Crisis times: a reply to ‘Crisis futures: COVID-19 and the speculative turning point of history’ by Ravinder Kaur

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Introduction

In her article, Ravinder Kaur (2022) mobilises the crisis of COVID-19 to make a broader argument about the politics of speed in India. What the pandemic has produced, she argues, is a situation of inequitable temporal distribution between the accelerated movements of those in accelerating positions of power and the conditions of deceleration for already-marginalised communities in India. Moreover, rather than simply viewing the temporal politics as a condition imposed by the pandemic, Kaur shows that acceleration has been mobilised as a political technique during COVID-19. This strategy, Kaur suggests, is key to understanding the political potential, and social and organisational consequences, of how pandemic time unfolded as a temporal regime in India, especially with respect to the oppression and singling out of Muslim and Chinese communities as particular vectors of viral harm. As Kaur’s article (2022) makes clear, technologies were key enablers of these temporal techniques. Kaur locates these techniques within the history of management studies and their genealogies of crisis management, which transformed crises into potential opportunities. This short commentary offers a media-theoretical perspective on the role that technology plays within these temporal techniques. Specifically, Kaur’s articulation of acceleration as a political technique resonates with long-standing concerns within feminist media theories on the relations between technology and temporality. In what follows, I thus mobilise theories by media theorists Sarah Sharma and Wendy Chun to unfold Kaur’s analysis within
the broader frameworks of ‘crisis’ and ‘power-chronography’. I offer this comment as a mode of engagement with Kaur’s work that might form further connections between political theory and feminist media theory.

The multiplicities and relationalities of time

The onset of COVID-19 introduced significant temporal disruptions: what used to move fast, such as airplanes and supply chains, suddenly lingered in airports and factory halls. Work hours shifted and appointments were cancelled. With these changes also emerged a different experience of time. For some, time suddenly seemed to move excruciatingly slowly, with waiting a default condition: waiting for schools and workplaces to reopen, for social gatherings to come back, and for ‘normalcy’ to return. For others, however, the pandemic introduced new forms of acceleration: corporations added temporal pressures on gig workers and online deliveries; the public health crisis forced medical workers to run, skip breaks and forgo sleep; and the virus itself mutated and spread with an ever-increasing speed. These new shifts were symptoms of a global temporal disruption and, as Ravinder Kaur shows, also fraught with temporal politics. As Kaur points out, rather than merely responding to temporal pressures, politicians and citizens around the globe also mobilised the political potentiality of the pandemic crisis through new mediated regimes to consolidate and strengthen positions of power through political techniques of acceleration.

Kaur’s argument regarding acceleration resonates with what feminist media theorist Sarah Sharma (2014) calls ‘speed theory’, that is, the discursive formation emerging around the turn of the 21st century that focused on the impact of technologies built for the acceleration of communication, capital and communities (see for instance Virilio, 1995; Wajcman and Dodd, 2016). Invoking Sarah Sharma’s work may add further nuance, I argue, to Kaur’s use of the concept of acceleration within the context of mediation.

In her book *In the Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*, Sharma (2014) argues for the need to forgo discourses on acceleration and instead attend to how technologies and their parameters of possibility are tied to multiple forms of social difference, that is, how they may both exacerbate and potentially also disrupt existing structures of power. Sharma’s work both challenges and complicates prevailing discourses of how the world is speeding up. She fleshes out the proliferating and contradictory temporalities that construct our current economic and political conjunctures. Through a multiplicity of ethnographies and discursive analyses, Sharma maps out different but interconnected forms of labour and technology – life coaches, jet-lag specialists, on-call taxi drivers, corporate yoga instructors and so on – to show how these produce diverse arrays of rhythms of everyday life in societies marked by global capitalism. Sharma turns to the ‘biopolitics of temporality’ to tease out these specific material practices and their political implications. She thereby sidesteps the more abstract and transcendent claims made by speed theory about how particular periods or peoples experience time, which is often articulated in singular (that is, ‘everything is speeding up’) or binary (that is, ‘fast versus slow classes’) terms (Sharma, 2014). Instead, she develops the concept of ‘power-chronography’ to finally flesh out how temporality must always be understood as multiple and relational. Rather than asking how things speed up or slow down, Sharma (2014) thus asks us to consider who has time, whose time is valuable or worthless, who has to recalibrate their bodies to different temporalities
and rhythms (that is, the night shift and irregular hours), who gets to move through time and who has to wait, and who is ‘out of time’.

Sharma’s sidestepping of discourses of acceleration in favour of attention to power-chronography is a powerful move because it allows us to analyse and complicate the fault lines within discourses of acceleration during COVID-19. Kaur foregrounds how strategic risk-assessment analysts increasingly described the post-pandemic world as a great acceleration of history, asking the reader: ‘What might acceleration even mean in this moment of confinement?’ (Kaur 2022), emphasis in original). Kaur herself then offers a succinct analysis of how political leaders in India mobilised theories on crisis management to consolidate power through arguments that acceleration can increase resilience and lead to further capital accumulation. Kaur reminds us that while these theories were mobilised within the context of a state, they originate from Harvard Business School, where they have long informed corporate strategies of profit maximisation through ‘creative disruption’. Kaur’s tracing of the genealogy of crisis management and its implementation within the context of the Indian nation state is both fascinating and disturbing, and it offers media and organisation theories on temporality a highly relevant empirical perspective on the immediate political implications of acceleration discourses. Kaur’s focus on the relationality of temporality is also very welcome in her emphasis that the ‘idea of crisis-as-acceleration…entailed slowing down other competing movements’ (Kaur 2022).

Yet, a single focus on acceleration also runs the risk of reifying the tacit focus on singular or binary temporalities, and omitting the intricate complexities of lived time. First, power always worked with multiple temporal needs and desires. Harvard Business School, for instance, and the market more broadly, advances and commercialises the benefits for the sake of profit not only of acceleration, but also of deceleration through wellness programmes, mediation and yoga (Sharma, 2014). Second, the discourse of acceleration – even when mobilised through critique – could be as much a part of the problematic cultural context in which people understand and experience time. Sharma thus argues for the need to forgo a polarity between fast and slow classes, or the ‘political choice between going fast or slow’, in favour of close examinations of the uneven multiplicities of temporalities complicated by ‘labor arrangements, cultural practices, technological environments, and social spaces that respond to this so-called globalized, speedy world’ (Sharma, 2014: 9). I believe that an attention to these multiplicities could meaningfully tease out the complicated temporal arrangements in India and how they are shaped by and further entrench existing power structures.

The social media campaign against Muslims and China, as well as the nationalist pro-Hindu online movements mentioned by Kaur, thus operate at different temporal scales and situations: it was exactly the standstill world that provided time for citizens to spend time on their phones (and conspiracy theories). The concept of power-chronography thus allows us to appreciate how the politics of temporality is not only about acceleration and deceleration, but also about maintaining time sensibilities as a form of social control and disciplining of labour across all layers of society. Included in this is also the recognition that power-chronographies rely on the transformation of social relations into relations for capital, marking out what it means to be a worthy human (Sharma, 2014: 70, 72). Attending to the biopolitics of temporality in India during COVID-19 could thus also highlight how discourses of acceleration exacerbate an already-existing temporal order in which the absence of ‘temporal investments’ in Muslim lives forced them to live in a ‘state of exception’ to the dominant temporal order (Sharma, 2014: 69).
**Crisis time and discriminating systems**

As Ravinder Kaur (2022) notes, politicians used the pandemic situation to mobilise the temporalities of new digital technologies in order to further entrench these orders. Specifically, Kaur (2022) identifies social media as a particularly powerful agent within these new techniques, underscoring how the ‘immediate’ quality of social media limited temporal distances while people were kept spatially apart (Kaur, 2022: 653): Wendy Chun’s media-theoretical work on the temporal logic and spatialising effects of new media offers a further nuance to this analysis.

In the chapter ‘Crisis, crisis, crisis, or sovereignty and networks’ of Chun’s (2016) book, Chun identifies a shift in the cultural logics of crisis engendered by new media vis-à-vis televised media. Televised media, Chun notes, with reference to Mary Ann Doane’s (1990) canonical article ‘Information, crisis, catastrophe’, offered a feeling of direct connection with unfolding events through a steady stream of information that transfixed those sitting before it. Catastrophe thus also inherently emphasised and consolidated the technological power of televised media because it underscored its ‘ability to be there … both on the scene and in your living room’, creating ‘an immediate collision with the real in all its intractability’ (Doane, 1990: 222, cited in Chun, 2016: 95). This cultural form of television also created a particular form of user, one transfixed in front of the television as a ‘couch potato’. New media, by contrast, is a ‘crisis machine’. New media thus relies on a conceptual difference between the idea of an ‘empowered user’ as an active producer of events vis-à-vis television’s passive consumer of events. This, in essence, is the cultural logic of the difference between the ‘captive audience’ logic of catastrophe and the engaged ‘user agency’ of new media: where televised media captivates audiences, new media activates them by ‘offering users a taste of real time responsibility and empowerment’ (Chun, 2016). Yet, while they seem immediate, as Kaur (2022) calls it, they are, in fact, technologically deferred, as they have already undergone several automated control mechanisms, including multiple forms of filtering and aggregation (Chun, 2016). The political implications of these digitally temporalised architectures cannot be boiled down to acceleration alone, then, but must also take into consideration the logics that programmed mechanisms adhere to. As Wendy Chun (2021) shows, social media networks ‘presume and prescribe homophily’ through their machine-learning techniques, thereby ‘perversely’ naturalising segregation through discourses of networks’. This is because network analytics relies on the fundamental premise of segregation and similarity metrics (through user likes and dislikes). Thus, the political situation described by Kaur (2022) must also be understood as an effect of how social media simultaneously entrenched mechanisms of discrimination and allowed for new forms of engagement, for example, the mobilisation of users as active knowledge producers, solving community cases and tracking ‘patient zeros’ in supposed ‘real time’ (Chun, 2021).

**Concluding remarks**

I deeply appreciate Ravinder Kaur’s succinct analysis of how political elites in India mobilised discourses and techniques of acceleration to entrench both power and capital in India through the further marginalisation of Muslim and Chinese communities and citizens. This commentary has sought to contextualise Kaur’s analysis within a feminist media-theoretical framework that attends to the complexities and multiplicities of
temporality in mediated frameworks, both on the level of the technologies themselves and on the level of sociotechnical systems. Doing so, I argue, may help move beyond the popular discourses of acceleration to further unpack the multiple and relational pandemic temporalities of contemporary biopower, capitalism and the control of time.

Conflict of interest
The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References