Circulating Uncertainty: Information and Insecurity in Karachi[1]
Sobia Ahmad Kaker, 2014.

Hearing gunshots close to his office on M. A. Jinnah Road, a Karachiite sends a tweet to @Khi_alerts, warning others of potential trouble in the area. A few journalists pick it up in their twitter feed and call sources in the vicinity to confirm if it's a news-worthy event. For some this is a corner-shop owner, or a tea boy, for others, a policeman. On hearing suspicions that this may have been a targeted attack killing a prominent political leader, these journalists rush to the scene to investigate further and perhaps report the event live. As TV channels sensationally break the news, urban residents predicting violent reprisals to the attack call friends and family to warn them to stay off the streets. Meanwhile, in London, analysts working in risk assessment companies read live news updates on killings in Karachi. Studying news reports, contacting friends in security agencies, and speaking to local security experts, risk analysts attempt to predict how current events will pan out in the future. Reading into real-time updates on violence in the city, risk analysts form a range of anticipated scenarios for the short, medium and long term that help clients consider and plan future investments in Karachi.

The multi-sited events above showcase how in Karachi, uncertainty is a relational dynamic that is both governed as well as produced through circulating information. In fact, looking ahead to what some are calling the Asian Century, it is uncertain what the future holds for Karachi, a city of approximately 20 million people. The port city, one of the most rapidly expanding cities in the world, finds itself caught between dual realities. On one hand, as Pakistan's financial, industrial, and trading capital, Karachi is widely cited as a global city with potential to be a key player in the Next Eleven, a group of countries that are expected to join BRICS in the near future. On the other, various local and international news and research reports consider the rapidly urbanising city to be at the limits of spatial growth, out of control, and careening toward a dystopian future where violence and insecurity run rife.

With murder rates as high as 13.49 per 100,000 people, local and international news media represent Karachi as one of the most dangerous megacities of the world.[2] Urban residents and

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[2] http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/09/03/cooking_in_karachi_meth_pakistan

governors alike fear the growing spread and influence of criminal and terrorist networks operating in the city, and are especially concerned by the increasingly high incidence of muggings, kidnappings, burglaries, killings, and terrorist attacks. Consequently, the megacity remains in the news as a city in crisis, a city nearing collapse, a city increasingly falling out of governmental control.

In an environment where urban residents and city government officials are keen to ensure that everyday life continues smoothly, sociality is fast emerging as the critical tool for survival – and circulating information is its related modality. Residents and officials frequently share information relating to power outages, riots, or security alerts in person or through traditional, broadcast, and social media. Updates on riots, killings, robberies or muggings allow residents with clues on how to proceed and react, as they review such information through past experiences of having lived through (or having heard others' stories of living through) similar events in the city. Information is therefore a critical tool for survival, and for navigating the uncertain city.

In gathering related information, credibility, however, is divested from police and other official channels who have lost legitimacy due to their inability to provide security and effectively control the city. Instead, charismatic figures and trusted technologies have gained authority and reliability over years of service. Public opinion is increasingly led by information shared by iconic public personalities, charismatic security experts, and popular talk show hosts, which is then shared amongst Karachiites through various media. These actors also play an important role in informing urban authorities and residents alike of critical information, helping them find ways of avoiding crisis and managing the spatio-temporal uncertainties of insecurity in the 'dangerzones' of Karachi.

However, whilst being an essential tool for governing everyday uncertainties in the complex megacity, such circulating information also often perpetuates uncertainties regarding the city's future. For this reason, it is important not to romanticise such alternative ways of managing and governing everyday life in Karachi as a system that always works, nor gloss over the gritty political realities associated with it. By tracing how particular security-related information is produced and circulates, it becomes apparent that security information may be exaggerated,

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The hype surrounding violence and insecurity in Karachi is paradoxical, especially since the city is considerably less dangerous that Johannesburg where the murder rate is 30.3 per 100.000, or even Bogota where it is 16.1 per 100,000 people.

flawed, biased, or simply untrue. Moreover, the politics of circulated information remains opaque to the general public, who is often only concerned with using information to manage urban insecurity and other uncertainties.

For example, evidence suggests that the hugely popular news media is not entirely free of corruption or partisan positions. News is sometimes planted by senior politicians, bureaucrats or security officials in the hopes of generating particular governmental outcomes. Here, the production of news and information tells another story, one where the official and unofficial intermesh in ways that are often opaque to urban residents and other consumers. The political nature of predictive information is further revealed when this is understood in relation to how its circulation produces affective responses in urban residents. Information can generate feelings of paranoia, fear, or frustration; but also dictate socio-economic outcomes such as urban relationships, movement, opportunities, and investment. Travelling across different scales – the local, national and global – the same information can have variant outcomes in different contexts and locations.

The ambiguous politics of circulatory information is further revealed when considering whose viewpoint is considered, who the sources are and what audience it is pitched at, and which channels it is circulated through. Take, for example, a situation in which the security head of a foreign consulate sends an SMS alerting employees to the imminent threat of a terrorist attack on Karachi's shopping malls. This information may have come from the security head's personal network of friends who serve as top-ranking intelligence officers. The information shared in full confidentiality goes viral across Karachi. The SMS stops people from visiting leisure places in the city, bringing down commercial retailers' profits. At the same time, local media reports the existing climate of fear and its related economic effects in online and print newspapers. Foreign journalists pick up this news to report on insecurity and commercial futures of Karachi, projecting a negative investment outlook for the regional financial and business hub. Thus, the entanglement between official and unofficial flows of information and its local and global ramifications not only reveal the importance of security information for managing spatio-temporal uncertainties in Karachi, but also showcase how such circulations may shape the city's future.

Similarly, statistics reporting an exponential rise in extortion threats to businessmen in Karachi, coupled with the frequent reported incidences of gang violence are fed into risk assessment algorithms run by companies based abroad which are tasked with creating abstract projections

of risk and uncertainty across global cities. The mundane task of defining uncertainty and risk and hence deciding urban futures of such megacities rests upon the shoulders of experts and analysts based in far-away offices in London, New York, Paris or Tokyo. As mentioned earlier, analysts interviewed in London reveal how they delve into information available from various news media while also tapping into a personally developed register of local informants. The same information is fed back into the city through credit ratings projecting investor confidence, which in turn have a bearing on how the anticipated future is played out in the present: Ensuing speculation and investment have immediate effects on the local economy as the market starts to react to the projected future calculated through various algorithms. In such a scenario, the exercise aimed at ensuring future certainty becomes generative of present day uncertainties.

Moreover, the political realities of news production are widely invisible to the public. The televised news industry in Pakistan is a business driven by goals of generating profit through increased viewership and sponsorship. Given how channel ratings are configured, Karachi dominates national news simply as it houses a dominant share of rating meters. Meanwhile, news in Karachi remains focused on crime, disorder and militancy in the city simply because statistics show that crime sells. Feeding the viewing public with sensationalised news about Karachi ensures high viewership and therefore increased channel ratings. Although such news helps residents navigate everyday life in the city, it also perpetuates urban fear and insecurity. News information advances an agenda of securitisation which divides urban residents into categories of safe and unsafe based on identity, political affiliation, and place. Such processes of identification re-produce urban violence and insecurity in the city by making marginal urban groups more vulnerable to police brutality.

Similarly, the dependency and level of trust placed on print and broadcast news, as well as news circulating through social media is problematic. In the absence of systematic regulation of information, the system is frequently exploited by political actors or police and security officials. Research suggests that the tight competition for breaking news stories, coupled with poor training of correspondents and weak regulation over news media frequently results in news channels unknowingly publishing and broadcasting stories they have been fed with particular reactions in mind. For example, news of a political worker's killing may be untrue, but may come via a trusted 'source' in the police so as to encourage a violent reaction which could be used as a tactical advantage in making militant political workers reveal themselves. Once in the public domain, news information takes on a life of its own. It forms chains of

reactions as it circulates over local and international media, picked up by residents trying to find clues for whether it is safe to head out to meet friends living in a certain locality, or analysts and forecasters at home and abroad trying to gauge Karachi's potential for investment at home and abroad.

Taking the circulation of information as an analytic for understanding uncertainty in Karachi, it becomes evident how the city's uncertain future is both governed and produced by circulating information. The competing futures of Pakistan's largest city—the global city with a thriving economy, or the chaotic and insecure city—co-exist in the present, and live through mediated information.

Despite frequent crisis and breakdown, residents are able to navigate spatio-temporal uncertainties and urban life and economy fairly successfully. The violent megacity continues to function and move forward, and urban residents, governors, and planners devise ways to mediate insecurity while business goes on as usual. In the face of prevalent insecurity, Karachi continues to attract and absorb migrants, generate economic value, and foster urban life. In the face of unprecedented violence, the otherwise throbbing city may skip a beat, but it is quick to bounce back and carry on. The story of Karachi therefore invokes a mode of urbanism that is reactionary but also opportunistic. Times of crisis reveal how the city finds ways to function through its own logic and urban life within it seems to push forward in organic ways. However, while information opens up possibilities for fostering systems that ensure functionality in an otherwise difficult city, it is a volatile medium of governance which can be appropriated by politically-motivated actors to either violently subject urban residents in various ways or create strategic disruptions. Meanwhile, crossing multiple scales and being appropriated by differently-positioned actors for various purposes, such circulated information on Karachi is also generative of negative discourses and bleak future outlooks of the city, thereby perpetuating present day uncertainties in the city.