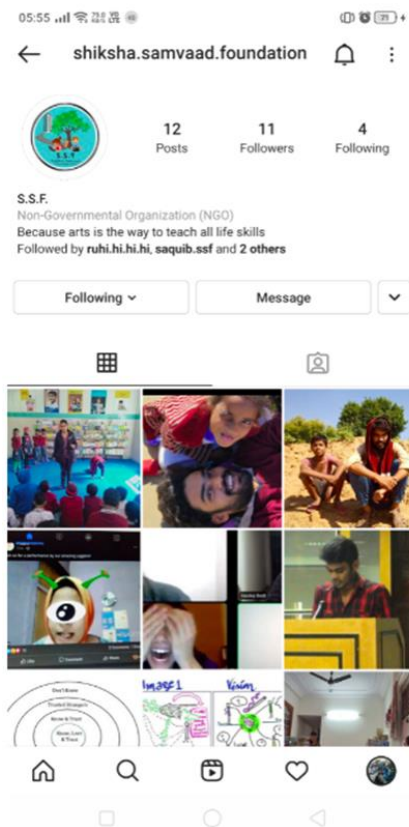
- About the Content
 - Will the fear of losing a job ever win over the courage to fight back or stand up against a harasser?
 - How can a woman's emotional investment in her work influence her response to harassment?
 - How can the creation of safe workspaces be a collective versus individual responsibility? Is it the responsibility of the victim to initiate this collective action?
- About the Form
 - Can a spect-actor virtually embody a protagonist's inner conflict?
 - How can collecting spect-actor interventions as digital data points support the research of dismantling oppressive systems?
 - Where is the digitization of Forum supporting a spontaneous response to the problem and where is it increasing an intellectual distance between the spect-actors and the problem?

It has now been four months since the conclusion of the project. We are curious to follow up with our digital spect-actors to see how many of them are still using the open-source *Unmuted* videos on YouTube to engage with these questions about online harassment and safety with their communities. Have these videos had any impact as catalysts for dialogue in their organizations, research, or training programs? We, as creators of this fictional world of SSF, continue to remain curious, critical, and maybe even a bit braver to stand-up against harassers in our own lives (virtual and real).

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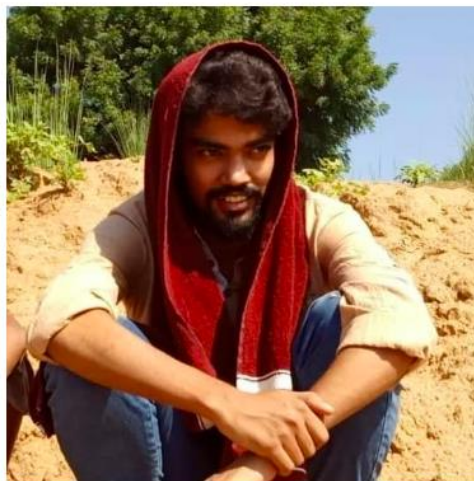
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APPENDIX A: Images of our fictional Instagram Profiles



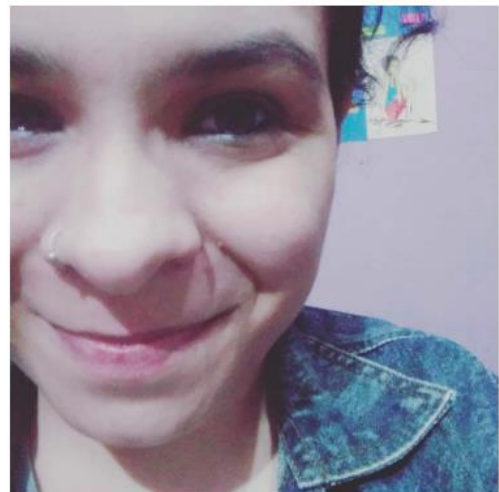
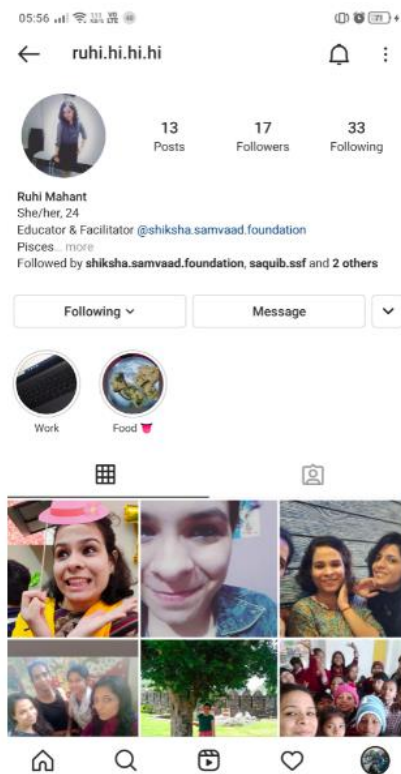
Shiksha Samvaad Foundation (S.S.F.) is a non-profit arts education organization, founded by Karan Sethi 2 years ago. It strives to create inclusive learning spaces for children from peri-urban communities by imparting life-skills education through the arts. Pre-covid, Karan, Saquib and Ruhi would design and facilitate workshops regularly at their centre in Bheem Nagar, Gurgaon. With the pandemic all of S.S.F.'s work shifted online and in April 2020, Karan hired Aastha to build their social media presence. Through the summer Karan spoke at many virtual conferences and managed to attract a few funders and collaborators. It is now November 2020 and despite a slow start SSF has a packed schedule of weekly online sessions for teachers and students pan-India. Follow us @shiksha.samvaad.foundation

Instagram Profile for SSF (Shiksha Samvaad Foundation)



Though I am only 26-years-old, age has never been a barrier for me. I started S.S.F. 2 years ago in the slums of Bheem Nagar and today we are a team of 5 regular members and a dedicated group of 8 volunteers. Our reputation amongst our community has helped us not only survive but thrive in the pandemic. Most of my family members are chartered accountants who don't really understand the depth of the work I do, but they always support me. They see how happy I am leading an amazing group of creative and passionate people like Saqib and Ruhi. When I am not obsessing about S.S.F, I am either clicking photographs, or on my bike or with a glass of beer (sometimes all at the same time :). Follow me @kar_ansethi!

Instagram Profile for Karan Sethi, Founder of SSF



I am a 25-year-old artist and educator. Pre-covid I was living in Gurgaon but have now moved back with my parents in West Delhi. After my first year at TCS, I realized that I love playing with kids much more than I love crunching numbers. I started interning with S.S.F. about a year and a half ago and have been obsessed ever since. Working with such talented children everyday brings me joy. Though we can't work with them physically right now, I am glad that we have kept in touch with their families and are also designing online workshops for new audiences. When not at S.S.F, I spend my days twirling around and trying my hand at hip-hop. Follow me @ruhi.hi.hi

Instagram Profile for Ruhi Mahant, Lead Facilitator at SSF

← saquib.ssf

9 Posts 12 Followers 22 Following

Saquib Khan
Professional Designer
Working for @shiksha.samvaad.foundation
Followed by shubham_ojha11, akhilakhanna and 3 others

Following Message

LIVES ON CAMERA

ARFF

I am a 26-year-old graphic designer from Gurgaon. 2 years ago I was working at a brand design agency when one night over drinks with Karan, I decided to quit. I've been inspired by Karan's passion since school and it was time for me to feed my own artistic cravings. Since I joined SSF I have also continued to free-lance with a few corporate clients because rent in Gurgaon is NOT cheap. This week I will be publishing SSF's website and also designing posters for the Diwali workshop. If you get me in the mood, I can read, write and recite any Faiz Ahmed Faiz ghazal! You can follow my poetry at @saquib.ssf

Instagram Profile for Saquib Khan, Designer at SSF

05:56

← aastha.sach.deva

9 Posts 6 Followers 8 Following

She/Her
Education is for all. Not Some.
LSR 21
Followed by ruhi.hi.hi, shiksha.samvaad.foundation and 2 others

Following Message

managing media Modi man Econor



I am a second year Psychology student at Lady Shri Ram College and go by she/her pronouns. I joined S.S.F. about 6 months back because I really like working with kids and I'm hoping to apply for the India Education fellowship program after graduation (fingers crossed!). Karan is a past fellow so I am excited to get some work-experience with his organization, especially during these times. This week I'm writing social media content for our upcoming Diwali workshop. In my free-time I like to listen to music and play with my doggo! You can follow me at @aastha.sach.deva

Instagram Profile for Aastha, Social Media Intern at SSF