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THE AESTHETICS OF NEWS: NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION AND MEDIA  
ILLITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

by

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A Dissertation  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree

College of Arts and Media  
in the Graduate School  
Southern Illinois University Carbondale  
August 2023

DISSERTATION APPROVAL  
THE AESTHETICS OF NEWS: NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION AND  
MEDIA ILLITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

by

Shashidhar Nanjundaiah

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in the field of Mass Communication and Media Arts

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May 23, 2023

## AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Shashidhar Nanjundaiah, for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in Mass Communication and Media Arts, presented on May 23, 2023, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE AESTHETICS OF NEWS: NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION AND MEDIA ILLITERACY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. Walter Metz

Amidst the public's declining trust in news, media prosumers—that is, media consumers who have also become producers of mediated texts—are not equipped with any credible alternative mechanism to better understand the world around them. Prior academic studies of news and its delivery have not adequately explored the ideological framework we need to confront this frightening situation. This dissertation does so.

I problematize the narration of news as an aesthetic process. This mass-mediated narration stitches together our world in ideological ways. A tidal flow of stories highlights and obscures selected truths in a frenzy of news cycles, the frequency of which has intensified with each new delivery platform. Social media platforms need to be understood using new analytical methods, given that the aesthetic and narrative dimensions of such audiovisual texts are so far removed from the pace, delivery, and meaning of 19<sup>th</sup>-century products like newspapers.

Aesthetic value undergirds the narration of news by falsely presenting certainty and consensus to media prosumers. In that environment, I theorize the process through which an incident is converted first into a media event, then a media spectacle, and finally into myth. My work breaks new ground in mass communication studies by understanding this aesthetic and narrative process as mystification, a formulation I borrow from contemporary philosophers. Mediated narration presents what the power brokers of a society deem desirable, while

evacuating that which contradicts their ideological position. I theorize this process in terms of “absenting” as a narrative process and “invisibilization” as an aesthetic maneuver.

To accomplish this, I employ Theodor Adorno’s aesthetic theory and explain how news narration routinizes values of visibility, forming a discursive field that envelops the media prosumer. Pierre Bourdieu’s habitus best explains this theoretical field. An important implication of my work concerns the current obsession with “media literacy.” I argue that media literacy has not adequately explained the ideological nature of mediated narration, shifting the blame for a disinformation society from the structural forces of textual production onto a purportedly “illiterate” public. I destabilize the current understanding of media literacy by revealing the ideological implications of the aesthetic and narrative construction of what both practitioners and scholars of the news reduce to a binary notion of truths and falsehoods.

I apply this theoretical apparatus to the narration of majoritarian nationalism. Postcolonial governments use nationalism as an emotional trigger to co-opt their citizens into participating in the modernization project. Current institutions use rationality to showcase their nation as modern. The general narratives I have just described are in fact gleaned from three disturbing media events in recent India. My nation’s shift in recent years from a pluralistic democracy to a majoritarian, authoritarian state makes it a timely location for inquiry. In my three case studies, news narration showcases the desirable and hiding undesirable elements; depicts farmers in a negative light, as obstacles to modernization; and discredits resistant voices and deems them illegitimate individuals with smartphones or unethical practitioners of journalism.

First, I analyze a media spectacle created in the city of Ahmedabad in 2020 by Narendra Modi’s government for Donald Trump’s visit. The government showcased this Potemkin Village as an example of the modernization project, a false construction that illuminates presentable

elements of the city while walling off the unrepresentable. I evaluate eight visual moments of this event and draw attention to the aesthetic facets of visibilization and invisibilization.

Second, I examine narrative performances in a news-based television show anchored by Arnab Goswami, who analyzes murders involving politicians and farmers in a small rural road on which farmers marched and a convoy of vehicles led by the son of a central minister ran over them from behind, inviting retaliation. The aesthetic practices of this coverage destabilize in a chilling way who are the perpetrators and victims in these stories.

In the third event, I analyze moments of journalistic struggle in a story of the police forcibly burning the body of a victim of gang-rape. Four men of an upper caste allegedly gang-raped a lower-caste woman in a village, and her dead body was brought back from a hospital in New Delhi. The media followed, and their cameras serendipitously captured the alleged destruction of evidence by the police.

My dissertation concludes with questions about what cultural capital would be required in a world in which a media prosumer would be able to read and interpret the aesthetic and narrative presentation of such mass media objects. I conclude by understanding how the visibilized and invisibilized maneuvers of our current news media lead to the construction, not of media literacy, but instead, of “media illiteracy.” It is my theoretical conclusion that demystification is the best process to mitigate the debilitating effects of this situation. My dissertation ends with recommendations for completely transformed media literacy programs, rooted in critical theory, which deliver to communities, not as pedagogical tools to individuals.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My gratitude list is long and seemingly endless. I have too many people to thank for their direct and indirect contributions to this dissertation to do any justice here. The most important disclaimer I make here is that the following is in no particular order of priority: How do I compare the diverse contributions of my committee chair and my wife?

My doctoral dissertation committee members have a talent for squeezing out capabilities in me I might have been unaware of. Dr. Walter Metz is notoriously so in my case. With each meeting, he demanded a higher standard of thought and expression. His own vast spectrum of interdisciplinary understanding has been the best tailwind to the interdisciplinary nature of this work. I feel I can never thank Walter enough. I am glad that despite already having full plate of advisees, he agreed to be my advisor. Prof. William Frievogel had a critical role to play. As a reputed journalist, Bill suggested the three case studies among many possible ones with great foresight. Each was different from, yet relatable to, the other. But all of them are fascinatingly emblematic. Dr. Sandy Pensoneau-Conway, Dr. Jennifer Horton, and Dr. Jayne Cubbage were instrumental through their feedback, comments, and astute observations.

To state that the academic learning at SIU bore core relevance to my work would be to state the most obvious. For that, I thank my excellent professors at SIU. Many academic discussions with professors and former professors and peers helped me construct ideas and perspectives. Among the former category, I want to thank Dr. Manjunath Pendakur in particular—a former Dean at SIU and now a friend whose enviable energy and meaningful social engagement in his Florida community has only grown after his retirement.

My conversations with media literacy practitioners and trainers in India led to its unpacking. In particular, Syed Nazakat, who runs FactShala, and Bhavna Pathak, a trainer there,

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I am indebted to my young journalist friend Tanushree Pandey for her input and insights on the Boolgarhi crime story and for her permission to use some of the short videos she shot there. The journalistic community in India continues to applaud Pandey's brave reporting from allegedly unsafe heartlands of Uttar Pradesh. At India Today TV, and through her subsequent jobs at *ThePrint* news portal and then with the NDTV news network, Pandey stands as a living testimony of what a journalist should be all about. I am also grateful to my friend Ketan Trivedi, an Ahmedabad-based journalist with the Gujarati publication *Chitralkha*, a popular Gujarati-language magazine and portal. On my request, Ketan gladly and promptly sourced original images from his publication's archives and emailed them to me. I acknowledge his prompt help.

But for my wife Shanthi's massive levels of tolerance of me, her repeated exhortations and constant support, I would not have returned to my Ph.D. program, much less complete it. My family, friends, current and former colleagues and students have been nothing short of motivational.



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>CHAPTER</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
ABSTRACT.....	i
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
CHAPTERS	
CHAPTER 1: Problem, methodology, this time and space.....	1
CHAPTER 2: Spectacle, routinization, mythification.....	63
CHAPTER 3: The spectacle of India's Potemkin village.....	103
CHAPTER 4: Performance of Lakhimpur Kheri.....	159
CHAPTER 5: Invisibility in Boolgarhi.....	206
CHAPTER 6: Towards demystification of media illiteracy.....	255
CHAPTER 7: Conclusion.....	293
REFERENCES.....	310
VITA.....	340

## LIST OF FIGURES

<u>FIGURE</u>	<u>PAGE</u>
Figure 1 – Bullet train in India.....	73
Figure 2 – Billboard Namaste Trump.....	126
Figure 3 – Saffron amidst a group of welcome boards.....	129
Figure 4 – A wall under construction.....	132
Figure 5 – Colorful paintings on the right side of the wall.....	133
Figure 6 – The wrong side of the wall.....	134
Figure 7 – Between friends, a bearhug.....	138
Figure 8 – Xi-Biden meeting in Bali, a different story.....	141
Figure 9 – Weaving yarn on an inscrutable wheel.....	143
Figure 10 – The traditional is recast in modern settings.....	145
Figure 11 – A festive crowd.....	146
Figure 12 – The panopticon view.....	149
Figure 13 – The culmination of camaraderie in the world’s biggest arena.....	151
Figure 14 – In Houston, the initiation of camaraderie to a sold-out crowd.....	152
Figure 15 – The screen that keeps everyone busy.....	185
Figure 16 – The text that fixes the blame.....	187
Figure 17 – The first in the narrated sequence of the Lakhimpur incident.....	194
Figure 18 – The second in the narrated sequence of the Lakhimpur incident.....	194
Figure 19 – The third in the narrated sequence of the Lakhimpur incident.....	194
Figure 20 – A dead giveaway.....	224
Figure 21 – Independent attempts of self-legitimacy.....	227

Figure 22 – Attempting to rip a suture of invisibility.....	231
Figure 23 – The muted journalist.....	235
Figure 24 – A discrediting act.....	237
Figure 25 – The old order must yield.....	240
Figure 26 – An invisible identity speaks inarticulately.....	245
Figure 27 – Between presentation and reality.....	284

## CHAPTER 1

### PROBLEM, METHODOLOGY, THIS TIME AND SPACE

#### **Introduction**

Narration is an instrument in the construction of our literate societies. In a world in which the process of modernization refuses to cease, institutionalized narration describes our world in systematic and normative ways. In this stitching-together of our understanding, it is as though the status and changes were pre-ordained truths that merely need explanations. Narration is mediated; it predicts our world using carefully selected stories. The media are able to sell us dreams by showcasing proposed projects through beautiful digital illustrations even while the realization of the projects may be uncertain. They may selectively airbrush out unflattering backdrops like slums, villages, traffic, and communities. Rather than solving real problems, these constructions present a world of problems as though everything were normal.

Narration is not merely denotative, but contains connotations that may be political, social, cultural, and ideological. One of the most salient features of the framework of mediated narration is that its referent is only what it renders visible: Consider the common observation of the neoliberal design of news or social media platforms in which extreme positions are also the popularly shared and amplified opinions. The *un*-narrated text is invisible and absent, and *un*-negotiable as it is itself invisible or from the blinding glare of the visible text that renders it invisible. This is a structure in which mystification occurs, one in which demystification struggles to disrupt and intervene.

Furthermore, narration is structured to selectively render visibility to stories and communities. Complementing that process, which I will refer to as “visibilization,” is a counter-process, which “invisibilizes” other stories and communities. Just as absence is different from

absenting, and presence depends on presentation, visibility depends on visibilization.

Resultantly, invisibilization is the form of airbrushing, the stitching over. Thus, our truths seem seamless and continuous; the news media's opaque processes add to this problem, lending a semblance of sense and continuity to our understanding of the world. The visibilized realities are embedded and rendered as myths in societies, stitched over invisibilized realities.

A gap in scholarship exists in helping to understand this normative construction particularly from ideological perspectives of news. Filling that gap would be an important intervention not only because of the inadequate scholarly attention but because the practice of media literacy needs it. Our understanding of the need for media literacy has turned from routine to urgent in recent years, yet in both cases, significant questions remain unanswered. A fresh look at media literacy by analyzing the ideological underpinnings and methodology of news would bridge that gap. My work is interested in the ways in which our world is presented to the media prosumer and the stabilizing and destabilizing factors of the understanding of that narrated world.<sup>1</sup>

Narrative constructions are presented as forms of our knowledge, while media literacy efforts purport to help us understand how those forms are constructed. This is problematic and inadequate. Corporate ownership, state institutional interventions, and the prosumer equally find a place in the construction playbook. For example, former U.S. President Donald Trump and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi are two recent products and early adopters of the social media-age phenomena. In modern-day India, efforts to discourage dissenting voices are on, but

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<sup>1</sup> In our interactive environment, media prosumer refers to the consumer of media texts who also re-produces them. I explain the term in the next section of this chapter.

the government denies any stifling of freedom of speech is afoot. Private social media corporations remove posts and stories from legitimate news organizations when they are flagged by the ruling political party. Constancy of articulate and visible text renders the inarticulate into invisible spaces—image over reality.

In this process of stitching together our realities, our modern institutions, including our news systems, play a pivotal role. For example, governments and related institutions promise change to their constituents through modernization. On one hand, they invite communities to ostensibly participate in discourse. On the other hand, they offer aesthetically valuable and well-selected glimpses of a modern society, whose image is aspirational to the constituents. In such a well-defined rendering of modernity, formulations of rationality lie in Western formats: Perhaps the simplest of examples is a Westernized news anchor on an Indian news channel. This anchor at once embodies and presents a modernizing, postcolonial society to be an appealing, trustworthy, and truthful authority.

Moreover, news media conduct their narrations by stating their *representational* role and using *presentational* processes. In their processes, modern institutions claim to provide important inputs that help societies to enter into a dialectical existence. They must have a semblance of discursivity: For example, news channels call in guest experts and political representatives for what seems to be rational discourse. Hence, the news media's implicit claim to discursivity is problematic as media platforms present a veneer that both hides and reveals. Therefore, by building such common values, the institutional construction of our world, by building and using aesthetic values, purports to offer tools of consensus to media prosumers.

Thus, on one hand, news media perform their role as agents of the modernization project. On the other, they take on the role of representing societies and putting up their realities for

scrutiny and action. Our societies must therefore depend on and trust mediated narrations. In turn, media narrations function on systems that are founded on aesthetic value. My project seeks to expose and illustrate the aesthetic methodology by which owners of this construction may claim to make the media prosumer more literate.

In our framework, the interpretation of aesthetics goes beyond its meaning in terms of beauty. The construction of an image corresponds to the aesthetic value of the object—the worth individuals and communities derive from its presentation. Moreover, aesthetics enable mystification, the stitching-together of our world. We will see in this dissertation how mediated narrations suture a world that makes sense, and is thereby desirable. By determining aesthetic value in terms of desirability, we may see how an object that is narratively presented to the media prosumer determines not only the ways in which the prosumer may behold it but the ways in which the presented object *affects* media prosumerism—the communicative outcomes of those narrative presentations.

This dissertation problematizes two issues. *First*, modern institutions such as news systems purport to depend on rationality and discursivity, yet they harness trust and emotion to narrate ideological texts to us. *Second*, we may expect that the discourse in society produces flux and uncertainty, and yet the pursuit of certainty appears as central to such communication. Hence, the question we must ask here is: *What has caused media illiteracy in a world consumed by the media?* That is the central question that triggered this project.

In the scheme of this project, I arrive at media illiteracy after explaining how mediated narrations construct our truths. That perspective is important before we infer that construction in terms of our literacy, or our instrument to understand those truths.

I illustrate that construction using specific examples from contemporary India, which is a postcolonial bastion as a nation in the field of the modernization project and thus offers a rich scope as a field of this study. What was once Gandhi's India is now Modi's India—the same society that once overwhelmingly applauded one now cheers for the other. Such is the irrationality of our social contracts. To dismantle Gandhian thought, it is important to use a multi-pronged approach that includes putting Gandhi's fame to good use. The dog-whistling tactics by the highest-ranking ministers in the demonization of various religious, caste-based, and activity-based minorities are a leaf straight out of a familiar playbook that resulted in segregation and targeting of minority groups in Nazi Germany and elsewhere. On the other hand, we cannot imagine Modi trying to shut down institutions such as courts and news media. The process of sense-making, the stitching-together, must occur within acceptable contours of modern societies while also nudging the boundaries of acceptance.

Contemporary India also presents a diverse community conflicted between Western templates of modernity, social practices, and the narration of an alluring modern nation of the future. India is also a salient foreground for contemporary political shifts we have begun to observe around the world especially since the 2010s: Since 2014, India has twice elected a strong government that promotes a new kind of majoritarian nationalism with messages of promise and duty. The period after the second election of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the subsequent nomination of Narendra Modi as Prime Minister is particularly interesting in that the appropriation of news and other institutions of social liberation and freedoms is more emboldened. In this ecosystem, the government has built and illuminated impressive statues, while the police have quietly destroyed evidence in politically fraught crimes, and sections of the news media routinely participated in the quelling of inconvenient voices that challenge this



paradigm of modernization. Furthermore, India is infamously known for its deep caste and religious fractures, particularly in rural areas. The news media gloss over these conditions while propping up singular incidents. Meanwhile, WhatsApp groups, common across India, spread falsehoods, even as independently shot videos on social media challenge these narratives by exposing hidden realities.

In this context, I ask: What are the constitutive presumptions in the narrative construction? How do news media stitch together their narration using visibilized, invisibilized, and mythologized conditions? Finally, in what ways may media prosumers move towards media literacy?

In the next section, I will describe the methodology of this work. I will then position myself in the framework of inquiry, provide the historical, political, and sociological environment for this work, and problematize conceptualizations and practices of media literacy. I next analyze the aesthetic process of the constructions of the media prosumer's truths using an ideological explanation of the way in which news media convert incidents into events, events into spectacles, and spectacles into myths. After illustrating the ideological applications of this process, I deep-dive into the notion of media illiteracy, and present a demystification model to explain how it can serve as a broad methodological foundation on which media literacy scholars can mount specific delivery methods and mechanisms for media literacy practice.

In contextualizing or defining the key concepts in this work including media illiteracy, news aesthetics, and demystification, my work harkens upon a number of theorists and the constructs they have offered us. Principally, these are Theodor Adorno's aesthetics, Pierre Bourdieu's habitus, and Roland Barthes's demystification. Others scaffold the ideological

notions of visibility and its relation to power. I invoke additional concepts and scholarly interventions as I evaluate my examples that illustrate my claims:

“The Spectacle of India’s Potemkin Village” observes the construction of a spectacle in the Indian city of Ahmedabad that spotlighted the city’s aesthetically desirable districts. The image of Ahmedabad as the tainted site of some of the worst communal riots in India on Modi’s watch must be replaced, as world leaders are invited by Modi to visit the city. This study spotlights U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to India in 2020. In the chapter “Performance of Lakhimpur Kheri,” I examine the various performances in the anchor monologue of Arnab Goswami, a television anchor and a vociferous supporter of Modi. Amidst claims to represent the nation, Goswami’s panel discussion showed his channel’s reports on a tragic incident that spotlighted the political opposition, cherry-picked facts, and flipped perpetration with victimhood. “Invisibility in Boolgarhi” highlights how the media shone the spotlight on an alleged gang-rape and murder in a deeply casteist rural India where 65 percent of its population lives. The state police and the administration burnt the victim's body without her family's permission. The police routinely adopt that method to erase evidence. My critical evaluation of the mediated event will discuss collaborative efforts of institutions to bury inconvenient truths.

## Methodology

If we must problematize media literacy as I do here, we must first take a deep dive into the ideological frameworks in which the media operate. My work situates news media as a modern institution. In this role, the media have become a game of economic survival based on trust, using information as a controlled product. Social media-generated media prosumerism has both amplified the dissemination of information and compounded the issues surrounding it. Although we recognize it, a majority of media literacy initiatives have viewed it, at best, as a problem of technology or source, and rarely as something more ideological. This dissertation uses ideological underpinnings of aesthetics, invisibility, postcolonial modernity, and demystification—which unfold with each section.

I do not profess to *fix* anything here. My effort is akin to that of a lighting director in a film production, fixing the spotlight from the ceiling so that it shines upon the right objects—this I see as the primary way in which to demystify our mystified truths. At the pivot of my methodological maneuver is narration and the narrative construction of the prosumer’s world that is partly visibilized and partly invisibilized for them. My interrogation probes the forms and processes that explain the ideological narrations’ influence on the presumption of their texts.

To evidence my claims, I have selected three news events, each distinct from the other—I observe a constructed Potemkin village by analyzing the hyper-visibilized visual moments in a large event; analyze the performance of a news anchor’s monologue in which he narrates a crime by flipping victimhood with perpetration; and critically evaluate the struggle between visibilization and invisibilization of the conditions of a village community after a crime against a so-called low-caste teenage girl.

I have chosen the objects of evaluation with four objectives. *First*, these three incidents occurred in 2020 and 2021. Thus, they are relatively recent and temporally relevant. Each is a publicly recognizable media story as each of them became national—even international—headlines. *Second*, they are quintessential examples to establish the relationship between invisibility and media illiteracy. *Third*, they help me unpack the new dynamics of how a highly unequal society is coping with claims and aspirations of modernity. *Fourth*, all these examples connect deeply to the factors that contribute to mediated construction of media illiteracy, but they are also different in their geography, visibility, and influence. While Ahmedabad is a large and hyper-visibility city that, as I show, glosses over its troubled interreligious conflicts in history, Boolgarhi is a tiny invisible village on the outskirts of a town, beset by overt practice of caste discrimination. The nondescript rural road in Lakhimpur Kheri became a zone of conflict between powerful and resistant forces—a symbolic strife that found its manifestation there. Note that this study does not take us to Lakhimpur Kheri—merely to its narration on a television news channel.

Within the three media events, I choose several media moments. These allude to instances that are available to us via the news media, which I have selected as examples. These are chosen because they are texts that best explain the arguments I make in this dissertation regarding visibilized, invisibilized, presented, absented narrations that suture our world, and those that struggle to break through that suture.

The three events are analyzed as follows:

1. In “The Spectacle of India’s Potemkin Village,” I analyze eight visual moments in the Trump event of the city of Ahmedabad—each either a still shot photographed by a media platform or clips from media videos. Using available media images

from this widely publicized event, where the government dressed up a city for Donald Trump, I evaluate moments in the event as visual texts. A visual analysis of a spectacle need not be that of frozen or moving images alone—it can be, as this study attempts, the examination of several specific spectacular moments in an event.

2. In “Performance of Lakhimpur Kheri,” I evaluate performance in a news-based anchored show in three ways—that of the screen, of the narrator, and of narrated text. Here, examining how a news anchor narrates victimhood and perpetration in a political crime, I conduct a critical analysis of the show’s performative elements. The analysis of the show is really the analysis of a monologue that is set in what seems like a discursive environment.
3. In “Invisibility in Boolgarhi,” I critically observe specific snapshots in the media-narrated events following an alleged gang-rape in Boolgarhi village, evaluating how the conditions of a village struck by a tragic incident are disrupted and stitched back. Tracing the incidents, events, and spectacles that form the media stories, I investigate six moments.

These aesthetic instances of mediated events are available to us via the news and social media. My sources are media texts available online, either on media organizations’ websites or their social media accounts on video aggregation channels like YouTube.

**Method.** I take a critical-cultural approach to my study while examining the three illustrations, using an explanatory approach. Given the arbitrariness and randomness that accompanies any incident that becomes a news event, my investigation zooms in on narrative

“moments”—specific spotlights within these events. Through these moments, I seek to explain the phenomena whose conceptualizations I first build.

One of the best affordances of my approach is that it provides access to examine ideological artifacts. Within this approach, I use aesthetic analysis, which connects the spectacle of a Potemkin village, performance of a news anchor, and invisibility and immobility of a village beset with caste politics.

Expectedly, the most conventional use of aesthetic analysis lies in art and the definition of aesthetics as an “investigation of the nature, laws, and ends of art, as a science of the universal idea of beauty” (Davies, 1901, p. 28). The oldest traced attempt by Edmund Burke and David Hume, dating back to the 18th century, used beauty as an aesthetic attribute and connected it to human experiences recorded in physical and psychological responses. As Fenner (2003) notes, the 17th and 18th century evaluations of aesthetic artifacts were in terms of judgment—objective, prescriptive. As long as a dichotomous view of knowledge/truth and perception prevailed, the aesthetics of experiences of pain and pleasure have been viewed as objective in that they are universal. As the aura of art gave way to its reproduceability and multiplicity, experiences have become a focus of scholarly attention.

By the 1960s aesthetic analysis became textual and relational. Expectedly, the several applications of aesthetic analysis lay in architectural studies, art, music, and humanities. Mavrikios (1965) evaluated the Parthenon’s curvature—“not the curves”—in order to arrive at an appreciation of the Greek temple’s charms, which may escape analysis (p. 264). To do so, the study takes into account inherent factors of curvature, deep-diving into the structure’s affectations. In other words, it attempts to find a relationship between a structure and its human

effects by studying what, to us as mass communication scholars, may seem like a critical analysis of a text. It examines relationships between elements within the structure.

As Bresler and Latta (2008) point out, the arrival of postmodernity on the research methodology scene, especially in our current century, has resulted in an erosion of traditional dichotomies. Context—social, cultural, and so forth, leading to aesthetic experience—became salient to scholarly evaluation. In its contemporary form, aesthetic experience forms an important data unit in aesthetic analysis research. While it is contextual in the experiential sense, it seems to ignore the ideological complexities in the artifacts. We must consider an analytical method in which the ideological implications of an artifact can be fully critiqued by considering strands like narratively, performatively, and visually sutured texts that hide conditions.

In this new version of aesthetic analysis, aesthetic conditions are embedded in specificities, and “deconstructed as contextual and social” (p.12). Ranciere (2004) argued that the distribution of the sensible is an aesthetic enterprise; what is at stake in any politics is aesthetics; and politics first becomes a possibility with the institution of common sense.<sup>2</sup> Aesthetic examinations have typically taken on three dimensions or forms of inquiry—individual, social, and cultural. While aesthetic analysis was conventionally deployed for works of art, the depiction of life—that is, how news and mediated narrations of realities use aesthetic values—has emerged as a research theme using specific forms of aesthetic analysis. To that end, news media become important carriers of the texts of analysis.

To understand aesthetic value and embed it in my methodology, I use Adorno’s aesthetic theory and notions of aesthetic value as a conceptual handle. As a critical-cultural theorist,

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<sup>2</sup> Cited in Wolfe (2006).

Adorno's later (leading up to the 1970 publication of the theory) approach to the constructs within our day-to-day aesthetic values is one that adequately captures the ideological nature of aesthetics. In exploring linkages between the producer and the consumer, between the story and the experience, I delve into aesthetic theory and its utility for us in news.

Film and media studies scholars have shown interest in applying aesthetic analysis in various ways. Predictably, the method's initial proposals for television were in terms of visible texts. In her proposal for "a model for visual aesthetic inquiry in television," Rogena Degge (1985) focuses on a foundational form of analysis of the audiovisual medium. In Degge's essay, aspects of authenticity and illusion stand out. Over the past two decades, a more critical form of the method is now widely employed to evaluate aesthetic values—how advertisements or films depict food perceptions between genders (Fuller et al., 2013), genital cosmetic surgery (Moran and Lee, 2013), and so forth. News photography analysis (e.g., van Leeuwen and Jaworski, 2002) has emerged popularly as an artifact of presentations—for example, as victor, victim, and perpetrator. An older text, Lang and Lang's (1953) well-cited "MacArthur Day in Chicago," is a particularly noteworthy analysis of a public spectacle, which is claimed to be the first televised event. In their critical observation, the authors compared real images and those shown spectacularly on television.

I use a critic's eye in these analyses—not with the idea of providing some grandiose objective analysis, but of detaching oneself from the text and yet evaluating by using a liminal space of a scholar interesting in offering a fresh theoretical canopy to specific events. To that end I approach aesthetic analysis as a way to set text and its related narrative frameworks in sociocultural, institutional, and political contexts. In our framework, we may observe how aesthetic value is built and maintained—how these practices are portrayed in the media and how



societies view these practices. Given the dynamic nature of our definition of the prosumer, in this work, these aspects of presentation and experience are interwoven and problematized.

Hence, my study offers a fresh approach by interpreting aesthetics in the context of mediated narrations in terms of visibility of communities to texts and vice versa and determines their relevance in explaining media illiteracy. I can see two specific affordances to this approach—criticality and flexibility. Both features are important to our discussions. What lies between two seeming opposites forms a particularly salient observation in this study. The methodological linkages are important in understanding the spaces that lie between the visible and the invisible, the narrated and the un-narrated, spectacle and myth, structure and agency. It is indeed the intervening, interrupting spaces that my study seeks to expose. This approach to aesthetics helps us conduct three artifacts of analysis—visual, performative, and narrative.

One limitation of my method is best stated by Jerome Bruner (1991).<sup>3</sup> Writing about the narrative construction of reality, he notes that a narrative is an account of events occurring over time: “It is irreducibly durative. It may be characterizable in seemingly nontemporal terms (as a tragedy or a farce), but such terms only summarize what are quintessentially patterns of events occurring over time” (p. 6). The methodological limitation of choosing moments is that when frozen in time, these moments may not represent the continuity we seek in a full understanding of how narration world. Events evolve over time, and continuity is an important concept in my work. This “durative” will remain a limitation of this project’s ability to a) examine the evolution

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<sup>3</sup> As a cognitive psychologist from Columbia University, Bruner offers constructivist, reception-driven conceptualizations that tantalizingly touch upon ideological underpinnings and yet remain loyal to his discipline of cognitive psychology. Hence I only make a limited mention of Bruner .

of the effects of narration on media (il)literacy, and b) to observe the process as it happens.

Nonetheless, the media moments demonstrate snapshot evidence of the process.

**Key terms.** Several conceptual and operational definitions are located in the relevant sections of this chapter. However, I find it important, before moving on to the conceptual part of this work, to introduce the reader briefly to the most essential foundational terms in this dissertation, and to the style of delivering this work in writing. The reader may note that it is important to define these terms upfront because they are all problematic. Moreover, these are terms I employ throughout this work. Thereby, while I describe other terms as we go along, the reader may find it important to bear the delineations in mind.

A key term is *narration*, along with its close cousins. For our ideological definition of narration, Bhabha's (1990) perspective in "Narrating the Nation," the introductory chapter of his edited volume *Nations and Narrations*, is particularly useful. In it, the point in the narration of a nation is its vulnerable position from which an ambivalence in interpretations prevails. He writes: "[I]n that large and liminal image of the [nation] ... is a particular ambivalence that haunts the idea of the nation, the language of those who write of it and the lives of those who live it" (p. 1). Moreover, narration can be a subjective (like the narration of a protagonist in a novel) or an objective, dehumanized description (Dynes, 2014). This battlefield between the subjective and the objective sets up a perfect context for our study: We may not immediately know whether news narration should be seen as objective or subjective.

This dissertation situates the arguments in a narrative paradigm in which modern news institutions use norms and values while narrating our world to their constituents. As we will see, dominant mediated narrations and their dialectical relationship with non-institutional mediated narrations form the crux of my evaluation. As the institution that is contracted to disseminate

information and public opinion, the news media aid *narrative* construction. The term narrative is interpreted differently from narration. As a noun, narrative can mean a story—the content of the text. A narration is the form—how the story is told. Possible adjectival forms of narration are narrative and narrational, which have related meanings. As an adjective, I prefer narrative. So, “narrative construction” means “construction by narration.”

The premise of narrative construction challenges construction of meaning by *discourse*. The term discourse drags in various meanings not only in the lexical sense, but even within mass communication literature. For example, a popular contemporary meaning of discourse, used especially in critical discourse analysis, is “language use in speech and writing as a social practice [that] implies a dialectical relationship in society” (Wodak and Busch, 2004, p. 108). In Foucault’s sense of term, discourse refers to “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations” (Weedon, 1997, p. 105). In my work, discourse is the promised but elusive dialectical feature that indexes the construction of knowledge—an outcome of literacy—in modern societies. In this sense, therefore, discourse must be seen as a binary to narration.

In media studies, discourse is a process that results in a text. Commonly, *text* refers to a finished product. In *The Rustle of Language*, Roland Barthes (1986) draws a distinction between work and text. In this delineation, work is the artifact and text is the act of making meanings of it. An essential feature of a text, in my definition, is that it is available to the reader. As Barthes says, it is experienced: Text “traverses” the work (p. 59). By the function that it carries an accumulation of meanings, it is also irreducible, rendering it impossible for this work to take, say, a quantitative approach.

I seek to shed light on both how ideology is constructed and how it is disseminated. The *context* behind the text is crucial in that effort. It is the context that defines ideology. Even when we embark on the aesthetics of spectacles, narrations, and narrative performances, the ideological context determines their value. I will explain this as we discuss Adorno's aesthetic theory—the premise of which is the ideological nature of aesthetics. Thus, the methods I employ in this project are employed to that end.

On the *normativity* of discourse, Habermas (2001/2014) writes of normative validity, whereby “valid norms must be capable in principle of meeting with the rationally motivated approval of everyone affected under conditions that neutralize all motives except that of cooperatively seeking the truth” (p. 19). Normative refers to the norms and procedures during speech that lead to communicative agreement. These are essentially modes of justification whereby we determine the validity of claims. A feature of Habermas's use of the term, however, is that consensus is needed before communication occurs. In my work, even in the deeper grammatical and ideological sense rooted in Habermas, I do not make that temporal distinction. Rather, I invoke the idea that agency, when it is implied as a discursive tool of transformation, should be placed under question. I use the term normative to describe a prescriptive nature of truths as narrated.

Deriving from these examinations, as we will learn, it follows that the instrument utilized by mediated narration—that is, the enabler and disabler of stories—is aesthetic control, chiefly over visibility and invisibility. Hence my terms *visibilization* and *invisibilization*. This process “presents” or “absents” communities to stories and stories to communities. These terms are especially relevant when I suggest a methodology of media illiteracy using visibility/invisibility and presence/absence. This model, rather than a recommended model of media literacy practice,

is intended to synthesize the inference we may draw from the three artifacts in this study—that media illiteracy is a narrative construction, that it is bound by the factors of invisibilized and absented realities.

Lastly, the use of the term *media prosumer* needs a more detailed treatment. I am mainstreaming this less-used term. I prefer the term media prosumers as an alternative to the term audience. One, audience often refers to an amorphous collective and ignores the dialectics and dynamism of communities. Two, in its purest sense, an audience is more passive than a user. On the other hand, the word user seems to me to afford too much agency and ignore structural frameworks altogether. It carries the same problem as its neoliberal counterpart, consumer. Where I use the term consumer, viewer, or audience, I intentionally employ those terms to allude to one-way communication.

The portmanteau term *prosumer* (producer + consumer) may be traced back to Alvin Toffler's (1980) *The Third Wave* where he proposes that people who produce their own goods and services are a phenomenon of the post-Industrial Age. Predictably, the world of business has found much use for the term. In Toffler's prosumerism, the incentive for this form of production-consumption can be monetary or other. Prosumerism has prominently found application in smart-grid technology in power and water transmission and distribution systems in which the grid, cabling, and metering technologies offer a two-way transmission. A consumer may generate power through rooftop solar and transmit it back to the grid.

The interactive media environment also finds apt application in the term, but the purpose here is not to extract more neoliberal or political economy critique from the term or its use. Spanish scholars Berrocal et al. (2014) reinterpreted and mainstreamed media prosumerism in our interactive media environment while discussing how it applies to political infotainment. In it,

they argue that as this new environment has enabled the mobilization of “immaterial work” of prosumers, the prosumer has become a “hegemonic element within the communication setting” (p. 66). My work takes a path that is somewhat related to but not completely aligned with this line of argument. I see embedded in prosumerism’s ideology a field that is at once enabling and disabling. Over the length of this work, this will become evident.

Here, the term media prosumer refers to the consumer-producer who is also a narrator. Thus, the emergence of the media prosumer might also herald a dialectical world in which we discursively construct our world. As I frame our objects of study in our ubiquitous social media contexts, I view the role of the prosumer as not only the interpreter of meanings but the expresser of those meanings forward. Thus, the prosumer’s text traverses across space and time. In the continuous production-consumption cycle of modern narration across media-space, the consumer is also the producer of mediated texts, as much as the producer also their consumer.

**Poststructural style.** My theoretical and methodological leanings are poststructural, founded, mainly, on those of Pierre Bourdieu and Jacques Derrida. Uncertain spaces are a marker of poststructuralism. Bourdieu introduces notions of the uncertain space in our seemingly structured modern roles, which I will describe as I explain in due course. Another marker is intertextuality. In Derrida’s (1967/1997) idea of intertextuality, an entire urban landscape can be woven like an endless fabric of differently interpretable texts. In film theory, an intertextual critic approaches relationships between texts, between authors and texts, and “between a text and some stable reality that it presumably merely serves to reinforce” (Metz, 2004, p. 5). In Julia Kristeva’s (who coined the term intertextuality founded on Mikhail Bakhtin’s work) definition, the term involves components of a textual system, and is the “the transposition of one or more systems of signs into another” (Kristeva, 1969/1980, p. 15). In this case, too, my interpretation of

the term is different from the original sense. It is in fact more in agreement with Derrida. On that grounding, intertextuality in my methodology connects different fields in which texts and processes operate.

I hope my project builds a meta-theoretical solution that might lead the academic avant-garde toward something that can re-orient us prosumers as we attempt to survive the effects of 21<sup>st</sup> century systems of control and become truly independent news generators. In this attempt, we must break disciplinary walls to arrive at that lighting studio I alluded to before. A feature of a poststructural approach is that it is almost necessarily interdisciplinary: An ordered disciplinary use of theory has resulted in a confused understanding of media literacy. Thus, for example, as Bourdieu and Derrida find a front seat in my work, they are also seated next to Adorno and Barthes. The idea is to apply their best maneuvers as applicable here.

My approach is interdisciplinary in the widest sense of that overused and trite buzzword. *One*, it is grounded in disciplines and theories that include media studies, news studies, communication studies, critical thought, sociology, and education. *Two*, while my work situates itself in social theory, it also relies upon a wider sense of critical theory, and defies unproductive divisions between thinkers bound in narrow academic disciplines. *Three*, in alignment with poststructuralist thought, I find it useful to study the derivation of narrative meanings from social hierarchies. The interdisciplinarity in this dissertation work demands a width of conceptual grounding. The structure of this work adopts a mosaic-like literature review. In the sense of the term mosaic used here, each section is a critical discussion of existing literature, building up to the final idea, but also building its own internal argument.

The term *mosaic* appears in Marshall McLuhan (1962) description of *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. However, my application is somewhat different from McLuhan's. His approach seeks to

be an answer to a problem in that it is “the only practical means of revealing causal operations in history ... of perpetually interacting forms that have undergone kaleidoscopic transformation” (p. 0). Mine is simply a style that seeks to avoid excessive structuring of literature, but rather, embed it into the flow of my arguments. It also indexes the rather eclectic nature of that literature, choosing on the merit of the relevance of what a philosopher or scholar or researcher says in particular contexts of my work.

Furthermore, I am interested in investigating how the form of institutional texts is structured to index contextualized and generalizable meanings. So, I find it appropriate that the form in my literature speaks to the grandiose nature of that project. I borrow from previous theorists with the aim to move on and make the original ideas I bring to the table. My critique, drawing from literature, film, mass communication, journalism, etc., is eclectic because I use scholars to evidence or thread through a precise set of points I make, using a diversity of intellectual shards to glue those thoughts.

This matrix-like approach demands the use of metaphors, and this project and my writing are replete with them. Additionally, this is a good fit into the poststructuralist approach. A poststructural style surfaces in my text organically and naturally, paralleling the unpacking of the destabilized media literacy of the media prosumer and uncertain spaces in which communities exist. As I have mentioned above, the field of my examination for this work is set in the Indian context. As someone who has grown up and lived in India and the United States, I occupy the insider-outsider position (which I describe in more detail in the next section), straddling a continuum of sociocultural locations consciously and, in this research project, purposefully. Of course, English will always remain a second language to me and I may use turns of phrase in my writing that may look strange to a native English reader.



## **This moment in time and space**

After Modi became India's Prime Minister in 2014 and after Trump occupied the White House in 2016, the practice of media literacy seemed to suddenly emerge out of the woodwork. Media literacy had quickly become a buzzword among academics and even among the public at large. As it became clear that democracy was under threat, like many media practitioners, I, too, felt the need to valiantly rescue our crumbling democracy. I made my efforts by writing newspaper and news portal columns, conducting workshops at schools, lecturing at colleges, and speaking at public seminars. Much of this moved to virtual space during the pandemic-instigated lockdown. In 2020, I launched "Being Responsible," a series of media literacy workshops for school-goers, and spoke at media colleges—virtually, of course, since the Covid-19 pandemic had injected itself into and consumed our real world by then. Then, in the fall of 2022, SIU assigned me to teach media literacy to undergraduate students—another educational experience for me.

In my interactions throughout, I found that students were ready to question the information they consumed if it came from public sources but not prepared to do so if it emerged from certain news platforms. This seemed practical in immediate terms but flawed as a methodology. If a corporation-funded fake news-busting website or a government-supported activity from which the ruling political party benefits were gaining from misinformation, that version of media literacy would only add to the problem. Thus began my foray that opened the doors to a quest for deeper understanding of media literacy. It seemed to me that media literacy had the scope to become one of the most important interventions in our media societies. However, its significant gaps became apparent over time.

The following paragraphs explain my positionality, somewhat autobiographically, as I situate myself in history and geography as a media literacy practitioner and a researcher. Next, I selectively and contextually trace the history of news in postcolonial India, adding to the abundantly available historical literature rather than repeating it. This will be my approach to the literature in general through this work. I then make a case for a critical evaluation of media literacy. I will return to media literacy in Chapter 6 to offer a methodological approach to it.

**The researcher's perch.** I have lived more than six years in Modi's India since 2014. Through these periods, I wrote columns and commentary in national dailies and news portals in India. I have observed two nations in the pandemic-influenced uncertainty, having lived in India through its initial year in 2020-21 and later in the United States, where I moved to complete my doctoral study.

A researcher's position is problematic because of their identity. This is not a unique experience, but if one were to write a book living in the contemporary environment of India, it is not without a certain chilling effect, a seed in one's mind about the repercussions of writing critically about the Hindu religion or about India in general. The Dalit movement, however, is strong enough to rebut strong-arming, and besides, this lowest-of-low castes forms a large vote bank. In the caste system, Savarnas are caste Hindus, or Hindus who are categorized under the caste system, unlike Dalits who do not find a place in it. Imagine various races on whom the most privileged race will practice racism—and then there are those who are so low down in the hierarchy of races that they do not belong to any race at all.

Given this intellectually tricky landscape of today's democratic-majoritarian-authoritarian environment of India for a writer, it should be unsurprising that the richness of intellectual democracy of the United States should be the safe space for research that I have

sought. An example is Suraj Yengde (2019), whose book *Caste Matters* caused a mild sensation in the scholarly circles, and comes from a lived experience of a Dalit identity. Indian reviewers, as though defending the dominant and the visible, charged him of not being objective, having perched himself in a location from where he cannot see the changes happening in his nation of origins.<sup>4</sup> Unlike many Indian university campuses, the United States still has bragging rights in that it protects voices like mine. That is the strength of intellectual democracy. After all, the greats have paved the way for this kind of migration of intellectual and critical freedom, from Hannah Arendt and Walter Benjamin from Hitler’s Germany to, more lately, Rwanda’s ethnic conflict victim Clemantine Wamariya. I do not claim to have Yengde’s advantage. However, I share with him the identity of an Indian writing from the safe haven of a U.S. university campus.

Even in the relative caution in a spooked post-Trump nation, the freedoms relative to the much more intense, direct, and mass forms of silencing in India are rather uninhibited and well-supported. India has become a prominent political and strategic partner for Western democracies, as it is situated in proximity to their new adversary China and Russia and strategically occupying a middle-of-the-road position. India’s political leadership is repeatedly and openly applauded by the self-proclaimed upholder of world democratic values, the United States. The optics of the overt endorsement (even if there is in-camera communication to the contrary) strengthen institutionalized discrimination and suppression of freedoms in India. The eerie uncertainty of what *could* happen—because of the exemplary nature of punitive action with more pervasive chilling effects—hangs over our heads like the proverbial Damocles sword.

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<sup>4</sup> See Jangir and Gochhayat’s (2021) review, which recounts those charges and “controversies.”

In July 2021, Gauhar Raza, a former chief scientist at the government’s Council of Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR), Apoorvanand, a well-known Hindi professor at Delhi University, and several other prominent persons from India, Poland, and the United States were expected to deliver lectures at an online event organized in association with New Jersey-based Montclair State University at Dr. Hari Singh Gour University, a central government university in BJP-governed Madhya Pradesh state. The theme was “Cultural and Linguistic Hurdles in the Achievement of Scientific Temper.” The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), the youth wing of BJP’s ideological parent, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), wrote an objection to the university, claiming that Raza and Apoorvanand bore an “anti-national mind-set” and “may disturb communal harmony.” They threatened the university with action. The police chief then also objected to the two names. Stating that the federal government did not grant permission to the event, the organizers canceled the event—the police even deployed personnel to ensure that no one participated.

The support to voices against intolerance is getting feeble. In 2021, Debasish Roy Chowdhury, an Indian journalist based in Hong Kong, and John Keane, an Australian professor, wrote a book evocatively titled *To Kill a Democracy: India’s Passage to Despotism*. The publishers, Oxford University Press (OUP), decided not to print the South Asia edition of the book and handed back the rights to the author to enable him to look for publishers independently. Media reports suggest that OUP’s decision emerged after a criticism of Roy Chowdhury in the *Organiser*, a periodical that supports the RSS.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Kakvi (2021) for the Madhya Pradesh report; Joshua (2021) for that on OUP’s decision.

Both Yengde and Roy Chowdhury are insiders who are located outside the field of action. As researchers, both insiders and outsiders bring advantages. In a social group, one's position may be that of an insider, allowing a more authentic and thick description and a deeper level of questioning; but critics argue that being an insider runs the risk of inherent biases and inability to bring an outsider's "dumb questions" into the process (Holmes, 2020, p. 5; Geertz, 1973). Insideness runs the peril of glossing over sociocultural realities that may be better visible to an outsider. On the other hand, the outsider's cultural sensitivity demands their ability to adapt to local practices, yet the outsidership may not evince all the answers. Regardless of whether ethnographer is an outsider or an insider, both are exposed to the outside world and educated enough to conduct such research.

**Insider-outsider.** Representation and presentation have thus gone hand-in-hand. Here, Robert Merton's (1972) foundational descriptions of *insider* (as a member) / *outsider* (as a non-member) may serve as a useful rule-of-thumb. Merton argues against the usage of a binary insider/outsider position. Instead, he says, the space is a continuum and boundaries separating insiders from outsiders are not fixed. A fuzzy boundary lies in a situational intersection. For example, a researcher's roots may lie in a village. The researcher may recognize but not fully understand local practices or rituals because they may be situationally located in a faraway city. Yet the villagers may therefore draw a familial connection of trust and communicative reassurance. The liminality of insider-outsider therefore ensures the entrée into a circle of trust, while also offering the detached objectivity needed for research.

While introducing the insider-outsider into our lexicon, I use the hyphen rather than the slash as the connecting punctuation to indicate the liminality: There is a progression in the researcher's own position. The dexterity of the inquiry may at least in part determine the

magnitude and direction of this progression. In other words, when a researcher applies their erudition and sensitivity in combination, they may progress from outsider to insider. The converse may result in an increased outsider position. The insider-outsider thus straddles a continuum in identity.

Now, onto that question of representation-presentation in the insider-outsider location. Here, I recall Linda Alcoff's (1992) categorizations of *speaking for*—which she calls a specific subset of representation—and *speaking about* as intertwined and inseparable. The process of discovering and speaking for another individual will have an impact on that represented individual. There is a problem speaking for others because a) the speaker's social identity cannot be altered and is valuable while representing other social identities, and b) depending on what that social location is, it can be “discursively dangerous” (pp. 6-7). The validity of such research is therefore questionable. On the other hand, no representation is devoid of “positionality, [social] location, or context” (p. 14) because of the *ritual* nature of utterance. This aligns with Alcoff's premise a). Premise b) is epistemic: Spheres of public discourse are locations of oppressive and counter-oppressive forces, but these forces are not equal. Because of these factors, the representative loses some meaning, thereby loss of control, during discourse.<sup>6</sup>

Alcoff points to a conundrum: If researchers do not represent the underprivileged, would it be tantamount to reneging on the responsibility that privilege places on us? Merely identifying the location of the speaker is not enough in interpreting representation—it is equally important to understand what the representation *does*, and what effects it has on whom. Moreover, as Alcoff

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<sup>6</sup> See Carey (2009, p. 16-17) for the distinction of ritual from transmission communication. As Carey argues, news is an invented form of culture.

argues, it is impossible to individualize self-representation: Every form of self-representation must also carry with it “participating in the creation and reproduction of discourses through which my own and other selves are constituted.”

This means full *representation* of the other is either flawed or impossible. Merely a form of *presentation* is possible. In Radha Hegde’s (2009) ethnography of a village in Tamil Nadu state, the researcher seeks to “render in text the vulnerability of subaltern experiences with a commitment to preserve the dignity of the lives” (p. 276). In that effort, “methodological transparency” is particularly demanding as to the subjectivity of the subaltern: Are they a subject, object, or both? The protagonist is Kumari, a cynical, angry mother of multiple daughters whom her neighbors call “completely irrational and crazy” and suspect of infanticide (although there had been no cases of infanticide). Kumari defends her position unapologetically. As the researcher descends into this unsettling world, she informs us about the corporal violence women experience there. Social worker Amrita, the researcher’s guide and interpreter, performs the role of an insider-outsider, a presenter-representer who eases the researcher into the milieu.

As a researcher, I find myself occupying a fluid insider-outsider space, often performing to requirement in dichotomous ways. On one hand my family on both sides is Brahmin, the highest in the Hindu caste order. On the other, my parents, well-educated, told me in my young age that the caste system should be shunned. I both reject my caste and practice my religion by participating in cultural festivals, even if perfunctorily.<sup>7</sup> This sometimes creates family conflicts

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<sup>7</sup> In Modi’s India, the BJP is trying to define religion on the basis of original identity. Several states (nine as in October 2022) governed by the BJP or its allies have passed “anti-conversion” laws. Hindu organizations regularly sponsor events where mass re-conversions into Hinduism are conducted. Samples may be seen in a news report by Jha (2017); another by *OpIndia*, a right-wing portal (Chhattisgarh, 2022). In general, in India, religion and caste are imagined as inherent and—now legally in some states—unchangeable.

as my outlook often creates a barrier within inner circles. For example, among the ultra-right sections of my extended family who, at informal family gatherings, might express a wish for Muslim genocide. This is a startling motif among insider gatherings.

Through my life, I have lived in rural pockets, big-city high-rises, and everything in between. Thus, I am not “rooted” either geographically or culturally. With my frequent relocations, I enjoyed and suffered the consequences of being an insider-outsider with only a functional interest in the vastly different local sociocultural systems. I was born in the mid-sized city of Mysore (now called Mysuru), leafy and beautiful, moderate in climate and conservative in outlook. I speak multiple languages, and settle in alien environments with comfort and flexibility. Language is a quick connector in Indian contexts—knowing a local language is a cultural door-opener. I attempt to use in my research my agnostic, unstable, fluid existence.

### **Continuity in postcolonial narration**

Before I arrive at the postcolonial context in which this study is set, I will briefly situate our current moment in history—a moment of convergence inasmuch as oppressive practices that seem to defy history and geography. In this global environment, there has been an overwhelming flood of conflicting narratives about the nature of coronavirus, access to and effects of vaccines in a confusing environment of national politics, diplomacy, science, and communication.

**Our moment.** Axel Honneth (1988/1991), the German philosopher who introduced a theory of recognition, remarks that it is important to be aware of the moment in the history of theory in which we find ourselves. Yet, the theoretical challenge in capturing history is that just as each language contains nuances that are untranslatable, local research contexts cannot be entirely generalized. The researcher may reconcile this by acknowledging the contextualization



of time and location, which becomes necessary as though it were a temporal and spatial disclaimer to the theoretical advancement.

An example is the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic that is changing the norms of life around the world. Virtual and hybrid workspaces with virtual communication began as a new entrant but are proving to be an enduring practice. The study of the sociological, psychological, ethical, and narrative consequences of this experiment is ongoing. Mired in a flux between information and misinformation, trust and distrust, modernity and tradition, we find ourselves questioning the assumptions of rationality.

In our excellent moment in history, I gather the new elements in our communicative experience and offer explanations. In this endeavor, I situate myself in a context of lived experience and observe how Indian news media organizations have navigated the new normal.

In the United States, 1,648 books were banned over the period of a year between July 2021 and June 2022, the most frequently banned being Maia Kobabe's *Gender Queer*. There is no evidence that critical race theory (CRT) is taught as part of school curricula, yet the reason states have banned most books is race or sexuality. The unwillingness among many conservative groups to let unpleasant history be included as part of curricula in the world's oldest and best-recognized democracy is stunning.

In Narendra Modi's India, federal school curricula have included chapters with personal anecdotes of his success stories. An anthology of 17 stories called *Bal Narendra* (Narendra the Child) was published shortly before his ascendancy as Prime Minister. The state of Maharashtra spent much more money to buy books about Narendra Modi in 2018 than it did on Mohandas Gandhi and India's constitution writer Babasaheb Ambedkar. Meanwhile, chapters on personalities who were earlier considered heroes are being removed: When the BJP won

elections and formed the state government of Karnataka, it cut chapters on one of the state's most celebrated war heroes, Tipu Sultan, in 2020. Tipu Sultan was a Muslim king of Mysore. In April 2023, a central school syllabus "purged" from history texts portions that traced RSS's dislike of Mahatma Gandhi and the ban on RSS after his assassination in 1948.<sup>8</sup>

As the world heals from a devastating pandemic, we are in flux, uncertain what shape a so-called new normal world will take. Institutional narrations of vaccine science are having a bearing on public trust; the increasingly virtual human communication will influence and impact narrative constructions of reality. The amplitude, or field, between the hyper-articulation and silencing of a text is unprecedented and enormous. A text may include fake news but may be sensational enough for people to engage in sharing it casually and enthusiastically, while another text may be fact-based but not sexy enough to be circulated in the same manner. As a result, a media user may have more access to the fake text than to the factual one.

Solutions from media literacy have been immediate—tools of fake news-busting have emerged. In the process, media literacy has become rather narrowly focused and practically limited. Although misinformation may have existed since the formation of societies, disruptive moments like pandemics attract extra attention to news-we-can-use that may lead to real action, like vaccine-related information. It is as though the development of media literacy practice was interrupted in the mid-2010s, and we have not yet switched back to a less need-based and urgent demand, a more organic development of the field. However, the experience through these years offers a scholar the opportunity to pause and take stock of our issues with narrated information.

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<sup>8</sup> See O'Kane (2022) on U.S. book ban; Maharashtra schools (2018) regarding the book purchases; Babu (2020) for the Tipu Sultan decision; Chopra (2023) for the latest deletion of significant portions of history from school syllabi.

**A postcolonial narration.** In general, news has been presented as a social activity constituted in frames of newsworthiness that set agendas.<sup>9</sup> This constructivist view is particularly prominent in Gaye Tuchman’s (1978) participant observation work—considered foundational to our understanding of modern news processes—of the routinization of the unexpected in which news becomes as a reproducer of the status quo. However, the ideological ramifications of this trend need more unpacking. Over the course of this chapter’s various sections, we will return to normative examples of how news relates to modernization.

Much of the history of news particularly emerges from the Western lens. In contrast, in postcolonial India and other well-documented colonial spaces, journalism joined resistance movements rather than routinizing the status quo. Hachen and Scotton (2016) term the “triumph of Western journalism” the trend of globalization not only of news but of the movement of people, commodities, and ideas—but in a Western sense of norms, ethics, and ideology (p. 247). However, the ideological ramifications of this trend need more unpacking. Over the course of this chapter’s various sections we will return to normative examples of this modernization.

Perhaps the most normative historical critique of the critical formulations of news can be found in Jurgen Habermas’s (1962/1989) historical critique of modern-day neoliberal journalism. I do not wish to simply repeat what Habermas describes in his abundantly cited notions of the bourgeois public sphere except that the neoliberal values that advertising and public relations have brought into news a confounding of the original public sphere, a streamlined and

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<sup>9</sup> The objective here is not to introduce the reader to or seek to add value to existing foundational literature on news studies. Therefore, I refrain from producing any elaborate discussion here.

democratic form of journalism. Modern scholars have taken up the question of whether the public sphere is, or ever was, relevant.

For example, while discussing Jurgen Habermas's "rational-critical discourse" in the bourgeois public sphere, Michael Schudson (1992) rejects the very idea that an ideal public sphere ever existed or could even exist. The idea that a public sphere existed in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century is flawed especially because of the foundational premise that Habermas makes—that the discourse was rational-critical (p. 146). Can we fathom, Schudson asks, rhetorically, that the success of the legendary Lincoln-Douglas debates of 1858 can be attributed to public rationality? Or should we assume more realistically that the public attended these debates to "have a good time" or for other reasons (p. 145-146)? To Schudson, there is not much to indicate even general interest, let alone participation, in public affairs. Christian Fuchs (2014) identifies digital labor as the continuation of the exploitation of labor on social media. According to Fuchs, three "antagonisms" of the social media currently operate under the clutches of corporate interests: a) the economic antagonism between users' data and social media corporations' profit interests, b) the political antagonism between users' privacy and the surveillance-industrial complex as well as citizens' desire for accountability of the powerful and the secrecy of power, and c) the civil society antagonism between the creation of public spheres and the corporate and state colonization of these spheres (p. 78). However, Fuchs follows Habermas's trend of thought and recommends a model of social media that is underpinned by *public* discourse that he calls "public service media." The biggest risk in a state-funded public sphere-like social media is that it would hand over to the state immense and possibly irrevocable powers of collecting our data and using them against us.

Here, I would like to make a distinction between *news* and *journalism*. Although journalism is inseparably integrated into news, I see news as a systemic process—seamless, institutional. Journalism is a method—disruptive, individual. Journalism ends where news begins. News engages in an ideological suturing of the events of the world. It manages journalism. News is also, of course, bound by the neoliberal systems of political economy. In later chapters, we will see how the narration of a news anchor sutures the story of a crime, whereas an individual reporter interrupts the flow of news and ruptures the suture. This is a factor of the practice of news media system, embedded in which a story has the potential to become a myth. In alignment with this distinction, we may question whether news systems, rather than journalists, should be naturally assumed to be representatives of societies. News systems are co-opted into political and social ideologies—positions by which they present and absent, visibilize and invisibilize equally if not more effectively.

An updated documentation of postcolonial world news systems lies in the much-cited repository *The World News Prism: Digital, Social, and Interactive* by Hachten and Scotton (2016). After beginning with a rather benign truism that “[j]ournalism has been undergoing rapid changes” (p. 9), the authors locate the colonial legacy, globalization, creolization, and hegemonic presence of the English language:

The most admired and imitated model of journalism evolved in England and the United States. A leader of any nation who wants to be widely understood in today's world must be able to speak English in a televised or radio interview. The same is true for public figures and celebrities. And the new media of digital distribution are mainly in English. (p. 61)

What the authors observe about this “language of the world” is evocative and elegant. The admiration of the colonial hegemony seeps into newsrooms from Malaysia to India and Africa,

not merely in the form of language but in terms of dressing, behavior, and attitude. It is almost as though speaking in English provides a special place of privilege and authority.

To remind the reader, our immediate empirical interest lies in India, and I will dwell on that specific context. Moreover, I limit my investigation to the audiovisual news media, so I will not discuss radio or print here. There, the tenor, framing, and affiliative fervor of the content we see in the Indian news media is nationalistic but the texture, look, and structures are Western.

Numerous scholars have periodically and amply situated Indian news media in history (eg., Chitty, 1992; Vishwanath and Karan, 2000; Wildermuth, 2001; Kumar, 2013). I will not review them here. Rather, as a synthesis, I will divide the Indian media history into four divisions in chronology and very briefly describe the phases of history:

1. 1947 to 1991, where development themes relating to the development agenda resulted in government-controlled radio and television for the vast illiterate majority, coupled with the private wisdom of newspapers and magazines for the literate—a clear distinction from the legacy of the British *raj* that continued.
2. 1992 to 2001, the decade after the media were liberalized in India and private channels competed with government-owned ones. On private radio, news is not permitted. In news media development, this was the learning stage, with new technology whose regulation barred live news and whose economy was prohibitive enough for channels to draw the curtains each night before midnight.
3. 2001 to 2014: As continuation of taking cautious steps in liberalization, live news was finally introduced in 2001. When the 2002 Gujarat riots were covered live, the news media took some of the blame for its role in their escalation. Later, in 2008, when terrorists sieged Mumbai and went around its streets gunning down people at random, the

news media's live coverage gave away secure locations—and the media channels were severely criticized.

4. Post-2014: This has been an era of a politically divided news media system. India is the largest producer of news—and this became a good premise for one of the Modi government's first soft appropriations. Channels and later newspapers became overt and sometimes extreme in their partisanship. A politician who supported Modi's party financed the Republic TV in 2017.

Although Western technology and models are widely in use, Indian government tried to replace this hegemony by controlling television news. In television, Doordarshan, the network claims to be independent of government influence in content—only financed and promoted by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting under a public corporation called Prasar Bharati. The network has grown from its initiation in 1959 as an experiment, then in 1965 as single-channel, development-themed national broadcaster into a maze of 34 terrestrial, cable and satellite channels—many of them in regional languages—with presence on air and online, including on the social media channel YouTube (Prasar Bharati, n.d.). The government evolved a quasi-development “mixed model” that aimed to place equal emphasis on education, information, and entertainment. In that model, India neither affiliated itself fully to evolutionism (self-reliance and endogenous development) nor to diffusionism (cultural borrowing), but a diverse mix of cultural and informational diversity. Much of the entertaining programming also aimed at some form of developmental content. Post-liberalization economic values found parallels in television (see, for example, Chitty, 1992). On one hand, as private channels (such as the homegrown Zee Network) were born or (such as Rupert Murdoch's Star Network) brought in, Doordarshan's format and content both remained national and unifying—

somewhat artificially. Nanjundaiah (1995) terms this a form of “internal imperialism.” On the other, the 1990s shows showcased the aspirations of affluence among the burgeoning middle class. Its developmental role changed after India’s economic liberalization policy of 1991. Doordarshan segmented its publics on the basis of content as more channels were introduced and developmental shows were replaced by shows in the entertainment genre to boost popularity.

Seven decades after India’s independence, the Indian media’s elitist bias has been on a resurgence. India scholar Sandhya Rao’s (2016) essay notes the complex nature of this bias, which may reside within a colonial mindset. Citing another study, she argues that Indian media’s bias is clear, and that “unfortunately, they may be emulating their international counterparts” who have framed India in terms of a conflict between the modern and the underdeveloped. For example, regarding the news coverage of a 2012 rape in New Delhi, Rao remarks: “The rape victim who was murdered was a medical student and portrayed as Westernized, while her male assailants were depicted as migrant workers and slum dwellers (pp. 127-128).” We may easily see from later chapters how this elitism-by-contrast links up with mediated constructions of landscapes into images. In them, the other is shunned. India’s hyper-visible urban space of “Potemkin village” is strategically constructed as a media spectacle, invisibilizing all else. In the chapter “Performances of Lakhimpur Kheri,” we will observe how a news anchor discredits farmers. In “Invisibility in Boolgarhi,” when a journalist tries to break through this suturing, institutions quickly discredit her in order to patch up the presentation of social order.

Television news channels have managed to increase their universe using attention-grabbing marketing gimmickry, enhancing their routinized and continuous narration. Only five percent of the television-viewing universe watched news even in mid-2000s. That figure rose to 10.4 percent in 2020 but largely attributed to the pandemic, lockdown, and our general inability



to be out there to experience reality. The figure slid back to 6.6 percent in 2022.<sup>10</sup> In the 1990s, a few channels, including news-based ones like TVi, folded up because of lack of advertising revenues. Several others struggled to survive. In contrast, in 2022, with nearly 400 channels out of a total of 898 licensed channels, India is host to the largest number of news channels in the world. There were 11 English-language news channels in operation in 2022, attracting a disproportionate 31 percent of advertisements, a large portion from the government and government-related agencies.<sup>11</sup> Around 210 million households own television sets in India, an impressive 84 percent of the 250 million households overall. News continues to be the third-preferred television genre in India after general entertainment and movies. In the mid-to-late 2000s, news television became an attractive proposition. The 9/11 terror attacks, the 2001 earthquake, the infamous 2002 Gujarat riots, the 2008 Mumbai terror attacks, and construction of Modi as a cult figure have added to the aesthetic value and the *desirability* of news. In 2003, newspapers, languishing from the onslaught of news television, started making newspapers a more visually appealing medium. Broadsheets were converted into tabloid-size publications. Infographics accompanied most front-page stories. Pages are multicolored and include supplements with glamorous photographs and non-news content. Younger readership is the new target.

In the 2010s, digital news became serious business. In that technology, stories use “lead images” as a design element mandated by most content management systems. As a result, a digital news story that routinely picks up a wire report and rewrites the story of a murder is

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<sup>10</sup> From a news report (Bansal 2022) that observed the figure for most groups of television viewers over four weeks.

<sup>11</sup> From a report by Kapoor and Bhambri (2022).

unlikely to show actual pictures. Instead, stock representative images are substitutes—the close-up image of a bloody hand, feet of a dead body tied together in a morgue. The news process thus provides routinized continuity in the narration of even shocking, disruptive events.

Since the second half of the 2010s, India’s press freedom has taken a particularly slippery trajectory. Channels complied with government threats and allurements more than ever before. The government became a major investor in advertisements on these channels, controlling at will how to spend it—sometimes using a reward-and-punish strategy to control the content that the platforms carry. Already ranked in the Freedom of the Press rankings at a lowly 87th among 137 countries in 2002, India slid drastically to 140th in 2019 and 150th in 2022 among 180 countries.<sup>12</sup> Under the Modi government, press freedom has suffered so much that he, as Prime Minister, has never held a proper press conference in India. The political opposition frequently alleges that his office routinely instructs private news channels what political content they should or should not broadcast.

In the new social media environment especially in the 2020s, the government has strategized effective management of public communication, whether it is *to* the public or *from* private individuals. When a social media user publishes a post, its visibility is sanctioned by algorithms, our new editors. Monitoring and editorial scrutiny in this space are not stated roles as they would be in mainstream news media. They are invisible, unstated, and behind the scenes—and often manipulated by national agendas. The absence of privacy seems normal in the age of technology. We act as routine, presuming our communicative agency. The 2020 IT Rules are an

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<sup>12</sup> Reporters Without Borders (n.d.) index. Another major freedom index from Freedom House (n.d.) has downgraded India to a “partly free” nation in political rights and civil liberties.

example. This new law empowers the Indian government to extract private citizens' data and texts from social media platform providers. The interactive social media environment has become an exciting field where the ordinary individual seems technologically empowered to challenge literally anything. Citizen journalism is another enablement of interactive media's availability on smartphones, which are widely available now. Several scholars such as Rodrigues (2010) have amply illustrated the status of citizen journalism in India. This hypercommunicative enablement should by no means indicate a public-driven transformation or unfettered empowerment.<sup>13</sup>

There is ample criticism about the role of social media platforms in undermining democracy (eg., Vaidhyathan, 2018; Vaidhyathan, 2021). Siva Vaidhyathan (2021) charges Facebook with being a “threat to democracy.” In his (earlier) book, *Antisocial Media: How Facebook Disconnects Us and Undermines Democracy*, Vaidhyathan (2018) writes:

Those who study or follow the rise of authoritarianism and the alarming erosion of democracy around the world would by 2017 list India, Indonesia, Kenya, Poland, Hungary, and the United States as sites of Facebook's direct contribution to violent ethnic and religious nationalism, the rise of authoritarian leaders, and a sort of mediated cacophony that would hinder public deliberation about important issues, thus undermining trust in institutions and experts (p. 3).

In October 2021, Frances Haugen, a whistleblower who left the microblogging site Facebook and testified before U.S. Congress, revealed the insidious nature of the operations of the social media space.<sup>14</sup> The testimony revealed that Facebook knew it harmed vulnerable communities

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<sup>13</sup> I have challenged the idea that we should now consider social media corporations merely as publishers, arguing that they are also the new editors of public text. (See Nanjundaiah, 2021a).

<sup>14</sup> Despite a request filed by the (then) Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Information Technology Shashi Tharoor—also a prominent leader of the main opposition party, the Indian National Congress (Congress, for short)—the Speaker of the Lower House of the Indian Parliament did not agree to grant a Facebook whistleblower permission to depose there. Media reports later speculated that “Sophie Zhang [another Facebook whistleblower] or

but set algorithms to behave in apparent editorial control in prioritizing posts rather than simply organizing them chronologically (Ortutay and Klepper, 2021). Our new challenge to communicative action lies in algorithm-driven institutions, where, instead of a presumed Panopticon-like surveillance, algorithms literally monitor every communicative action. In this artificial intelligence (AI)-enabled environment, most extreme voices gain “clicks,” and then algorithms make those posts more available than moderate ones. Rather than acting as thinking individuals, the media prosumer adopts strategies that are derived from a user’s manual—playing a seemingly transformative role in a controlled laboratory that seeks to maintain status quo.

**A precipitous path.** Over Modi’s years, an environment of uncertainty has unfolded for practitioners of critical thought, whether it is in commentary, journalism, academia, research, or other scholarship, and the trend—not only in India but in South Asia at large—has not escaped the notice of even Western scholars. I find Sten Widmalm’s (2022) edited volume particularly interesting because the book is called *The Routledge Handbook of Autocratization in South Asia*. On Modi’s India, an 11-chapter section focuses on the “building of the ethnic state.” Surprisingly, it devotes only small subsections to the news media: For example, a chapter by Devin Joshi mentions how the government uses intimidation tactics against journalists and there have been “accusations of neo- authoritarian practices in state-media relations” (p. 29). Widmalm’s book illustrates real concerns about what the loss of freedoms in India means.

Risks have increased dramatically without providing the time to adjust. In the e-book *The Voice of Freedom: On Democracy, Culture, and the Nation*, Ramon Magsaysay Award-winning

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other foreigners might have to wait longer to depose before a parliamentary panel since authorities are working on ‘new modalities’ for foreign nationals appearing before House panels” (See Chatterji, 2022).

journalist Ravish Kumar (2018) devotes Chapter 3 to a “national project of instilling fear,” summing it up thus: “[A] mob of lunatics, armed with manufactured opinions and primed by fake news, has risen amongst us. That mob will surround us and kill us—whether we are alone, or we number in the thousands.” The increasingly authoritarian ways of the government are a cause for concern for naysayers who have more conventional notions of democratic freedoms, and write at potential personal risk. I write newspaper commentaries that critique the Modi government’s policies. My lectures on media literacy are peppered with examples of narrative manipulations by the government. As I wrote a chapter in 2022 for a scholarly book on digital journalism in South Asia published by a major international publisher, its India-based editors advised me and other authors not to write anything “controversial.” At frighteningly short intervals, news sources inform us of incidents where the police and central investigative agencies are subjecting members of civil society, including journalists, academics, students, comedians, activists, opposition leaders, and members of minority religions to shaming, harassment, torture, arrest, framing of false charges under non-bailable legal sections meant for suspects of terrorism. Incidents of lynch-mobs, who shoot and post videos of their acts, and those of government agencies’ silencing of voices, have been amplified on news and social media, they have precipitated in a chilling effect across the nation.

The trend further escalated in 2022 to a new level of Talibanization. In one particularly ghastly incident, the Gujarat police, wearing civilian clothes, caught Muslim men after

suspecting them of pelting stones at a community dance, held them against an electric pole in a village square, and thrashed them with batons as the village crowd cheered them on.<sup>15</sup>

Fake news seems irrational because there is rationality to news. Calls to genocide by Hindu groups are now given with regularity—such is the power of narration that it results in social action. The fear of genocide from mediated evocation of hateful action is fresh in our minds. The genocide over the summer of 1994 in Rwanda is perhaps the most shameful example of the failure of news media in recent history (although I fear the Indian news media, with dangerously bigoted content emanating from several news platforms, is climbing up the charts). Radio Mille Collines collaborated with the extremists among the Hutu tribes and urged them to kill moderate Hutus and Tutsi tribespeople. The killings remained under the surface. Even the number of people who were massacred remains disputed, ranging from 491,000 to 800,000.<sup>16</sup> Scholars have pointed to the irony of rationality, holding it as a co-culprit in the media-triggered Rwanda genocide. Lemarchand (1995) says, it is “no less ‘rational’ than that which presided over the extermination of millions of human beings in Hitler’s Germany or Pol Pot’s Cambodia” (p. 8). Noam Schimmel (2011) points to elements that index the mediated invisibility of this genocide as it was being meticulously plotted—racism, a lack of media interest in reporting a brewing condition rather than dramatic disruptive events, and media’s uncritical reportage of government statements that denied or downplayed the genocide. The cloak of rationality that

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<sup>15</sup> See Outlook Web Desk (2022) for image and news story.

<sup>16</sup> USAID-affiliated Lemarchand (1995) mentions the number as “half a million” (p. 8).

news media wore, undermining the enormity of the genocide, is not limited to the Rwandan case. I argue that such institutionally collaborated truth-making is the norm.<sup>17</sup>

This favorable positioning of a neo-authoritarian leader among democratic nations continues to find allies. BBC Documentary, a division of the famed public British audiovisual news network, released a documentary film on Modi in January 2023 to U.K. audiences. The two-part film is based on ground reporting of BBC journalists and an internal U.K. government's investigation into the 2002 riots in the state of Gujarat, where Modi was the chief minister at that time. In those riots, about 1,000 people were killed, mostly Muslims. The Supreme Court of India controversially gave Modi a clean chit, citing lack of sufficient evidence. The film revealed that the U.K. probe, which preceded the judgment, not only found Modi culpable for presiding over the “pogrom” but held him directly responsible for it, and seemingly for public lynching of Muslims, which now occurs regularly. The documentary, which was made available only to U.K. audiences, irked Modi's supporters. The Indian government was quick to dismiss it as propaganda by past colonial masters with a colonial mindset. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, the Indian-origin Prime Minister Rishi Sunak reacted to a question in Parliament, stating that while he does not stand for persecution “anywhere,” he did not agree with the documentary's characterization of Modi.<sup>18</sup> Expectedly, most of the Indian media platforms hailed this as Britain's support to Modi—with no ironic juxtaposition to the Indian government's dismissal as a colonist's propaganda (e.g., “Rishi Sunak defended PM Narendra Modi”; “Rishi

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<sup>17</sup> Independent organization Genocide Watch warns of an impending genocide in India. See Genocide Watch (2021). While this may come true, a sudden outbreak of massacre is unlikely—Hindutva extremism has invested in gradual increments of smaller incidents rather than in anything so dramatic as to attract world attention.

<sup>18</sup> See India government criticizes (2023).

Sunak shuts down Pak-origin UK MP over BBC documentary on PM Modi”).<sup>19</sup> In its overkill, the Indian government went on to “ban” the film, which was already not available in India, and used “emergency powers” in the IT Act to instruct Twitter to pull down any tweet mentioning or linking any pirated versions of the film. Amidst Twitter owner Elon Musk’s repeated claims that Twitter would be a platform for free speech, Twitter promptly complied with this instruction. Defiantly, students of several reputed universities in India screened pirated versions on their campuses, creating a media spectacle. When police and university administrations tried to stop them, sometimes by cutting off power supply and at other times by arresting student leaders, they shared it on their smartphones in watch-parties. As institutions collaboratively tried to stem the narrations that ran contrary to a carefully constructed image, technology collaborated with *non*-institutions—individual student groups—to expose holes in the narration.

Meanwhile, in the face of the religious division, migrant worker deaths, and other reports of mishandling during the extended lockdown during 2020 and 2021, Biden repeatedly praised Modi for his handling of the pandemic, visibly condoning authoritarianism while targeting China.<sup>20</sup> In one photo-op, U.S. President Joe Biden is seen with his arm around Modi’s shoulder, in another, guffawing together intimately. The optics of mutual back-patting are unmistakable.

These political and ideological acts do not make our moment unique in history in the sense that our societies have suffered oppression of direct and indirect forms. Nazi Germany is the most recalled example here. Yet the world over, the call for media literacy has never been more strident.

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<sup>19</sup> See Mojo Story (2023); Rishi Sunak (2023). Most Indian news platforms use the prefix PM, for Prime Minister, for Modi. The Indian media added no prefix for Sunak. Many news styles disallow the inclusion of honorific prefixes such as “Mr.”

<sup>20</sup> See Heer (2022).



## **The problem of media literacy**

The practice of media literacy has largely remained at pedagogical levels and experimentative. Moreover, we have framed media literacy in the same individualistic terms as education. The pursuit of this practice has been successful in specific, ad hoc ways. Legislative success and its rollout among many high school districts is an example. Learning technical tools to construct basic communication and understanding disinformation have been the main areas of focus. Definitions of media literacy have remained vague and narrow, and effectiveness of the practice is questionable. Independent organizations now offer training programs in media literacy for teachers and misinformation-busting tools for dispelling misinformation.

Here, I will keep the focus on media literacy in the United States and India. I will problematize its conceptualizations and explain the problem. I will pick up this thread of our discussion in the chapter, “Towards Demystification of Media Illiteracy.”

**Origins of practice.** In the 1940s, Wisconsin Joint Committee for Better Radio Listening (WJCBRL) published monthly listings that recommended “good listening.” WJCBRL became the National Telemedia Council (NTC), among the first known entities of what we may retrospectively call media literacy. Recently, NTC renamed itself as International Council for Media Literacy (IC4ML), documenting and recommending global practices of media literacy.<sup>21</sup>

The first institutional definition of media literacy in the United States emerged in 1992 after rounds of acerbic debate at the Media Literacy National Leadership Conference on Media Literacy, organized in Washington, D.C., by the Aspen Institute “to shape a national framework for media literacy.” Policies were first discussed at a national level for pedagogic application.

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<sup>21</sup> See IC4ML (n.d.)

The definition was that media literacy is “the ability of a citizen to access, analyze, and produce information for specific outcomes.”<sup>22</sup> This definition is problematic at two levels. First, the emphasis on the individual (*a citizen*) continues as the traditional form of learning. Second, the phrase *for specific outcomes* is the most contentious of all because it exposes the institutional, not public, objectives for which it *needs* people to be media-literate.

Significant associations have emerged particularly after the 1992 National Leadership Conference. For example, the National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE) gathers scholars and practitioners regularly in various activities. The News Literacy Project offers free teacher training through online resources like Checkology. However, like all skill development projects, significant media literacy practice focuses on tools and skills, aiming to reestablish the declining public trust in our media institutions. They may provide and highlight the rationale of detecting misinformation about specific events—about election processes, the Covid-19 pandemic, and so on. A media prosumer learns not to trust sources without checking, thereby about trustworthiness, about governing institutions, corporations, and so on. The onus of this unreliable form of self-learning, therefore, remains on the prosumer.

Since then, scholars have grounded media literacy in either media studies or learning frameworks. Campaigners of media literacy have since introduced useful models that mainly help educators. Hobbs (2006) introduced three frames for media literacy learning—authors and audiences, messages and meanings, and representation and reality. Potter (2016) proposed three “building blocks”—skills, knowledge structures, and personal locus. Buckingham (2007) was concerned about concepts in media literacy theory-building and placed four such concepts

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<sup>22</sup> As it appears in Patricia Aufderheide’s (1993) report of the conference.

around which media literacy should be centered—production, language, representation, and audience. Livingstone et al.’s (2007) critical analysis of discourse around the formation of the U.K. communications regulator OfCom. In their study, the hyphenated term “citizen-consumer” tries to fuse the social and the neoliberal. Media literacy scholars have appealed for a more critical approach to media literacy (eg., Kellner and Share, 2007; Lewis and Jhally, 1998). Hence, media literacy would help us understand our world as narrated to us (by the media), since that is how we understand it in the mediated ecosystem we now live in. It is both a method by which we make sense of relationships that exist in the world and as an instrument by which we can effect change.

Application-driven media literacy initiatives abound. Livingstone and van der Graaf’s (2008) encyclopedia of communication, which includes a chapter on media literacy, points out its categories based on technology or genre—advertising literacy, film literacy, health literacy, policy discourse analysis, and so forth. In these approaches, too, the core remains how the individual learner can achieve media literacy either in specialized disciplines or using specific methods. De Abreu (2022) is interested in media literacy as a way to foster dialogue in an environment where “[c]ancel culture and censorship have become synonymous, and while some groups have said that this is about holding people accountable, others have said it limits an opportunity for people to see that the world often lives in the in-betweens” (p. 3). Antonio Lopez has devoted a major part of his inquiry into “ecomedia literacy” in an endeavor to set the record straight on climate change and providing what he terms “ecomedia pedagogy” (Lopez, 2020). Wang et al. (2022) introduce the idea of “immersive media literacy,” a gamified method using virtual reality technology, demonstrating that such an approach increases empathy.

After well over two decades (if we take the 1992 National Conference as the first institutional trigger at a national level at least in the United States) of sputtering development, the concept of media literacy found traction in the late 2010s. A few years ago, our familiar Buckingham stated: “During the noughties, media literacy was one of the flavours of the decade in policy circles ... Yet in 2016, media literacy is barely a whisper” (Buckingham, 2016). In hindsight, I suspect he might have said something different if he had waited out the year. As it turned out, it was 2016—the very year Buckingham records the bare whispers—when things changed dramatically for media literacy. We may attribute its rejuvenation to two disruptive incidents. The first was the arrival of Donald Trump on the U.S. political mainstream in 2016. News media platforms suspected that Trump used misinformation and spread it from foreign locations to discredit his political opponent and woo voters. Despite the media’s warnings, trump won the 2016 election. This led to introspection among prominent media organizations, and they took steps to strengthen their checking processes while keeping the original, opaque processes unchanged. In 2018, Democrats introduced a media literacy bill in the federal House of Representatives. In June 2022, the bill was introduced in the Senate as Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy Act, defining media literacy and digital citizenship as:

Media literacy includes the ability to access relevant information, analyze media content, evaluate the accuracy of information, and make educated decisions based on information obtained from media and digital sources.

Digital citizenship includes the ability to safely, responsibly, and ethically use communication technologies and to participate in the political, economic, social, and cultural aspects of life related to technology and the digital world.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> See S.4490 (2022).

The second disruptive trigger was the onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic at the beginning of the year 2020. Misinformation and disinformation about the pandemic became so rampant, particularly on social media platforms, that it fortified and justified the need for the mainstreaming of media literacy. The resolution has mostly been prescriptive: YouTube automatically intervenes in independent video content about the Covid-19 pandemic with a suggestion to check the World Health Organization (WHO) website—discrediting even researchers and doctors. Research that showed the negative effects of the Covid-19 vaccines for the pandemic remained hidden from the institutional narrations for long. No doubt, these kneejerk reactions, which media literacy enthusiasts seem to gladly embrace as a part of media literacy, are fundamentally nothing but emergency measures that are purpose-driven.<sup>24</sup> In any case, this prescriptive role of media literacy is vague and unfulfilling of a larger solution.

In this phase, Illinois became the first U.S. state to implement the inclusion of media literacy at public high schools. A recent study by Emily Cooper (2022) indicates that confusion reigns in this rollout because there is little clarity on definitions and roles. Moreover, Cooper points out, the program under Illinois Public Act of July 2021 lacks resources and oversight. Moreover, teachers in Republican and Democratic states grapple with the politics in media literacy: For example, a 2021 Texas law mandates media literacy in teacher training programs, but “also takes anti-free speech steps, including limiting the material and concepts that teachers are allowed to discuss in class.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The reader may recall that the 1992 National Conference definition of media literacy ends with the contentious phrase “for specific purposes.”

<sup>25</sup> Texas Constitution and Statutes, Sec. 21.4555 Civic training; Sec. 28.0022 Certain requirements and prohibitions. See text as introduced in Texas Senate Bill 3/2021 in Legiscan (2021).

Like the Bechdel Test, a simple template by which we can understand whether a film or a television show portrays women in sexist ways, disinformation-testing mechanisms in which media literacy practice has so heavily invested itself are ad hoc, incomplete, and flawed. Still, like the Bechdel, they are useful in making media prosumers ground themselves in the larger issues.<sup>26</sup> Yet, my concern here is that a deeper evaluation eludes media literacy practice. It is as though a hastily assembled firefighting team is operating in an attempt to restore previous order.

**Media literacy in India.** In September 2021, the Indian government participated as a “core country” in the International Partnership for Information and Democracy, participated in the Summit for Information and Democracy, an event leading up to the UN Media and Information Literacy Week. Information and Broadcasting Minister Anurag Thakur declared there that “while the world is battling the pandemic, ... [i]t is important that the issue of infodemic is addressed at the highest level”. He claimed that India has dealt swiftly with fake news and misinformation surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic through “clear communication based on science and facts [by means of] daily press briefings on Covid widely disseminated through the TV news, print, radio and social media” (Press Information Bureau, 2021). Meanwhile, BJP leaders routinely blamed Muslims for the virus. In 2020, as Modi declared a nationwide lockdown, he asked people to stand in their balconies and clang kitchen utensils to appreciate healthcare workers.

The Indian government has been an active frontrunner in the use of news media and social media. However, no media literacy policy exists. There is nothing to indicate that anything

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<sup>26</sup> Bechdel’s (2008) graphic novel, *The Essential Dykes To Watch Out For*, and several other tests of the Bechdel test explain this test of women characters’ participation in film plots.

will change in the near future. The Modi government has pushed digital technology by making smartphone data and access affordable. Among 1.2 billion mobile phone subscriptions in India in 2021, 750 million were smartphone users.<sup>27</sup> Egged on by the new enablement, the communication technology has quickly pervaded the nation. Meanwhile, the new IT Rules 2020 curbs social media and grants the government the powers to access private communication. The IT Rules also continue to be amended in efforts to curb independent news media. On the other hand, community training even in the use of “tools” to counter this welter of disinformation is sporadic and fragmented. A systematic delivery of media (and information) literacy, even in its basic critical pedagogic form, has eluded India’s schools and colleges. On the contrary, vested groups have usurped the space.

An example is WhatsApp, a smartphone application owned by Meta, the owner of popular social media platforms Facebook and Instagram. This closed, peer-to-peer application is unmonitored and fully encrypted, and is both more insidious (Goel, 2018) and more trusted (Nanjundaiah, 2018) than its counterparts like Facebook, whose texts are open to public. WhatsApp officials say they are themselves concerned about rampant hate speech, threats of violence, and false statements. On WhatsApp, people may organize themselves on the basis of some shared interest into groups managed by administrators: A hyperlocal group formed by residents of a housing complex is an example. Specific interests can claim legitimacy and utilize the social power systems. This organizational tool has suited dominant party politics. Thousands of WhatsApp groups routinely campaign during elections for the ruling BJP and for its extreme-right ideological parent, the RSS. WhatsApp groups are frequently accused of spreading

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<sup>27</sup> As reported by Press Trust of India (2022).

misinformation and conspiracy theories (Chauchard, 2021). Although WhatsApp groups should be a major cause for concern for media literacy practitioners, it is easy to see why the government wants to control communication on them.

However, as media literacy quickly became a buzzword in the western hemisphere, its development did not go completely unnoticed. A handful of India's entrepreneurs took up training initiatives to help communities identify sources of misinformation. Most of these efforts are benign, carefully staying away from directly blaming dominant political parties. Prominent among them is an independent project called FactShala (literally, *school of facts*) by New Delhi-based DataLeads, funded by U.S. digital technology corporation Google. Trainers are paid and have targets to make presentations to communities. They seek groups and deliver specific presentations including methods to identify misinformation, to avoid WhatsApp group messages, to trust legitimized sources, etc. A few fact-check portals have emerged, either corporate-funded (for example, Boom Live) or struggle to survive on public or institutional donations and against a hostile government (for example, AltNews). The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) runs programs in media literacy, as a corporation runs social responsibility activities as though to reclaim lost morality.

Yet, deeper evaluations and bolder initiatives elude us, and with good political reason in an environment of surveillance and fear.

**Media literacy as ability.** A parsing of the term *media literacy* would lead to the question of semantics: Should we read literacy in the concept of media literacy to mean the same as literacy in its original sense? On one hand, there is a compulsion of trust in what we *read*, in our own literacy. Trust in the text works well for a media prosumer, who must use it while sharing the text on social media with any opinion or annotations. This seems like a rational thing



to do. Hence, we do not question our literacy. On the other hand, our modern existence is defined by our ability to think and question. This dichotomous situation is amplified in media literacy as the ability to understand our world on the basis of media texts.

Political scientist and methodology scholar Gary Goertz—who urges researchers to understand the difference between semantics and concepts—defines concepts as the highest of the elements of inquiry, the fountainhead of inquiry from which abstractions can be rendered tangibly real and operationalized. For example, referring to the French word *etat*, which could mean state or government, Goertz (2006) writes: “In a theoretical and empirical view of scientific concepts their semantics change as our understanding of the phenomenon changes” (p. 4). This is true of several other terms—for example, development. In Hindi, the language spoken in India by a large section of people mainly in the north, the equivalent word is *vikas*. *Vikas* is a complex Hindi term of Sanskrit origin that, at once, means development, expansion, and progress. One may choose to contextualize the meaning for it to make sense, or to leave it open-ended, not unlike a pun. I apply this term in the empirical chapters. *Vikas* has been Modi’s manifesto since the 2014 election.

Literacy is the ability to read and write, where both read and write are used in the intransitive sense of the verbs. Hence, a literate person has embedded this formula, a template into which language is filled and they must make sense of it all. However, strictly, this sense-making is not regarded to be in the ambit of the concept of literacy. Literacy is the process of accomplishing that ability. Hence, if media literacy is our ability to read and write media texts, then media illiteracy must be the inability to do so. This is a flawed way to look at literacy: The possibility that our presumed ability to read the media may only fortify our illiteracy. To understand this claim, the conceptualizations of media literacy must be destabilized.

Moreover, we assume our learning is individualistic. In his book *Literacy and Education*, James Paul Gee (2015) traces how, starting in the 1980s, the concept of literacy has signified to mean social and cultural practice and not merely a mental exercise. The so-called new literacy studies, led by Brian Street (1993), called for the need for literacy studies to shift focus from individual, mental processes to social practices.<sup>28</sup> Yet we understand literacy in narrow, educational contexts. We are taught various subjects using the skill of literacy. The building blocks of our literacy are formed around language—to be precise, the alphabet. We do not learn the ideological structures embedded in language and its metaphors. We do not learn the mechanisms that use our presumed literacy to mystify our understanding of the world.

Meanwhile, the very terminology of media literacy is not convincing to everybody. For example, David Buckingham (2019) does not believe media *literacy* in its current form is really serving the purpose. He prefers media *education*, viewing it as a dialogic and reflexive process in which students analyze language, representation, production, and audiences through reading, writing, and contextual analysis. In much of the foundational literature on media literacy, the difference between literacy and education has remained somewhat unsatisfactorily resolved. At any rate, it seems to me that our concerns so far have been at these nominal levels of recommendations of the contours and frameworks of the pedagogical practice of media literacy rather than with more fundamental questions. Media education, as it is established in schools (in India and elsewhere), already helps students grasp how it all works in technical and constructive

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<sup>28</sup> We seem to use the term “new” without realizing it is bound to get old with time. As far back as 1963 by educator Ralph Tyler and then Edgar Dale in 1970, and more recently, by David Buckingham in 1993—all of whom alluded to the “new literacies.” In his essay on “new” contexts, Raymond Pape (2015) astutely points out that our technology-driven trends need a periodic relook: “The trend is bound to continue, allowing new literacies to remain in a perpetual state of growth for the foreseeable future” (p. 75).

terms. However, the point is to use our literacy as a methodology to understand, not merely know, our world.

Notwithstanding Buckingham's discomfort, there is considerable nebulosity around the term media literacy. The term media literacy may sound too particular, specific to a media ecosystem. However, I argue that this is a new but sustaining ecosystem, just as new inventions gave rise to the reproduction of literature and art, enabling the proliferation of religion and popular culture, ably captured by Walter Benjamin (1955/1969). It must lend itself to interpretations in various directions and applications, such as aesthetics (for example, Fedorov, 2015), freedoms (for example, Moeller, 2009), governance (Das, 2009), civic agency (Kotilainen, 2009), critical pedagogy (Melki, 2018), and so forth. On one hand, some governments are taking media literacy, sometimes conveniently adding "information" to the phrase, as a subject of pedagogical pursuit that will help citizens better decode mediated messages. On the other hand, media literacy has been pedagogically frameworked to be interpreted in disjointed and application-driven ways—mediated information on political issues, health, data, ecology, and an increasing array of forms of literacy that governments or educators deem critical to citizens' living responsibly and making informed choices. But this makes for a somewhat ad hoc catalogue. The term "media and information literacy" seems to cover for its multifarious inclusions such as health literacy, data literacy, and eco-literacy.

We have known the term literacy to mean an instrument by which we practice our various understandings. That is why we should view media literacy as a methodology of reading. We learn grammar in order to understand language. We learn language to understand (say) science. We understand science to understand the various natural phenomena of our world. We must learn reading and writing in order to understand our world, since our institutions have filled

much of that understanding in books. The constitution of a nation is an example: We may live it, but without reading it, our lived experience may be different from what the book says. In essence, education uses literacy as the tool to our understanding of the world. Perhaps the most relevant delineation for us is that literacy is the tool that allows us to question our education. This is, of course, tautological, since literacy must be delivered in the form of education—it is not in itself a thing. It is merely an undecipherable form that, even in its ghost-like existence, prescribes our modern existence.

Media literacy practice purports to help societies understand media texts, reflect, critique, and act. But despite a cottage industry of media literacy textbooks, courses, online and offline insights, and so on, I find precious little evidence of an increase in the number of media-literate citizens. Furthermore, in this current pedagogic practice of media literacy, I observe a semblance of neutrality among practitioners in their attempt to apply media literacy to a variety of subjects. The concept of media literacy is hardly new, but its legislative and pedagogic applications are relatively new. It is a practice that, in most Western nations, subsists on government-supported neoliberal systems, morally tied to dominant power systems. Therefore, this text-book approach to the subject is understandable. One visible gap is in media literacy's continued obsession with misinformation and relegation of deeper and more structural problems. The next stage of media literacy literature must address structural, ideological, and institutional concerns.

The most visible of the gaps is the recent overemphasis on disinformation and its various semantic variations: The most prolific practice of media literacy, especially at community levels, has been in the form of providing information and tools to debunk fake news. Merriam-Webster (n.d.) dictionary states: "The printing and dissemination of spurious news is hardly new, but the term *fake news* is ... *Fake news* appears to have begun seeing general use at the end of the 19th

century.” When news started getting competitive in those decades, news stories were often sensationalized. Fake news implies that if there is something real, it automatically implies that there exists something that is unreal. Thus, fake news is but a distinguishing label. Several organizations, particularly in the United States and Europe, have launched projects to train teachers and librarians in helping to understand it. Independent initiatives in various countries in Asia are ongoing. Experiments are afoot to circumvent fake news completely by “pre-bunking” using AI. In our new fetish to sharpen definitions of fake news, a growing list of new terms nuanced from one another (misinformation, disinformation, malinformation, and so forth, based mainly on presence or absence of intent, selectiveness of fact, and so forth) has emerged. I do not distinguish between them on the basis of intent, a vague and undefinable concept. The simplest form of reality is fact. If a car passes by my house, I can’t dispute that it did. If it didn’t, and I claim it did, that’s not factual. But if fake news were that simple, we would not need a whole movement of media literacy.

The larger problem I see in media literacy is that we have not invested enough in exploring the ideological underpinnings. I find it useful to view literacy and illiteracy as constructs whose ideology is controlled not only by institutions, but by their structures. Hence, when mediated communication has become so fundamental to us, what would explain the assumption that *media illiteracy* persists, perhaps rampantly, in societies? Through this work, my handle to explain the ideological underpinnings of news media is their aesthetics. There is a relationship between that aesthetic suturing and our literacy. As a culmination of this chapter, I will end with an illustration that links the above conceptual and contextual moment.

**Mediated pandemic.** It is apt to call the Covid pandemic a mediated one because the media became instruments of both knowledge and confusion. News platforms in India benefited

from the national lockdown as they became primary carriers of information essential to daily life. In the absence of public movements on the street, WhatsApp groups took over. At no other time in history were media prosumers so dependent on virtual-ness: In the confusing mix of reality and falsehood, image and reality became one.

Over the pre-pandemic years, India's expansive news television industry of over 400 channels had grown at a healthy rate. But in 2020, within two weeks of the first lockdown in March 2020, its growth spurted nearly 300 percent. Over the year, television news enjoyed the most (about 27 percent) growth in viewership among all TV genres.<sup>29</sup> Although advertising revenues dipped, the large viewership resulting from work-from-home and lockdown mandates have meant more eyeballs and subscriptions. In January 2021, India's government communication was themed on euphoria, as Modi called the ebbing Covid-19 tide a great victory for the nation.<sup>30</sup> Two months later, a far more calamitous wave struck. By late April, India was at the peak of the pandemic as daily numbers reached hundreds of thousands. The government, which had earlier boasted that India was a global benefactor of medical supplies, was forced to seek global help.<sup>31</sup>

On March 25, 2020, two months after the first onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic in India on January 30 and about two weeks after it was declared a global pandemic, Modi abruptly announced a complete, nationwide lockdown. Among many changes to livelihoods was that of migrant labor. Suddenly deprived of work, poor daily-wage laborers fled cities of employment to

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<sup>29</sup> See Nayak Dutta (2021).

<sup>30</sup> Even during the first phase of the pandemic, euphoric messaging pervaded Modi's and Trump's rhetoric. See Nanjundaiah (2020) and Kalita (2021).

<sup>31</sup> While it reported around 200,000 deaths by mid-April 2021, India is believed to have under-counted the deaths by several times—the count could be in excess of 17 million. See Salikuddin and Singh (2021).

their villages to be with their families and save money. These absent and invisible communities suddenly became objects of media limelight. It was a crisis to which the government was caught without a convincing response except to blame the main political opposition party (Indian National Congress, or Congress) for the migrant labor crisis.<sup>32</sup>

About 65 percent of India's population lives in rural areas, but perhaps in our visually conscious news media systems, these embarrassing villages on the margins rarely appear on India's news channels.<sup>33</sup> In 2015, Qatar-based Al Jazeera English channel's show "The Listening Post" termed this media neglect a "rural blind spot," exposing the consumerist approach to India's news coverage.<sup>34</sup> In their participation in projecting India's nationalistic modernity, private Indian television channels rarely show unflattering sides of the country, even though a large percentage of the country's population lives there. As news anchors must be urbane and presentable, visuals, too, must be desirable. Most of these villages, unplanned and underdeveloped, may appear to be ugly eyesores in the modern aesthetic scheme. Even when channels do cover the rural landscape, few show zoomed-out and naturalistic surroundings, instead including shots of nicely paved highways, and long shots of farming fields that absented the poor laborers working in them or the impoverished conditions of their villages—most living on earnings of less than \$2 a day. The following shot may directly cut to show tight shots of people speaking. Even a national farmers' agitation over many months in 2020-21 did not take the media to villages; rather than delve into the issues, the visuals largely showed farmers camped outside New Delhi. It took a pandemic to lift the news blind spot, when international

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<sup>32</sup> See Kapur (2022) for a commentary on how Modi blamed the Congress party, shielding his government's inept planning.

<sup>33</sup> See Singh et al. (2008).

<sup>34</sup> See Al Jazeera (2015). The original show does not appear in a search on the Al Jazeera website.

news channels such as CNN and BBC penetrated the veil of obscurity and reported from villages to reveal startling details such as a lack of basic health infrastructure. The dire health infrastructure in India's villages came to light after the international media covered it.

After the near-total national lockdown, panic ensued among daily-wage workers who had migrated from far-flung villages to the biggest cities in search of work. Millions of these migrant workers, now out of work, attempted to walk to their native villages hundreds of miles away, in the blazing heat of the summer. Many died. When the news media showed these stories, the government discredited them and claimed it did not have data on the deaths of migrant laborers. The health ministry's daily health bulletins on television updated the citizens, and invariably claimed that the government was deftly handling vaccinations. One bulletin went to the extent of claiming that the domestic ventilator industry received a shot in the arm because of the pandemic.<sup>35</sup> In it, Health Minister Harsh Vardhan's address repeatedly hailed his government's vaccination drive, including phrases such as *santoshjanak baat hai, khushi ki baat hai* (it is a matter of pleasure, it is a matter of joy). The government claimed these daily health bulletins were in fact media literacy programs.

Meanwhile, several leaders of the governing BJP frequently spread misinformation. In one instance, ministers repeatedly blamed a congregation of a Muslim group called Tablighi Jamaat for spreading the coronavirus that caused the pandemic.<sup>36</sup> Popular sections of the news media took the cue and began a blame game, spreading insidious rumors about Muslims in

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<sup>35</sup>A ventilator is the apparatus hospitals use to pump oxygen artificially into the body—a critical procedure during the pandemic that was in short supply all over India, costing many lives. See India Today (2020).

<sup>36</sup> A newspaper editorial mentions why a judicial court in India flagged “malice in the [government's] handling of Tablighi episode” (Say Sorry, 2020).



general. News platforms, especially television channels, and social media routinely amplified divisive and populist messages through panel debates and editorial commentaries.

Merely neoliberal political economy cannot explain this mediated construction of absence. We must also consider ideological factors of invisibility. Spotlighting blind spots merely renders the media prosumer more informed. We may even want to know more about the conditions of a village, but do not control the instrument by which to know them. That control of visibilization lies with the news media system. Moreover, our literacy is also blinded by an interplay between rational and emotional approaches to objects. This is why we need an understanding of the ways in the media prosumer's world is constructed before we understand their literacy and illiteracy.

## CHAPTER 2

### SPECTACLE, ROUTINIZATION, MYTHIFICATION

#### Prologue

When old age shall this generation waste,  
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe  
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,  
“Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

-John Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 1819

The ornate urn promotes the aesthetic value of *itself* while it contains (perhaps) ashes within it. The concluding remark is an assertion: It is not only all we know, it is all we *need* to know. Once we place this beautiful ode in the framework of trust and our communicative institutions, we may perceive the normative nature of news. Scholarship on aesthetics has so fully immersed itself in the formats of art that the scope to discover their application to the presentation of life offers itself to us. The rationality of modern aesthetics is not limited to art but extends to the aura in the presentation of *news*.

That narration of reality should be a natural outcome of aesthetics. Stories present visual evidence and attach positivism as rationality. News is unlike art in the sense that it depends on incidents, which are arbitrary and uncontrolled, unlike the controlled construction in art. In this theory-building chapter, I will explain how mediated narrations stitch together our understanding of the world in the form of a tapestry—a shape that we recognize, like the Grecian urn: We do not need to look inside because we know what an urn *normally* contains. We trust it—its practice constitutes our rationality. If we stop trusting that understanding of an urn, a new meaning might emerge. The urn, like our literacy, is structured to make us understand what lies inside it.

## **Aesthetic theory**

A critical point in Theodor Adorno's (1970/1997) *Aesthetic Theory* is that aesthetics are ideological. Considered his magnum opus, this theory forms a foundational pillar of my argument as I extend it to mediated narration, explain the metaphoric presentations of visibility and invisibility that we find in mediated narrations, and place the media prosumer at the center of it all. In the following pages, we will see how aesthetics may apply to the presentation of our reality, i.e., the narration of events in news and other mediated forms. The ideological linkage may be direct enough. For example, the aesthetic value of a hyper-visibility Potemkin village corresponds to the antithetical aesthetic value in the invisibilization of Dalit conditions behind the spotlight. The authoritative presentation by a well-heeled news anchor narrating a crime with logical straightforwardness hides the struggle of the oppression that caused it.

Of course, I use the theory selectively, but two main strands of clarity are in order. First, there is a sociological premise to news, and spectatorship in my work is a communal notion. Second, I disabuse the notion that subjectivity and objectivity of art are "equivocal," presumably a synthesis of an internal, Hegelian dialectic, with the more robustly applicable concept of Bourdieu's (1972/1977) habitus, in which the two exist in uncertainty. Adorno proposes that natural beauty must step outside itself and present itself as artificial—like art. It is the presentation rather than experience that defines the object—presentation facilitates human perception. This defines the aesthetic value of the object:

Even in its fallibility and weakness, the subject who contemplates art is not expected simply to retreat from the claim to objectivity. Otherwise, it would hold that those alien to art—the philistines devoid of any relation to art, who let it *affect* them as if they were a *tabula rasa*—would be the most qualified to understand and judge it. (p. 175, emphasis on the word "affect" added)

Such retreat of a beholder of art would be an admission of the loss of its aura. Holding up the pretense of aura is suitable for the social imagination of beauty. As literature has abundantly cited, Walter Benjamin (1955/1969) is both critical and nostalgic of aura: Aura makes him cringe at the thought, and yet lends the superiority of a rational appreciation of art. There is really no resolution between the two.

Beauty is not only normative but fearsome—it has an *affective value*. A more standoffish critic would merely appreciate it. This is its *appreciative value*. We know that the absence of light is darkness when we switch off a lightbulb. The philistine experiences beauty, while the spectator appreciates it. Likewise, if we assume light and darkness to natural, visibility and invisibility should have an affective value for one who is unexposed to one or the other.

Adorno makes a deceptive statement: “To say that art is not identical with the concept of beauty, but requires for its realization the concept of the ugly as its negation, is a platitude” (p. 45). Yet, if we reflect on the post-Enlightenment schism between the rational and the irrational, the difference between art as imitation and art in its natural form may inform that schism. The rational is claimed to be a consequence of criticality, and a reflection of mimetic knowledge. Moreover, it informs us that beauty is desirable, but ugliness must be present and rejected for beauty to be desired and accepted. A crime scene is not a beautiful rose, yet it is desirable to the media prosumer: Its narration creates a response. This is the ideological value of the presented reality.

Presentation is the process of harnessing incidents into controlled forms: A news story weaves a tapestry that must not only be acceptable but *desirable*. These are not the same as beautiful—desirability can be built merely by showing the undesirable. We feel either safe or a sense of *schadenfreude* or feel an emotional response to the sight and sound of something that

looks ugly to us. When news presents a crime to us, we may either feel safe or unsafe depending on our proximity to the scene, among other factors. The desire to see even an ugly truth depends on how it affects us.

Absence of rationality concerns both Benjamin and Adorno. Adorno argues:

That art, something mimetic, is possible in the midst of rationality and that it employs its [rationality's] means, is a response to the faulty irrationality of the rational world as an over-administrated world. For the aim of all, rationality—the quintessence of the means for dominating nature—would have to be something other than means, hence something not rational. (pp. 53-54)

That is, rationality operates in a naturally irrational world but aims to tame this irrationality. If the act of understanding and adopting this rationality (in art, media, etc.) marks our literacy, we may become blinded by that framework, not being able to see when art or media act in that rational structure in bad faith. There is a central application of this part of Adorno's theory to my work. We may see its relevance in the way mediated narration presents the world to us.

The purpose of aesthetics is to present. Purpose defines how something is presented to us and something else is absented. This process forms a dialectic relationship between presentation, or visibilization of the present, and what we may call "absentation," the invisibilization of the absent.<sup>37</sup> It also forms the relationship between what is aesthetically acceptable and unacceptable. Being conditioned to conflate the natural with the social, human cognition cannot perceive beauty without automatically relating it to the non-beauty. Thus, *presentation of the absent* and *absentation of the present* are ideological schemes. Thus, presentation of something

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<sup>37</sup> The act of absenting is akin to erasing a text and writing over it. I derive, of course, from "under erasure" in Derrida's deconstruction. That concept is an extension of Heidegger's *sous rature*, in which a writer strikes out a word and yet the word is visible and legible. However, there are distinctions within this, which I discuss in Chapter 6, in which I unpack the constructs of "invisible absence" and "visible absence." See Derrida's (1967/1997) *Of Grammatology*.

is the absentation of other things. As we will see in later chapters, beneath the hyper-visualized Potemkin village hides a palimpsest;<sup>38</sup> behind the over-presented criminal acts of the farmers in an anchor's narration lies an under-presented criminal act; in the cover of darkness of the village of Boolgarhi stands a community that struggles in its invisibilized presence.

The main attribute of aesthetic value is that there must be agreement between the presenter and the prosumer. The media prosumer's role begins when desirability is presented. As consumers and re-producers of mediated texts, they share media texts, add opinions, memes, and so on. They participate in selecting what stories should matter to their communities. Therefore, the utility of this rational presentation of aesthetics to the production of mediated realities should be evident to us. Once set in motion, this set of actions becomes a perpetual cycle of narration. The constancy of the visible absents the invisible.

Adorno's position as to this consensus between the producer and the prosumer of our realities is that "the principle of construction remains aesthetically obedient to the administered world." Yet he is hopeful that "it may terminate in a yet unknown aesthetic form, whose rational organization might point to the abolition of all categories of administration" (p. 225). A resistant, disruptive voice, perhaps on social media, can redefine the agreed aesthetic value of an object or add elements, hence throwing the media prosumer into chaos—the agreement may collapse.

**Suturing our world.** Before proceeding, I will interrupt to introduce *suture*, a metaphor that illustrates the process of presentation-absentation, which is also visibilization-invisibilization. I have used the term *suture* throughout this work. It is a term evocatively used in

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<sup>38</sup> My use of the palimpsest, too, may find its roots in Derrida's (1967/1997) "erasure," even more directly than absenting in the sense of rewriting over an existing text.

film and media studies to indicate the media-narrated package that constructs the story. In our context, this story is not an artform—it is reality. However, the process remains loyal to both.

Our rationality is systematically woven and metaphors are a matter of imaginative rationality—they are at the center of our rational understanding of the world. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) state, “the very systematicity that allows us to comprehend one aspect of a concept in terms of another ... will necessarily hide other aspects of the concept” (p. 10). Terms like *get an idea across*, *attacking* an opponent in debate, or the various rhetorical representations of the cave in Plato are all metaphors.

Lakoff and Johnson suggest that ideological meanings are made from metaphors. Suture is, of course, such a metaphor. It evokes an apt description of how our world is stitched together and presented to us in an ideologically packaged form. As a metaphor, suture may excellently explain the structural forms of how the compiled film approaches and engulfs the media audience’s cognition. Suture occurs as a filmmaker presents an overwhelming world in simpler terms using limited shots that pretend to be the whole, but in fact are shards of reality. Positioning the viewer as a subject, a creator mounts a narrative by placing the audience as subjects in the proceedings.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> A filmmaker “incorporat[es] the spectator as signifier within a system of “signifiers,” producing meaning while simultaneously instilling and establishing a sense of subject-hood, which is to say, the effect of suture produces the phenomenon of spectator as ‘subject’” (Magrini, 2006). Miller was the first in the illustrious list of film scholars to have called the theory as suture, but he attributes the concept to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytical notion of subject formation. Jean-Pierre Oudart (1970/1990), who has long been concerned with the theory of suture, writing about the sign, explains that it is “not simply a visual reproduction of the profilmic object but the ‘signifier of something invisible, whose unmasking is delayed’” (p. 126). The theory is founded in Lacan’s psychoanalysis rather than in Adorno, Foucault, Barthes, or Marx. For example, in Jacques-Alain Miller’s definition, “[s]uture names the relation of the subject to the chain of its discourse” (Miller, 1966/1977, p. 2). Jean-Pierre Oudart (1970/1990) employs suture to explain the process of stitching together a film so that the story conceals its production.

The ideological implications of suture are pursued in the scholarship of Daniel Dayan (1974). Suture stitches voids (logical, narrative, cognitive-affective) together into a narrative of continuity, placing the viewer as a subject—a signifier—within a system of signifiers. It establishes the symbolic within the physical realm in the field of language. Thus, the act of the suture firmly stitches together a smooth, desirable tapestry of elements, generating certainty while hiding the chaos, the uncertainty beneath.

Hence, suture unlocks the power to a presenter to render objects visible or invisible. Axel Honneth (2001) distinguishes between physical and metaphorical invisibility. Traditionally oppressed communities are socially invisibilized. To be metaphorically (socially) invisible, one must be physically visible and available for evaluation. Hence, and staying with the metaphor of light (visibility) and darkness (invisibility), our literacy is derived from the visibility of things, and therefore our illiteracy is derived from their invisibilization. We do not normally possess the tools to see and recognize in the dark. Just as invisibility is not the absence of visibility but the creation of darkness in a well-lit room, illiteracy is an aesthetic ideological construction. We may think of several colorful patches of cloth—like incidents that happen all around us—being stitched together into a tapestry, such as a news bulletin or a newspaper or news portal. For it to make sense, the thread that weaves, like a suture, must disappear from our vision. The tapestry, despite its various colors, must appear seamless. Suture is as much a process of stitching *over* as it is that of patching *together*.

In this work, suture is, *firstly*, a metaphor that represents the process by which images are put together for presentation on the screen in its edited and packaged form. *Secondly*, suture is also an ideological metaphor. *Thirdly*, suture must be viewed as an aesthetic process in which



mediated narrations weave stories that make up our world, rendering selected elements visible while rejecting others into oblivion.

We should expect news to present and represent reality. Ugliness is perhaps an acceptable outcome of news. Therefore, we should expect that this *rendering* of news into our life is more a technological process than a process of control. Yet, we find that news systems narrate reality with the persuasion akin to art. A painting, bound by the rules of rationality, must show and hide things based on its appreciative and affective values. News narration, persuaded by features of modernity such as nationalism, invisibilizes similarly.<sup>40</sup>

The sutured world takes on similar outcomes of beauty as our truth. Hence, sutured narration tells us what we *should* know. This may exclude social conditions that defy modernity, foster national pride, or “other” the foe, although, beneath that grand tapestry lie invisibilized and absented realities. Just as our gaze adjusts to a spotlighted object, leading us away from recognizing objects in the darkness, the invisibility of the *other* reality is an inevitable consequence—like the streetlight effect in a well-lit Potemkin village.

By this process, the news media use stories to build our truths. The stories rationally explain our world using visible evidence. In their positivism, they visibilize a world that *makes sense*. To draw our metaphor further, the suture itself is invisibilized in sense-making. For the content to make sense, the form must make sense. The assumed literacy of the media prosumer is that they must trust this formal sense and depend on it to learn about their world. Only the stitched product—in narrated forms—is available. That must remain our mediated truth, our

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<sup>40</sup> Benedict Anderson’s (1983/2006) book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* provides a foundational explanation of the genesis of nationalism.

instrument for understanding our world—our literacy. The suture fills and invisibilizes the gaps in our understanding through logic.

“Media logic” is a process that is governed by the formats and processes by which the media produce their content, the formal and informal rules that are responsible for what they present to us (Altheide and Snow, 1979; Altheide, 2013). For example, formats and definitions of newsworthiness and editing techniques are forms of media logic. Media logic uses organizational, technological, and aesthetic determinants that influence the audiences and make them view their world in mediated ways. Landerer (2014) views media logic as a metaprocess, as governed not by media’s processes alone, but those of other institutions. For example, media and political actors adapt their behavior to the audience-oriented market logic. Once this audience-oriented market logic starts to dominate political actors’ behavior on a permanent basis, this might challenge established institutional mechanisms in advanced democracies.

Block (2013) argues that because “human–media interplay appears to be rooted in cultural symbols, beliefs, values, meaning, and practices peculiar to some groups or societies,” it is important that we consider the *symbolic* and hegemonic values of media (p. 261). This may seem like a cultural approach, but it is also social, embedded in communities of media prosumers. As Deacon and Stanyer (2014) argue, this would be an oversimplified assumption because it undermines the opposite—the influence of those other symbolic forms of politics and economics on the media. If we consider how a television news channel selects which event—or which sequence within an event—to visibilize and which to invisibilize, the underlay of an ideological thread is both observable and inevitable.

The digital and social media’s logic is determined by ways in which users organize their texts according to algorithmic logic using multiple formats including new ones like memes. The

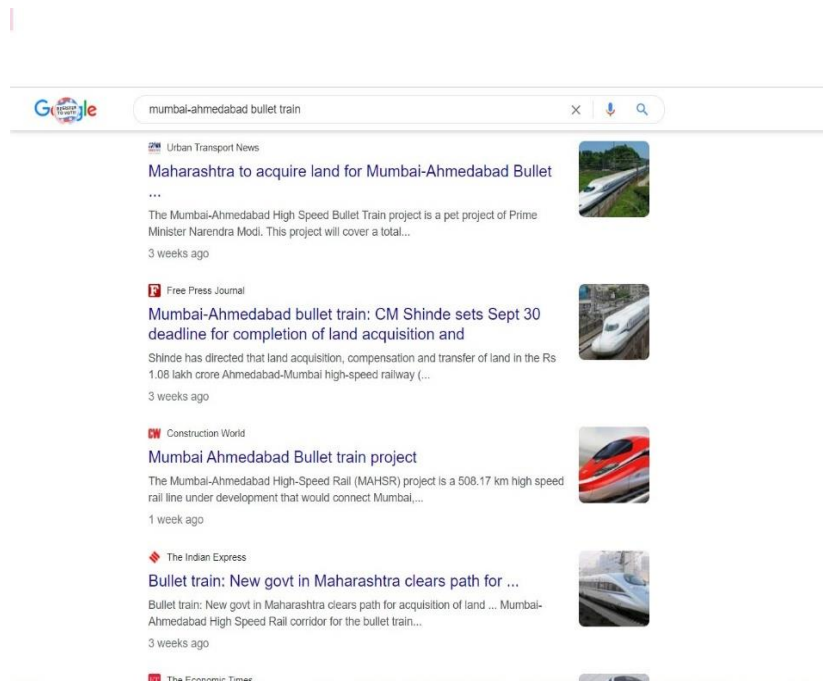
news-based narration is set in a modern environment and influences our new forms of social communication. News stories and social media (as I illustrated in Chapter 1) construct artifacts that are futuristic by using artistry and graphics. On Instagram, a user may graphically “add” a dream element to a video clip of an overcrowded city—say, a new form of transport, such as a Skybus, which operates on rails running at an elevation beneath metro rail bridges and along buildings. As though in tandem, the government states that it plans to consider Skybus as a form of urban public transport. Graphic visualizations normally focused erase slums, repair bad roads, and eliminate poor people from an image. At that point, our society’s aspired modernized form looks within reach.

I will illustrate how media logic works using two examples. One is the story of the Bullet Train, the fastest train in the world proudly owned by the Japanese, which became an ambitious program for Modi in 2015. The previous government had begun exploring the idea. The government had signed a memorandum with Shinzo Abe’s Japanese government in 2013. A new corporation, the National High-Speed Rail Corporation Limited (NHSRCL), was established in Modi’s time, in 2016. The India version of the famed Japanese train would run between the two western of Mumbai, India’s economic hub, and Ahmedabad, the largest city in Modi’s home state of Gujarat, at a dramatic speed of 200 miles per hour. The first train would be rolled out in 2023. The \$12.5 billion<sup>41</sup> project ran into land acquisition problems primarily because farmers have been unwilling to sell their lands. By 2022, the project had seen several delays and a reassessed timeline estimates the launch of the full corridor to be in 2028.

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<sup>41</sup> At conversion of Indian Rupees 80 to a dollar. India’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP) size is \$3,173.4 billion.

The Mumbai-Ahmedabad rail corridor enjoys one of the most frequent train services between any two cities in India. In response to a Right to Information inquiry in 2017, the government said the corridor was running losses as more than 40 percent of the capacity on the



**Figure 1:** Bullet Train in India in repeatedly reminded anticipation. Courtesy: Google. Screenshot by author.

trains go vacant (IANS, 2017).<sup>42</sup> In India, the Bullet Train’s anticipated arrival finds wide publicity on news and social media.

One of the embedded conditions in the technology of many digital content management systems (CMS), on which such stories are mounted on digital platforms, is that there should be a

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<sup>42</sup> Right to Information Act (RTI) of 2007, akin to the U.S. Freedom of Information Act, provides for citizens to seek specific information and data from the government. However, information is denied on many occasions; recent replies even indicate the absence of the relevant information with the government. This was the case when information was sought in regard to widely reported deaths of migrant workers as they walked hundreds of miles from their place of work to their native villages in the summer of 2020 after Modi clamped a total lockdown on the country in response to the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“lead image.” Portal editors routinely choose representational and not real images. In the absence of a real train, artist’s impressions have been plentiful, showing the train in dramatic animated videos, plying along unreal landscape. Mainstream news media routinely foreground their updates—many of them speculative—on the Bullet Train by representational images or illustrations, presumably from Japan, in many cases, even the most reputed newspapers not mentioning that the images are not real.

Information is designed to find our un-waiting eyes with aesthetics of visibility and invisibility processed to compellingly seek our trust. Conversely, news media narrations now depend on their media prosumers. When Queen Elizabeth died in September 2022, even Britain’s largest colony, India, announced a one-day mourning. In England, several National Health Services trusts postponed non-emergency appointments as a mark of mourning. In business strategy, providing visibility to public using “virtue-signaling” is popular. A sushi restaurant in Reading put on hold a reduction in price of its sushi dish.<sup>43</sup> On social media, virality is the perpetuation of a text across space and time as it gathers opinions and distortions. This is no longer a challenge—it is a mechanical, continuous process.

The transformational prospect of social media seems exciting even to scholars. Movements mobilized on social media have certainly triggered change. The promise of the Arab Spring movement is an example. As a social revolution mobilized on social media, first in Tunisia and then in Egypt and other north African countries, the Arab Spring that began in 2011 has been hailed as a social media revolution. However, previous order was restored in the region as one authoritarian leader replaced another in Egypt. Elsewhere, not much changed at all.

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<sup>43</sup> See LBC (2022) for Ian Dale’s critique of this and other virtue-signaling acts after Queen Elizabeth’s death.

Change did not lead to transformation. The differences in the technological organization between revolutions such as the Arab Spring of the 2010s and the non-revolution in the Germany of the 1930s cannot explain the outcome, either immediate or eventual failure.

Media prosumption no longer bears the narcotizing dysfunction of the media environment of 1948.<sup>44</sup> There is an added *role* of the new media prosumer—to participate in texts. Our mediated understanding is a happy continuum that relies on trust, technology, and media logic. News media processes have created a routine for the media prosumer not merely in habit-forming terms but of what and whose stories are available—one rendering the other inconsequential. In this routinization, they participate in the suturing of our realities, weaving the varied surface of the tapestry in such a way that in continuity, the world makes sense.

### **The ideological process of aesthetic narration**

In this section, we shall examine what constitutes that narrative suture—*all ye need to know*. In this relationship between aesthetics and the production of news, I introduce an applied way to view the news process. I extract four features of media aesthetics, discuss the process of routinization and relate the creation of invisibility to mythification. Bourdieu's concept of habitus is also helpful in connecting us with absence and presence, visibility and invisibility.

In the continuity of narration, the media prosumer must operate in spaces between the presented and experienced realities. A marginalized community—say, in a village in the heart of India, bound in the politics and social discrimination of the caste system—negotiates its experiential existence, invisible and absented to the prosumer's appreciation. Both are affected by this unavailability but neither may realize it. Denial further occurs when the media draw the

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<sup>44</sup> See Lazarsfeld and Merton (1948/1971).

attention of the prosumer *away* from stories of those continuing conditions of the community, replacing that absence with a different story that appears disruptive and desirable.

Thus, as mediated narration *presents* our realities, absencing and replacement are methods by which it functions. News thus bears the semblance of completeness, as though we have learned all we needed to know. A news platform approaches an incident, converts it into a media event, creates a spectacle, and mythologizes it:

Incident – Event – Spectacle – Myth

In this framework, the conversion of an incident to an event is a *journalistic practice*. Dayan and Katz (1992) describe media events as “world rituals” that interrupted routine media programs. Thus, they viewed media events and media spectacles as either the same or at least too similar to distinguish significantly. The sequence in a news bulletin, beginning with national politics and ending with sports and weather, became formulaic. The derived formula for news became normative. The urban, well-dressed, impressive-looking face told us the news and we believed “That’s the way it is.”<sup>45</sup>

Using recognition, the production of the media event into a spectacle is an *aesthetic practice*. We may argue that *recognition* constitutes the key factor between invisibility and visibility, absence and presence. The incident must be recognized as disruptive enough to become news. The news media accomplish this recognition for the prosumer. It is the stage of the creation of story, which nudges the understanding of our world forward. Thus, the uncertain space in the process of news storytelling is already in operation for us. Recognition grants an

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<sup>45</sup> A quote made famous as a sign-off at the end of each news bulletin by Walter Cronkite, a celebrated CBS news anchor from 1962 to 1981.

incident legitimacy: When mounted on a platform, that is, the news media, the incident now becomes *recognizable* as somehow salient to our world. From recognition ensues a story—the input stage of news production.

Spectacle becomes the enabler of our truths. It is the inspirer of awe. This aesthetic process weaves spectacular stories in a series to form a continuous spectacle. The residues left behind in this stitched continuity are non-spectacles, *non-stories*. Non-stories, by definition, do not constitute news. The legitimacy, prescriptive role, inscrutable processes, and technological capability provide the news media with the right scaffolding for their narration.

Douglas Kellner (2010) views media spectacle as a media event that is enabled by media technologies that process events in a spectacular form—“more defuse (*sic*), variable, unpredictable, and contestable” (pp. 5-6). This is the grand form in which stories are prepared and *presented*—on our television screens, the headlines of a newspaper, or the image-enabled stories on news aggregating online platforms. This is the output stage of media production and the stage of amplification without which a story cannot reach its consumers in an effective manner. It is the stage of dissemination in which all elements of display must be visibilized, including language, speech, visuals, graphics, and authorship. We may observe, for example in television news, that a story’s narration shifts to the anchor, as though the audiovisual package is present to validate and evidence the anchor’s claim. A newspaper similarly takes ownership of the story. The institution takes over from the individual.

A news event can be seen as a ritual in the sense that it is a part of a continuous process that is ritualistic and routinized. The routinization of the media spectacle into a myth is an *ideological practice*, which forms the crux of this study. Kellner (2010) views media events as constructed, significant, social rituals that reproduced the existing society [that tend] to be



temporally regular, discrete, temporary, and relatively predictable. Mythification is the most invisible and the most long-term of the aesthetic processes. There is continuity in this construction of an incident into a myth. It is a disruptive practice routinized by constancy. In our digital interactive framework of social media prosumerism, the prosumer's role lies in consuming, owning, and sharing the story. By owning, I mean the addition of an individual prosumer's input into an existing product. Now the story is back in the hands of the individual. When thus shared, say, on social media, a re-presented story is also a fresh story in the same way as a digitally reproduced image is also a new image.<sup>46</sup>

In the three cases I evaluate in this work, the construction of India's Potemkin village comes in a desirable format and no rupture is possible in this tapestry; in the news anchor's narration of a crime, victimhood is flipped from farmers to politicians, but it is done in a recognizable format; in the aftermath of the brutalization and murder in Boolgarhi, the local community tries to rupture the suture, with limited success, indicating a self-narration that tries to demystify their conditions to us the media prosumer.

**Routinization and myth.** I have tried to explain that the news media construct events using the disruptive value of spectacle. First of all, the routinized sequencing of spectacles embeds the news form as a myth. Mythification means that a combination of aesthetics and affectation in a continued format results in rationalization and social acceptance. Secondly, a story is presented as an important event although it forms an element in a continuous flow of news. This follows the order of media logic: For example, a newspaper recognizes the most

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<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, as Lev Manovich (2001) points out, interactivity comes with a new technological "layer," which in turn comes with *variability*, from which media objects are floating and not static—automating the process and integrating it with human creation, generating numerous, hyperlinked copies that have no real original (pp. 36-45).

important story of the day with the largest-font headline on the front page, or a television news bulletin accords the first in the sequence to such a story. Using that logic, news narration suggests what the myth is. Below, I will provide an example to show how a news story sutures a spectacle into a routine and embeds it in myth. I will then situate myth in some theoretical detail before linking it to uncertainty and liminality.

From September 2022 through January 2023, the Congress party took out *Bharat Jodo Yatra*, or “Unite India Tour,” a marathon march of over 2,250 miles from Kanyakumari on the southern tip of the Indian peninsula to Srinagar in northernmost Kashmir. Walking through diverse cultural landscapes, the party’s former President Rahul Gandhi and hundreds of party workers met with local people in what the party called “unmediated” way. In October, Nabila Jamal, a news anchor at India’s India Today channel, was sent to report the march from Bellary, a dusty town in the southern state of Karnataka. In her report, she stood amidst the visibly massive crowd in anticipation of the famed marathon walkers, and posed open- and closed-ended questions in a vox-populi format, a news storytelling format in which a news reporter gathers popular opinion by asking the same sets of questions to many people, typically by catching them on the street off-guard, and collecting short quotes:

“Why are you here? Have you come here to see Rahul Gandhi? Do you like Rahul Gandhi?”

Being placed under a spotlight in that manner can be unnerving in general. Women in India face scrutiny from their families and social circles to the extent that many may become cautious and evasive when confronted with such a question in public. Kannada-speaking communities in many parts of Karnataka often creolize at will, using words from English or Hindi and using it in a Kannada syntax and produce nuanced and culturally contextualized meanings. The word “like”

is one such. Among conservative communities in that region, the word “like” between genders is often construed in a romantic or (especially) sexual way. In their answer, they must state only what they would like people in their circles and perhaps scrutinizing governments must hear. Thus, a sudden spotlight implies a potential threat.

Even though Jamal speaks Kannada, here, her question to the locals was in English, *Do you like Rahul Gandhi?* In its most straightforward meaning, she might imply, *Do you support Rahul Gandhi?* However, in the instance that the question was posed to the group of women, the respondents seemed ill at ease with it. A few of them stated vaguely that they had gathered to catch a glimpse of the political leader, while some stated that they supported him. In general, they did not reply with a straightforward *yes* or *no*. Jamal insisted: “[I know] you are here to *see* Rahul Gandhi but do you *like* Rahul Gandhi?” The same respondent as before replied: “I am here to see Rahul Gandhi.” Jamal took the microphone away. Speaking against the background of a noisy crowd, Jamal inferred in a piece-to-camera that the crowds were there primarily to see the man, not to support him. She explained to her viewers: “Ah, ‘I am just here to see him but I don’t know if I *like* him.’”

News anchors have routinely employed tones that indicate that they would consider Rahul Gandhi a non-serious and even reluctant politician who merely enjoys a dynastic position. Jamal’s manner was almost jocular, as though it should be construed as a fun event. This final summation, too, was made as though in jest. On occasion, Jamal would withdraw the microphone as the respondent was speaking, interrupting to speak to the viewer. It appeared to me as a viewer of the report that the respondent might have prefaced something to say something else if the microphone were available for a few more seconds—perhaps, *Of course, I have come here to see Rahul Gandhi ... but I also support him*. A more camera-savvy respondent—like a

political spokesperson—might have answered more deftly. While not directly deriding the opposition leader, Jamal’s report faithfully reflected the non-serious demeanor to the viewer.<sup>47</sup>

The presentation was packaged to perfection. The channel fulfilled a normal expectation, in that it covered what was already being touted as the largest event of the year, where large crowds were present every day. Yet, the presentation, in its manner, clarified to the viewer that the political opposition’s most visible leader is merely an object, a spectacle without meaning. The visual must be bifurcated from the theme, the aesthetic from the moral. The viewer’s comprehension becomes complete with the stamp of authority that comes in the *form*, complete with the expertise of the news anchor, seeming to endorse each story, as though to say, it is *all ye need to know*.<sup>48</sup>

A visual background lends authenticity to news. It is carefully chosen, depending on what the reporter wants us to know. If Jamal wanted to tell us that the crowds were in fact sparse and hostile to Rahul Gandhi, she could do so simply by locating herself cleverly. Deliberately showing the event entirely in a negative light would be counterintuitive since another reporter might contradict and discredit the story. Still, in the environment where a plethora of news platforms cover a single incident, such multiple constructions of the same reality are prevalent. The reporter conveys the side of a story convincingly enough without overtly taking sides.

The problem with this routinization of rationality is to fit it into today’s confused media system’s presentation and representation. Routinization is described in sociology, most fundamentally, as a reference to Max Weber’s (1978) usage of the term. Weber used

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<sup>47</sup> See India Today (2022a). A piece-to-camera is also called a stand-up.

<sup>48</sup> The viewer is different from the spectator. The event’s spectator on the ground is also the respondent to Jamal’s questions while the viewer understands the world through the mediated filter of the camera.

*routinization* to mean that charismatic authority is inherently unstable and must be stabilized into a routine for it to be effective. It is unstable because it is rooted in the personality of a leader, who exhorts followers to follow. For such followership to be perpetuated, a more organized form of power is necessary. Because monarchy is implicitly dynastic, there is a risk attached to the personality of each king. However, as Weber argued, in modern institutions, such risk is well-hedged by the institutionalization of the inheritance of the charisma into rational-legal structures.

News is equally well-presented to us. It beautifies reality. Let us take the example (just to keep this work focused) of a news anchor, who is designed to charm. Through the process of scheduling night after night, the anchor's charisma is anticipated, awaited, and cherished. Along with stories, the anchor is also presented as a spectacle. However, this is unsustainable. The anchor has to end a show. A news anchor cannot sustain their charisma beyond a show. An anchor is likely to change their job for a more lucrative one in a competitor's network. All this makes the neoliberal system—which uses charisma—unstable. Such disruption makes the viewer betrayed. Therefore, even an invisible anchor must live in cognition like a hovering ghost. Even after the lights are off after the show, the anchor and their narrated stories must hold the semblance of continuous illumination. The texture, the form, and the style of the stories act as sutures that do not take away the salience of charisma, but in fact help in its perpetuation. Thus, a fundamental feature of the creation of this continuity is the aesthetic value the media consumer attributes to the visible that removes the value of the invisible.

In the formulation of myth by its most celebrated work *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes (1957/1991) explains:

Myth does not deny thing, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them, it makes them innocent, it gives them a natural and eternal justification, it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but of a statement of fact. If I state

the fact of French imperialism without explaining it, I am very near to finding that it is natural and goes without saying: I am reassured. (p. 143)

While spectacle embellishes, myth de-embellishes. Where spectacle makes even an ordinary event extraordinary, myth is the process of routinization, where the extraordinary may become not only routine, but *reasonable*: The rationale for Barthes's magnum opus, *Mythologies*, is that he was troubled by the "'naturalness' with which newspapers, art and common sense constantly dress up a reality, which, even though it is the one we live in, is undoubtedly determined by history ... in the decorative display of *what-goes-without-saying*" (p. 10). Barthes simply stated that a myth, *today*, is a speech, but of course, "language needs special conditions in order to become myth [and therefore] everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse" (p. 107). While mythification of spectacle is continuous, engagement is discrete, random, and sporadic. Engagement is the status of a media story—an aspirational groove for all digital marketers to coax media consumers into. (Note that marketers prefer the term 'users' to refer to the consumers of their media commodities.) On social media, experience/involvement and observation/gaze merge and perhaps mimic each other as engagement. Engagement might break the continuity of the myth, and therefore its aspirational status must be understood as an objective to return to the spectacle. Engagement therefore obeys a spectacle because a spectacle disrupts while a myth insinuates. One is the spatial, the other, temporal. Spectacle is urgent and bears immediate results—it must at least be an event. Myth is important but ferments over time—it is the non-event.

Barthes (1970/1989) moves from the structural to the poststructural interpretation of myths in *Empire of Signs*. In doing so, he takes an approach to narration in which he seeks, as critic Trifonas (2001) notes, to "decentre its authority and disrupt its legitimacy" (p. 17).

Barthes's approach is less semiological and more experiential. Meanings are subservient, in this interpretation, to the pleasurable experience of reading, or love, that should be devoid of systems of representation. In the new Barthes, reading is a form of resistance to the culture-centric myth that text creates. Because the work's setting itself is multicultural, Barthes's eyes are opened to the multifarious ways in which the same sign can be interpreted. If a Frenchman were to read Japanese literature with no prior knowledge of the myths behind the signs, there is still interpretation in the obscurity in the meaning. That is why *gloss* irritates Barthes because it seems gloss, the cultural varnish to text, creates unnecessary *meaning*. In *Empire of Signs*, Barthes writes as a Western discoverer of the Orient. He tries to approach Japan without the Western fixations. In this approach, decontextualizing and dehistoricizing text is important in that context and historical "gloss" brings with it the supremacy of language in myth. The *intelligible* conflates with the *real*: "While being quite intelligible, the haiku means nothing" (Barthes, 1970/1989, p. 69). Therefore, impression collides with experience, gloss over truth, the visible over the invisible.

Barthes's point, of course, would be that discourse itself is antithetical to text, since it is the text that cements history in intelligibility. The problem remains, however: Without the intelligible, the externalization of the reality and positioning it against another, there is no dialectical existence of truth. There is no chance for movement in history. Experience is devoid of the very ideological underpinnings that bring about change in history, and immutability is the result of it. Human rights violations and other such modern conceptualizations remain bracketed in contexts that are Western. Gang-rapes of women by men for reasons such as caste hierarchies are cemented in time without the power of discourse.

Nationalism is an example of the mythification using aesthetic value. Timothy Brennan's (1990) chapter "The National Longing For Form" (in *Nations and Narrations* edited by Bhabha) referring to Malinowski, refers to "myths of the nation" as "a charter for the present-day social order; it supplies a retrospective pattern of moral values, sociological order, and magical belief" (pp. 44-45).<sup>49</sup> Brennan unites the various concepts of "myth as distortion or lie; myth as mythology, legend, or oral tradition; myth as literature per se; [and] myth as shibboleth" (p. 44). Unless these concepts are fused, the myth of "nation" as a unified concept would be fruitless.

The addition of myth as "distortion or lie" is particularly important to this unified provision, because it accurately describes the methodology by which a narrative construction of our knowledge is built. Without distortion of a historical belief, a myth cannot be changed. Texts in the Indian news media and social media are building new constructs of our world—for example, the role of the Muslim rulers in the development of Indian culture. For public conceptualization to be changed from something unconsidered or even positive to something considered and negative, history books must be rewritten. Doing so creates generations of people whose beliefs are changed; and faithful narration and sharing regenerates the oral traditions that form our legends that are further documented in history.

To build agreement, or *consensus*, we need a common yardstick—an objective measure. Let us consider the aesthetic value of routinization as at least one such device. To do so, let us return to the question, why do news media use aesthetics? Stories are not merely symbolic as myths would have it. They are material commodities, aspired and fetishized by their consumers. If Adorno debates the autonomy of beauty and critiques its tampering by rationality, Georgy

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<sup>49</sup> Brennan's reference to Malinowski's words is as quoted in Worsley (1964), p. 5.



Lukács's approach unveils how human intervention in aesthetics speaks to its use in society. His connection to aesthetics, predictably, is in a dialectical connection between nature, art, and mimesis. Specifically, Lukács saw aesthetics in relation to reification, which he viewed as a social pathology, a factor of objective "rationality" that is powered by economic, administrative, and technological structures (Feenberg, 2011).

Lukács's (1922/1971) neo-Kantian argument is that the subject of 'action' must be "seen to be the maker of reality" (p. 138). This is because

only if it can be shown that such a subjectivity can be found in the consciousness and that there can be a principle of form which is not affected by the problem of indifference vis-a-vis content and the resulting difficulties concerning the thing-in-itself, 'intelligible contingency', etc., only then is it methodologically possible to advance concretely beyond formal rationalism. Only then can a logical solution to the problem of irrationality (i.e. the relation of form to content) become at all feasible. Only then will it be possible to posit the world as conceived by thought as a perfected, concrete, meaningful system 'created' by us and attaining in us the stage of self-awareness" (p. 138).

This is a useful link to the methodology by which media *attract* media consumers. In the above example of engagement, the effort on the part of marketers should be to wish their consumers to be aware of the spectacle and not routinize their consumption into a zombie-like process: While what Lukács terms "formal rationalism" must be retained, it cannot suppress creation within this framework (p. 138). The consumer must also continue to create as a media prosumer. Without aesthetic value as the grease-like catalyst, this simulation of reality creation is impossible. But aesthetic value must be formalized before it is shared. Aesthetic value is created with careful consideration for history, by refraining from making value-judgments that are anachronistic, but above all, aesthetic value must be seen as objective—what Lukács calls value-related historical objectivity (p. 151). Aesthetic value therefore attaches itself to the same framework as cultural, historical, and political values to provide the simulation of autonomy to it.

If “the world must be aestheticised,” it makes the subject “purely contemplative” and “annihilates action” (p. 140). Intuitive understanding is needed, and intuition that leads to “objective reality” is the rejection of a creation—it is necessarily the acceptance of the “ready-made.”

As long as a man adopts a stance of intuition and contemplation he can only relate to his own thought and to the objects of the empirical world in an immediate way. He accepts both as ready-made—produced by historical reality. (p. 202)

The myth of an artifact’s aesthetic value may pervade across a media consumer by the self-evident processes in our interactive media environment through public sharing and the embedded endorsements. If intuition is our retrieval of historical reality as presented to us, it should find a place in our multi-media consumption of reality as presented in news. Although visibility is pervasive, the idea of visibility as a control mechanism does not find a prominent place in Lukács. I am concerned not with the concept of invisible forces at play in economics, but with what the visible does when invisibilized. Visibility is a production-controlled mechanism and builds completeness, through which we interrelate it with experience. Therefore, it makes sense that news shows us stories—different stories—that we relate to.

Thus, what is visible as a *continuous* spectacle eventually becomes intuitive and mythologized. In this case, it is the viewer that invisibilizes an intuitive object that is right under their nose. Aesthetic value cannot be judged on an abstraction—it needs an artifact, a sequence, and a spectacle. Therefore, it may be argued that sending these elements back into the woodwork enhances intuition. One way to look at visibility is as a factor of action. Lukács calls the party an “active, *visible* and organized incarnation of class consciousness” (p. 42, emphasis added). Invisibility is what defines class consciousness itself, then: “class *consciousness* implies a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one’s own socio-historical and economic condition ... an

intellectual reflex of the objective economic structure” (p. 50, emphases added). At the cusp of this consciousness-unconsciousness and invisibility-visibility lies our understanding of mediated and experienced reality.

An aspect of this interplay is the narrative space that intervenes between them. It is this space that contributes to the continuity we are discussing. Therefore, before proceeding, I will take a moment to explain this intervening space. Derrida’s notion of this space is at the root of this intervention. While discussing the representations of invisibility in *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida (1993/1994) famously invented the term *hauntology*. He uses the term *trace* to represent invisibility and silence as a tool of power—the absence of presence—not only the disappearance of origin but the constitution of an origin is by its reciprocal, a *non-origin*. Derrida invents the word *hauntology* in the very section where he writes that “the medium of the media ... is neither living nor dead, present nor absent” (p. 63). Yet, strangely, and even though he interprets Marx’s “visibility of the invisible” (p. 6) and of “invisible visibility” (p. 157), he seems to miss out a natural connection of absence to invisibilization, and of invisibilization to *de-articulation* (or *silencing*). Derrida does not believe absence and presence are binaries.<sup>50</sup> In the chapter “Injunctions of Marx,” he writes:

If there is something like spectrality, there are reasons to doubt this reassuring order of presents and, especially, the border between the present, the actual or present reality of the present, and everything that can be opposed to it: absence, non-presence, non-effectivity, inactuality, virtuality, or even the simulacrum in general. (p. 48)

Next, I turn to Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak (1988), whose investigation into subaltern agency is well-documented. Spivak explains the illusion of representation when she writes of

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<sup>50</sup> notwithstanding Cornel West’s (1990) critique of the binary implications in Derrida’s methodology of deconstruction.

“first-world masquerading as the absent nonrepresenter who lets the oppressed speak for themselves” (p. 87, emphasis added). As an example of the provocation of how such false representation, she cites the illegalization of the practice of *sati*, where a Hindu woman immolates herself on the pyre of her husband, by the British:

The abolition of this rite by the British has been generally understood as a case of ‘White men saving brown women from brown men. White women ... have not produced an alternative understanding. Against this is the Indian nativist argument, a parody of the nostalgia for lost origins: ‘The women actually wanted to die.’ (p. 93)

Here, the missing voice of the absent woman haunts Spivak. For her absent presence is a misarticulation, a misrepresentation of silence where “what the work *cannot* say becomes important” (pp. 80-81).

In the book, *The Alchemy of Race and Right*, Patricia Williams (1992), whose great-great grandmother had been a slave to a well-known Tennessee lawyer and jurist, Austin Miller, says she sees ghosts and does not know if she is crazy or not:

I am engaged in a long-term project of tracking his [Austin Miller’s] words—through his letters and opinions—and those of his sons also lawyers and judges, of *finding the shape described by her absence* ... I see her shape and his hand in the vast networking of our society. (p. 19, emphasis added)

Her great-great grandmother had been a slave to a well-known Tennessee lawyer and jurist, Austin Miller. The structures and shapes of objects and their contextual backgrounds contribute to our understanding of beauty and economics, resulting in the values we attach to them. As Avery Gordon (1997) notes in *Ghostly Matters*, Williams’s *finding the shape described by her absence* captures “the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time” (p. 6). Visibility and the uncertain presence of the objects and subjects of its stories constitute the aesthetic ways in which news achieves mythification.

I will now return to news narration's function in mythification. Nick Couldry (2008) has pointed us to the myth-making functions of a mediated spectacle. The form is a powerful enabler of these functions. Our news media fill our world with a constant flow of information—a “continuous spectacle,” as Couldry (2008, p. 162) says, but not only because the media produce the continuity, but because we can access, retrieve, and share the spectacle continuously and perpetuating the order of mythification—a term we may use to indicate the creation and crystallization of a myth.

Myth is the mnemonical form that routinized stories take over time. “What society can live without myths?” Nick Couldry (2008, p. 174) asks. Media events and their bearing on the media consumer's inevitable acceptance of mediated realities and their “universalising panoramas” (p. 174). Thus, mythification flourishes on the process of sharing stories along with the form and formulas on which they are mounted. In that sense, the creation of a sign is the spectacle, the perpetuating of it its mythification. An effective spectacle cannot work as a snapshot, therefore—temporality is salient not only to myth, but to spectacle. A spectacle and the myth are co-created by the media and their audience.

**Features of news aesthetics.** In the process of aesthetic constructions, *presenting the visible* also means *visibilizing the present*. Likewise, the act of *invisibilizing the absent* also means *absenting the invisible*. The invisibilization is thus the act of absentation. Together, presentation and absentation generate our reality and our illusion. I propose four features that explain presentation in terms of visibility and invisibility, presence and absence—in other words, in terms of aesthetic value.

The *first* feature is display—presenting the visible (visibilizing the present) in ideological and process-driven ways. Display is naturally embedded in the process of visibilization and

invisibilization. It seems natural because of the acceptance of the process. An example of this employment is the use of a “lead image” in digital news. Content management system platforms routinely mandate the lead image use. To embellish the visual factor in the pursuit of aspired modernity, artists’ illustrative representations, often futuristic, substitute for the real artifact. A close-up image of a generic hand, gray, genderless, and lifeless, acts as the lead image in murder stories where there is no image of the murdered person. The same image is employed day after day like a routine for murder stories. Sometimes the image of two feet, tied together as in a mortuary, is used as an alternative. The hand and the feet are at once a dehumanizing and routinizing of a ghastly act on individuals in society, yet serve the aesthetic mandates of those who control the medium.

The *second* is embellishment or hyper-visibilization—the Keats-esque aesthetic, which describes the magnificent screen that the urn’s surface displays. What it holds within it, however, must remain invisible to us, because the beauty is the truth—worse, it’s *all* we need to know. What we are permitted to see is what we know. Keats’s lines, appropriate to describe the dependence of our knowledge on the news media’s methods of gathering, processing, and dissemination, also illustrate the challenge for media literacy—the narrative challenge.

The *third* is invisibilization—making something absent by presenting the *presence* of the alternative, the way in which a veneer is presented to us to package or hide. An example is the India Shining political advertising campaign before the 2004 general election in India. In it, the BJP tried to showcase a feel-good factor of bonhomie and prosperity to its electorate. This claim was rejected by the voter and the BJP lost to a silent articulation at the electoral ballot (Nanjundaiah, 2005). However, rather than telling us that what they tell us is all we need to

know, we are now told what, presumably, we like to hear. This is not an absence of narration—it is the narration of the presence of a different reality.

The *fourth* is rendering of reality—a combination of visibilization-invisibilization and presentation-absentation. This is the suturing of truths in aesthetic terms. It is the final step in rendering aesthetic value. Ranciere (2009) relates aesthetics to ideology in that spectators emerge more knowledgeable from a theater ready for action. Here, I include the knowledge we derive from the *form* of news. In this position, the media prosumer must derive knowledge from the form and the frame of reality that is presented to them. Our understanding of the mythologized rationality of news presentation is the instrument by which we learn—this is our literacy.

Theorists have recognized storytelling as a presentation of both life and art. The only way to understand the spectator’s illusory experience would be to “enlarge the frame of description and know how to draw—behind the back of the spectator, so to speak—a second screen on which the osmotic exchange between the so-called spectator and the events on the primary screen becomes visible” (Pollmann and Hediger, 2011, p. 139). Illusion may be understood as a projection of reality squeezed in time and space to produce emotional consistency in the spectator. It is this projection that, in a “corporeal-somatic” way, makes the spectator a surrogate body, thus completing the two-way projection between spectator and the illusory goings-on on screen. In doing so, film deftly invokes a spectator’s tacit knowledge. The creation of this illusion has been discussed copiously, often in structuralist and procedural terms—especially concerned with the spectator’s subjectivity and engagement.

Film and news are different from each other in their intent and outcome of reality and illusion. Yet film and news work in similar ways in the production process: The *news* screen (or page) is fed by the authenticity of field footage and live reportage, and nothing could be more

credible. However, the suspension of disbelief in a film and the *belief* in news resonate with each other. In news production, when we place it in the field of visibility/invisibility and presence/absence, we can see it as a construction of the illusion of presence, or of absence, by visibilization and invisibilization.

We now arrive at news—the presentation of our realities or media-truths. One of the most universally recognizable aesthetic patterns in news is the look and feel of the human brand, the news anchor and reporter—visible and trustworthy bearers of carefully selected tidings, and of opinion. Behind NDTV’s Sonia Singh, the nightly news anchor before the panel shows take over, is a glitzy skyline. Behind her are moving, distracting, impressive, expensive 3D graphics. They must distract so as not to immerse us so much in the news that we ignore the value behind the aesthetics: This is a channel that can afford the best, therefore it must be trusted to deliver only the best. Behind Arnab Goswami, the nightly news-analysis anchor is the most impressive structure in a city—perhaps the Howrah Bridge in Kolkata, built in British times by English architecture and Indian hands. The stamp of authority is palpable, even overacted out. Many English-language news reporters and anchors are often trained at British institutes. We see this in Edward R. Murrow, Walter Cronkite, Stephen Sackur, and others who follow the same playbook. India Today channel’s anchor Rahul Kanwal stands on an inner balcony of a massive building, delivering his headlines as we take in the awe-inspiring visuals of the building’s interiors before he is seen to enter his news studio. Clad in an opulent suit, backgrounded by the glitter and glamor of celebrity-like lifestyle, he enters a set constructed of wood and graphics and framed by a camera that promises not to show the artifice or the lived experience. In their appearance, news sets and news anchors look alike in the post-colonies and the lands of their colonial masters.



It is interesting to observe the history of the emergence of the anchor as a leading brand representation of credibility in a news channel. Edward R. Murrow was a field reporter and then developed news and entertaining shows on CBS channel. He was both the reader of the 15-minute evening news bulletins and an analyst. From 1981, through the 1990s until 2005, Dan Rather was essentially the evening news reader on CBS. In India, Doordarshan has employed news readers whose sole (usually part-time) task is to prepare for and read the news. Differently, anchors stitched news-analysis or other programmatic shows. Zee News, too, used news readers in the 1990s, until it, along with all other significant channels, started using anchors as human brands. Prannoy Roy, who began as a show anchor on Doordarshan in the 1980s and 1990s before starting one of the biggest news television networks in India, NDTV, may be regarded as India's first news anchor. Arnab Goswami, Rajdeep Sardesai, Rahul Kanwal, Anjana Om Kashyap, Rubika Liyaqat, Aman Verma, Amish Devgan, and Sudhir Chaudhary are some of the most watched news anchors. They are also some of the most trolled people. Night after night, anchors present themselves with a look of authority and appearance of polemic night after night, routinely discrediting political leaders and trolling political spokespersons of opposition parties. Their conventional role may be compromised but they are their channels' breadwinners. No solution evolves by the end of their shows, but in all the ham, a sense of victory prevails.

Another evident form of the aesthetic value of news is the adoption of text and screen patterns that are suitable as an immediate attraction. A channel-surfer must deal with a confusing flood of channels to choose from. Screens are made provocative in general, with glamorous-looking anchors and an array of colorful visual elements on the screen. Text graphics are an interesting form of representation of this attractiveness. Headlines on screens attract attention, while moving text on a busy screen may compel a surfer to stop and read. Provocative text is

arguably more so. All these elements bear value that provokes the viewer to interact with the screen. This Horton and Wohl (1956), writing at a time when major scholarship was shifting towards reception- and cognition-driven evaluations, called para-social interaction, in which the technological, the visual, the audio, the haptic, and the cognitive senses work in tandem to fulfill a moral purpose. In that case, the elements of production must converge to carve out a smooth, convenient, and pleasurable path for the viewer towards that end. The look, the voice, the background, and the overall set are conveyors of meaning and knowledge.

This artifice is not too different from that of a movie set. It cannot afford to show ugliness in any form. Similarly, in the stories, ugliness must be presented in ways that tug at our aesthetic values. However, the exploitation and construction of aesthetic values do not occur merely in visual terms. News media must create our reality in aesthetic ways to serve purposes that are at once neoliberal (well-documented in scholarship) and processual (alluding back to the incident-to-mythification progression). In the combination of overt and inherent motivations, they must show what is desirable—not in the sense of beauty but in terms of allure to the medium. Desirability in this context is the ability of a text to lure the prosumer to consume and produce.

In this section, I have attempted to establish the aesthetic, ideological space in which a media prosumer finds themselves. In this field of aesthetic forces of visibility and presentation, the location of the media prosumer is such that in an apparently liminal existence, they consume and re-present the reality presented to them—this is a position that lies between experience and presentation, illusion and reality. In our new world of a constant social media feed, we find ourselves at an intersection of formats, genres, and devices, eagerly performing mediated roles that are constructed to maintain our focus on the uses and the gratifications we must derive—that is, keep our eye on truths that are presented to us.

## **Aesthetic construction and media literacy**

My final maneuver in this section is to draw a reference of aesthetics to the location of media literacy. While pre-modern societies were marked by the coincidence of location and “presence,” modern societies foster absence and distance. Writing about the “consequences of modernity,” Anthony Giddens (1990) argues that locationality and distance collaborate with the creation of social order: “The problem of order is here seen as one of time-space distancing—the conditions under which time and space are organised so as to connect presence and absence” (p. 14). In media-societies that characterize our modern life, the news media operate arbitrarily on the basis of distance and absence, depending on aesthetic value. For a media platform, a village is only relevant when it emerges with numbers of users of the media technology that make an economically viable proposition.

Location and distance are narrative components of both aesthetics and literacy: A camera placed close to a face may reveal the face in a different perspective if it is placed at a different distance; it may hide scars and may reveal that the person is disabled, perhaps. Likewise, television news audience in New York may appreciate local issues differently from those in Carbondale, Illinois or Boolgarhi, India. Modernity and urbanity have gone hand-in-hand; urban centers are seen as preservers of art and architecture; cities are the first centers of nation-branding. It is the well-ordered spaces of our cities that we must use. Yet, the prosumer is torn between this presentation and their life-experience. In their location, the prosumer might live the liminal space where they must at once puncture and maintain the surface of presented realities.

I would like to situate the concept of location by employing the literacy metaphor in the much-discussed chapter “Walking in the City” of Michel de Certeau’s (1984) book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which is useful in three ways. First, his reading of Manhattan as a text is

helpful. Second, his work is useful in a broader interpretation of literacy as reading and writing. Third, it helps us by pointing to locations of subject and object.

In the chapter, de Certeau presents an order of the city that is trying to defy a pre-ordered surface in which people seem to be reading and writing the city: “The surface of this order is everywhere punched and torn open by ellipses, drifts, and leaks of meaning: it is a sieve-order” (p. 107). In colonial countries, urbanity is literally a palimpsest (a word de Certeau also uses for the stratified place), a rural surface over which an urban script has been written. I have detailed this aspect in describing Ahmedabad in “The Spectacle of India’s Potemkin Village.”

Walking in the city, however, creates its own rhetoric because it does not form a pattern: To de Certeau, these are imaginative and open-ended acts, the seeming chaos that paves the way for patterned texts. Describing urban practitioners, he writes:

[T]hey are walkers, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban “text” they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. (p. 93)

de Certeau could well be describing a farm laborer or a slum dweller or another illiterate denizen of the rural pockets of urban India—the most visible among rural spaces to an urban prosumer. These are not the orderly text-makers of Manhattan—on the contrary, they generate chaos and disturbance to the image of orderliness. Therefore, perhaps it should be unsurprising to learn that on India’s news media, villages remain almost off-radar, un-covered and un-presented. In news presentation, 600,000 villages, where 65 percent of India lives, are invisibilized so that the other 35 percent may live their experience as prosumers. In turn, within that segment, they are presented a selected medley.

So how might de Certeau describe a view from a high-rise in Mumbai, India, Nairobi, Kenya, or Manila, the Philippines, where islands of villages are also the suturing patches? These

are not Manhattan's World Trade Center from where, before 9/11, one had been able to look down at practitioners of the street. After 9/11, that vantage point no longer exists—it has been razed and taken over by a worm's-eye view in which we see our reality intermeshed with that which is presented to the prosumer. It is the space where myths are made: de Certeau calls this a “stylistic metamorphosis.” de Certeau's pedestrian is not listless and liberated. In the seeming order of presented reality and the chaos of lived reality, the prosumer's role alone seems constant, flat and mechanical.

In the practice of everyday mediated life, presentation is distorted by a viewer's location—in a locational blind spot. Although over 65 percent of India's population is rural, most of the audiences considered core to the news media do not live there.<sup>51</sup> They do not occupy the same spaces as the village folk who witnessed the incident live in rural areas. To these audiences, the rural folk may be a mythical trope about which they may have heard in sporadic media stories and conversations, perhaps from people in proximity who link the locations—migrant workers or household help. Oppressions and exploitations are invisible except when they are seen through a common lens. Crime becomes amoral and indistinguishable from injustice. Justice to the prosumer may be different to justice to the experiencer. This is our blind spot, constructed by the “normal” media processes—dark spaces that lurk in the urban palimpsest—the present, invisible spaces.

In the chapter “Stratified Places” in de Certeau's book, the old order of construction paves way for the new. Foundations remain underneath new structures. Despite the dominance of the “logic of production ever since the eighteenth century ... beneath the fabricating and

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<sup>51</sup> See The World Bank (2020).

universal writing of technology, opaque and stubborn places remain.” This immobility is an illusion, however, since these are simply fragments that make up the whole, “linked to totalities” (p. 201). Yet the stubborn village-like “pieces” must make up a renovation.

Thus, the location of the prosumer is removed from the location of the presentation. To a village, the promise of modernity lies in the arrival of new highways, private hospitals, and in general, new buildings amidst the ugly old ones. The urban is the aspirational modern, visible and desirable. To the prosumer of well-constructed images, villages may appear green, innocent, and sparse. They may become the prosumer’s mythic dreamland. Yet villages are built-over spaces. They are the urban palimpsest. They are nodes in the fabric of a city, poor and technologically backward islands whose inhabitants serve to sustain the rest of the city. Between them new urban buildings have come up. Yet the original spaces of the cities are termed slums in their own spaces. They suture cities and the entire land of nations—a process of mythification.

News media, an important vehicle in the dissemination of modernity, do not always try to weave a national narration. Instead, they use nationalism as a synecdoche, a metaphor, or an emblem. When a news channel proclaims to be “national,” it often employs stories that appeal to a national audience. National broadcasts, national politics, national business, national sports, and so forth appear not in some nefarious form, but rather, as a seemingly innocuous manifestation of the limitations of technology, resources, and space/time. These are contextual arguments, and particularly fitting of postcolonial contexts. The stories, however, can be challenged at local levels of experience—a local group, a community leader, or a national politician walking through localities may point out the disjointed nature of these narratives. Still, the efforts at a unified narrative continue. The agenda of nationalism is uniformly conducted.

A comparison between two news items may help in the explanation. Even a year-long agitation by farmers, one of the longest in India's history, in 2020-21 did not take the media to the hinterlands of India. Rather, their visuals showed farmers camped outside the national capital of Delhi and in the periphery of its suburb of Noida, a major hub of television news studios. In contrast, in February 2020, when U.S. President Donald Trump visited India, he was taken through the colorfully decorated streets of Ahmedabad, where the government had organized spectacular street dances by children and adults to welcome Trump. This was one of the most widely covered media events that year. Trump never visited or saw any Indian village. If, oddly, Modi had decided that Trump should be allowed to visit a village, it would have been cleaned up and decorated with paved roads and painted houses. The urban spectacle blinds media gaze to the dark spaces that remained uncovered by news and covered in invisibility.

The understanding of the media prosumer of the aesthetic design of media texts is their media literacy. In that way, understanding the meaning of aesthetic experience is knowledge derived from the narrative constructions that the news media, like art, weave. In the *natural* function of media literacy—to decode and encode narration—the prosumer probes the surface of the palimpsest, punctures the tapestry, without disturbing it. The media prosumer is thus Derrida's ghost. In re-producing and re-presenting mediated truths, there is immobilization even in action.

### **A note on next chapters**

In the following three chapters, I provide practical evidence that binds and extends the foregoing problematizations. While all of these units of the study are located in India, each is set in a different locational context. They are bound to the other in that they all illustrate visibility and invisibility, presentation and experience, certainty and uncertainty.

In “The Spectacle of India’s Potemkin Village,” elaborate and expensive events are put up to attract the camera. These events bear immense value, but their communicative value lies in the display. Their coverage and value transcend national borders, yet they appeal to nationalism in specific locations. They are a microcosm of the acceptance of that location in the globalized world. The representations in these events must, therefore, be put on display for capture by the news media.

The chapter “Performance of Lakhimpur Kheri” is a presentation of aesthetic performance by mediated means, and specifically, by Arnab Goswami, a star anchor of a nightly news-analysis show on Republic TV news channel. In it, the desirable is foregrounded and displayed. In his performance, the anchor, commentating on a criminal act, may reverse victimhood and perpetration by reciting criminal acts in an ideological framework of modernization.

In “Invisibility in Boolgarhi,” the focus is on the role of serendipity and its disruptive nature in well-ordered societies. News media’s accidental discoveries of the undesirable can be problematic to socially disseminated aesthetic values like the caste system. The undesirable must be immediately narrated as the aberration, not the norm. Such narrations come in the way of, and disrupt, a well-sutured story that constitutes the continuity of our understanding of our world.

In analyzing these cases, I make three strands of evaluation: In the Potemkin village, the analysis exposes the contradictions in the aesthetic creation of the setting of a hyper-visible event as a showcase of nationalism. In the second instance, star anchor Arnab Goswami uses ambiguity to create certainty, using a veneer of media truths and use of the aesthetics of language to prescribe not only what should be. The third, in the aftermath of the brutalization and murder of a low-caste teenage girl in a village, is an evaluation of the implications of rupture of continuity



by journalistic action on the media prosumer's position. Inasmuch as these are also struggles of the media prosumer in understanding their world through mediated means, I link these strands of struggle to media illiteracy.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE SPECTACLE OF INDIA'S POTEMKIN VILLAGE

#### **The façade of the Potemkin village**

In this chapter, I relate the media spectacle around Trump's 2020 visit to Ahmedabad, the largest city of Gujarat state, to the nationalistic aspirations of a modernizing nation where I hope to reveal the value of the aesthetics of narrative construction. My aesthetic analysis of snapshot moments of this visit will reveal the ways in which an image of India's nationalistic modernization project is constructed in the contemporary political environment, in which segregation has emerged as a popular "solution" to social strife. Large cities are showcases of modernity in which façades attract tourists and investment. Within them, governments build streets and districts that can showcase nations to international views. Films use sets that simulate these showcases, airbrushing out the un-modern. Television news media may choose shiny spotlights as backgrounds. By spotlighting the desirable, India's Potemkin village keeps the undesirable in the dark, highlighting artifice and concealing reality. My endeavor here is to dig beneath the surface of the aesthetic veneer of this Potemkin village, of the palimpsest, of the cover of applause over history, the exhibit over the invisible.

Gujarat is a good location for this examination. It is a perfect setting to impress and overwhelm any world leader, to provide evidence of popular support and dispel rumors around the world of Modi's dictatorial acts. Gujarat is the land of Gandhi. Godse, his assassin, belonged to the RSS, Modi's organizational parent. As a BJP leader, Modi resolves the distance between Gandhi and Godse. The state has elected the BJP continuously for more than two decades, and Modi has served as its Chief Minister for well over a decade. When he, as Prime Minister, visits his home state, he receives thunderous applause.

The term Potemkin village is not a widely used metaphor. In the book *The Post-Soviet Potemkin Village: Politics and Property Rights in the Black Earth*, Jessica Allina-Pisano (2008) describes a Potemkin village as follows:

Liberal economic policies and local politics combined to produce a façade of rural ownership—a modern Potemkin village. Like the wooden façades that, according to legend, were constructed along Crimean roads to impress and mislead Tsarina Catherine the Great during her travels at the end of the eighteenth century, post-Soviet Potemkin villages convinced Moscow and Kyiv of local state officials' loyalty and international lending institutions of the Russian and Ukrainian governments' commitment to property rights reform. (p. 3)

A Saxon envoy to the court of Catherine II and not a friend of Potemkin, Georg von Helbig, is said to have passed along the story of how Potemkin operated to please his Tsarina. As per Helbig's narration, in 1787, four years after the (first) annexation of Crimea from the Ottoman empire, Russian governor and celebrated military leader-statesman Grigory Potemkin devised an innovative way to hide his corrupt inefficiency in the economically precipitous region when Catherine the Great decided to visit and inspect villages under his command. He instructed that beggars should be hidden. He constructed fake settlements to impress Empress Catherine II—although he was her close ally in a coup and her lover—and hide the pathetic conditions of the towns. Legend has it that he even used portable villages. Potemkin had façades painted on buildings to mimic villages. In them, Catherine watched cheering and smiling villagers who pretended to be happy and well-fed.

The genesis of this story is disputed but significant. The existence of the Potemkin village is disputed, especially by Montefiori (2000), who is Potemkin's sympathetic biographer more than 200 years after the latter's death. Nevertheless, the veracity of the Potemkin village story is not important for our purpose, as it merely presents to us the persuasive power of the artifice entailed in its construction. The allegory of the Potemkin village is helpful in examining this

desirability-based visibility, and its binary relationship with invisibility. A Potemkin village refers to a hyper-visibility location that a government uses to build its nationalistic image. It is constructed as a hyper-visible, illuminated showcase, hiding less pleasant realities.

India's Potemkin village is a showcase of an official, nationalistic, modernist narration that controls the hyper-visibility of aesthetically acceptable elements in a society and the invisibilization of realities that are inconvenient to that narration. Spectacular displays of opulence, grandeur, and adulation have been a leitmotif in Modi's events. An example of this grand display was during U.S. President Donald Trump's visit to India on February 24, 2020. On that day, Trump and First Lady Melania Trump arrived directly in Ahmedabad. This is already unusual, since heads of state normally fly into the national capital, New Delhi, either mostly limiting themselves to that city or at least arriving there for initial meet-and-greet protocols. The entire show in Ahmedabad was managed for Trump, the world, and proud Indians to appreciate the enthusiasm and appeal of the city.

Fittingly, Modi received him in his home state and gave him a quick tour of some of the city's best quarters, including the iconic *ashram* that Mahatma Gandhi had established on the banks of the Sabarmati river. Trump rode along the long route to Sardar Patel stadium, a cricket venue named after India's freedom fighter and first Deputy Prime Minister. In 2021, Modi renamed it after himself. Both the heads of state addressed a gathering of over 100,000 people at that massive venue, the largest in the world. Modi accompanied him through a welcome roadshow to the rally. The Covid-19 pandemic had descended upon us, but a lockdown was put in place only one month after this visit. With no official mask mandates, Trump and Modi hugged each other as the stadium erupted into joyous rapture and festive crowds thronged the streets.

There is nothing unusual for postcolonial leaders to take pride in showcasing their nation's progress in the same modernization project as the Western counterparts. In the book *Planet of Slums*, Mark Davis (2007) describes how urban slums are excluded or hidden when foreign dignitaries visit cities. In a bleak and critical account of the economics and politics of congested and often illegal urban pockets, Davis makes the remarkable observation that:

In the urban Third World, poor people dread high-profile international events — conferences, dignitary visits, sporting events, beauty contests, and international festivals — that prompt authorities to launch crusades to clean up the city: slum-dwellers know that they are the "dirt" or "blight" that their governments prefer the world not to see. (p. 104)

The spaces of modern development are the mainstream that suture over the dark liminal spaces, like the Black man on the streets who was largely invisible to the news camera in 1950s America. Poverty and illness are routinely glossed over even in the most developed nations—how else would the global North (as we must now call that region—we are evolving in our political correctness) be proud to be the developed world? People in those “Third World” slums may never know that their situation may not be unique to their part of the world. In their world, even with tarred roads and brick buildings have reached beyond the cities, they cannot be showcased. They are merely functional and lack aesthetic value—unless, of course, they are dressed up specially to present them to attract international tourists, who, from their locational distance, may find them quaint and desirable—like the urban prosumer. The village along the tourist's safari route in Masai Mara of Kenya, and the tribal village Khuri village in Rajasthan in India, decked up for tourists, are thus displayed. The villages must be preserved as exotic, quaint and well-airbrushed—not as the mainstream. Even urban slums attract illnesses of the poor, like

leprosy—34 percent of Indian cities are slums. India contributes 52 percent of the world's leprosy. Gujarat is among the states that have not achieved its total eradication.<sup>52</sup>

Those foregrounds and backgrounds offer definitions of what must be rendered visible. The narrator in Ralph Ellison's (1952) novel *The Invisible Man* converts his absence into presence simply by narrating it. Thereby, he embodies the very visibility that eludes him. A modern Potemkin village is both a showcase for a mediated event and itself a communicative event. As much as world leaders build Potemkin villages for one another's benefit, there is rich domestic value in them. After all, nationalism is a powerful and successful concept that must be reified and harnessed for affective use in political demagoguery and in motivational discourse. In that routine, good aesthetics are harbingers of good emotions. They lead to good relations and good commerce. In this framework, it is important that narrations gloss over irritants to national pride and protect the prosumer from the pain of unseemly realities. Furthermore, it would seem that leaders implicitly acknowledge the Potemkin villages of one another's nations. They may themselves indulge in similar constructions in establishing world supremacy. But these may be platitudes. Platitudes are important in reaffirming in how a *nation* (not its leader alone) should see another. A leader affirms this by being an object whom the cameras capture in desirable contexts and a subject who articulates that desirability—a quid pro quo in developing mass blindness amongst non-spectators.

From Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) *Metaphors We Live By*, we learn that metaphors create a *semblance* of similarity. Unlike the benign similes, things are not *like* up and down, they

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<sup>52</sup> UN Habitat's 2018 figures, India fares poorly in its ranking, as the 52<sup>nd</sup> among cities with districts that have the least access to drinking water, sanitation services, sufficient living area, and durable housing. India's health minister revealed the leprosy figures on February 16, 2023. See Matter of great concern (2023).

simply *are*. For example, inflation is *up*, sad is *down*. Mercator's map has set our ideas of north *as up* and south *as down*. That is why, as Lakoff and Johnson say, metaphors are the transporters of our rationality the way we make sense. (The reader may recall "imaginative rationality" from the previous chapter.) The characterization of *sense* that our mediated narration presents to us is objective and—as Lakoff and Johnson term it—"disembodied" (p. 199). In this ideological sense of meaning, the user is the interpreter who operates with a semblance of independence.

Metaphors lend a useful methodology for an examination of typing Potemkin villages to the modern rationality of visibility. Spectatorship is documented particularly well in film studies. A non-spectator's aesthetic values are in alignment with mediated aesthetic values—with media aesthetics.<sup>53</sup> This agreement forms the bedrock in the creation of value. Behind the illusory nature of images lies the affective value of their aesthetics. This illusion, as in the viewer's parasocial interaction with the medium, is generated by the spectator in an aesthetic experience.<sup>54</sup> This resolution of spectator and film (subject and object) is also a representation of the seeming conflict between illusion and reality. The relationship between the real and the represented is also the interface between the material and the metaphorical. That is why, through this analysis, we cannot ignore the representative value of the Potemkin village. However, the presentation and the representation are not the same—metaphors originate from literal meanings but take on larger interpretations. The literal value of the Potemkin village, which Grigory Potemkin presented, need not be present in its full form in its presentations.

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<sup>53</sup> For a detailed explanation of aesthetic value, see "Spectacle, routinization, mythification."

<sup>54</sup> See Horton and Wohl (1956).

As an aesthetic feature, the original Potemkin village created an embellishment—much like a film set—to create the awe and spectacle that puts undesirable conditions in the dark. But it is also a representation of the visibility-invisibility interplay, like a magician who distracts us to a different object while he performs a trick and does not allow us to make sense of the trick. Embellishments take the form of desirable elements. It is common among cities to illuminate their iconic structures. An example is the Victoria Terminus one of the busiest train stations in the country that was built in colonial India and now renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Terminus. It may be a historical reminder but it is a desirable reminder. It stands for the city of Mumbai. The famed Mysore palace is a reminder of the city's monarchic past but stands for the city itself. These spotlights, like the streetlight, point to what we must not miss, but also that unless we have prior knowledge, we can miss that which is not spotlighted. Just as language metaphorizes the world for us, these spotlighted spots are metaphors for the city itself. Their physical forms represent the desirable—their beauty is our truth.

The contexts, subjects, objects, and spectators of Ahmedabad and Crimea are poles apart and yet like the glorious presentation in the original, India's Potemkin village builds the consensus of the desirable-visible and the undesirable-invisible.



## **Beauty and truth: Narrative construction of spectacle**

The intent and structure of Potemkin villages resonate with Keats's evocation of the Grecian urn in which he pits truth and beauty in opposition, ending in an artificial synthesis using poetic irony—truth *is* beauty, the urn is beautiful, because I say so. That is the rendering of the truth.

Narrative suturing is a process of rendering our world to us. To recapitulate the construct, suture patches different, sometimes disparate, elements in a tapestry. In its basic form, suture is a technique of stitching voids (logical, narrative, cognitive-affective) together into a narrative of continuity, placing the viewer as a subject—a signifier—within a system of signifiers. A filmmaker artificially creates a set to make these controlled maneuvers. The camera captures frames that are then rendered into a spectacle. The editing process then stitches the film together—and as we know, this is the technical step-up from the snapshot images of art. In a news story, a set is framed before the newsmaker arrives on the scene. The camera, the microphone, the pen capture frames of this construction and present it to the media consumers. The camera, the microphone, and the pen then construct the narration of the spectacle. We have been introduced earlier in this work the process of converting an incident into a media event, a media event into a media spectacle, and finally mythologizing it into public cognition.

What happens behind the scenes, beneath the suture, is aesthetically problematic: To explain art in the chaos of our world is an irrational act. Foucault's (1966) interpretation of Diego Velázquez's 1656 portrait *Las Meninas* is discomfiting: By considering art as a mere documentation or artifact in history, it positions art in life. Vasquez's painting portrays the painter painting, including elements of the real environment within the frame that would not find a place in an actual portrait—normal people peeping, the painting itself, and so on. It provides a

startling frame within which one must view it—as an artificial construct of the king who is being painted. The painting is disruptive in that it presents the reality beneath the construction of art. It is therefore irrational. A more rational portrait would be perfect, depictive of the grandeur of monarchy. In that way, *Las Meninas* is an underwhelming deconstruction of itself, devoid of the aura that high art demands.

The construction of the aesthetic value demands technique. Technique creates a familiar aesthetic context. As Adorno says, “[t]echnique insures that the artwork is more than an agglomeration of what is factually available, and this more is art’s context” (p. 216). Moreover, the mass production of this familiarity is helpful. The meaning of aura cannot be stuck in a semantic rut—we must also view it as the affective original that is reproduced for appreciation. The institutional apparatuses that conduct the performance of educating us promise to provide us both the understanding of historical realities and the critical tools of learning that can create the future.

Aesthetics and expression must go together, Adorno argues. Furthermore, the mimetic and constructive formulas of art can arrive at a “consensus.” A derivative formula to this synthesis does not appeal to him: Derivation is too purposive. Instead, he cites the example of H. B. Scharoun’s Philharmonic Hall in Berlin, which assimilates with its surroundings (p. 44). The purpose of the hall is hidden by the beautiful blending-in of the aesthetic with the expression. The naturalness of post-War Berlin’s urban space does not betray its artifice. Harmonious music provides an effective cover in a theater that presents its beauty in a natural manner. Underneath, gory history lies.

Adorno’s Berlin is my Ahmedabad. For decades before 2020, Ahmedabad has had its share of strife, violence, segregation, and divisions. Peace prevails after segregation. That is the

ideological palimpsest of the city. A perfect surface is ready on which the Trump cavalcade can ply. In Adorno's Berlin and my Ahmedabad, undertones of disturbance and conflict lurk underneath the sheen of order and the cloak of song and dance. The purpose of aura is incomplete without expression for which it is meant. Expression acts as a suturing mechanism to stitch a beautiful surface over turbulent history. Joyous expression completes the palimpsest—the re-writing—of the city.

History must be retold because it can defy myth. History is being rewritten in Modi's India—from revisions in history textbooks to revisionist self-assertions that defy historical evidence. In that narration, after its independence from the British, India had become a diffident and meek nation, remaining servile to the White man until the 2014 arrival of a strong, assertive, *local* leader. India's constitutional (nominated, not elected) head, President Droupadi Murmu, resonated with aesthetic expression in early 2023 when she addressed the Parliament and called the Modi government “fearless and decisive ... from surgical strike to a firm crackdown on terrorism” (Modi govt ‘fearless, decisive’, 2023). The expression is bold, assertive, self-congratulatory. The relationship between the Brown and the White man is now one among equals. In recent years, popular Indian cinema has been routinely making films on the theme of belligerence, claiming the supremacy of Indian strategic intelligence and its forces over those of, say, its arch-rival Pakistan. In general, these films tell stories of Indian military supremacy and strategic brilliance in simplistic portrayals—reminiscent of Hollywood films of Jerry Bruckheimer. These Bollywood films unabashedly borrow visual mnemonics from their Hollywood counterparts and portray urbane, Western-suit-clad Indian women in positions of strategic leadership and men as nation-saving superheroes. The news media and the entertainment media are seen as independent institutions not bound by political linkages.

Spectacle disrupts and yet provides continuity. It interrupts our experience to show us how the world *should* look, sound, and feel. Modi's entry to the United States was barred soon after the Gujarat riots of 2002 killed more than a thousand Muslims on his watch, revoked after the Supreme Court exonerated him of direct responsibility in the pogrom and he became Prime Minister in 2014. Now, a hug between the very same countries, the punisher and the forgiven, is a symbol of triumph. A poster showing Modi and Trump hugging each other on the roadside in Ahmedabad or Houston represents bonhomie and the emergence of a chain of strong and authoritarian world leaders. It puts them on equal footing. The leader of two democracies includes the acclaimed leader of the world and a leader whose history is marred with dubiousness and bans.

In this integration of spectacle into continuity, we may find consensus. For example, when falsehood is presented repeatedly using a simulation of scientific arguments, the irrational becomes the rational. Resistant voices may interrupt this consensus but without the Philharmonic Hall to amplify, legitimize, and validate them, those voices must remain hidden underneath the suture. Aesthetic value becomes consented value.

Let me illustrate this using, first, an example of nation-branding. In this relatively new, competitive form of neoliberalism, nations make efforts to attract investments by present their nation in aesthetically appreciable ways although the experience of the reality may be otherwise.<sup>55</sup> Imagine an American tourist, normally accustomed to orderly traffic and disciplined pedestrian behavior, arriving in Mumbai's frightening chaos with no foreknowledge of what to expect. A browse through the promotional literature presented to them by government agencies

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<sup>55</sup> See Jansen's (2008) study for a detailed critique of nation-branding.

sets the mind at rest—this is not chaos, this is the autonomy of the pedestrian, as Michel de Certeau might have said, merely a representation of the vibrancy of the Indian life and culture. The tourist now has a relative handle by which to suppress the fear and reconcile it in a dialectic fashion. A guide then takes the tourist through marked areas of the city that showcase British colonial structures that are beautiful and familiar, the sight of a beach which is a blend of familiar natural scenes and made-for-tourists scenarios.

Distance, like time, heals the suture. The spectator is also affected in the process. But spectacle is not intended for experiencers. They are elements in the spectacle. We may reasonably infer that a spectator's aesthetic values may be different from those of a non-spectator. Over time, the surface looks seamless. The picture that emerges is coherent in its appeal. This continuity is the affective value of a spectacle, seeking to influence a non-spectator—the media prosumer. A spectator is the witness of the spectacle. The return of General MacArthur from the Korean War in 1953 was converted into a grand spectacle in Chicago. More than three million Americans filled the streets of the city to applaud him (Lang and Lang, 1953). Television covered the Chicago event live, and Chicagoans were stuck in a “dilemma” for the first time, having to decide whether to attend the event or to watch it on television (Katz and Dayan, 2003, p. 122). The televised version had a national, cascading effect of somewhat of a landslide, Lang and Lang (1953) wrote, of “national indignation over MacArthur's abrupt dismissal,” rendering “the impression of enthusiastic support, bordering on ‘mass hysteria’” (p. 4). This rendered reality glossed over the reason for MacArthur's return—that President Truman had *recalled* the general for overstepping his authority in the post-war period. As Katz and Dayan point out, “the debate is no longer about reality and lack of it, but between different

constructions” (p. 125). Facts are available to a spectator. The non-spectator must rely on media truths.

In India, Modi weaves aesthetic acceptability into a notion of modernity that is blended with Hindu tradition. Acting in the capacity of an inspirational leader, Modi takes pains to build that image, installing that image among citizens as a model that accompanies his political manifesto of *vikas*. Multiple camera units and slick editing techniques are required to establish this model. An instance of this is seen in Modi’s mediated visit to the Himalayas: News units rarely miss opportunities of world leaders performing unusual tasks—they are spectacles that perfectly define the very contours of newsworthiness. Modi takes advantage of this norm. In a documentary on May 13, 2022, German broadcaster Deutsche Welle’s biographic documentary on Modi talks mostly with unpretentious awe, portraying him as India’s “new strong man on the international stage.” Between the lines, however, the narrator brings in the nuance: “Modi goes to great lengths to cultivate an image of *spirituality* ... He portrays himself both as spiritual leader and man of action” (DW Documentaries, 2022, emphasis added).<sup>56</sup> The narrator tells the viewer that his television crew “accompanied” Modi on his journey to Kedarnath, a Hindu shrine in the Himalayas. Scenes used in the documentary can also be found on other news channels.

The purpose of this mediated event should be seen from the perspective that the agenda of nationalism and the showcase of modernity go hand-in-hand, and the function is two-fold—*internal* and *external*. In the internal, the content, form, and audience are oriented to domestic consumption aimed at national consensus through nationalism. The external is largely economic,

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<sup>56</sup> Alternatively, The world of Narendra Modi (2022). The video content in the link in DW Documentaries (2022) appears, bafflingly, to have been since removed with the message “This content is private.”

aimed at global audiences. In this narrative construction, the participation of the news media in events and spectacles is an important form of amplification. Nationalism and modernity have been the guiding forces for nations to brand themselves through news media's well-entrenched mechanics of agenda-setting<sup>57</sup>—by cherry-picking the visibility of the desirable and rendering invisible the undesirable. Physicality, or embodiment, is arguably the most easily *visibilizable* elements of such branding.

The documentary diligently informs us of the blend of Modi's Hindu religious identity and his careful image-building exercise: "In front of the cameras, Modi portrays himself as a holy man," the narrator explains. This description of Modi as a self-portrayed *holy man* is true, with nuanced differences that strike an insider. In the video, Modi is shown walking in the Himalayas, clad in flowing, gray-colored clothes with a stylish saffron waistband, an unusual ensemble that may represent local cultures of the mountainous regions of India, Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan. This is not a mainstream Hindu attire at all. It is not readily associated and yet is exotic and pious-looking. At best, it may appear like a twinning of a Buddhist monk's—Buddhism branched out of Hinduism when Prince Siddhartha left home and discovered a set of paths to salvation. The integration of the attire brings back Buddhism into the narrative fold of its original religion. Yet, this self-construct of a demi-god resonates with Modi's supporters.

A dichotomous imagery pervades Western notions of Hindu spirituality. They are divided between mystical magic and chaotic, unintelligible practices. Modi's portrayal of the Hindu religion starkly contrasts with the images made available through the traditional Western lens. In these images, ash-smearing naked men sit on the banks of the polluted Ganges river, frenzied and

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<sup>57</sup> For a detailed description of media agenda-setting theory, see McCombs, M. (2004).

jostling crowds dance around a large idol of the elephant-faced God Ganesha. Recast as a orderly practice, Hinduism becomes simpler, more appealing, more spiritual. Spiritual practices have enjoyed a much more universal, more comprehensible presence in the conventional Western lens. To the interested Western mind, peaceful and leafy *ashrams*, or hermitages, and the increasingly popular practice of Yoga form popular images of this supposedly transformational practice. This vision of a pious leader who is redefining the behaviors and attires associated with his religion has domestic appeal in a nation that has quickly turned Hindu-majoritarian.

Modi capitalizes on the recasting of majoritarian nationalism in three ways: He promotes Yoga, projects a seemingly tidy, peaceful, practice of Hinduism, and establishes himself as the visibly spiritual leader unafraid of conventional Western ridicule of Hindu practices. In other words, he occupied a perfect seat with three powerful legs of postcolonial modernity. This aesthetic, *visible* blend of tradition and modernity is useful material both in providing communicative material for the common media prosumer on social media, and for a more international marketplace of nations. On one hand, Modi proclaims that he uses global benchmarks of infrastructural development to modernize. On the other hand, his display of spirituality in stylish spiritual attire projects a new postcolonial response.

In this narration, Hindus are the original inhabitants of India and Muslims as outsiders. The otherness is well represented among known channels, shows, and newspapers. But even in opposing such a division, naysaying media platforms must use the same language of division and otherness. When Modi claimed in June 2022 in Germany that “today, every village in India is open-defecation-free,” independent media platforms called it out as false apart from marking



several instances of his claims as false or misleading.<sup>58</sup> Modi's speeches during electioneering are also tracked and regularly scrutinized by these platforms. For example, a fact-check story reports on Modi's campaign at a state assembly election in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh: "During the length of the 30-minute speech, the Prime Minister made various claims and among them were false or misleading statements. There were also instances where the PM presented his favourable opinions about BJP's governance as facts" (Mehta, 2021). Modi's party's thumping success in nearly every state election tells us the story of the triumph of narration.

Tribes in the deep forests in India and elsewhere remain invisible to the world outside the forests. They do not affiliate themselves to the mainstream religions, practices, or spaces. Recognition eludes them—perhaps recognition would be an imposition on them. These are unconnected people, often speaking different languages across small distances. In those pre-modern spaces, there is no technique available, employed, or demanded. Invisibilization therefore seems natural. It does not require technique if it is self-imposed. Imagine a villager in Masai Mara or Khuri, hyper-visibility for the tourist. It is natural that this hyper-visibility villager should crave invisibility. It is illuminated knowledge that confirms the prosumer's literacy, and illumination lies in the hands of the narrator regardless of whether such recognition is desired by its object.

### **Quid pro quo: Before Trump's visit**

The February 2020 event in Ahmedabad was a quid pro quo between Trump and Modi to endorse each other's candidacy as heads of their respective states. A contextualization is warranted to understand how Trump's visit is situated in history, politics, and geography. U.S.

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<sup>58</sup> For example, cited in Jacob (2022).

Presidents' visits to India bear the stamp of vindication in India. When Dwight Eisenhower visited in December 1959, India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had initiated enough nationalism within the newly liberated nation to warrant a celebration at global participation in the nation. Eisenhower, who landed in New Delhi after visiting Afghanistan and Pakistan, addressed the Indian Parliament. Between Eisenhower and Trump, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Carter, Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama had visited India—mostly as a combined tour of South Asia. Carter and Obama alone made trips specifically to India. Geopolitics have changed over decades—President Lyndon Johnson visited Pakistan without visiting its rival India. On the other hand, Obama visited India alone and skipped Pakistan.

The year 2020 was marked by the worst advocate for globalization so far, the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic around the world. When the coronavirus struck in striking synchrony with the beginning of that year, it turned out to be the most significant disruption in the collective human history of this century. The first cases of Covid-19 in India appeared in late January.<sup>59</sup> Modi, in a style that had become familiar to Indians after his stunning declaration of currency demonetization in November 2016, declared at primetime on March 24 that a stringent three-week nationwide lockdown would begin just four hours later. Nearly all transport, movement, shops, and businesses were shut down. Days later, thousands of daily-wage laborers from far-flung villages, stuck in their places of work with no earning and no transport, walked several hundred miles to return to their families. The government denied it had any data to prove that many of these migrant workers died on their way home. Media reports indicated otherwise,

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<sup>59</sup> See Andrews et al. (2020).

claiming at least 200 had died by June that year.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, international data of the figures of deaths from the coronavirus are in multiples of those the Indian government produced.<sup>61</sup> Amidst the disputes and mediated debates, we may never learn what the real figures are.

Meanwhile, large groups had been protesting a new law, the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), after the government muscled it through both the lower and the upper Houses of the Parliament in December 2019. Under that law, non-Muslim communities who were considered persecuted minorities in neighboring countries like Pakistan or Myanmar would be granted Indian citizenship. The obvious and only omission in this list were Muslims. This was the first time that religion became a criterion for Indian citizenship under the law. Protesters gathered at various locations in several states, and most famously at Shaheen Bagh in Delhi. Here, crowds reached up to 100,000. The protests continued for months. Indian-origin communities held protests of their own in cities and campuses in various parts of the world.<sup>62</sup>

On February 23, Kapil Mishra, a political leader, made a fiery public statement to his supporters in Delhi. Until a few months before, Mishra had been a Member of the Legislative Assembly of New Delhi from the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), which was the incumbent party in the state of Delhi, lost an election a few months before, and switched to BJP. In his speech, Mishra warned the Delhi Police (not governed by the AAP, the ruling party in the state, but by the federal BJP government) that he and his men would take law into their own hands if the police did not remove the largely Muslim protesters from those sites, specifically from Maujpur

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<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Banerji (2020).

<sup>61</sup> Jha, et al. (2022) independently analyzed more than 137,000 cases and concluded that the Covid-19 deaths could be “six to seven times higher than reported officially” (p. 667). On the other hand, Pasricha (2022) points out, the World Health Organization (WHO) suspects that the deaths are nearly 10 times (4.7 million) higher than the 481,000 deaths that the Indian government acknowledges.

<sup>62</sup> These protests were held in several U.S. cities and campuses. See CAA Protests (2019).

and Jaffrabad in northeast Delhi. Mishra told a gathering: “Till U.S. President is in India, we are leaving the area peacefully. After that we won’t listen to you (police) if the roads are not vacated by then.”<sup>63</sup> Mishra, an active user of Twitter with a following of 1.3 million, also tweeted his intended action that day, giving an ultimatum to the police. This was the dog whistle that the Hindu-majority crowds appeared to await as riots broke out soon afterwards. That night, riots broke out in that neighborhood, resulting mainly in clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities, killing 53 people. A *New York Times* report said: “Within hours, the worst Hindu-Muslim violence in India in years was exploding. Gangs of Hindus and Muslims fought each other with swords and bats, shops burst into flames, chunks of bricks sailed through the air, and mobs rained blows on cornered men” (Gettleman et al., 2020). The occurrence of one of the worst communal riots in recent history on the eve of Trump’s arrival in India was not the most desirable news story to hit the headlines the next day.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) expressed its grave concern over the incidents that, the Commission said, targeted the Muslim community.<sup>64</sup> The government claimed that the incident appeared to be orchestrated to coincide with Trump’s visit. This reaction was nothing new: The government and the BJP have frequently called out individuals and international agencies for what it believes defaming the nation.

### **A freshly segregated city**

Ahmedabad is the largest city in the western state of Gujarat, home to Mohandas Gandhi, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Narendra Modi. The city developed as a textile hub, and is now home to

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<sup>63</sup> Translated from Hindi by *The Indian Express*. See Express Web Desk (2020).

<sup>64</sup> The Indian government reacted strongly denying the accusation. See Delhi violence (2020).

the two richest Indian industrialists, Gautam Adani and Mukesh Ambani, two men whose personal proximity to Modi is well-known. Modi's hometown of Vadnagar lies in Gujarat. It is where he began his training and discipline at the extreme-right RSS before plunging into politics. In October 2001, Modi was nominated Chief Minister of the state and the bizarre incident and a massacre followed four months later. Democracy in Gujarat is amoral, even Machiavellian, in that the dominant majority's voice wins. Going from strength to strength, Modi was nominated Prime Minister of India in 2014 after his party won the general election.

As India's westernmost state, Gujarat has been the port of call for many an invader from Persia and the Middle East. The name Ahmedabad is named after (and by) a Muslim ruler, Sultan Ahmed Shah, whose grandfather Muzaffar broke away from the Mughal *Sultanat* and established himself as the ruler of a city that was earlier called Ashaval and then Karnavati. Gujaratis colloquially call the city *Amdavad*, which sounds less Muslim. In 2018, the state government proposed to change the Muslim name Ahmedabad to the Hindu name Karnavati, but although the governing party, the BJP, continues, the name change has not been effected.

Although some scholars have observed the city, Ahmedabad remains surprisingly under the critical radar in scholarly circles. Among the few is Arvind Rajagopal (2011), who describes the ways in which *exceptions* to the law apply in Indian cities founded on public convenience around the demands of modernization and development:

[I]n formerly colonial countries, economic development is itself considered to be an emergency condition requiring extraordinary initiatives. State leaders seldom hesitate to justify invoking exceptions to prevailing rules, in the interests of the people as a whole ... Exceptionality may be invoked in religio-cultural, spatial and regional registers, with social, political and economic implications that then follow. For example, the widely prevalent notion in Ahmedabad, that Muslims are an unsanitary and criminal-minded population, for most Hindus explains Muslims' spatial segregation in ghettos, their economic marginalization, their political subordination to Hindus, and condones overt violence against Muslims as pedagogical or prophylactic (p. 2).

In his book, *Shock City of Twentieth-Century India*, Spodek (2011) evocatively calls Ahmedabad a “shock city,” by which he means that it was the fountainhead of caste- and religion-based violence that developed especially in and after the 1960s. In 2002, the worst such violence in post-Independence India hit Ahmedabad’s growth—and image. Miscreants, allegedly Muslim men, set fire to a train compartment in Godhra, in eastern Gujarat. The compartment was locked and unable to exit it, 59 Hindu religious workers were burnt to death. These workers, called *kar sevaks*, were returning from the Hindu holy city of Ayodhya, the epicenter where Hindus demolished a Muslim shrine claiming it was built—centuries ago—over a Hindu shrine. Following the incident, retaliatory violence took 1,200-odd lives, a large majority of whom were Muslims.

Modi had become the Chief Minister of Gujarat merely four months before the Godhra incident.<sup>65</sup> The press and critics have repeatedly accused Modi and the state police of either not doing enough to curb the violence, or of fueling it. Soon after the riots, Ahmedabad bore the look of a haunted city, with real estate going abegging. It would take a new kind of construction—a narrative kind—over decades to provide Ahmedabad a respectable status. After Gujarat became the cynosure of international attention, the United States banned Modi from entering its borders until Barack Obama revoked the ban after Modi was elected Prime Minister in 2014. Modi took upon the task of rebuilding the image of Ahmedabad after 2002. A riverfront came up on the Sabarmati. Well-paved roads, uncommon in Indian cities even then, were built around it.

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<sup>65</sup> A chief minister is the top executive leader of a state—akin to a state’s governor in the United States—who is selected from within a political party that wins a state election.

Muslims were segregated even further than the “substandard informal settlement and then ... a ‘Muslim city’” (Bobbio, 2022).

Modi repeatedly claims—accurately, most of his critics agree—that Gujarat has been freed from communal violence after 2002. That was the year in which Muslims were finally put in their place, quite literally. After that year, Ahmedabad became India’s most segregated large city.<sup>66</sup> While I lived briefly and commuted in Ahmedabad in 2017-18, I invariably struck conversations with my Uber (or its Indian clone, Ola) drivers en route. The inevitable question came up: “How is your city after the 2002 riots?” The answers would, of course, vary. The one that has remained in my mind is that Ahmedabad has found its peace after Muslims and Hindus live in separate areas, because both “we” and “they” are happy with the arrangement.

### **Telling pictures**

Billboards, walls, and stadiums themselves represent forms of mass communication. In this chapter, the communicative, ideological functions of these representations are analyzed. In turn, these are images themselves—they are captured by media cameras using their media logic. Each is framed to impress upon us the story. Not in all cases is the story that of the beauty of the event. Some media images, compulsively, it seems, capture those behind-the-scenes images that confront that beauty. The showcase—the event—is the grandest of the communicative events in this chapter. Snapshots of events as spotlighted by cameras present an opportunity for an analysis of the events themselves. Here, I analyze eight such snapshots from Trump’s visit to Ahmedabad on February 24. The aesthetic analysis I refer to is essentially an image analysis. However, by snapshots I do not mean still images alone, but significant moments as captured by cameras. This

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<sup>66</sup> See Jaffrelot and Laliwala (2018).

analysis is a culmination of the process I set out to accomplish, an illustration of the theoretical arguments I have made so far.

In this analysis, I make no overt attempt to draw the generalized theoretical inferences, not wishing to do the overkill and relying on the reader's critical intellect to make those connections. Choosing these snapshots from available images and stories is somewhat symbolic. After all, the event is sustained in history precisely because of these images, and yet here I am critiquing that technological process. Without the snapshots, there is no memory for the non-spectator. Nevertheless, plowing on in the irony, I sequence these moments in a rough chronology from Trump's arrival in the city through his 22-kilometer ride to the stadium where he and Modi addressed a massive gathering of people from the city and neighboring villages. Where I use the original images, I have pasted them in the document. Where I use images from published media stories, I have provided hyperlinks.<sup>67</sup>

**Heritage, not mega.** One of the billboards on Trump's arrival tells us where he and Modi were headed. The host city of the visit is also the owner of this billboard is the "*Amdavad* Municipal Corporation," an interesting de-Islam-ified nomenclature considering that the name of the city remains Ahmedabad, reminding us of its Islamic history. I analyze this billboard from NDTV's story, whose thumbnail carries this image.

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<sup>67</sup> Permitted under Section 52(1)(p) of the Copyright Act of India; Section 29(1) of U.K. Copyright Act; Fair use public domain such as official White House photographs in U.S. law; and copyright-free images.



In NDTV's image, two workers are carrying a flex billboard, tilted at an angle, to its nearby destination. The billboard itself is over six feet tall and 10 feet wide, as I see it in relation to the two men. It would soon be mounted at a lofty location en route the cavalcade from the airport to the stadium, and would be seen from bottom up as people stand, ride, or drive by. It carries a towering picture of the stadium. It is unclear whether it is an actual shot of the stadium from the outside, perhaps on the day of the launch, or whether it is an artist's impression. These artists' impressions are popular in India. They showcase the icon and decontextualize it, invisibilizing the un-beautiful surroundings. Alternatively, they beautify them—as in Mike



## Ahmedabad Event For Trump "Will Have Few Parallels," Says Government

Watch

Uploaded: Feb 20, 2020

**Figure 2.** This image is from a story dated February 20, 2020, available online at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/us-president-donald-trump-will-be-given-an-unparalleled-welcome-says-foreign-ministry-2183171>. The salience of this billboard is the effort that a city government makes to play host while also propping the city up to the most positive sobriquet it has earned in recent years. (Courtesy: NDTV. Screenshot by author.)

Davis's planet of slums. Still, we see the image of a number of people standing around holding up the Indian tricolor flags proudly flourished all over. Underneath the image of the stadium, Trump and Modi smilingly look into their cameras. They are positioned at the (our) left half of the bottom of the billboard. They are placed so close to each other that Trump's left shoulder hides Modi's right. Beside them is the text "Amdavad says! Namaste Trump."

On the billboard, the large-font text at the top of the frame, above the image of the stadium, reads: "Bringing India and America together at the [in smaller font]

World's Biggest Stadium [in larger font]

WELCOME TO WORLD HERITAGE CITY

AMDAVAD [in smaller capitals]"

The sobriquet has changed. When the Chinese Premier Xi Jinping arrived in Ahmedabad in 2015, the city showcased itself with the debatable embellishment: "India's megacity." As "India's megacity"—not *one of* the megacities, but *the* megacity, presumably—Ahmedabad's claim superseded the unsegregated text that lies buried beneath the city, the palimpsest. Critiquing India's five megacities—in this pre-riots essay, Ahmedabad was not among the cities she identified—Calcutta-born literary critic and sociologist Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak (2000) writes: "[T]he 'culture' or 'subject' of the virtual megacity is not only diversified in the usual race-class-gender way alone, but is also capital-fractured in agency-between active and passive, or, if you like, 'control' and its antonym" (p. 12). The term *megacity*, like other modern terms, is laden with critical implications, especially as "the allure of modernization, technology, and development" (Bobbio, 2022). China has bragging rights for urban agglomerations, with four out of the five most populated cities in the world. They grow in size as people in hordes migrate from deprived areas of the countries. These cities are showcased as symbols of pride because the

infrastructure required for the glitz and globally saleable elements are better provided in those cities. Ahmedabad holds the 51<sup>st</sup> rank in this list of world cities. In February 2020, in all its uncritical reading, the megacity-turned world heritage city of Ahmedabad prepared the celebratory welcome for the man who, accused of electoral manipulations among other things, would be rejected in the election 10 months later in his home country.

The claim for Ahmedabad as a “world heritage city” is accurate after UNESCO declared it so in in 2017. It is a badge of honor for a city that was torn asunder 15 years before. The heritage of what the palimpsest holds must, however, must be carefully propped up. As a city ridden with negative sobriquets, Ahmedabad seems to have found its moment to celebrate the best glory it has received after the 2002 riots. It joins such world cities as Paris, Rome, Vienna, Edinburgh, Cairo, and Brussels, having buried its recent bloody history and propped up the old, more than 2,600 heritage sites that include artistic and deep wells, forts, monuments both Islamic and Hindu, and Gandhi’s Sabarmati Ashram make India’s only UNESCO heritage city. There is no segregation in the aesthetic medley of remembered history.

**A saffron *Namaste*.** About a week before the visit, the Modi government at the Centre directed the state to rename the event *Namaste, President Trump*, representing a more national and more familiar term of greeting—*Namaste* is Sanskrit, literally, “I bow to you,” and is a formal and honorific form of greeting in India. Trump’s visit during a year of the presidential election in his country was preceded by Modi’s visit in September 2019 to the United States. That event’s sobriquet was *Howdy Modi*. The Howdy, Modi! event, with a footfall of 50,000, is claimed to be the largest gathering for an invited foreign leader visiting the United States other

than the Pope. There, Modi had held Trump’s hand while they walked around the NRG Stadium in Houston, the largest city in the bastion state for Trump’s Republican party.<sup>68</sup> In his address, Modi endorsed the words of his presidential candidacy, proclaiming to a large, cheering and clapping crowd of Indian Americans: “*Abki baar Trump sarkaar!*” (Hindi for “Trump government this time [too]!”).<sup>69</sup> Given their politics, it might seem logical that Modi and Trump would endorse each other. Yet, even though a majority (about 72 percent) of Indian Americans vote Democrat, a majority of them support the far-right Modi in India.<sup>70</sup>

Billboards form an important claim-makers on these occasions. In Ahmedabad, they are a



**Figure 3.** In the image I have chosen, a mid-shot from a story by *The Hindu Business Line*, the saffron flag is seen to insinuate itself *between* the national flags. This story is available online at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/namaste-trump-pm-to-receive-us-president-in-ahmedabad-today/article30896587.ece>. (Courtesy: The Hindu Business Line. Screenshot by author.)

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<sup>68</sup> See Brooks and Holland (2019). The “Howdy, Modi!” website, [howdymodi.org](http://howdymodi.org), which also claims that number, bears the tagline “Shared dreams, bright futures.” About 650 Texas-based organizations hosted the event. “*Abki baar Trump sarkaar*” is a variation of a previous, more successful political slogan in India, “*Abki baar, Modi sarkaar*.” Modi’s party won the election on that occasion in 2014 and again in 2019.

<sup>69</sup> See the video clipping of Modi’s address in NDTV (2019).

<sup>70</sup> A 2021 survey by Carnegie indicates that a larger proportion of Indian-Americans support the BJP, and nearly half of the respondents believed Modi was on the right track. The study surveyed only 1,200 individuals, and therefore may not represent the diaspora at large. See Badrinathan, et al. (2021).

feature that the news media most prominently covered in preparation of the visit. Billboards are an occasion to narrate the bond between the two leaders, their “friendship” established in Houston barely four months before. That also means friendship between their countries—the two largest democracies. “Two dynamic personalities, one momentous occasion,” the largest billboard claims. “Stronger friendship for a brighter future,” says the second. The emotional appeal is unmistakable.

Billboards set the city up in anticipation; they are meant as welcome signs for the guest but serve as timely reminders to people who must gather with their flags and paraphernalia to greet him smilingly. As several cameras have captured, there is a collection of billboards at a busy junction. There are three billboards welcoming Trump, one overlapping the other as though falling over one another in enthusiasm. There is a fourth placed on the other side of the road, half-visible. The excitement is palpable—it is an occasion to showcase many things, but the running theme must include the ideologically correct colors. The bottom frame in all the billboards bears the signature “Namaste [in Hindi] Trump.”

Blue, gray, red and saffron appear as theme colors. The red and blue also appear, of course, on the American flag that flanks these billboards. The saffron and white from the Indian tricolor are also seen in the billboards. The green in the Indian tricolor is conspicuously missing in them. As Hindus appropriated saffron, Muslims seem to have taken over green. Therefore, it would perhaps be inappropriate for Ahmedabad to bring it to the surface. Green must remain buried. All the billboards carry the two personalities prominently.

The red is reserved for the word “Trump” alone—the color of the Republicans. However, whether it represents the color of his political party is unclear. It certainly matches the ubiquitous color of Trump’s necktie. Modi wears no tie. In one picture, he wears something more Indian—a

sleeveless jacket, presumably made of *khadi*, hand-spun and woven from natural fiber, a cloth Gandhi made famous. In another billboard not in this medley, he wears a saffron jacket. (*See Heritage, Not Mega*, above.) In another, presumably from the Houston event, he wears what we have known as the Nehru jacket, a closed-neck coat. These days, we have been told it should be called the Modi jacket.

*Namaste* is typed in Hindi in white, reversed (a lighter-color font within a darker colored background) in a saffron circle. To a non-Hindi reader, the *Namaste* in Hindi means nothing. The Municipality uses Hindi (Devanagari) font for a wider national consumption and not the local Gujarati—that is why these images that appear in the media are more easily interpreted. The Gujarat government had earlier given this tour its Gujarati branding—*Kem Chho Trump* (“How do you do, Trump?”). Gujarati is not only the main language spoken in Gujarat, but also the language of the largest Indian-American group. Yet, the central government replaced it with the more widely recognizable *Namaste*. Hindi is India’s most popularly spoken language, and the largest proportion of Indian-Americans, too, speak that language. Less proportionate is the number of Gujarati speakers: While only 6 percent of people in India speak Gujarati, Gujarati speakers constitute 20 percent of the Indian diaspora in the United States, the largest number from a single Indian state.

*Namaste* is thus surrounded by saffron, the signature color the BJP has appropriated, a color venerated in Hinduism, so much so that BJP-governed state governments threatened to ban a 2023 Hindi film *Pathaan* for its portrayal of a saffron bikini on actor Deepika Padukone. Therefore, the *Namaste* the saffron must be seen together—in Modi’s world, they symbolize India because they symbolize nationalistic Hindu values defined by his party. The targeted spectatorship of the billboard is deliberate, diffuse, and polysemic. It is for Trump but it is also



for the Ahmedabadis. It is for Modi's benevolence but for the media prosumers, the non-spectators, to understand his authority. It is less so for those who are hidden behind walls and in the spaces from where the billboard is invisible.

**A new wall.** Every route is somewhat of a leveler—and the one from the airport to the venue of the speeches is no exception. Inconvenient locations dot it. One of the most discussed



**Figure 4.** The story from February 14, 2020, is available online <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/preparations-on-for-22km-trump-modi-roadshow-in-ahmedabad-11581696016898.html>. The construction workers, busy at their work, could well have trekked to their villages hundreds of miles away when a lockdown was clamped that summer. (Courtesy: Mint. Screenshot by author.)

structures during Trump's visit is a wall, a parapet, really, that was built just in time, to cover a large slum. The news media copiously clicked photographs of the painted roadside of the wall, the unpainted view from the slum, and the wall as it was being constructed. A news agency (Reuters) photograph that CBS News used shows the wall under construction.

As we see the workers at work, we can estimate the wall's pillars at seven feet high. The news media later reported that the height of the wall was reduced.<sup>71</sup> The wall, which the local government built, is now a four-foot high, 1,640 feet long wall on the side of the road from the airport to the venue. The city's mayor Bijal Patel unironically explained the construction as follows: "Apart from security reasons, the wall is also part of a beautification and cleanliness drive" (Bowden, 2020).

Cities are centers of activity where the aspirational, postcolonial villager migrates and lives in hutments. These "informal" workers are an exploited lot in an overwhelming reality, as Davis reminds us (p. 178). It is also these workers who hide behind the wall specially built to



**Figure 5.** As the photograph in the news story by U.K. newspaper *The Guardian* (accessible through the link <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/21/trump-got-his-wall-indian-city-beautify-visit>) depicts, the wall was painted on the roadside and both protected and distracted the onlooker from what lay behind them. (Courtesy: Guardian News & Media Ltd. Screenshot by author.)

“beautify” the city, hiding them from visiting dignitaries who must carry back the constructed theme of a nation that has modernized itself on Western benchmarks. Perhaps some are migrant workers who would flee the city a month later as Modi clamps a national lockdown.

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<sup>71</sup> See Associated Press (2020b).



Local art covered much of the roadside walls. Paintings of Trump and Modi with slogans ran along these walls. The one in front of the aforesaid slums said “U&I” with the two faces of Trump and Modi. It seems Trump and Modi must appear together at all times, in every image. Even an explanation was painted alongside—U stands for the United States, I for India. Inside the letter U, the U.S. flag pattern was painted, while the I bore those of the Indian flag. Innocent, schoolboyish, and sophomoric, such uncritical public art anxiously aspires to become a brick to strengthen the structure of solidarity between Modi and Trump. The painting of Trump and a



**Figure 6.** The story from February 20, 2020, is available online at <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/us-president-donald-trump-will-be-given-an-unparalleled-welcome-says-foreign-ministry-2183171>. Behind the painted road-facing side of a wall, a contrasting picture presents itself—the undesirable side. On this side, the wall now limits the slum-dwellers’ visibility to merely what they must be concerned with—their side of the city. (Courtesy: NDTV. Screenshot by author.)

cool version of Modi wearing shades make them look almost unrecognizable. They look like caricatures. But the intent is not to caricature them. It is just poor artistry. Nevertheless, beautification is achieved.<sup>72</sup>

Behind the wall in Ahmedabad lies the invisibilized text of urban reality, as this photograph from Indian news portal *ThePrint* (accessible through the hyperlink

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<sup>72</sup> See NDTV (2020); Associated Press (2020b) for video reports of the wall.

<https://theprint.in/india/behind-the-wall-story-of-the-ahmedabad-community-modi-govt-hid-from-us-president-trump/374269/>) depicts. There is a slum—ugly and dirty—that we can see as the wall goes up. It seems to be an unchanging text and hence, its aesthetic value does not conform to *vikas*. During the construction, we see abandoned, unremoved trash along it. Removed trash adds to the beauty. Ignored, it is an eyesore; it stinks. Surely, it would be picked before Trump arrived. Likewise hidden, about 2,000 people live in the unseemly hutments behind the wall. The roofs of the huts are made of makeshift material like cloth. Many huts' walls, too, are made of cloth.

Before Trump's arrival, international and liberal national media had visibilized the hutments behind this wall. News agency ANI and *The Indian Express* daily, along with news portal *The Quint*, sought reactions from the slum-dwellers, who reacted with the resignation they have grown accustomed to and the revival of a forgotten indignation that comes with a serendipitous realization of an opportunity. Their continuity was disrupted by beauty, it seems. Some of them wanted to know why there were being hidden.

A wall can be an act of resistance and of oppression, of decoration and of invisibility. When the Berlin wall was demolished, bits of it became souvenirs—people kept it to remind themselves of the symbol that defied the *glasnost* that accompanied the broken wall. In Austin, Texas, an interstate highway, the I-35, constructed through the city, starkly divides it along racial lines—it is a permanent marker of racial practices. The wall Trump wanted along the U.S.-Mexico border comes in the way of the philosophy of the American dream—those who cross these borders are actually called dreamers. The crossing of a wall leads to the achievement of a dream.

The media's coverage of the ugliness behind the presumable beauty of the painted side of the wall is a reminder of the limitations of a two-dimensional view of aesthetics. News reports can rarely report what went behind the construction of older monuments, but the flip side of the desirable coincides with the undesirable side of the role of the media in the modernization project. When a social media user nudges forward a mediated message and bounces it in a certain direction, the message bundles the social opinion along with information in an entertaining format. It makes a statement, sometimes running counter and sometimes running alongside the original. As though to reinforce the ugliness of the wall, fake photographs surfaced around the cordoning wall. Alt News is a portal that is devoted to exposing fake news. It decodes fake photos and videos using a mechanism called reverse search on the search engine Google. I have extracted the following fake image from the Alt News story, available through the hyperlink <https://www.altnews.in/photo-of-wall-painted-ahead-of-trumps-gujarat-visit-morphed-and-shared-online/>. In India, slums are eyesores—they are the dumping grounds, neglected by authorities, and avoided by the moneyed classes. Therefore, showcasing the ugly is often accompanied by lampooning the socially undesirable. The suturing of the desirables over the undesirables is thus the construction of the margins. The main path cordons off those margins. Davis (2007) begins *Planet of Slums* with an epigraph by Okome, which states that “we live in the age of the city” (p. 1). This observation is especially true of the so-called developing, modernizing, postcolonial parts of the world. Mass migrants from deprived villages in these parts into cities seek jobs that build those cities, such as those in construction and infrastructure. This migration is the opposite of the U.S. experience of the 1950s and 1960s, where people fled crowded cities into the comfort of suburbs. In contrast, there exist walled cities in the hearts of many cities in India. The walled parts are the oldest districts that are surrounded by fortified

structures that invading and local monarchs built as measures of *protection*. Therefore, aesthetic protection remains core to the wall freshly built in Ahmedabad—it shields Trump’s vision—but the painting pleases his eye, too. In faithful conformity with the beautification project, forty-five families from other slums of the route, near the Sardar Patel stadium, received eviction notices only a few days before the Trump rally at the stadium. Residents told journalists they were asked to leave their homes after 20 years of living there because of Trump’s visit (Solanki, 2020). Ugly, unplanned structures often go hand-in-hand with deprivation of basic amenities and therefore become barriers to acceptable aesthetic appeal of modern nations. They are the resistant eyesores that come in the way of claims to modernization.

**Portrayals of friendship.** As Melania and Donald Trump descended from their aircraft and before the more officious protocols, he (Donald) and Modi gave each other a hug like old friends. Modi has developed a characteristic hug with which he greets international visitors, and Trump was no exception. Having greeted him in this manner, Modi took him around Ahmedabad. On stage at the Ahmedabad stadium, they shook hands. In this picture, we see Modi, Trump, and Melania—it seems as though Modi is giving Trump a bearhug with his hands meeting at Trump’s back. Because of the squeeze and the difference in heights, his face is touching Trump’s chest. while Trump indulges in a more restrained manner, his hands holding Modi’s sides. Indian Prime Ministers are standoffish, formal, cautious. Modi delivers the opposite. In Western countries, it has become normal practice for men to hug women, women to hug women, but it is still rare for men to hug men. In particular, many American men have traditionally been wary of the man-to-man hug. In our age when definitions of gender have expanded and gender is itself a subject of scholarly and policy discussions, it should not surprise us to see men hugging men.



**Figure 7.** When Modi hugs Trump at the Ahmedabad airport, the display of the cameras is unavailable to Modi both because he buries his face in the other's body, and the bulk of Trump's body blinds him. Hence, what is visible to us is perhaps more available to the critic than to the artist of the hug. I will use what I believe is the most evocative of the hug images, a screenshot from Twitter, available at <https://twitter.com/i/events/1231805466595872769>. (Courtesy: Twitter/Newsroom Post.)

However, the Ahmedabad meeting followed the more physical Houston meet, where both the leaders walked hand-in-hand around the stadium, waving at the masses. Therefore, Modi's hug was anticipated, but Trump's optics should reflect a small amount of discomfiture to fit his domestic image of hypermasculinity and strong leadership where hugs are both un-masculine and weak. For Modi, however, these hug moments are in conformity with Indian culture. A *chaiwallah*—tea seller—from a small town became the Prime Minister, and is now hugging the world's biggest leaders that his compatriots only watched on television in awe. He conforms to the displays of the crowds outside—ebullience, warmth, friendly. It is as though he is welcoming a guest to our nationalistically unified home, India. There is nationalistic pride in seeing the

Prime Minister leading the social courtesies. This is our India—this is how we do things. The hug is followed by the more accepted Western norm, the handshake.

As much as the physicality seems like a cultural mismatch, Trump was hardly the first dignitary to receive the personalized honor. Male—and only male—leaders from around the world are bestowed thus, Russian President Vladimir Putin included. Only four months after becoming Prime Minister, Modi took Chinese Premier Xi Jinping to his home state and to the city of Ahmedabad. In well-publicized images and videos, Xi and Modi sat together on a decorated swing on the banks of the Sabarmati river as they relished what was called a private dinner, in a cordoned-off public space. In 1962, India had lost a war with China. The first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's biographers say he never recovered from the army's error of judgment and his trust in the Chinese. Since then, India managed to keep its new borders intact, although independent researchers have traced an average of 7.8 incursions every year over 15 years from the Chinese into Indian territory and the Indian government claims as many as 30 on average (Brethouwer et al., 2022). In the summer of 2020, China and India clashed after a Chinese incursion across the agreed border in Galwan. Several Indian soldiers were killed. In December 2022, a smaller tussle on another border ensued. An independent video surfaced, and the government downplayed these activities, although aberrant sections of the news media sporadically reported it (Saaliq, 2022; Yeung, 2022). The earlier personalizations with Xi are no longer on display except in the ridicules of the opposition parties. A less controversial leader, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, a regular visitor to India over his decades-long premiership, attended a Hindu religious festival in Uttar Pradesh state during his 2015 visit on Modi's invitation before he was taken on a three-day trip to Gujarat. During another visit in

2017, Abe and Modi rode a convertible car through the streets of the city of Ahmedabad, waving at performing artists amidst music and fanfare.<sup>73</sup>

In this description, unlike the others, I would like to additionally include a brief analysis of the media's reportage of the hugs. The lede in *The Economic Times* stated "PM Modi welcomes US President with a warm hug at Ahmedabad airport" (The Economic Times, 2020). News reports competed among themselves to count how many times Modi hugged Trump. In a primetime show called "Masterstroke," ABP channel's video headline claimed five: Namaste Trump: "PM Modi & Donald Trump hug 5 times during event" (ABP News, 2020). Not to be outdone, NDTV's online news story claimed six, headlining its report as: "PM Modi, Donald Trump share 6 hugs during Ahmedabad event: Report" (PM Modi, 2020). A keen copy editor's eye may catch the similarities between competing headlines' texts and their commonness in the references to the two leaders. The most obvious common factor among the three texts is the use of "PM Modi." When Modi began his first term, news media platforms routinely alluded to him as they always had—by the last name. While many U.S. newspapers use salutations in text (the *New York Times* uses "Mr. Modi"), many Indian news media platforms drop them. In an October 24, 2014, analysis, NDTV called its headline: "Why Modi won't talk to the media" (Malik, 2014). If it were to publish that analysis today, "Modi" would be prefixed by "PM"—the prefix PM is an acceptable median between having to adhere to editorial style standards and a new form of address reserved only for Modi. Most media platforms add that prefix except those that have chosen to remain defiant and have already paid the price. (*The Wire* is an example—its co-founder Siddharth Varadarajan has faced multiple hurdles from the government including a short

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<sup>73</sup> See the video clipping of the roadshow in Abe starts Gujarat tour (2017).

visit to the jail.) In contrast, international media platforms and agencies continue to refer to him as per their styles. Secondly, in the same headline, Modi and Trump are addressed differently. Trump is merely “US President” or “Donald Trump.” He is dismissed with the editorial disdain accorded to every person other than Modi.

The image is the event. It freezes and captures at once. Thereby, the power of the optics of what the camera must see can only be seen in comparison. Contrast the Modi-Trump hug image with what is more regular among heads of state involving Western leaders. Below is a photograph that stands in contrast. The smiles and the personal touch have vanished—these are leaders not meeting in friendship or for any reason of mutual political back-scratching. This is a formal, even officious meeting. Smiles betray the image that can contrast with the chasm between U.S. President Joe Biden, the acclaimed leader of the free world, and Chinese Premier Xi Jinping, who has long held an increasingly strong iron grip over his country, share. The differences must be put on display. In contrast, Modi is a hugger—in various photographs over the years, he is seen hugging Trump, Xi, Abe, Erdogan, and even, tentatively, Biden, who is



**Figure 8.** At the G-20 summit in November 2022, preferring the handshake to the hug, Chinese Premier Xi Jinping and U.S. President Joe Biden exchanged what *The New York Times* described as rival visions to solve global issues. The image presents a suitable story. (Courtesy: Facebook/The White House. Screenshot by author.)



repeatedly captured with his arm around Modi's shoulder, all smiles, sharing jokes.

Meanwhile, the billboards, already in anticipation of these familiar displays, claim that the friendship between Modi and Trump is the manifestation of India's friendship with the United States. This is not about alliances. It is about friendship—personal and emotional attachment—and its consequences on more rational, global activity. At least, that is the takeaway from the elaborate displays.

**The spinning wheel.** En route to the stadium at Motera, Modi took Trump on a visit to the Sabarmati Ashram. There, he trained Trump on spinning an indigenous spinning wheel, the *charkha*. The Sabarmati Ashram is located on the banks of the Sabarmati river, which had been essentially a dry river. Under Modi's Chief Ministership, stagnant water is looped in from the Narmada river, downstream. It is made to appear to flow perennially. Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi built the Ashram after his return from South Africa in 1915. It was to become the fountainhead of Mahatma's search for truth. It is now popularly called the Gandhi Ashram and conducts routine activities to keep us reminded of the freedom struggle.<sup>74</sup>

The pure form of the charkha is an iconic and exotic item because it stands for Gandhi's claim to Indian sovereignty based on the rejection of British hand-downs of the modernization project. It is therefore a symbol of protest and a representative of Gandhi's famed *Swadeshi* (*self-reliance*) movement. The humble indigenous contraption symbolizes that defiance. Yet, mechanized spinning textile mills were Ahmedabad's biggest employers until their decline in the 1980s and the 1990s. Paradoxically, they seemed to stand in defiance of their tallest defiant figure—as though trying to rationalize the very concepts he embodied. One of Gandhi's most

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<sup>74</sup> See more details at the Ashram's website at <https://gandhiashramsabarmati.org/en/>.

iconic photographs shows him spinning the charkha. To him, it was a symbol and a ritual; to poet-Nobel Laureate-freedom fighter Rabindranath Tagore, it was a mere “cult.” Gandhi would go as far into the realm of globalization as to say, as Gandhi’s best known Indian biographer Ramachandra Guha writes, that “I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any” (Guha, 1999).



**Figure 9.** I borrow the photograph for this part of the visit from the lead image in an article from *The New Indian Express*, whose online version is available at: <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/feb/24/trump-melania-visit-sabarmati-ashram-weave-khadi-on-a-charkha-2107778.html>. In it, Melania and Donald Trump are seen seated on a mattress on the floor before a charkha. Modi, standing with his index finger pointed at them, appears to be schooling them on how to spin the wheel. (Courtesy: The New Indian Express. Screenshot by author.)

Trump’s operation of the very cult-like instrument that symbolized *Swadeshi* protest against the Western colonization is nothing short of momentous. Of course, the colonizers themselves are rather sheepish about their brutal history, and the modern Indian intellectual spares none of the easily available moments to remind them of it, often speaking on British soil at events sponsored by British universities and even the British Parliament. Trump looks as though the depth of the moment of being schooled by Modi in indigenous tradition is not lost on him. The Ashram’s trustee, who ushered the U.S. President through the premises, claimed Trump told him he understood the symbolism of the place.

Modi's claims to modernity are a display of the negation—or *denial*, in terms of their selective visibility—of Western conceptualizations of postcolonial nations. They are an attempt to find a legitimate space in global discourse. Modi's tryst with the charkha has been as an instrument for his claim to his home state. Well-publicized still photographs and videos show him operating it. However, this new spin on the charkha pits him against his ideological mentor, the extreme-right organization RSS. The RSS is a known rejecter of Gandhi's principles of equality: Guha writes that the RSS "deeply distrusted him." They supported the British in many ways and "detested Muslims" (Guha, 2019). In Modi's India, we find the same rhetoric and resonances as RSS's 1947 critiques of Gandhi.

**A new festival.** The following two images capture not only the people, but what they do to the city, to the personal relationship between Trump and Modi, to the bilateral relationship between the nations. Such elaborate festivities around the visit of a head-of-state might surprise some readers. The creation of a festive atmosphere is an important element in narrative construction. Celebrations generate positivity. If a nation wants to be modern, it must first celebrate what it modernized. The affective nature of this celebration is also the recognition of success of positivity—that is what the neo-authoritarian leadership must be seen to have delivered. Not only does it look welcoming, it draws attention to the desirable cultural artifacts. It attracts the cameras. That is why celebration must involve only the desirable. We must bear in mind, however, that for the visitor, the locations become snapshots. They do not experience the continuous life that occurs when the cutouts are taken down and people go back to their homes behind the walls lining the decorated streets. The folk dancers are paid, the billboards have done their job.



**Figure 10.** A performance showcases India as exotic, colorful, traditional embedded in modern structures. The ubiquitous billboard appears in the background. Modi appears in it along with Donald and Melania Trump. (Courtesy: Ketan Trivedi.)

In the first image, performers are brought in to celebrate the villages, the *real* culture, by dressing up like them. These are folk dances from the Kathiawad region of Gujarat—the region Gandhi came from. Performed on a stage, these shows romanticize what is a mundane routine for villagers. The costumes are deliberately more colorful, more elaborate, more beautiful. But these are also shows to keep the crowds entertained as they await the arrival of the celebrated leaders. They must be kept engaged so that they remain there waiting and do not slip away to escape the increasingly sultry heat.

In the second image, we do not see a wall. It is a pretty sight. Where the route passed locations where local businesses or apartments were not available on the roadside, people were brought in to line the streets. Nearby, a beautifully constructed Sabarmati River Front runs along the Sabarmati, whose water is artificially diverted from the larger Narmada river so that the water flows on the Sabarmati through the city perennially. Middle-class folks from the city wearing “Trump India Road Show” caps wave the American flags, smiling. There are a few

Indian flags and even a saffron flag. A beautiful fountain springs forth from the river's water in the background.

Along the 22-kilometer (13.75-mile) route to the stadium, well-organized celebrations lined the streets, from traditional dances to displays of festoons and painted walls. Thousands of local people lined the walls and the sidewalks to wave clap, and cheer as Trump's and Modi's cars passed them by. People carried their children and American flags. Thousands of schoolgoers and folk artists were brought in. Apparently unmindful of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had already set in, they thronged the streets in resplendent colors, cheering and dancing. Schoolchildren performed at the airport. At various locations along the road, men and women performed traditional Gujarati dances in colorful costumes. A parade of floats resembled the



**Figure 11.** With fountains and smiles, U.S. and Indian flags, young and old gather along the streets. This could be Houston or Ahmedabad—so close are the environments. Whether the loudest cheers are reserved for the guest or the host, we do not know. (Courtesy: Ketan Trivedi.)

grand Republic Day parade, a grand display of military and cultural strength conducted in New Delhi every year on January 26, the day India adopted its constitution in 1950. A journalist, describing the resemblance of the jamboree to the Republic Day celebrations, remarks: “One

wonders if someone was explaining to the Trumps exactly what the Indians were trying to impress upon them” (Kapur, 2020).

Even in their qualified praise of the Langs’ account of the MacArthur event in Chicago as a canonic text, Katz and Dayan appear to miss an important point. The spectator, while being the bearer of facts, can still be the instrument of de-contextualization. Situating India’s national unity in a global system of nations, the Trump spectacle in Ahmedabad signaled the willing participation of people at large of all ages at the beck and call of their Prime Minister—a willingness thereby to share their enthusiasm at branding their nation. This was therefore a victory rally for Modi, although carefully choreographed and not in any way a spontaneous outpouring. If modernity is the essential display in the wall, a definition of what the government means by modernity is symbolized in the corridor. The spectator, who is also an uncritical participant in the proceedings, is responsible for decontextualizing the event and participates in the construction of a screen before the non-spectator. The spectator is also a part of the construction, a cheering, joyous face that cameras can zoom in on and show millions of onlookers on their screens or on paper.

The physical presence of the mass of people protected the sights behind walls while their bright clothes and demeanor helped in beautifying the city. They protected the invisible and the absent. This beautification goes beyond the physical. Cheers, smiles, and festivities are symbols of peace, prosperity, happiness. A new festival celebrates, for, celebrations make the world beautiful. They hide, not destroy, the ugliness. A billboard towering above the people in the picture shows Trump and Modi and asserts: “Real Smiles.”

**Behind the tinted glass.** The sheer mass of people lining the streets can impress the most powerful man on the planet. Certainly, Trump’s speech later acknowledged the gathering at the

stadium and the cultural display there. Along the way, he rode in a tinted car. He was bound by security.

The U.S. security is unhumorous in the stringency of its protocols of the First Citizen, and the President's car, with darkened windows, flies with the President wherever he goes. We must always be reminded that the price of this security. U.S. Presidents, particularly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy who rode in disdain of his own security in an open car in Dallas and was shot dead by, we are told, a famed lone-wolf assailant. The Beast, the U.S. Presidential Cadillac, is unmatched.

In India, Modi is blessed with unprecedented security especially following his repeated narration of forces within and outside India that now operate to threaten her security. Hence, Modi's cars have evolved since 2014 from a special Toyota Land Cruiser. In Ahmedabad, Modi rode in a Range Rover Vogue. Since 2022, he rides a new Mercedes Maybach he has added to his fleet. This car is not only bullet-proof but blast-proof—it seems such is the price we pay for strong, divisive leadership. The more the rhetoric of paranoia, the more the need for security. But the mighty vision of the secure car of an authority figure is awe-inspiring. The more sophisticated it is, the more is the leader's claim to superpowerdom. These cars do not merely carry the powerful—they are the power.

Like Bentham's prison, these cars offer a Panopticon-like view. Bentham's Panopticon, built in New Delhi in 1817, afforded the luxury of minimal control and maximum power. In the Panopticon, the subject's control tower alone is visible to the prisoners. Therefore, the presence of the guards must all be presumed at all times. Security accommodates such a hierarchical relationship—a whiplike control is embarrassing to a democratic nation such as ours. Therefore, like Foucault's (1975/1995) Panopticon, these are not structures of control but constructs of

power. Hence, the people cheering along the streets, like the prisoners in Foucault, have no idea whether the cheered personality is waving back, smiling back benevolently from behind the tinted windows. They must cheer on, oblivious and presumptuous of his benevolence. Not cheering because they cannot see the leader is not something they should consider because the invisibility exerts power on them. They even wave at the car's rear window because that is where the leader is expected to be seated.



**Figure 12.** The power of the panopticon-like tinted-windows cars in which powerful men travel is that people on the sides must cheer them on whether the man inside is merely reading a novel and not noticing them at all or whether he is enthusiastically waving back. We will know neither. (Courtesy: Ketan Trivedi.)

Conveying to the object the knowledge *of* power while rendering hazy the subject-object is the methodology: In these secure cars, the popular man can see the people at will, but the people cannot see the leader. When the subject pretends to be the object, such haziness is possible. Whom the subject wants to see, what they want to make visible, where they perch themselves, when they visibilize themselves or the object—none of this is known. The tinted windows on Trump's car do not accommodate a view from outside, but the driver's windshield cannot afford to be completely tinted. The spectator can see a marginal, ghost-like vision when



they peep inside. The presence of a human inside a car is evocative and seems purposeful. It must be carrying the leader. The displayed masses must presume the benevolence. They must assume that the passenger in the car is not complaining to their co-passengers about the exhausting flight, the jetlag, and the long drive. It is also unclear whether Trump fully grasped whether these proud, genial, and uncritical residents of Gujarat represented India, or whether they acted out of gratitude and bonding for their long-serving leader Modi, who had worked hard to gift them a living segregated from the confusion and chaos of mixed communities. The subject and the object are confused. Who is beholding whom? It is unclear.

A wave-back, a return smile, the invisibilized show of benevolence from behind the tinted glass would bear no practical relevance, no aesthetic meaning. It would be silly if Trump or Modi did wave back and smile at these crowds because they would essentially have done so out of some moral instinct. The fleeting vignettes—multiple billboards conveying the same welcome messages but nudging different and new claims of mutual friendship, combined leadership, and strength—might have merely amused a more cynical leader. Towering above the crowds, billboards and cutouts extolled Trump and Modi. Flattery is a sweet character of Indian hospitality—one that must be taken and left at face value. But can we expect such nonchalance from Trump and Modi? Both often refer to themselves in the third person. But such solipsism requires external validation. This endorsement might as well be reflexive since cheering crowds around politicians are rarely formed as a natural phenomenon. They must be coaxed and cajoled. Controlled flattery also serves a public purpose—it adds outcomes.

With the camera comes the power to make some of us subjects and others objects. The invisibility enraptures the camera, too, but the camera does not share with human cognition the subject-object ambiguity. The camera, like the humans, can presume and capture its object. It

weaves the context—as in the photograph I have used here. The camera waits at a junction where a larger-than-life cutout of Trump beams down at us. The right moment is when Trump’s car passes it. Now the cutout is behind the car. The crowds cheer from behind the camera. Where the occupant is looking is unknown.

**The theater of encomium.** Here, I observe the sights and sounds of the stadium in Motera, the venue that became an amphitheater for Trump and Modi to address a massive gathering in Ahmedabad. The grandeur of the venue and the awe-inspiring crowd of an estimated 100,000 people is well represented in the images well-captured by the moving camera in the video story from Doordarshan National (2020). I access Trump’s speech from the same video. Various other channels, including the PBS NewsHour, have also captured this moment. In Modi’s India, the venue for the grand finale of this roadshow is fitting. Built in 2017, the



**Figure 13.** The top photographic capture of the stadium in Motera (see <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2843952739025774&set=a.2834307776656937>), awe-inspiring because of its sheer size, is perhaps the most grand of the showcases of Modi’s Ahmedabad. (Courtesy: Facebook/The White House. Screenshot by author.)



**Figure 14.** The bottom image is from the “Howdy Modi” event in Houston in September 2019. This is a (copyright-free) image of the Houston event from FlickrR (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/whitehouse45/48784112406>). The story was covered extensively, including in the Indian American media; eg., <https://www.americanbazaaronline.com/2019/09/23/us-media-covers-trump-modi-event-in-houston-like-a-domestic-story-438883/>. The similarity between these events is striking. (Courtesy: FlickrR. Screenshot by author.)

Narendra Modi stadium is the world’s biggest, and was named after Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, one of the best-known freedom fighters from Gujarat and the Deputy Prime Minister in Jawaharlal Nehru’s cabinet. A year after Trump’s visit, in February 2021, the stadium was renamed Narendra Modi Stadium. It is meant to stand as a modern national symbol of *vikas*.

The similarity between the events in the Ahmedabad stadium and the Houston stadium event is striking—media images show this mutual resemblance. The Houston stadium’s image resembles the Ahmedabad stadium—we could substitute one for the other and the beholder would not immediately discern one from the other.

The Motera stadium dwarfs the Houston stadium in its sheer size. It brought in capacity crowds of 100,000. The Houston’s Howdy Modi event, held in the NRG Stadium, was sold out—unlike Ahmedabad, where people were brought in, the Houston event was paid-entry—at 50,000. Both Modi and Trump are known to display their masculine strength, and the stadiums must be appropriately competitive. The Houston reception must also be met with an appropriate *quid pro quo*. Most attendees in both cases are Indians or Indian Americans. The same walk of

friendship by Modi and Trump is seen in both—albeit without the hand-in-hand bromance style of Houston in the latter event. The same robotic “Modi-Modi” cheers fill both stadiums.

Pithy, slogan-filled speeches are precious for further dissemination both over the news and over social media. Without them in our social media world, the nudge-forward from their followers would be lost and the purpose defeated. No two people in the world understood that better than Modi and Trump. Together, they filled the mediated world with juicy aphorisms. Modi made famous a slogan he declared in his Houston rally: *Bharat mein sab achha hai* (*Everything is fine in India*). He made this statement as a sort of a response to the title of his rally, Howdy (Texan slang for “how are you doing”) Modi—and took the time to repeat the statement 10 times, in English and nine Indian languages.<sup>75</sup> When Modi hosted the private dinner in beautified surroundings in Ahmedabad a few months after his Houston rally, it was a reiteration of that statement he made in 10 languages, covered widely in the Indian news media. At the Ahmedabad stadium, Modi announced (in Hindi) in his speech in Trump’s presence at the Ahmedabad stadium: “We are using global benchmarks in creating infrastructure and the social sector in this 21<sup>st</sup> century,” appealing to Western validation to postcolonial interpretations.<sup>76</sup>

Trump’s speech at the rally resembled an endorsement of Modi: “America loves India”; “Everybody loves him [Modi]. But I’ll tell you this: He is very tough.” Modi, thanking him in English, and then slipped into Hindi (a language that is widely spoken in India, and not Gujarati, the native language of the state of Gujarat), as Trump looked on with a polite smile as no translation was available. Yet, each time they realized there was a pause, the crowds roared in

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<sup>75</sup> See The Economic Times (2019) for a video clip of this portion of Modi’s speech in Houston.

<sup>76</sup> See Republic World (2020) for Modi’s speech at the stadium.

unison. Yet some words resonate: India. Gujarat. *Chaiwallah* (tea seller, alluding to the story that Modi sold tea at a railway station in Gujarat before he joined the RSS). And above all, Modi. As he extolled Modi's virtues, the crowd erupted in a familiar refrain: *Modi, Modi, Modi*. Trump's speechwriter did justice to the embellishments and half-truths that Modi himself makes in his speeches—*270 million people lifted out of poverty*. True, but Modi can hardly take the credit for it as millions slipped back into poverty after he suddenly imposed an ill-conceived demonetization and taxation policies of 2016-18. That should remain unmentioned, of course—in the theme of invisibilizing the inconvenient. The aesthetic value of the occasion demands something embellishing, something that arouses, affects.

The true impact lay in the visual aesthetics of the packaged showcase. Most of the people attending the rally at the stadium did not understand much of what Trump said after his first words, “Namaste Modi”—perhaps the messaging was intended for his voters in the United States. Yet the words are immaterial to them. Their exclusion from the speech does not bother them. The now-familiar white caps with “Trump India rally” written on them adorned the heads of those seated on the field and rows of people seated in concentric circles around the amphitheater. The stadium was nearly full. Cricket matches do not witness crowds of this size—only an event where people are brought in from other places can justify the size of the stadium.

The role of nationalism as a *discursive* mechanism is to invoke nationalism in perfunctory and performative ways and provoke individuals and communities to act in material ways that support the symbol. Discursive mechanisms of nationalism, whose means of discourse remains the mainstream media, must therefore rely on both material evidences of modernity to perpetuate the existence of nationalism. But amplified rhetoric and its reiteration simulate the process of social discourse. The amplified voice is first heard, then it is repeated in the

semblance of a discourse. Therefore, the initial amplification is important to create the narrative structure on which it can serve as the torque for further public discourse. It seems natural that in an environment where pleasing rhetoric enthruses the majority to be vocal. From the amphitheater of aesthetics, onlookers provide the appeal of visual amplification; the voices disseminate the agenda.

## **Conclusion**

We must ponder: What has our modern world learnt from the legend of Grigory Potemkin? Writing about the consequences of the economy in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine, Allina-Pisano (2008) describes life after the privatization of a farmland larger than Australia. Urban populations flourished in an economy flushed with oil revenue, while rural folk killed their cows because the price of milk was too low for their maintenance:

If the Soviet system produced a façade of political rights, enshrined in its constitution but ignored or openly flouted in practice, land reform in post-Soviet Russia and Ukraine produced a new Potemkin village, easily visible from the windows of government offices in the capitals. This village is made of paper, and it records the recreation of a Eurasian steppe populated with independent landowners. But behind it stands the reality of the post-Soviet countryside. In that reality, rural populations on both sides of the border have become proletarianized and economically marginalized. (p. 188)

In every Potemkin village lies apparently liminal existence, yo-yoing between layers of the visible and the invisible, voice and silence, image and reality, beauty and truth. The postcolonial city, with its cheer, smiles, flag-waving, and happy faces, presents itself as a reliable and uncomplicated case. We have discussed before the unstable role of trust in the operation of modern democratic institutions. Trust in a leader has led to belief in his systems, his operations of segregation, his method of image-building.

Ahmedabad is not Catherine II's Potemkin village. Here, the city seems happy in the knowledge that the authority, even though sporadic in his visits, is ever-present in his hyper-

visibilized figure. The Foucauldian power to visibilize lies now in the hands of the public. The student, the employee, the schoolteacher, the laborer merge on the streets to cheer the nation—they are not distinct in that endeavor. Together, beauty and truth must be made to be seen as one. In making the nation, they must suture over their own society. In this effort, they know which stories to frame and share, know how to participate.

Cameras have forever captured the snapshots of Ahmedabad that together constitute the intended metaphor—the veneer, the *façade*—for the nation. They do not want us to miss their aesthetic value in postcolonial modernity, consensus of nationalism, and the inclusivity of the public in the construction of the nation. The narration of such events lies in the joint hands of the narrator and the communicator—the government and the news media. It must be evident by now that the narration of modern nationalism is inextricably linked to that of the media. They are both an instrument of modern institutions and themselves a modern institution, partnering in the project of modernization as defined by political institutions, shining the spotlight in the *right* areas. The efforts do not go unappreciated—they are faithfully rendered in the media in texts of nationalism. The subtext hides underneath the buoyant texts. The simplicity of power of invisibility, and the power behind it, is compelling.

Marxist thought argues that aesthetic value lies in power structures, but in lived spaces, this takes quite a literal meaning. Aesthetics relate to spectacle. Notions of beauty may emerge from our framework of language and visual grammar, although they may be different in different contexts. The charm of medieval architecture and the glitz of glass-façade buildings may clash or collaborate; so can the ethical appeal of slums in Ahmedabad to a Western lens and the emotional appeal of a postcolonial nouveau-riche neighborhood in Ahmedabad to an Indian.

Algorithms are designed in such a way that on an online search engine, the most accessed news stories are also the most visible. Therefore, whether a news story bears significance to livelihoods to a majority or emotional appeal to that majority, its access by a large section of the population guarantees its visibility. A news story with equal significance to livelihoods, but to a smaller section of the population, may be accessed by fewer people, and therefore will be far less visible on a search engine. In the modern, rational world, we rely on multiplicity of voices to alternative pictures that reaffirm the myths that are knitted so carefully.

We learn about our world through these selected narrations—they are the modern mirrors, equipped with special lenses. These lenses form our new literacy, the instrument for us to understand and draw necessary linkages between narrated events and sutured myths. Therein lies the fallacy of media literacy: Intellectuals must continue to be troubled by the illiteracy that emerges from *non*-narration. It is a fallacy, of course, because a non-narration cannot make anything *emerge*. Illiteracy is seen as a static absence of literacy because of this non-narration: What is not available, we cannot understand. Thus, this illiteracy is the incomprehensible counterpart of invisibility, of silence. Without visibility and articulation, the path for an authoritarian vision and voice is uninterrupted, crystal-clear, decisive.

The Ahmedabad study should also make us think whether there is a sufficient number of resistant voices in Modi's India that dare to run counter to the mainstream narration of the nation they want *others* to see. Perhaps the local voices via social media are not powerful enough to break through the dark liminal spaces and enter the spotlight that captivates the public eye; perhaps the alternative individual voices that can demystify the myths behind spectacles must themselves depend on mediation by representation. Even so, such mediated representation must then find sufficient visibility—eyeballs, in marketing lingo—to make any difference to our



perception. Only the joining together of this multiplicity can create a floodlight-like distraction from the mainstream spotlight; yet, such collaboration does not appear on the horizon.

## CHAPTER 4

### PERFORMANCE OF LAKHIMPUR KHERI

#### **The aesthetic schema**

As Adorno has adequately informed us, aesthetics are ideological. Performance evidences how they work in the most intimate yet ceremonial terms. Throughout this dissertation, I have used the notion of aesthetic values in narration and invisibilization. Furthermore, I fit this notion into the information and news genre. A part of this interpretation endeavors to show news actors' performances in the narrative constructions. That is, I will explain how these actors suture our world using the aesthetics of narration.

Without examining the performance of the language of narration, an exploration of such a performance would remain incomplete. By language, I mean both audiovisual and textual grammar in its descriptive interpretations and ideological scope. The function of language is binary: Using language, a narrator at once communicates and hides, constructs and deconstructs, distracts us from one fact and draws our attention to another. This feature is not limited to words we normally consider in binaries, such as good/bad, beautiful/ugly, but extends to those that we may not. *Something is there* might not indicate something that is *not* there, and indeed, draw us away from the idea of that absent something. That is the performative feature of language: It creates the streetlight effect, selecting where to shine the spotlight, thereby darkening other spaces.

In this chapter, I approach narrative construction in the context of a popular Indian television news channel. Specifically, I examine narration by Arnab Goswami in a popular news-analysis show he anchors on the English-language news channel Republic TV. Goswami plays a role as a frontline voice in conveying a majoritarian form of nationalism. In this examination, I

go into the performative dimensions of his news-based show and evaluate how the narration weaves a tragic incident into a nationalistic frame and generates the context for a project of modernization.

Here, I analyze how the aesthetics of media messages help in that construction. In the next chapter “Invisibility in Boolgarhi,” I will interrogate the social aesthetics that depict a calm ocean of continuity and order. Disrupted by ugly incidents that accidentally visibilize themselves to news consumers, the spotlight shifts to the intervention by the aberrant journalist. Between the two chapters, the reader may also observe the difference between the institutional, continuity-rendering role of the news system and the individual role of a disruptive journalist—a distinction I mentioned in the introductory chapter.

### **Quest for certainty**

Verisimilitude in a life-painting and the lack of it in a bizarre photograph might produce the same response of shock and awe. Therefore, a painter takes liberties with their art that a photograph or a narration does not take with reality. Yet the details of a photograph, like a news report, are fundamentally anchored in the presentation of reality. A photograph and a narration use tools that their creators, the photographer and the narrator, permit them to. The airbrushing of a photograph is a maneuver to hide detail in much the same way as an editing machine might cut details of an expert’s long-drawn quote and as text graphics on our television screen coax us to question the visuals of reality we are observing on the same screen. The narration of the logic behind even a crime can act as a scaffolding of its objectionable nature, perhaps even reverse the objection.

While discussing the performative feature of narration, linguistic philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein provides a perspective by connecting the affective and the aesthetic in a

relationship of sequence (and, arguably, not so much causation). Wittgenstein's (1966) premise for aesthetics is that it is "very big"—presumably because it pervades every dimension of human affairs, including that of the understanding of our world. That means the aesthetic is not merely a conscious artistic endeavor, but something that persists in our cognition in an existential way. The bearing aesthetics and their ethical value have on the beholder's experience and knowledge is best explained in Wittgenstein's argument that the claim "I feel discomfort, and I know the case" is entirely misleading (p. 14). Experience and knowledge go together in the aesthetic reactions we undergo when we are confronted by a stimulus, such as an artifact or a narration. However, Wittgenstein contends, the knowledge-seeking response to an artifact is conceptual—it is not empirical. We seek explanations in a framework—for example, a cultural framework. Knowledge lies in the acceptance of narration that is placed in an appealing construct. Something must click into place: *I am being told something I was unaware of; I was told something different earlier; the current narration negates my earlier belief, causing discomfort; the current narration's explanation is more coherent; it comes from a known and reliable source (such as a news anchor); therefore, I must now believe and act on the basis of my new knowledge.*

A feature of this presentation of knowledge is *naturalness*. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1982) writes that a "undevelopable" photograph, like the Japanese Haiku, in which "everything is given," causes "intense immobility"—the inability for the beholder to "dream," i.e., engage in a rhetorical expansion (p. 49). The appeal of naturalness may lie in its ability to at once settle the beholder down in a comfortable suspension of disbelief *and* trigger a furthering of its meaning. As Barthes says, the "artifice of the camera angle" is easily detectable. The detail must be a necessary "supplement," perhaps casually thrown into the field (p. 47). The understanding of the deeper meaning must be made after a suitable framing is completed. The appeal draws us in, the

verisimilitude draws us out. One performs an engaging function, the other, the alienating function. Thus, for effect, naturalness must appear both in a news anchor's performance and media logic.

Barthes suggests that the theatrical face lies not in make-up but in the thing that is inscribed, written. His critics might contend this claim, as does Huston (1986), who counters him with the summary, "the gap between performance and thought is alarming... the synthesis you seek is neither fundamental nor natural, that its reality is no more no less than a convincing performance" (p. 99-100). But this synthesis is uneasy if the seeker-doer is aware of this dilemma. For example, invisibilized text may be more easily accessible to a particularly persistent scholar poring over texts deeply looking to read between the lines, so to speak, while a more casual media prosumer might gloss over it unmindful of any ideological consequences of the omission. A scholar seeks uncertainty, a prosumer seeks to overcome it.

The rationality of aesthetics must lie in our agreement and acceptance of its value.<sup>77</sup> Consider the process that a media prosumer must go through, first, dismantling a self-perceived ignorance into a self-perceived knowledge, and then learning new knowledge. India's closed-group social media misinformation offers us an illustration. WhatsApp groups routinely spread misinformation among new smartphone users, yet, offering it as information spreads two kinds of misinformation—*one*, the content of the message, whatever it might be; *two*, that the user was never told something all these years. Thus, when my relative told me, "I believe [India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal] Nehru's grandfather was a Muslim," he was conveying to me that a) it would be wrong from India's Prime Minister to have a Muslim grandfather; c) it was

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<sup>77</sup> I have explained the value of aesthetics in the discussion on Adorno's aesthetic theory.

outrageous that this fact was being revealed only now, having kept us uninformed all these years. Thousands of WhatsApp groups routinely campaign during elections for the ruling BJP and routinely for its ideological parent, the RSS. Having chosen their somewhat monocultural or in some way monolithic targets, BJP workers infiltrate these groups and operate to create the idea that Muslims have done much damage to India, both in their centuries-long Mughal rule and now. Many targeted users of WhatsApp groups tend to start believing they have been kept illiterate, because that the education system in India after its independence in 1947 has been so bad that our understanding of history is lopsided and somehow sides with the colonial perspectives. Thus, not only has this nation been mismanaged, it has told us lies for decades. The BJP's Modi has arrived to rectify all that. This playbook has worked well in creating the divisions, but also in uniting the majority. Thus, the self-perception of illiteracy shames the social media user—they realize it is the WhatsApp group that is educating them.<sup>78</sup>

What Wittgenstein terms aesthetic puzzlement, which leads to a sort of a cognitive dissonance, is an unbearable state of flux for us as humans. We learn values in certain terms—certain tones and gestures that we take to be prescriptive. Hence, the relation between a rose and beauty.<sup>79</sup> We expect modern democratic societies to progress through discourse. Our institutions of modernity that promote it are founded in the uncertainty of contingency. Yet certainty is what we seek. German philosopher Niklas Luhmann calls this antithesis *social impatience*.<sup>80</sup> As Luhmann (1994) rightly posits, such angst is paradoxical since contingency is a hallmark of

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<sup>78</sup> See Kumar (2023), an interview in which the well-known anchor Ravish Kumar, who left his job at NDTV after it was taken over by the Adani Group in 2022, explains this self-perception of illiteracy among WhatsApp group members.

<sup>79</sup> See Coleman (1968) for a critical explanation of Wittgenstein's aesthetics. Hagberg (2014) notes that for all the centrality of aesthetics to Wittgenstein's thought, he wrote very little about it.

<sup>80</sup> See section on post-reflexive modernity in the theory chapter for a more detailed discussion on this topic.

science. The post-Renaissance period's most major marker was the rejection of the absolute—we have relied on relativity and coexistence of thought. Yet the angst for certainty coincides with the anxiety to be modern.

In bridging that gap from uncertainty to certainty, an implicit question of *how do we know* is readily answered. In *On Certainty*, this is Wittgenstein's (1969) maneuver to tackle G. E. Moore, whose effort was to evidence that a world exists outside our senses prescribing reality to us. Wittgenstein's counter to this argument is that the very knowledge that something exists defeats Moore's stand. An external truth exists because all doubt is embedded in our existing beliefs. A hand is a hand because we call it so. We must agree. If modernity is the myth to be achieved, consensus is the methodology. The new modernization project must reject elements that appear to be pre-modern—agrarian sections of a society and resistance, for example. This is a normative narration, woven to bear the semblance of *naturalness*, and is enshrined in people's trust in the institution that offers the chalice in which to carry stories of modernization's methodology—that is, the news media. I use the metaphor of chalice here because it is a suitably ornate cup, perhaps less of a *memento mori* version of Keats's Grecian urn, which I have alluded to earlier while explaining the invisibilizing and diversional role of aesthetics. Moreover, we expect a chalice to be an intoxicating drink that is a ceremonial form of persuasion to remember an absolute and certain truth.

This is a problematic feature of institutional trust. If Wittgenstein's stand, central to his *On Certainty*, that “[t]he game of doubting itself presupposes certainty” (Wittgenstein, 1969, p. 116), is valid, then the production of uncertainty must also produce certainty. Trust builds the

successful narration of media truths.<sup>81</sup> Credibility and good faith are pillars of trust, yet these components must themselves rely on how convincingly a news media platform tells stories. They must adopt forms of storytelling that are visually appealing, rationally convincing, and affectively compelling. The aesthetics of narration perform a vital task in this persuasive endeavor, using visible and invisible triggers. A narrator can latch on to linguistic manipulations and aesthetic instruments to construct a persuasive narration. There can be little more convincing than an emphatic resolution to one's doubt: Trust generates certainty.

In Goswami's use of ambiguous language, we find validity to persuasive ambiguity. Communication is essentially ambiguous.<sup>82</sup> Simone de Beauvoir (1949) points out in *Ethics of Ambiguity* that ambiguity lies between our own positions as subject and object, between our perceived freedom and our social or political or physical limitations—the framework of our past knowledge and the independence of our future actions. Thus, ambiguity is a central feature of creating doubt in luring the reader towards the quest for certainty—a pursuit of predictable outcomes. de Beauvoir says desire is important because there is some mistaken assumption that there is completion at the end of it—and this she considers dangerous. This work is interested in the external production of that desire.<sup>83</sup>

The creation of ambiguity and uncertainty is the antithesis of the discursive, dialectical existence we are supposed to straddle in modernity, the direction of whose outcome is unpredictable. A demonstration of the thesis relating the epistemological human endeavor with

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<sup>81</sup> Geoffrey Hosking (2014) provides a systematic history of trust and social phenomena founded on it. Anthony Giddens (1990) suggests that societies “trust in abstract systems” on one hand. On the other, trust is also an abstract non-entity, undefinable by modern systems. Trust in systems entails “faceless commitments” (p. 83-88).

<sup>82</sup> I borrow the claim from Gaines (2010), who makes it in a semiotic analysis of television news texts (pp. 37-55).

<sup>83</sup> I am aware that de Beauvoir's idea of ambiguity problematizes much more in her feminist approach to oppression. Significantly, however, a common factor, *desire* is salient because it is an aesthetic feature.



its manipulation is easily observable in art, drama, and persuasive communication. Uncertainty and ambiguity are thus joined at the hip in that uncertainty is the affective impact of ambiguity. If ambiguity is caused by the manipulation of language, it results in uncertainty. In the neoliberalism of the news media, that manifestation might be less expected. At least, we find its employment in the genre of news as we must accept it—the genre of persuasion is now embedded in the genre of news analysis, as though the narrator has an invisible endgame.

Ambiguity stands in opposition to certainty. Ambiguity acts as an aesthetic veneer in the communication of good faith. Further, in its displayed ambiguity, Goswami's text beseeches his consumer's trust, which is the resolution to dissonance—the settling of Wittgenstein's *puzzlement*. It leads to certainty. This inauthentic use of ambiguity is not a linguistic modulation. Rather, it should be viewed as an instrument in building trust. In turn, trust assumes good faith. Good faith exists in covenants in religions and in legal contracts, but it is not invokable in our social contracts. A *bona fide* agreement, in part, indicates the honesty of communication of an action.

As de Beauvoir might point out, good faith manifests itself in taking responsibility for action. In bad faith, on the other hand, individuals act inauthentically by yielding to pressures of the society or other external influences. But there is no guarantee that institutions act in good faith and maintain the spirit of the principles around which they have built their processes. The organizations that make up the institution of news are one such example. I compulsively wonder if de Beauvoir might argue that the media prosumer, too, acts in bad faith. She might see this action as aimed at a flight from freedom, a mollification of anxiety about the risks involved in such freedom. However, if such attribution is necessary, then it would seem that the media

prosumer's anxiety may also be accompanied by a far more overt need for non-freedom, perhaps to be subservient to a master.

It is not clear from de Beauvoir's exploration of the ethics of ambiguity what the trigger for an individual is to aim for the goals as aspire to act towards. I hope that this chapter can point to how specific external triggers might work. Whether the media prosumer's *action* faithfully follows trust or not should be a matter of dispute among media literacy scholars, but largely, it is not. Trust must be seen as the governing factor of good-faith action. Yet the expectation of good faith assumes that the media prosumer is uncertain, that they are seeking fact-based truths that can destabilize their beliefs. Such has been the progression of our social scientists' claim, first, of knowledge gap, and in the age of social media, of the belief gap.<sup>84</sup> Stable belief and unstable knowledge-seeking must go hand-in-hand, but this poses a logical contradiction if it is also claimed that knowledge destabilizes belief.

Hence, while performance and its consequences must be seen in tandem, the argument that this constitutes a stable system and the contention that it creates chaos cannot both be true. It needs an elaborate thesis of its own. That is why, in this work, I feel uneasy with any linkages between performances and their consequences, between production and consumption of mediated narration. I focus on its production alone. If ambiguity yields certainty, we have a paradox. As I describe specific instances of how ambiguity is employed in the narration of nationalism, the relationship between faith, trust, and certainty may become clearer.

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<sup>84</sup> See Tichenor et al. (1970) for an understanding of the persistence of a knowledge gap in societies; Hindman (2009) for the introduction of belief gap in our social media societies; and Veenstra et al. (2014) for its application.

## **The presentation of nationalism**

Postcolonial societies face a conflict between the rationality of the modern and the wisdom of the un-modern. Particularly, in today's India, the continuous narration on our hypermedia generates the belief that modernization is not only underway but within reach. That narration of finiteness effectively sets up nationalistic fervor and promotes the angst for certainty. In further harnessing the angst, narration entails emotion-linked nationalistic features of modernity such as majoritarianism and national duty. There are practices and voices that do not conform to this single-minded path. Narration must therefore also identify, address, and critique irritants in that agreed path toward modernization. Like the pre-modern, the *un*-modern, the seeking of modernity in ways that defy its frameworks of rationality, is marked by unscientific irrationality. Yet this process, the narrative chalice, selectively discards what it considers pre-modern, and yet possesses the ability to recast, validate, even justify irrationality.

Goswami's performance, which I observe in this chapter, echoes a broader political attitude that is prevalent among Modi's majoritarian political rhetoric. In that way, Goswami's text strikes in his committed political viewer the logical sequence of a news story—it acts as an allegory: *See what I mean?* An example is the inclusion of hatemongering experts and the exclusion of farmers as agricultural experts in primetime debates. The aggressive majoritarianism found in both BJP and Goswami's rhetoric takes on a religious majoritarianism in political rhetoric, which Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) call "Hindu nationalism." Nationalism has also taken on a binary relativity, where nationalism in post-partition India (that is, after the formation of Pakistan in August 1947) was defined in relation to military and political foes such as Pakistan. Pakistan became an Islamic state, and, in recent years under the BJP rule, Muslims in India have been positioned in political, nationalistic rhetoric as the "other." In other words,

nationalism has taken on a majoritarian, “ethno-religious idiom” (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2020). Muslims are targeted, tortured, and lynched at regular intervals by rabid Hindu crowds. In Goswami’s discourse, we also see illustrations of a more generalized majoritarianism: For example, the ruling political party is a representative who must be celebrated; the farmer is a minority who must be suspected of disrupting development.

Narrated by fair-skinned, sharply Western-attired anchors and reporters, the narrative *coverage* of a modernizing nation is incomplete and normative. It must at once urge its prosumers to work in their nationalistic roles by performing the outrage and externalizing the social angst for certainty. Display of emotional outbursts of outrage by is an example of how this narration is achieved. Seemingly incongruous, since the anchors wear all the aesthetic elements of rationality, the displays are in fact completely the opposite—they build the coating of the rational look required to build conviction. A rational argument clad in emotion seems to work well. The performance, by suturing selection, language, and agreeable aesthetics into stories, constructs our world. Above all, we, the media prosumer, do not leave the theater after this performance because we live in a constancy of that narration, in a hypermediated world. We must take forward the performance by sharing and opinionating it further.

Here, I contextualize narration in the context prevalent in India, a postcolonial nation seemingly in a hurry to modernize itself. An urgency prevails in the modernization project. An intense and outraged man-in-a-hurry demeanor of Indian news anchors reflects this urgency. Narration becomes critical in this race, because modernity can wait while its perception need not. By invisibilizing the undesirable, narration can build the image of modernization. However, the nation must participate in this mammoth effort—a majority must believe in it. Modi has created the opportunity to build a modern nation quickly. In that haste, news media must help prescribe

and spread the new and necessary social values—otherwise, the opportunity may slip away. There is no time for dissenting voices. The underlying new media logic is its attempt at undeniability: Who can deny that development is a good goal to have? Shining the light constantly on that question leaves unilluminated irritants such as social equity and equality. Modi calls such irritants *andolan-jeevi*, those who live to protest. It is a popular term amongst anchors. Protesters are therefore not those who are protesting in a particular instance, but those who protest in general. Well-aided by social media amplification, the loud voices become the norm.

In 2021, there were 392 news channels in India (down from over 406 in 2016), including 14 exclusively English-language news channels, all of which have a national or international footprint. Government of India owns Doordarshan, which it calls an “autonomous public service broadcaster,” a bouquet of 21 national and regional Doordarshan television channels that are nevertheless in part funded commercially.<sup>85</sup> News channels in India not only include news stories, but news anchors freely offer opinions even within news broadcasts.

I must delineate how the term *news anchors* has come to be understood in common parlance. In contrast to newsreaders, these anchors offer a combination of information, insight, opinion, and even entertainment. They are narrators on news channels, but they should not be mistaken to be mere providers of links between /news stories. A news program is a long-format moderated panel discussion. Primetime often includes a news program, often hosted by an anchor, often with a view to promoting the show as a brand and an attractive proposition for advertising. Anchors act as the owners of those brands, weaving branding messages into their narration, marketing and protecting them.

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<sup>85</sup> According to (Krishnan, 2021) and the telecom regulator, TRAI (2021). Also see Doordarshan (n.d.).

These examples reaffirm our faith in the narration of nationalism, woven around strategies of representation and self-representation, which Stuart Hall detected in the 1990s. According to Hall (1992), cultural constructions of *us*, or in-groups, and *them*, out-groups, define otherness, generating self-images and images of others. In the chapter “Invisibility in Boolgarhi,” we see how the serendipitous nature of the journalistic coverage of a crime essentially acted as the journalist’s audacious insinuation into a condition that ended up disrupting socio-institutional continuity. In that story, it seems a journalist must stand either with *us* or with *them*.

Nationalism in its new form must be narrated in news ways by credible sources. News stories offer scope to metaphorize incidents in majoritarian terms. Thus, if a Hindu mob lynches a Muslim man, a news reporter can direct questions at whether the Muslim was acting in bad faith, maybe carrying cow meat in contravention of Hindu social norms and, recently, a law in many states. The incident then becomes a subject of discussion and spirals up as a larger symptom of threats to the social order. A hijab-wearing Muslim student can be narrated as an irritant to school discipline, but also indexed as a threat to the kind of modernity we want to achieve. A farmer’s protest can be seen as a roadblock to the showcasing of glitzy, Western urbanity. Displaying the underbelly is not a nationalistic endeavor—it must quickly be written off as an undesirable fringe of an otherwise eminently showcaseable nation.

In any case, this destabilization of traditional news practices manifests itself at organizational levels. Rewarded amply by government advertisements, news platforms set themselves in that profitable and collaborative groove. Since the government can afford to easily and copiously allocate public money to advertise itself, the new ownership pattern for news media organizations and media systems in general makes it imperative for pliant news platforms to frame stories accordingly. News platforms use common narrations of an illusory national

culture, confounding prevalent notions among local populations about their culture, both unifying them into a national narration and into a globally perceptible idea. Moreover, these ideas are simplified into easy and chewable messages.

Furthermore, popular acceptability is an important feature in this form of national self-representation by influential people on influential media platforms. As a post-colonial nation whips up dreams, it must also impress global leadership and global audiences. The postcolonial nation seeks to be accepted as a western modern entity through self-narration and assertion. In these assertions, majoritarianism becomes the very template in which nationalistic modernization can occur.

Sometimes, this kind of assertion finds its resonance in unexpected ways. Gautam Adani, chairman of the Ahmedabad-based Adani Group and a known friend of Modi, became one of the richest persons in the world over the past few years during Modi's governance, rising from a modest 604<sup>th</sup> among rich people in 2014 to the third richest in 2022. In January 2023, Hindenburg Research, a U.S. company interested in investment research and short-selling, brought out a report that sent Adani's stock market crashing. The report documents "How the world's third richest man is pulling the largest con in corporate history ... [having] engaged in a brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme over the course of decades" (Hindenburg Research, 2023). In reply, Adani called the report a "calculated attack on India" (Langa, 2023). Stirring up nationalistic fervor among primarily his Indian investors and vicariously the Indian citizen, Adani essentially sought his compatriots' support because their country was under attack from the West. Much of the Indian news media system and some prominent social media voices like former cricket star Virendra Sehwag and spiritual discourse leader Jaggi Vasudev (called Sadhguru, the "true teacher") started taking sides, mostly

supporting Adani primarily by discrediting Hindenburg, but also joining Adani in claiming all this was an international conspiracy by *them* against *us*. The refrain or hashtag was that this was an attempted “hit job” on Indian markets, a “well-planned conspiracy” by “goras”—the fair-skinned foreigners who cannot tolerate India’s progress (Sehwag). “Firangs” have always been that way, and we cannot allow that to happen anymore, since we need “a prosperous India—Let Us Make it Happen!” (Sadhguru).<sup>86</sup> Tweets such as “If you can spare 5,000 rupees, you should invest in Adani because he is one of us” did the rounds. We are the victims, they are the perpetrators. Within less than two weeks, Adani’s stocks, which had been in a free fall, recovered and managed to regain its upward trend.

The success of the narration of the enemy of the state seems repeatedly worthy of the effort. The populist laws and policies either marginalize or eliminate minority groups from the mainstream—the Citizen Amendment Act is a prominent example. However, Muslims are merely the visual minorities. Those that come in the way of Modi’s modernization plan, too, belong in that group. Anti-national activities are so rampant in Modi’s India, it would seem from the constant exhortations of people in the BJP and especially in primetime anchor rhetoric, that the hyphenated adjective has now become a noun: There are internal forces that are at play by anti-nationals, “urban Naxals,” the “Vadra Congress” or “Congi” party, and indeed, anyone who does not fit into the majoritarian scheme of things and is therefore a threat to it. Muslims are visually displayed in their skull caps and beards on primetime—there, they are lampooned and berated: Their kind has refused to support Modi. These are voices that don’t fit.

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<sup>86</sup> See Sehwag (2023) and Sadhguru (2023).



News talk anchors set the theme, topics, possible questions, and tone of the impending debate in monologues that typically precede panel debates. Arnab Goswami, who started Republic TV in 2017, intensified his popular shock-jock style of anchoring primetime news shows—primarily structured as discussions between politicians and experts, preceded by a monologue by Goswami—and created or amplified several lexical innovations such as “urban Naxal” and “anti-national” to describe intellectuals and dissenters of Narendra Modi’s BJP.<sup>87</sup>

Goswami often frames the opposition as conspirators against Modi and his nationalistic development agenda. In particular, his favorite whipping boy has been Rahul Gandhi, the grandson of Indira Gandhi and a leader of the Congress party. Goswami lampoons, name-calls, and shows special disdain for him. These agendas and fervors are the Modi government’s stated manifestoes, but Goswami discursively manipulates dissenting actions or words to categorize them as “the other.” In the case of the Boolgarhi gang-rape, which I have described in the chapter “Invisibility in Boolgarhi,” Goswami pitched it similarly to the current case, as a political game by the parties opposed to the governing BJP. There, Republic TV claimed to have caught politicians in a sting operation. Comparing the Boolgarhi incident with the killings of Lakhimpur Kheri, Goswami thundered: “Same party, same politics, same approach. Hathras politics repeats all over again in Lakhimpur.”

Thus, the narration indicates that a citizen / media prosumer must contribute to a modernization project. Branded by the West as merely a “developing” nation, India’s people must together create what the West will accept as a developed one. Development becomes a

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<sup>87</sup> Naxalites are communist-backed far-left extremists known to ambush and kill members of the police and administration. The United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government declared in 2010 that they were a “greater threat than Islamic terrorists” (Indian minister, 2010).

seemingly finite, competitive agenda with fulfillment in sight. This effort takes *vikas*, a simultaneous application of expansion, infrastructure, and the prescription of *kartavya*, duty. For their part, institutions choose the artifacts of *vikas* carefully—the visuals matter. It is also the duty of the citizen to prevent and condemn inimical activities.<sup>88</sup> Citizens must be wary of sharing inside information. Government officials and other nationalists now routinely advise Indians, especially those who live abroad, not to show their country in poor light. Doing so would be anti-national. The kinds of buildings, roads, photographable items that form the right images must determine what is modern. The supremacy of intellect over experience is easily observed in daily life. One stands for rationality, the other for arbitrariness. The rationality of intellect in Goswami, as in the technological affordances of news media, is often merely the exploitative narration of rationality: We will show you an event in an edited sequence. Founded on that sequence, you will draw inferences that appear natural.

Thus, the nation becomes what Stavrakakis et al. (2019) call transcendental signifier, whereby “the nation and the national community ... is primarily and almost exclusively understood as the true meaning” (p. 434). A natural corollary of this process is the integral linkage of visibility to understanding as the media prosumer enters the ideological-linguistic market (extending Pierre Bourdieu’s [1984/1993] proposition of the linguistic market). In this event, a narrator of a news event may use an incident to construct nationalism even though, to the media prosumer/reader initially, the text may seem incongruous with its context, the physical

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<sup>88</sup> See The Wire (2022);

may appear irrelevant to the moral, the reality may seem the opposite of the narration.<sup>89</sup> Specific to the scaffolding around majoritarian nationalism is the ideology of the majority. The ideology manifests itself in social identity—attire, color, race, and so forth. The majority must always be narrated as *us*. The other must always remain the minority, narrated as *them*.

**Republic TV.** Republic Media Network is an Indian news television network whose first channel, the English-language Republic TV, was launched in May 2017. It has since launched two more channels, in Hindi and Bengali. As a start-up venture, it was co-owned by Rajeev Chandrasekhar, a right-leaning independent politician who became a Member of Parliament after joining the party in power, the BJP, and Arnab Goswami, co-owner of ARG Outlier Media. Chandrasekhar hived off his stake in 2019. Goswami owns most of the network.

Born in 1973 to Suprabha and Indian army colonel Manoranjan, Goswami built his journalistic career at the moderately aligned NDTV news network, and moved in 2006 as Editor-in-Chief and primetime anchor to Times Now, where he launched a loud, opinionated outrage primetime show and ran it until early 2017. There, he positioned himself as a political kingmaker by claiming repeatedly that “the nation wants to know.”

Republic TV’s content has been acknowledged in international media and scholarly literature for its favorable stance to Modi’s BJP. For example, Jaffrelot and Verniers (2020) write: “Republic TV, Times Now and Zee TV, among many other channels, regularly spread pieces of (dis)information that echoed to a large extent the social media handled by the BJP IT

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<sup>89</sup> Norman Fairclough (2000) identifies three dimensions to examine a communicative event (such as a television program): Text, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice. He proposes that the production and consumption of media texts are examples of discourse practice, while the relationship of media texts to the economics, politics, and culture of the media pertains to their sociocultural practice. He points out that this language-society dialectic is dynamic, and that a text enables a constant construction of society’s various functions—identities, social relations, knowledge and belief systems, and (arguably) discourse.

cell” (p. 165). Using majoritarian nationalism and theme of outrage, Republic TV’s primetime debate anchor Goswami weaves an othering narration.

Republic TV depends in most part on advertising revenues. The Modi government spends billions of rupees on advertising its achievements—by far the highest by any government so far. The government of India distributes its massive advertising outlay among news channels. In the financial year 2018-19, which ended weeks before the national election, it spent 11 billion rupees (USD 135 million). Over the next year, 2019-20, it spent 6.27 billion rupees (USD 77 million), and in 2020-21, only 3.49 billion rupees (USD 42.8 million). Although, like Republic TV, most news platforms have been amplifying the Modi government’s achievements in the form of news and analyses, advertising may motivate them to do so—more so, the potential advertising pullout from one of their biggest advertisers motivates news channels, night after night, to pursue agendas that promote the government and its political party. Yet, curiously, Republic TV is missing from the 2022 expenditure report of the government’s list of news channels on which it advertised.<sup>90</sup>

Republic TV enjoyed the highest ratings among its peers: In week 10 of 2022, it had a viewership of 23 million among age groups 15 and over, compared to the second highest, Times Now, with 14 million. On social media, Goswami appears to have a cult following, and seen as a hero of Hindu nationalism (Purohit, 2020). In a chest-thumping effort, Goswami’s network releases angry retorts aimed at its critics. (See ‘Don’t you dare point a finger,’ 2022). However, the ratings themselves have been disputed, and the government halted the ratings system in 2020 in response to those allegations. Somewhat contradictorily, people do not trust Republic TV as

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<sup>90</sup> From Tiwari (2022); Somanchi and David (2020); Divya (2022).

much as one would expect. In the 2022 Reuters Institute survey, 57 percent of the survey's young, English-speaking urban respondents said they trust that brand, as against 75 percent for the highest trusted news brand, *The Times of India* newspaper followed by government-owned radio and television channels (Newman et al., 2022, pp. 134-135). So, high trust does not mean low viewership, and that is what counts in the world of neoliberal economics.

Both the first (October 4) and the second (October 6) episodes I examine in this study are “powered by Amity University,” a large private university based in Noida. The advertiser knows that they are aligning with an extreme political position that is dressed up as outrage discourse. The same advertiser may often balance their politics by also sponsoring another show of a different ideology. In this case, Amity University advertises widely on different news channels. Nationalism—specifically, majoritarian Hindu-nationalism—is a running theme among several Indian channels including Republic TV. Within that theme, however, the manifestation of nationalism in incidents, events, and coverage may vary. Republic TV in particular often chooses topics around ethnicity on debates, and discredits political parties or leaders whom it portrays as supporters of Muslims, sometimes falsely or inaccurately. A nation, invoked in the majoritarian sense, is exclusive rather than inclusive.

**A crime, narrated.** News broke on October 3, 2021, that a convoy of cars and SUVs plowed through a group of farmers marching in peaceful protest on a low-traffic rural road in Lakhimpur Kheri district (county) of India's northern state of Uttar Pradesh. The incident took multiple—at least eight—lives and remained hidden until independent videos identified the driver to be the son of the union (federal) minister in charge of home (internal security). The video surfaced a full day after the incident, which became a political slugfest as the Congress party compiled it from videos from independent smartphone footage.

The state government put together a Special Investigating Team (SIT), comprising police officials from the state of Uttar Pradesh where the incident occurred. Subsequently, the SIT arrested the main accused, Ashish Mishra, the son of the Union Minister of State for Home Ajay Mishra Teni, and nine other people including three farmers. Teni senior denied that his son was even present at the scene. When the SIT questioned him, Ashish Mishra showed them more than 10 videos where he is seen speaking elsewhere. However, forensic evidence seemed to indicate that a cartridge in the SUV belonged to his gun. The SIT rejected the videos and called his responses evasive.

The case has been a tug-of-war between the state High Court (the state Supreme Court) on one side and the (federal) Supreme Court on the other. The Supreme Court of India intervened *suo motu*, rejected the SIT's report. One of the people killed in the incident was a journalist, and the SIT showed his death because of being beaten to death. However, the court pointed out that evidence suggested otherwise—that “the impression sought to be given was that this journalist was beaten to death” (‘Let ex-HC judge monitor,’ 2021). The High Court released Mishra on bail in February 2022; in April 2022, the Supreme Court canceled the bail; in January 2023, again granted him bail for an initial period of eight weeks. Four people from the group of farmers have been arrested for the murder of Mishra's driver and others. While allowing bail to Mishra, the Supreme Court has asked the High Court to release the farmers on bail.

The case in the Supreme Court involves the farmers' side that is arguing that the minister's son acted criminally. Mishra's lawyer contends that the charge is “completely false” and that, rather, “[i]t is a case of mob violence that our jeep was attacked” (Tiwarly, 2022). The local Additional Sessions court in Lakhimpur framed murder charges against Mishra only in December 2022 after the Supreme Court sought a report from the lower court. This court told the

Supreme Court that it needs five years for the trial to conclude and that 208 witnesses, 171 documents, and 27 forensic reports were involved.

Republic TV ran debates on this incident in its primetime shows. The two episodes of that show, on October 4 and October 6, 2021, are themed on that incident. Called “Arnab Goswami on the Debate,” the show is a panel discussion hosted and moderated by Goswami. An initial monologue by a news analysis show’s anchor sets the framework for a discussion. I only examine Goswami’s monologue on both days. The first, just over 7 minutes long, is from the show’s episode on October 4. The second, about 4 minutes 20 seconds long, is taken from the October 6 episode.

In the intervening period of two days, Republic TV added its own videos to an existing mix of independent videos that emerged after the incident, claiming to have unearthed new evidence between the two days. At the time of both shows, initial videos had already surfaced. However, the videos were not authenticated by October 4.<sup>91</sup>

### **Performances of a story**

I have explained in foregoing paragraphs the rationale for a news channel to build credibility, the bastion of trust. Yardsticks that measure news credibility show a sharply dipping trend. However, it is possible that the yardstick may need a revision. For example, does a media prosumer expect the same things as they did decades ago? A media prosumer with self-professed sense of logic and the ability for both knowledge-seeking and action may approve of the need for movement of societies toward a reconciliation of experience and (what Barthes calls) intelligibility, between inside and outside locational frameworks, between reality and narrative

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<sup>91</sup> See Goswami (2021); Republic TV (2021a); Republic TV (2021b).

construction. Yet only the experience of a visibilized and sutured reality, its performance, is available to a media prosumer. The narrator must use performative elements to justify agendas underlying news stories, such as majoritarian nationalism. The stories therefore serve as illustrations of those agendas. When a group of farmers is involved in an imbroglio with members of the ruling political party, it is an example of how small groups of people are trying to disrupt an urgent agenda that the government has set out to accomplish. We must support the agenda, not the roadblock. If a commentator supports the majoritarian agenda, a media prosumer might see it as fair game. However, if a newscaster runs a news-analysis show, showing news reports and visual clippings of news events, it must be dressed up as such to cloak bias in the aesthetics of media logic. Since its purpose is to persuade, outrage must be performed. Since we do not look upon news as persuasive, it must include the elements necessary to make the screen and the show look standoffish.

Narration in news employs several performative strands, such as the ambience, audiovisual, textual, and linguistic. Together, they must deliver stories that, as sutured, appear rational, reasonable, natural. Among the assembly of scaffoldings that the narrator needs for a compelling narration is a tangible montage of elements for the performance. Hence, he calls upon a combined use of visual, audio, haptic, and body-language tools; represents the available facts; and interprets those facts. This method also entails the performance of language in its spectrum—audio, visual, text. The visual look of the television screen, the music, the energetically moving headlines and text graphics, the anchor's perch, his attire, hold together what is being said. The layout of the television screen, the colors, the music, the opening sequence, the editing cuts, and the packaging constitute the contours of the chalice, the aesthetically appealing storytelling form in which the nationalism of majoritarianism must find a



rational explanation. Yet, being a news media channel, the expression of outrage towards the perpetration of a criminal act must be tempered by the performance of perfunctory journalistic acts. The aesthetics of language in both embellishments and understatements are useful here.

The elements must also bear an overall significance—that of a news analysis rather than a commentary from a supporter of an establishment. A commentary could bear the perception of bias and blind subjectivity. Therefore, if a channel purporting to disseminate fair analysis must create the perception of fairness, it is important that a commentary show don the attire of an analysis of a news event. On the other hand, the performance of fairness in a redefined form involves outrage and anger—it must bear elements that produce the effect of reasonable, logical, and fair argument using elements such as emotion that connect and resonate with the prosumer.

Thus, the performative elements stitch together a desirable show, so that regardless of how unseemly the content may be—such as the ghastly sights of people killing each other—it must be presented in a manner that inspires the same aspirations and actions that more agreeable content would. In the following sections, I present three instances of performances—audiovisual, emotive, and linguistic—that work in combination for the certainty of consensus.

**Performing screen.** In this subsection, I conduct an audiovisual analysis of what appears on the screen in Goswami’s show. Earlier, I have explained the process of suturing. Although the theory is well-applied in film, I have argued, the evocatively conceptualized term and concept should be equally applicable to all audiovisual constructions. It is possible to extend this process to mediated constructions even in digital and print media. However, my current example is limited to the audiovisual, and I will not stretch it beyond. My interest is in the process of the conversion of an incident into a media event, a media event into a spectacle, and its embedding

into myth. The presentation of news is a sutured form that stitches together the urban and the rural, the incident and the event, the spectacle into the story.

Each episode opens with a one-minute-long title sequence. The unusually long visual opening sequence, accompanied by music, is nearly one minute long. The visuals are a jumble of rapidly changing graphics with occasional views of the streets in the city showing vibrant traffic and busy life. Like Goswami's embellished style, these are bombastic, sophisticated graphics with a blue tint remind us of Hollywood drama. There is never a rural scene. Villages and agricultural fields are not modern—those vignettes must be left to the state-owned Doordarshan News. On Goswami's screen we find fast-forwarded images of cars, illuminated buildings, streams of light running through streets. These are cities without traffic jams—the futuristic cities we desire. Most are night shots, with their spotlighted illumination, as though a day shot would reveal the unsavory. The only daytime shot is an actual video of traffic over Kolkata's iconic Howrah bridge, indicating that the October 4 show is from "our Kolkata studios."

The music accompanying the montage resembles a fast-paced allegro section of a concerto, mostly in the upper part of the octaves but also with rapid ups and downs. It may immediately remind a keen observer that the music mimics Goswami's style. Both when he greets the audience as well as through his monologue, Goswami speaks in a high pitch. There is an emphasis on the mid-tones and the treble in the music as well. When he smiles, it is invariably for wry or caustic reasons.



**Figure 15.** The busy screen on Goswami’s show keeps the viewer occupied by the visual awe—so many voices waiting to address a story that must be important. (Courtesy: Republic TV [Goswami, 2021.] Screenshot by author.)

Otherwise, he maintains a stern demeanor, leaning forward into the camera and gazing right into it. The alternation between his pauses with a seemingly stoic stare into the camera and his dramatic and sudden outbursts of seeming outrage find a worthy parallel in the fast-paced crescendos and cadences in the music.

As Goswami starts to speak, the dramatic title music continues. He is attired immaculately in a suit and tie, his glasses and the “Convent English” style of speaking (referring to a style of spoken English learned from Christian missionary schools) lending him a solemn look—is what Barthes might find ideologically credible to aspirants of the dream of modernization where glitzy structures and urbane looks fuse with majoritarian values, the global promotion of India to the world, and the globalization of Hindu thought. The *other* is, of course, whatever looks like an irritant in that image—the impoverished, the rural, the non-Hindu. The real betrayers, of course, are the “urban Naxals”—a term Goswami coined to indicate that people who conform to all the above desirable values but remain the naysayers, the hurdles in the path of the marketing of constructed Indian modernity. This is the tango between the highlighting and

the glossing, between the disruptive intervention and the sutured realities of our mediated existence.

During the session where Goswami's "guests" are invited to "debate" the issue, the screen is split. On the screen, Goswami is always at the center—the cynosure. His shows include many invitees, sometimes more than 10. On October 4, there are nine of them—political spokespersons and politically affiliated analysts pretending to be objective. (Several of these purportedly non-political experts may even wear sleeveless Indian *khadi* jackets and saris, neither a common nor a strikingly unusual practice. However, Indian politicians prefer wearing them.) The debate is, of course, perfunctory. An ad hoc viewer might mistake the perfunctoriness to mean that the incident is so outrageous that it cannot possibly generate a real debate. But the perfunctoriness in this show is the opposite—anyone who dares to contradict Goswami will not be tolerated by him. The decibels will rise and the dissenter will be shouted out. As a metaphoric representation for the contemporary state of affairs in Modi's India, where journalists and others are routinely jailed or otherwise harassed, Goswami's show is authentic.

The aesthetic mnemonics of the man-in-a-hurry are not limited to Goswami because Goswami must himself act as an externalization of the center of all this effort—as a personal manifestation of Modi and that of his majoritarian nationalism. Outrage must reflect in the effort to shake things up—thus, the emergence of a new approach. The screen demands the viewer's engagement with it. Text graphics perform a para-social function. Along with the audio and the visuals, indicate a busy screen, attracting attention and fulfilling an economic purpose, of course, but also representing the urgency that is needed in the larger project. The screen must act provocatively to engage the media prosumer. It sets the larger agenda while its elements set

specific agendas. The experience and the impression collide as the visual of the SUV running over farmers is sutured over by the alternative visual of farmers beating the driver to death.

The first video that appears as Goswami, at the beginning of his monologue, tells us the gist shows farmers beating the driver and his colleagues with sticks and batons. “What happened in Lakhimpur terrible” says the text at the bottom, as Goswami shakes his head. The second visual shows a vehicle set on fire by the farmers. Text graphics on Goswami’s show act not as textual forms of information, as we would expect in traditional news television, but as textual aides to his narration. The busy screen in the show has three forms of texts: a presumed headline, a crawler at the bottom, and some in the middle. The screen is sometimes filled with these text graphics. These texts are not static—they move around dynamically, reiterating the sense of immediacy, not so much of the information, but of the project and the agenda. It becomes



**Figure 16.** Discrediting a nationwide farmers’ protest is critical in fixing perpetration of crimes that may seem like a nuisance in the path of the modernization project. In this image, we see a prominent opposition leader known to jump between the Congress and the BJP—an action that is common among Indian parties. (Courtesy: Republic TV [Goswami, 2021]. Screenshot by author.)

difficult to read, but the job is done if the text has attracted the attention of the literate person compelled to read. On-screen text graphics may be seen as supplements to stories or to panel discussions. They are also a news director’s rhetorical device that draws viewers into those

discussions by informing them of the issue being discussed, by disseminating any deliberate editorial slant, and by making the content and format of the text provocative. An example of such provocative format is the use of question marks or exclamation marks to end the text graphic. The videos' titles and subtitles, each of which acts as the headline to the main story in each video, use punctuation to create a question. At the end of the headline under each of the videos is a question mark.

The episode of October 4—even though it is the initial episode that reveals what happened in rural Lakhimpur Kheri—uses the hashtag #LakhimpurPolitics, something we would expect to find in a later show that analyzes developments that follow the incident itself. The headline in the video of October 4 reads: “Violence in Lakhimpur: An attempt to create chaos ahead of UP polls?” followed by a sub-headline, also ending in a question mark: “Opposition stoking fire amid Lakhimpur Kheri violence to make political gains in UP Polls?” Later, an insinuated reversal of attribution in “Who is promoting lawlessness?” the picture shows a member of the Congress party—in faraway Punjab. In the video of October 6, in which Republic TV uses the hashtag #LakhimpurFaultlines, alluding to the fractured political stances, the headline is “Attempt To Turn Lakhimpur Tragedy Into A Simmering Political Cauldron?” The questions are more incisive on the 6<sup>th</sup>, even in their performed ambivalence: “Using tragedy to conspire?” The accusatory tone is hardly hidden in the performance of the question mark.

These might appear to be rhetorical questions, but technically, they are still questions, aligning with a purported function of news media and a popular claim by the media: We just ask the questions. Firstly, headlines or, in this case, video titles routinely do not carry verbs that we might use in normal sentences. Inserted, the questions might read: “*Is there* an attempt to create chaos ahead of UP polls?” “*Is the* opposition stoking fire amid Lakhimpur Kheri violence to

make political gains in UP Polls?” and “*Is There an Attempt To Turn Lakhimpur Tragedy Into A Simmering Political Cauldron?*” Still, we may observe that in their present format, these are not actual questions, but statements with question marks after them. That is to say, if we remove the question marks at the end, they form grammatically correct sentences—making them claims. So it is possible for us to view them as equivocations. Secondly, and on the other hand, Goswami claims, thereby answers the questions, thus leaving no room for guessing which way the ensuing debate will be steered. If the questions were shorn of the question marks, they resemble the words spoken by Goswami (albeit in fuller sentences including necessary verbs). There are two kinds of texts that appear on the screen: One, Goswami’s words as he speaks, typically in quotation marks. Two, “independently displayed text” refers to the graphic texts or video titles that do not appear in quotes—in other words, are not direct quotes from Goswami’s discourse. The question is not ambiguous—it has a performative function. It is a fulfillment of journalistic norm. To the beholder, the question mark is physically present, yet virtually absent.

**Performing narrator.** It is interesting that theater can take the liberty of adopting the Brechtian style of drama. On the other hand, we expect news to be detached in its narration while engaging us in the storytelling of reality. Theater and journalism “share a desire to permeate the ‘fourth wall’ between performers and their witnesses to bond a tribal unity between them” either through an emotional engagement or by alienation (Pitcher, 2020). They are both rooted in performance of storytelling. In that role, journalism borrows from theater but particularly from the style of Brechtian theater, purporting to make its audience think *by feeling*. The combined alienation-engagement influence is depicted in a 2017 study by researchers from a documentary theater project at the University of Texas at Austin. Audiences watched the performance of plays based on investigative reports and reported the various influences of the dramatic version of

reality (Tenenboim and Stroud, 2019). This is not new. Newspaper headlines perform similar roles, drawing attention through drama to reveal unknown stories from our world and cause a sensational response from its reader. Outrage has become a particularly convenient response because it directly speaks to the self-adopted journalistic role of campaigning for what is right. In this subsection I examine how, on his nightly debate show on Republic TV, Goswami's emotive demeanor and the accompanying audiovisual and textual narration together construct the performance of outrage.

The watchdog role that journalists have adopted today has grown into the kind of outrage journalism we see today, manipulating what we must see as outrageous. Television anchors who host news-based talk shows often produce outrage discourse (Berry and Sobieraj, 2013). The use of outrage has become an impressive technique by which to click media consumers to attention and draw their emotional responses. However, as much as we can be outraged by a crime or by incompetence, the direction and magnitude of outrage entirely depend on its communication. Goswami and the Fox News right-campaigner Tucker Carlson show common strategies. However, Goswami employs outrage in his own behavior, exhorting and pleading with his audience to follow suit. Sometimes hysterically animated, he emotes the passion he wants to transfer to his audiences. Unlike Goswami, Carlson is a ventriloquist of outrage: He transfers outrage onto his beholder on the other side of the screen using an occasional facial gesture, but largely using wordplay and misplaced claims to certainty for his opinion. An excerpt from his February 13, 2023, show reveals this strategy:

What we know for *certain* tonight is that there is chaos in American domestic airspace. This has never happened before. It's not a good sign. There's chaos on the ground, too—a lot of it. Ten days ago, apparently, a train derailed in East Palestine, Ohio ... Apparently, there was some kind of mechanical failure [first twitching and then raising eyebrows as though incredulously]—which we don't have details of what the failure was



... of course we don't! ... Representatives from the Environment Protection Agency arrived to restore calm. Yes—an EPA agency spokesman explained, chemicals from the derailed train did enter the local watershed, and yes, they did kill the fish. *But!* [Raising index finger, raising eyebrows, and with a caustic smile] the drinking water supply remains totally safe! (Carlson, 2023; Italics indicate emphasis in Carlson's narration).

In its formative years in the early 1970s, journalism of outrage was equated with investigative journalism. Traditionally defined journalism of outrage is a form of investigative journalism that seeks to express “righteous indignation not merely at [an] individual tragedy, but also at the moral disorder and social breakdown which the tragedy represents” (Ettema, 1988, p. 3), and to defend “traditional virtue by telling stories of terrible vice ... Their moral task is to evoke outrage at the violation of dearly held values” (Ehrlich, 1996). After Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of *The Washington Post* exposed in June 1972 what came to be known as the Watergate scandal in the United States, a new investigative function of journalism sought actively to “expose social ills and appeal to public reason to cure those ills” (Ehrlich, 1996). Outrage journalism may refer to news stories, where reporters are assigned to investigate and narrate news stories in formats that are structured in the form of news. In television news production terms, we may view this as an input strategy.

Outrage discourse, on the other hand, refers to anchors' monologues or discussion on longer-format shows, so in television news production terms, this is a job of the output team to which anchors typically belong.<sup>92</sup> The discourse includes commentaries and opinions usually founded on a recent piece of news or in general on current affairs. Politicians across the spectrum routinely harness discourse through a display of outrage that weaves political or ideological

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<sup>92</sup> Here, I use the word *discourse* in breach of a distinction I normally make between discourse, which is dialogic, and narration, which is unidirectional. This departure is necessary in this case because the “outrage discourse” is used throughout literature as a sort of standard term. I would have preferred *the narration of outrage* if it were not such an awkward phrase.

narratives. Outrage discourse on these shows use excesses such as overgeneralizations, sensationalism, prejudicial attacks, and misleading or inaccurate information to provoke anger, fear or moral righteousness (Miller and McKerrow, 2006). Partisan media outlets engage in outrage discourse, promoting hostility and disdain for those on the other side (Garrett et al., 2019). In political media discourse, affective polarization links audiences' media use to political misperceptions.

Many anchored news television shows use outrage discourse while othering social, cultural, or political communities. Talk show anchors in the United States such as Tucker Carlson routinely discredit social movements that threaten the status quo: In 2020, he repeatedly claimed that the Black Lives Matter movement is essentially a political party that is using its power and is not concerned about the lives of African Americans (Carlson, 2020). Other right-wing television commentators on television like Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly take on religious or political issues in uncivil ways in their "over-the-top" discourse in political opinion media (Berry & Sobieraj, 2013). Recent studies about outrage discourse on European news television reveal the othering of minority groups such as Muslims especially by right-wing media platforms such as [Breitbart](#) as threats to national security (Jan and Shah, 2020). As a combination of verbal and nonverbal language, using emotional gestures and expressions (Maoz, 2012; Bucy and Grabe, 2008) and using insult and belligerence (Bartolucci, 2012), such mediated discourse of outrage is transmitted to audience outrage through "media logic" (Altheide, 2013). Evaluation of some specific forms of othering in discourse on Indian news media points to the centrality of the nation-state in news media's othering of other nations, specially those that are hostile to the media's home country (Sonwalkar, 2010); Indian magazines' discourse constructs Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in either "threat frames" as

illegal or criminal threats to the nation, or “victim frames” as sufferers of the nation’s oppressions (Wani, 2022); the visualization of refugees in specific othering ways (Mohanty, 2022). Outrage discourse on extreme news-based discussion shows exploit language to generate otherness, often using the interplay of textual, visual, and oral discourse, speaking to three categories of audiences: *One*, the core audience that is affiliated to or inclined to affiliate to or agrees with the channel’s perspectives on issues; *two*, a set of individuals who remain undecided or defer their agreement until the end of a program; and *three*, the outliers, or those who may view the program critically despite disagreeing with its methods, style, and approach to issues. There is a need for a systematic critical analysis of extreme discourse on Indian news-based shows that display political and ideological affiliations, and this paper hopes to fill that gap. Specifically, we expect outrage discourse to use extreme language, but news program anchors also use equivocation to fortify their narrative.

In the case of Goswami’s discourse in the examined segments, divisiveness takes on two different tactics: Farmers (not just *the* farmers who are involved in the incident) are othered in a nuanced way, while the political opposition is othered in more direct terms. In his strategy, Goswami frames his monologue in such a way that viewers can infer that the farmers in the incident were bigger perpetrators than the BJP politician’s men. He manipulates a combination of discursive elements, including linguistic strategies such as equivocation and obfuscation, combined with nonverbal devices including the pitch, volume, and voice modulation to display outrage, discredit the political opposition, convey politically affiliated rhetoric, “other” the farmers, and position the viewer at the center of his monologues.

By October 4, news channels used independent videos that surfaced showing the cars driving over the farmers from behind and Ashish Mishra to be present on the scene. Many sections of the media used the videos. On October 5, Republic TV used a high degree of



**Figure 17; Figure 18; Figure 19.** The sequence matters in mediated narration: It would seem natural to us that the perpetration that is first *shown* to us is also how real action occurred. In this sequence, the farmers beat up occupants of vehicles; locals help a local journalist into a vehicle to transport him to a hospital; and a vehicle is set on fire. (Courtesy: YouTube/Republic TV. Screenshots by author.)

selectivity in the videos, editing them in combination with other videos it claimed to have obtained. In a news package that was inserted on October 5, the intervening day between the shows, and titled “The *real truth* of Lakhimpur incident unravelled, videos expose chronology of ghastly violence” (emphasis added), the channel claimed that a sequence of 10 events. According to that story, the sequence began when the “protesters” showed black flags to a BJP “convoy” of cars—a different location with different farmers. The next cut briefly shows the car running over the protesters. In the following cuts, attention is paid only to the violence that took place thereafter with detailed and graphic video evidence. The story further claimed there was no premeditated intent on the part of the BJP “convoy” to drive over the protesters. Only the person being beaten in retaliation is shown as the victim pleading for his life with the angry farmer-protesters-turned-mob (Republic TV, 2021a). This claim is in alignment with Goswami’s repeated hints that the farmers were the aggressors. But the sequence also alludes to our understanding of the violence as an event in a sequence of events, and that the context is important to arrive at that conclusion.

The first visuals that were made available on Goswami’s show were sequenced in an interesting way. Rather than following a chronological sequence as we would expect from a news show, visual clips were edited into a preview-like assembly. The first is a quick four-second shot, in which we see a shaky visual of an ambulance, a close-up shot of two men placing an injured man inside an ambulance. Goswami’s first words, a mix of active and passive voice, of attribution and un-attribution, set the stage for the outrage to follow:

Ladies and gentlemen, what has happened in Lakhimpur in Uttar Pradesh is terrible. Eight people have died—four *by cars* of a BJP convoy running over protesters, and four *when the protesters turned into a lynchmob* and pulled out people from the cars and lynched them, killed them, beat them to pulp, after first brutally injuring them. (Emphasis added.)

The next shot runs for 11 seconds. A roadside slope where people (the farmers) are beating up some other people (the SUV's driver and other occupants) with sticks or batons. The designer has placed a red circle around a man who is being beaten. The third is the longest—it runs for 14 seconds, showing first a mid-shot and then the camera's lens is zoomed out slightly into a longer mid-shot. In this shot, a vehicle—presumably one of the vehicles in the BJP convoy—in flames. Thus, Goswami's narration uses several performative elements at once to create the aesthetics of outrage. The attribution of agency in the primary incident is to a *car*. In the retaliatory attack that followed, the attribution is to *protesters*. We also find a clever use of nouns that are equivocal: The repeated use of the word “protesters” as against “farmers” is an example of how the narration brackets a group. In the entire transcript of the two monologues, the term “farmers” is used only once—in a headline—while the term “protesters” is used three times to refer to the same group of people.

This is an example of what van Dijk (2007) calls a proposition, whereby the viewer must use a word as a referential word to indicate a “global message” (p. xxvii). In this case, the word *protesters* may connote that protesting, not farming, is the primary function of the people who were killed. But what are protesters if not an aberrant irritant for the mainstream? Moreover, a riot is a form of protest—never mind that protest is rarely a form of a riot. Yet, Goswami suggests, somewhat syllogistically, that politicians schemed this protest in a *vulturistic craving for a riot*. One might ask, *to what end?* Goswami insinuates the answer: Khalistani t-shirts are seen among the protesters; the riot must be supported, therefore, by Khalistanis from the Sikh militant separatist group Khalistan Liberation Force, most of whose members now live abroad. In synchrony, members of the government and the ruling BJP have implied in ample measure that the protesting farmers are politically motivated.

A historicization of the word *protesters* may be needed. Goswami's narration makes protesters sound like protesting is what they do for a living. For over a year between 2020 and 2021, farmers were on protest in many regions of India, largely concentrated around the national capital, Delhi, which was later barricaded and farmers were barred from entering after a crowd of people in tractors on Republic Day drove to the Red Fort and hoisted a flag different from the national flag. (Goswami refers to this act as a "desecration of the tricolor" erroneously, since the national flag was not tampered with.) The farmers had been protesting against three newly tabled laws that promoted neoliberal, market economics. After more than a year of protest, finally in December 2021, Modi withdrew the three laws. At the time of Goswami's shows in October, the farmers' protests were ongoing. In Lakhimpur Kheri, the farmers were protesting against a minister's arrival at a rally. Repeatedly calling the farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri "protesters" rather than "farmers" marks a shift from an adjectival form into a noun. In itself, this shift performs a cognitive function in that it assigns the farmers as a category of protesters, equating the two terms with each other.

**Performing ambiguity.** In othering discourse, narrators may find it salient to provide rationale and logic. They might find it useful to first destabilize the concepts of majority and minority, us and them, and then reconstruct them differently, using the same bricks but a different design. The medium affords a certain fluidity in myth-building in that myths can be constructed and reconstructed, destroyed and dismantled simply with the passage of time and painting over the original story. The enabling feature of our understanding our world, through mediated means, is that it should be intelligible to us. However, that would be a simplistic assumption. The framework of intellectual obfuscation fortifies the technological affordance of the medium. So, even while seemingly denying a specifically bracketed incident within a larger

story, the conformity to a larger, majoritarian inference must be protected. With all the seeming obfuscation, Goswami's narration may be technically ambiguous even while the message is clear. The obfuscation of the binary is a deliberate act to recreate a refocused binary.

My goal here is to disclose how and to what outcome grammatical play produces ambiguity, and not so much its phenomenological affectation on individuals or audiences. Hence, I must view the performance of aesthetics in its role of triggering or instigating the effect. If de Beauvoir was concerned with the ethics of ambiguity, here we illustrate the production and performance of its aesthetics. I steer clear of the ethics of ambiguity (either de Beauvoir's or her predecessor Jean-Paul Sartre's versions) for more than one reason: One is the limitation of my work's scope. The second is that I suspect Goswami would dispute the idea that his actions are in bad-faith. His audience must trust his word just as we trust a reporter's reportage to be faithful to the truth. The addition of opinion into the mix—as in the narration of many contemporary anchors including Goswami—may seem to dislodge that trust and must be reinstalled. Ambiguity becomes the cement with which to do so. On one hand, there is Goswami, the “serious man,” who acts as a subordinate to some external influence. On the other, his beholders act like the men and women in love who may act in bad faith when they submerge their identities in their lover.

Thus, the quelling of the perception of bad faith lies in the communication of good faith and of credibility. This communication determines whether the media prosumer must proceed further in considering the influence of the narration. It is important as the narration is the only way a media prosumer makes sense of their world. If the relationship between Goswami and his audience of media prosumers must be successful, trust must prevail. As someone who seems to have converted from his left leanings to an ultra-right position, Goswami might seem to have



altered the position for external reasons—perhaps to attend to the call of profiteering, as a market opportunity that must be usurped in fulfillment of an accepted paradigm of neoliberalist operation. In nudging Goswami’s narration into social media discourse, the prosumer, too, is entwined in a similar neoliberal pursuit, seeking to profit from the likes, shares, engagements, and persuasion. Trust rationalizes the chasm between perceptions of bad and good faith. Trusting or distrusting determining in which direction the prosumer will gravitate.

Othering will act as a good case in point of the relationship I have tried to draw between faith, trust, and certainty. Since we expect Goswami’s monologue to indulge in othering and create the ambiguity of predictable outcomes, I find Teun van Dijk’s (1998) model of the “ideological square” a useful handle to foreground the illustration at hand. van Dijk’s model is a useful addition to existing methodological thought because it specifically classifies othering forms of “we” and “they” into four strategic “moves” that a narrator employs. These moves can be represented thus:

Express/emphasize information that is positive about Us	Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive about Them
Express/emphasize information that is negative about Them	Suppress/de-emphasize information that is negative about Us

This Ideological Square is founded on three premises: a) the presence or absence of information in semantic representation derived from event models, b) the function of expression or suppression of information in the interests of the speaker, and c) ideological opinions expressed in discourse must have implications for groups or social issues (p. 267). An assumption in van Dijk’s model is that ideological discourse expresses and emphasizes positive information about the in-group and negative information about the out-group. This may be an overgeneralization:

We can observe that some media discourse does the opposite, that is, has a less critical attitude about a cultural *them* while bearing an excessive criticality about the cultural *us*.

In other words, a social, political, or cultural in-group or out-group may be different from an ideological or discursive in-group and out-group. For example, scholars, speakers, and television anchors may pursue an ideological line that may “other” the majority: Indeed, a common accusation among right-wing majoritarians has been this kind of othering by the mainstream media. Moreover, such reverse othering can be situational and locally applicable rather than sweepingly defined racial, gender, or cultural groups. So a paraphrasing of van Dijk’s Ideological Square may be needed to allow interchangeable definitions of Us and Them. With this fluidity in place, the Ideological Square may be re-plotted as follows:

Express/emphasize information that is positive/negative about Us	Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive/negative about Them
Express/emphasize information that is positive/negative about Them	Suppress/de-emphasize information that is positive/negative about Us

This model opens the Ideological Square to fresh ways to view the concept of othering especially in media representation. For example, a politically left-liberal news program anchor and a politically right-conservative news program anchor routinely frame the same events in different ways by othering the opposite groups. Conventionally majority and minority groups are conflated in this framing model. This is an exercise in modern intellectualism. It pretends to practice openness although it nudges us constantly, to allow the object to speak although it scaffolds the object and distorts the voice. We will now examine a specific case of the creation of ambiguity, using equivocation.

Equivocation, a specific form of ambiguity, occurs when a word or phrase is used with different meanings, in an ambiguous way. Goswami’s use of pronouns is an example of this

process. Most conspicuously in this discourse, Goswami uses the pronoun “we” to indicate (more obvious attributions) a) the channel, or perhaps the media; b) the people in general; (less obvious attributions) c) the politicians or people in general—the meaning itself is unclear. The word *we* may have two different meanings in the sentences Goswami uses in a sequence. He also uses other pronouns such as *you* fluidly:

[T]he Delhi riots, completely premeditated and preplanned as *we* know by the lobby, was a direct consequence of that. Fifty-four people died. But *we* still won't learn the lesson. *We* will still do flashpoint politics. Hathras—the moment the incident happened, the political opportunists were caught on sting cameras by this network—the Republic Network—planning the riot. They said on record that *we* want to get a few people killed very quickly. And then *we* want to get some political mileage because it's going to give some trouble to Yogi's government. And yet *we* didn't learn and yet today there are people who are celebrating flashpoint politics. In Delhi ... and I wonder sometimes how much *we* will have to go through as a country to learn the lessons ... In Delhi, *you* saw the tricolor [Indian flag] being desecrated. *You* saw a near-riot in the National Capital Region. [longish pause] And yet *we* don't learn. Yet there are people applauding [claps]. (Emphases added).

In the first case, “we” refers to the media and also the audience—*we, therefore, are on the same side*. The second and third uses refer to the politicians of the opposition parties. Further, the word “we” is normally used in an active sense, where *we* is the subject of an action. The outcome of ambiguity cannot be left dangling—it must have tangible and desirable action. So the word morphs into a call to action—*we must do something*:

Viewers, I just want to say one thing to you tonight. One citizen to another. Whatever your politics, please, viewers, oppose politicians who enjoy flashpoint politics. It will hit all of us. When violence happens, when riots happen, nobody is spared. What happened in Lakhimpur can hit us all. We need governance in this country. We need a development agenda in this country. We don't need flashpoint politics in this country. It may be seen as entertaining for the opportunistic politicians, but it's dangerous for the nation. So, please, don't stand aside and watch this as an unaffected observer. The fact of the matter is, viewers [dramatic pause], nobody will be unaffected. Nobody will stand unaffected if we don't stop this now.

Goswami situates the Lakhimpur Kheri incident, where, an accident killed farmers, and farmers killed in retaliation, in parallel to the 2020 Delhi riots. In his call to action, Goswami

does not spell out what that action needs to be. There is a pronoun equivocation in the call to “stop this.” Without a qualifying object, “this” can lead to a confused interpretation—from lawlessness to protests, lynching, riots, political opposition, or something else, we do not quite know. Riots broke out in Delhi during protests in 2020 against a new law that sought to omit Muslims alone from seeking new citizenship. However, in the riots, the perpetrators were mostly the majority Hindu community against the Muslims as “the Delhi police played in enabling the violence, which was predominately Hindu mobs attacking Muslims. Of the 51 people who died, at least three-quarters were Muslim, and many Muslims are still missing” (Ellis-Petersen and Rahman, 2020). However, Goswami’s discourse does not spell out what the call to action is. He merely tells the viewers what they should not do—be a bystander.

The impact of shifts in the meanings of words leads to “misreading” and has been called the fallacy of equivocation, and has roots in Aristotlean works (see Kirwan, 1979; Deppermann, 2000). The typical conditions under which equivocation fallacy occurs are when a fallacious conclusion can be drawn because a word is used ambivalently and without clarifying or distinguishing between them. But when the reverse occurs—that is, when the term is indeed clarified in each case, then the conclusion does not follow. In an equivocation, the speaker may deliberately cause ambiguity and thereby obfuscate the meaning, leaving it to the cognition of the audience to draw meanings. In this case, the speaker may have an advantage that is beyond the rhetorical, perhaps political. Oliver’s (2005) much-cited example unearths the equivocation fallacy in the term “overweight,” quoting National Institutes of Health (NIH) definition that stated in 1985 that a body-mass index (BMI) of over 27.8 for men and over 27.3 for women would be considered overweight. In 1988, the NIH changed those indices to 25.0. Oliver states that about 37 million Americans became “overweight” as a result of this new definition even

though, in reality, they had not gained any weight—providing a financial advantage to the medical and pharmaceutical industries. Only an individual who derived a meaning of the term “overweight” that was consistent with a 1985 definition would not consider herself overweight. The use of *we* as an equivocation serves two purposes. One, by referring to the word *we*, Goswami linguistically includes the audience. *We know*. Two, the second use of the word *we*, while in fact alluding to politicians of opposition parties, evades the actual subject of the action. *We will do flashpoint politics*.

Ambiguity of the pronoun generates linguistic *uncertainty*, but the narration must result in interpretive *certainty*. Certainty completes the loop, which began with Goswami performing an homage to a traditional journalistic practice of standoffishness and ended in his performance of outrage. To loyalist prosumers, any obfuscation may appear to be merely a technical maneuver to circumvent an irrelevant social contract in which we may expect fact to foreground our truths.<sup>93</sup> Only by presenting a flipped version can we see facts no one else told us. In this suturing, ambiguity is a component. Calls to action must complete the process. The prosumer should be quiet. Hence: “Whatever your politics, please, viewers, oppose politicians who enjoy flashpoint politics ... Please, don’t stand aside and watch this as an unaffected observer.” Goswami rounds off by leaving it to us to understand the text beneath his veneer of text. What that action he alludes to is—whether it is a call to communicative, electoral, or social action—shall remain hidden from an outside observer’s understanding. However, to an insider-prosumer, the communicative action should seem obvious, and sharing on social media the outrage as an instructive truth may be a significant first step.

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<sup>93</sup> Charles Mills’s (1999/2022) assault on social contracts highlights the social imbalances in which they are made.

## Conclusion

In Goswami's narration, there are four main actors in this incident: a) the perpetrators, b) conspirators, c) victims, and d) *we*, "whatever our politics." Ordinarily, as the incident unfolded, the news media would frame them as a) the occupants of the political vehicle convoy, b) the political party to which they belong, c) the protesting farmers, and d) the audience. But in Goswami's framing, we may derive the reverse, obfuscated, "othered" meanings: a) the protesting farmers and the individual driver of the vehicle that ran over them, b) the political opposition parties and sections of the media, c) the occupants of the vehicles, and d) the audience. To exemplify, I will string together of Goswami's descriptors into coherent definitions, as follows:

The marching farmers are protesters, who have indulged in the past in violence and riots, turned into a lynchmob, beat the occupants of the vehicles to a pulp, brutally injuring them and ultimately killing the occupants of those vehicles under whose wheels some farmers unfortunately died.

The driver of the vehicle that ran over farmers ran amok and killed so many people in a horrendous and condemnable act.

The occupants of convoy vehicles caused an accident and were killed by a lynchmob.

Opposition is the vulturistic, hungry opportunistic lobby that wants to fan the fires quickly to gain mileage through polarization, making it a riot agenda by encouraging lynchmobs, conspiring to play flashpoint politics that is dangerous for the country.

The Congi media, who would have got away with half truths, but now totally cornered as their carefully crafted narrative to exploit Lakhimpur faultlines falls apart.

The viewer of the show is a passive participant, but must become an active agent—a catalyst in the process of amplifying the narrative construction—and not stand aside and watch this as an unaffected observer, because nobody will stand unaffected if [they] don't act now.

In this re-presentation of an "accident" that was followed by a criminal act, the farmers and the car are the real perpetrators, the occupants of the vehicles are the victims, sections of the news

media and the political parties opposed to the BJP are conspirators who are operating against the nation's interests. We must agree to be convinced that the sequence of actions narrated to us is indeed a well-hatched, global conspiracy.

In professing to represent his insider-prosumer, Goswami connects them to not merely the *rhetorical sign* but the *intellectual sign*. The folly of anti-intellectualism lies in the rejection of that which is modern. Defying intellectual methodology is denying modernity. However, a section of intellectual thought does not arrive at the precise inference as the prescribed direction. Intellectual discourse may challenge the prescription. While the intellectual sign represents sophisticated ambiguity, the authority must remain above ambiguity. We have seen Modi—through multiple camera angles—walking in the Himalayas personifying the modern Hindu sage, in the nation's capital renaming streets after the aspired modernization, and in Ahmedabad showcasing modern urban streets. Such prescriptive direction fits like a glove into the intellectual aspirations of a news channel—that is, the aspirations to showcase and market the semblance of intellect. Once the us/them division is intellectually achieved by the semblance of discursive activity, the framework for a modern nation is set, and the path indicating an acceptable direction for any aspirant of a modern nation is then illuminated.

Playbooks repeat over periods of time and across space. For example, the United States has reinforced its commitments to liberal democracy since Roosevelt's hydra-headed approach to infiltrate institutions under the pretext of nationalistic demands. Today, we see the same approach playing out in other countries. The politicization of news is a chapter in a historical playbook that has played out in some modern nations, while modernizing nations must perhaps go through that process by themselves in order to learn from it. Perhaps an authoritarian form is needed to bring order and stability to a chaotic democracy. We do not know. The playing-out is a

diachronic process, but while chaos is being gathered into order, narration through the familiar news rule-of-thumb using questions of who, what, where, when, how must be tied together by the *why*. Questions must be preempted so that answers can bring order preemptively.

This narrative construction of illiteracy is a routine ideological formula. From suppression of Covid-19 vaccine's side effects in order to promote the vaccine for a larger good to gag orders on institutions preventing them from sharing critical information about a sinking town in the Himalayas, the role of institutions is often at loggerheads with the idea of freedom and transparency. Therefore, the generation of such illiteracy is a result of both inbuilt media processes and interventions. The construction of the myth of victimhood and perpetration in the ideological-linguistic market would be incomplete without the denouement—where the police takes its own time in filing charges and the ensuing court proceedings against the accused Mishra are extended for such a great length of time, stretching to years on end, that it would take another media disruption to construct a different myth. On the other hand, time makes it possible for media platforms to keep the myth: If the court finds Mishra guilty of instructing his driver to mow down the farmers.



## CHAPTER 5

### INVISIBILITY IN BOOLGARHI

#### **A well-ordered tapestry**

One of the best-known anthropologists, Clifford Geertz, famously described his observations of a 1958 Balinese cockfight in the chapter “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight” in his book *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz, 1973). The cockfight is a routine ritual that may be routinely captured by cameras. There is nothing about the cockfight that raises an eyebrow within the community. It represents honor and social status of the humans—the cock represents his master and carries the tremendous burden of the master’s prestige. He must win. It is all pointless, and yet he must win. Survival and death are mutually exchangeable in the event. The winning cock’s owner takes the dead rooster and cooks it for a meal—even in his “aesthetic disgust, and cannibal joy” (p. 421). These events are reminders of how the social order works: Yet nothing changes in the social order.

Like any art form-for that, finally, is what we are dealing with the cockfight renders ordinary, everyday experience comprehensible by presenting it in terms of acts and objects which have had their practical consequences removed and been reduced (or, if you prefer, raised) to the level of sheer appearances, where their meaning can be more powerfully articulated and more exactly perceived. (p. 443)

In this chapter, I examine how the well-stitched continuity of social order was breached, not without consequences. In the village of Boolgarhi in the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh in the middle of a late-September night in 2020, the police burnt a rape victim’s body and destroyed whatever evidence she carried. The victim belonged, according to the Hindu tradition, to the lowest status in the caste system. Eventually the police charged four upper-caste men with rape and murder. The police burnt the victim’s body during the middle of the night—against the customs and wishes of the victim’s parents. A persistent reporter caught this act on camera and

uploaded videos, after which the political and media agencies attempted to discredit her. The police and the local magistrate on the scene tried to clarify to the media that the victim's family had earlier agreed to the midnight cremation by the police and backed out at the last minute. Caught between the *yes* and the *no*, visibility and invisibility, voice and inarticulation, purchase and threat, the family now lives in an uncertain space. The rupture in the suture became visible and the invisibilized became visible.

When the low-caste rape victim faces upper-caste punishment, the act may actually be a reminder to the community of the victory of social order. The rapist may feel aesthetic disgust, yet he must twirl his mustache in pride as is customary of his upper-caste Thakur status. He, too, is immobilized. His is not even an ethnographer's Balinese fight: It is merely a reminder of the status quo, where the actor is also the controller of the ladder.

As per their self-routinized ritualistic process, news media platforms stitch the story using sophisticated audiovisual elements and appealing narration. While news is institutional, a smartphone-uploaded social media video is non-institutional. Moreover, we may expect that the media prosumer's trust normally lies with the institutional. If trust shifts to the non-institutional, chaos may result. By investing in smartphone journalism, news media are attempting to retain their status as the legitimate storytellers.

Interruption forms a well-practiced pattern in news. The term *breaking story* is a term most news organizations employ, normally to mean the first dissemination of an important news story. Sometimes, news organizations in their compulsive marketing habit have designed the term *breaking* to mean that it is the first time the story is running on their platform (as opposed to the first time on the news media overall). This is a marketing usage intended to impress external audiences; internally, in editorial rooms, *breaking a story* still carries the conventional

denotation. For example, a refrain we hear from senior editors is the question to monitoring desk employees: “Did we break the story or did the other channel break it?” In Boolgarhi, the story interrupted, but also disrupted continuity.

The ethnographer may deeply and richly embed themselves—so deeply and richly, in fact, that they become framed within the very locality they seek to describe. Unbeknownst to them, they become the insider-outsider. They interrupt but do not disrupt. On one hand, the White man intrudes into a smoothly functioning native locality and observes the practices from an alien eye. On the other, he uses universal sets of ethical considerations to evaluate the actions, narrating the story to an alien reader. One destabilizes the locality, the other neglects local spaces. Once the spotlight is off, the communities reorganize themselves, evaluating who snitched. In the gridlock lies the immobility of the invisibilized.

Unlike an ethnographer, a journalist may cause a rupture in a well-ordered society. If all things were equal, the Indian village reportage would appear in the world of journalism to be routine investigative reporting. In fact, reporting from the complex rural heartland can be anything but routine. A journalist can try to rupture the continuity of the sutured social order or describe an event framed in that very social order. News media also follow a universal set of norms and ethics. These global norms and ethics may not be framed for local realities.

### **Unchanging and uncertain**

Cornel West’s (1993/2001) *Race Matters* argues that race is woven into the fabric of American life, so much so that Black people feel a sense of worthlessness. According to West, the solution lies in moral awakening. The new cultural practices of difference must find its legitimate position across the society, but especially among Black people. In recent years, Suraj Yengde has emerged as a much-acclaimed Dalit author in English. Yengde’s (2019) *Caste*

*Matters*, titled in the style of Cornel West's *Race Matters* and written in a lived-experience, part-narrative, part-academic style, parallels many structural problems. Yengde, who writes eloquently from his experience as a Dalit man, while seeing through the false collective liberating voice, writes about the *dissenting* Dalit public sphere.

I imagine the mounting of one collective public sphere shouting at another collective public sphere in resistance. The practice of public opinion as the practice of resistance is perfunctory: If public spheres where opinions are heard are composed of unafraid and articulate voices, voices in liminal and subliminal spaces are inarticulate and without representation, they would never seem to have problems with their lives and livelihoods. In Yengde's experience, however, the persistence of the caste system is a routine practice where nobody has the time to change anything.

An example of the darkness of the liminal space within structured community spaces is Radha Hegde's (2009) ethnography of her cynical protagonist, Kumari. Kumari exemplifies the invisibilized realities of communities and also a researcher's gaze at those realities. In it, she is both a subject and an object of social violence and therefore "destabilize[s] the fixity of the ethnographic binary between the viewed object and the viewing subject by reversing the expectations to regain her speaking and subject position" (p. 291). Kumari therefore must assert her position through crazed, hyper-aggressive behavior in an environment where women are absent and invisible. The ethnography is a revelation, a de-screening of realities that are invisibilized by institutional forms such as the news media, whose processes are so concerned with disruption that they cannot narrate continuity of conditions, and on the other hand, they are so problematically bound to neoliberal institutions that disruption is viciously confronted by forces that seek to sew back the fabric of social order.

I wonder if Yengde might find conceptualizations of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1750/2002)—or those of later writers on justice such as John Rawls (1971/1999)—not rooted sufficiently in the materiality of the experience. Dalits, Yengde says, are visualized in homogeneous ways from a Brahminical prism, as “ritually confined beings” bound to continue social traditions, “appear[ing] to be without aspiration” (pp. 62-63). The constancy of the caste system under a majoritarian regime can be particularly worrisome, as even scholarship either bows down to it or finds majoritarian politics so powerful that scholars are compelled to see caste system as either declining or good.

There is a certain immobility to the communities that remain hidden from common view. They perform their designated roles in societies but are rendered absent, silent, and invisible. A farm laborer may be dazzled if a light is shone in his face, and may retract from speaking out. Still, shining the light on those dark spaces of existence can help us understand the *meta-stories*—invisible stories behind visible stories. The audiences that are core to news platforms, sitting in their urban living rooms far removed from the invisible spaces, are both the cynosure and the object of news. News runs for them, by them. Amidst the vast rural populations of India, these prosumers are a minority and yet they are the glorified, hyper-visibility sections of the society. Yet they, too, are immobilized, in Barthes’s description in *Camera Lucida*, as the viewer of a Haiku painting; in the same way as the cheering onlookers of the Balinese cockfight. There is nothing to be done because they have no role to play except to tell the story of who won and how they achieved their victory. The story immobilizes action. Any action would be disruptive to the story. The spaces I describe lie at the heart this immobility. These are not the liminal spaces that enable voice and visibility.

In its original sense that Arnold van Gennep used it in 1909, the *liminal* phase was one of constant transition, as it turned out for him—as he remained forever traveling, forever learning, the rite of passage never ended. For the later symbolic anthropologist Victor Turner, who wrote in 1969, liminality meant something more than a ritual—it was the condition of being between categories, suspended between roles leading to impassivity or a social impasse. Mary Douglas suggested that the suspension between pure categories leads to danger, fear, and insecurity. Foucault describes contemporary anxiety as that of space, not of time. Time is eternal—space is not. In a 1967 lecture that was later published as an essay, “Of Other Spaces,” Foucault (1984/1986) termed “heterotopian” his idea of utopian (non-)spaces where social hierarchies were suspended. Like the poststructuralists, scholars of postcolonialism have evolved its definitions. For example, its proponent Homi Bhabha’s (1994) *Location of Culture* views liminality as the interstitial space from which cultural transformation can take place. Bhabha’s “border” location is the space for the signifying practices of cultural hybridity. According to him, this happens “without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (p. 4). Hybrid identities such as the diaspora of people of one origin living in another, of interracial birth, or rural-urban upbringing have produced intellectual and strategic advantages in life experiences.<sup>94</sup>

However, I need not overemphasize that the experience of the liminal as a cultural transformational space has hardly been encouraging. A more direct meaning of the liminal space is observable in physical spaces such as markets and cricket stadiums. But the “heterotopic” nature of physical liminal spaces is suspect. They are subject to change, ironically, at the very

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<sup>94</sup> Chakraborty (2016) brings up an interesting point about hybridity (Bhabha’s “third space”). He notes that the term hybrid carries the significance of mixed breed—a negative connotation in some cultures. Perhaps transgender is an example of such a social stigma.

hands of the practitioners of cultural specificity unless a groundswell overwhelms them. The frenzy among Indians surrounding short-form cricket matches is well represented in the recent rebuilding of the world's largest stadium in Ahmedabad. Yet stadiums are layered and divided.

Markets, on the other hand, are divided on the lines of activities and products. In India, a fish market is not the same as a vegetable market because food is an important determinant in the caste system. Most Brahmins and many other castes do not eat any meat including eggs and fish. Fish-sellers belong to particular sub-castes. On the other hand, a supermarket—a product of the same Western modernity that postcolonial spaces absorb in practice and reject in rhetoric—may integrate the two irrespective of considerations of caste and status. Like the stadium, their social division acts along economic lines. Thus, the ideological formulations of these cultural spaces appear to be explored from specific lenses that focus on the cultural bridging potential of postcolonial cultures with modernity and ignoring the practice of reflexivity and appropriation of cultures by local politics that may hail a monolithic framework. In that framework, liminal spaces exist but are marginalized and invisibilized by (mediated) narrations of modernity, often leading to self-invisibilization by those who find themselves marginalized even further than their caste or other persistent systems do.

Nevertheless, in the spaces of uncertain existence I observe here, invisibilization lies at the heart. The space that interests my work lies between the experience and the story, presence and absence. In these spaces are found communities living in unchanging, uncertain, undesirable, un-modern conditions. The visibility of marginalized rural communities may be key to a media prosumer's understanding of their existence. Only disruptive media events shed the spotlight on them momentarily. If the context is a rape, it may be seen merely as a crime, not a consequence of the conditions of communities. Narrations are enablers of this space—through the various

processes I have described throughout this dissertation, narration constructs our world by highlighting the narratable. Thus, the presumed liminality, the cusp between visibility and invisibility, is immobilizing in that no change occurs as a result of the storytelling process. Any aberration in the narration has a destabilizing effect on the aesthetics of the story—the *what-needs-to-be-told*.

The immobilizing liminality is not the same as Bhabha's (1996) "fixity," which he describes as a paradoxical mode of representation that "connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition" (p. 37). Fixity finds its location in the same social practices of racism, apartheid, or casteism from which communities cannot emerge. In my space, a combination of available agency and the inability to use it operates.

Thus, the lived experiences of those communities in uncertain spaces, stuck between visibility and invisibility, voice and silence, are far from transformational. This is neither utopian, nor is it dystopian, nor a form of free-flowing hybrid transit between categories. Quite the opposite: These spaces are found between the hyper-visible and the invisible. Notwithstanding the compulsions of oppositional spaces—public and private, family and social, work and leisure—these spaces straddle not only between them, but through them. These oppositional spaces may be created from crisis or deviation, as Foucault describes, and may be reconciled by the space of the cemetery, a liminal space where the soul is believed to live. Thereby, we may extend, the urn that carries ashes is similarly so. Returning to our visibility metaphor, we may describe this existence as one that is amorphous, ghost-like—neither invisible nor seen, neither unable to speak nor able to heard, neither present nor absent, but a denied construct of a suture of social order and its (mediated) narration.



Regardless, there is aesthetic value to these spaces. Aesthetics are defined by the creator and the beholder, not by the object and the experiencer. Those dark spaces also form the gaps in continuity through which we can occasionally catch a glimpse, the dark regions between spotlighted spectacles, when the light accidentally shines on them. Furthermore, a low-caste individual is a part of a caste-group as well as a part of a village-group. They may feel threatened to speak up in a village-group that comprises people of various castes. These subaltern communities must gather themselves in numbers to find the strength to articulate above the din of the story—cross-hierarchy settings are suspicious, unsafe spaces—and find the kind of flawed representations and non-representations that Gayatri Chakravorty-Spivak wrote of. The emergence of a socially oppressed-group leader is tantamount to resistance. Such labels are not without consequences for individuals and communities. They become incidents that disrupt the continuity that is constituted by the experiences in those conditions. The invisibility of those experiences and conditions is made possible by an aesthetic cover.

The emergence of the media prosumer seems to have changed everything. The media prosumer lies at the cusp between subject and object, perhaps equidistant from both but able only to see one in respect of the other. In this paradigm, when a nation votes in a statedly majoritarian government, the agendas that newsrooms set may also change either by purchase or coercion. For example, in the majoritarian agenda, they may marginalize communities or recast them as irritants in the modernization plan. The media prosumer may have the ability to challenge this agenda, but they are bound by algorithms, regulations, and limited legitimacy.

Hence, re-presenting a story from the legitimized media sources is a more normative role for the media prosumer. In the constant presentation and re-presentation in which media prosumers find themselves, we may need a new approach to study this simulacrum of dialectical

continuum.<sup>95</sup> Something indeterminate and yet real lies in the spaces between the visible and the invisible, between stories and reality, in which communities and stories are invisibilized and absented in media texts, and whose understanding of the world is also a product of the same media texts. Our understanding of these spaces occurs by interventions of mediated presentations. We will see in later paragraphs that the rape victim's family exists in the limbo between their lived realities and those that a media prosumer would normally learn about them. Reporter Tanushree Pandey's camera captured and tried to pull the family out of that limbo. However, the unexplained part of such a transformational liminal experience is that it comes as a disruption to various institutional and social structures, challenging the continuity of the dark liminal existence.

### **Disruption and continuity**

Axel Honneth (2001) defines invisibility as a state, from which, we may derive, a media user can emerge as a result of visibilization and representation. As Honneth acknowledges, there are two ways in which we can view invisibility. One is the literal, the other, metaphoric. Viewing recognition as a form of agency means that rather than viewing recognition as some individual endeavor, a commerce-driven yet benign fight within a larger umbrella of good intentions, we can view it within community frameworks. Further, communities and media texts may be seen in terms of their selective visibility and invisibilization that seem natural but in fact are states that are imposed or self-imposed. Marginalized communities may be at the center of disruptive

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<sup>95</sup> Nick Couldry and Andreas Hepp (2013) say "something is going on" in our mediated lives that cannot be explained by merely analyzing media texts (p. 191). It seems this something is so complex that its methodology defies divisions of scholarly inquiry.

action, but they are confronted with accusations of tearing a fabric woven aesthetically across a convenient set of practices.

This is akin to the specter-like present-absence of the ability to *read* and *write* their conditions. Here, we are reminded of Derrida's *Specters of Marx*. The specter cannot be heard. Similarly, the ability exists in every person to experience their condition, but the social *conditioning* snatches away the ability to articulate it. The lack of disruption seems to bother Derrida: Why is there no membrane in the haunting space between absence and presence? The conditioning of experience stitches the continuity of the condition—the membranes are invisible.

Forms of invisibility are not merely some abstract constructs. They are also material. Regions whose local practices of oppression, economic sustenance, and so forth, may suffer from a lack of research—critics and artists may opt out of these regions because they may be less accessible, less communicative, or less known. Thereby, communities are invisibilized not merely by structural institutions, but by the very critical forces that promise to offer discursive or other forms of resolution to social issues.

The rupture of social order is possible if continuity is disrupted by spectacle. In our media ecosystem of amplification and invisibilization, I illustrate how serendipity disrupts the acts that invisibilize communities, as a journalist interrupts and ruptures the flow of a social order. Disruption may occur when we read a book, watch a film, or view a news bulletin. In a book, a film, or an engrossing show on television or online, disruption is accompanied by a momentary suspension of disbelief, albeit in varying degrees by levels of involvement. A film in a dark movie theater may be the most involving, a show with repeated commercial interruptions the least involving. News disruptions are different in that the temporary suspension of disbelief is replaced by an active application of belief. For news to work as a trustworthy modern institution,

this belief must continue after the story is over, since it is the narration of real stories. News media appear disruptive in that they present to us bits of reality that we assume to be somehow worthy of news coverage. For news media to be trustworthy, they must maintain the narrative suture that makes us believe that what is *not* told to us is not worthy of coverage.

Examples of selectivity in mediated visibility and its failure abound. One is the surprising loss of an incumbent government in India in the 2004 election, despite a highly publicized and persuasive political campaign branded as “India Shining.” As I have mentioned earlier, the campaign failed to reinforce a “feel-good factor” among voters, who exercised their franchise “silently” and voted the government out (Nanjundaiah, 2005). The electoral loss for the BJP was rupture in continuity—communities’ impoverished experiences defied the glorifying narration of their lives, and they used their voting franchise to disrupt the narration.

Still, visibilization must always remain selective—both because of media logic, processes, and technology, and because of control mechanisms. Government agencies, corporations, and funding agencies contribute not only to the political economy of the media but determine which realities are more salient. Through this escape, it becomes impossible for invisibilized communities to either be the object or the subject of a dialectical society.

Enlightenment philosophers have copiously discussed human freedom. The foremost among these, of course, was Rousseau. His idea of freedom in a newly modernizing world is that we are slaves to our needs. Hence, a farm laborer is engaged in the physically challenging job, tolerating the abuse and the humiliation. The promise of redemption lies within the oppression

itself, Rousseau might argue. The drive for recognition is central to human rationality.<sup>96</sup> Yet freedom eludes us—it is as though a resolution has been reached and we are stuck in limbo, an immobilizing deadlock.

**Reflexive invisibility.** We may view invisibilization from two directions, either as the absence of the text or the absence of the reader. While analyzing Althusser’s term in the essay “Reading Althusser,” Pierre Macherey (2022) explains the structuring of absence by framing symptomatic reading as “not the hidden presence of a content ... which requires only that it be brought into the open ... but a lack waiting for the means that would permit it to be filled” (p. 174). Such reading is a bridge between a psychological and an ideological problem, it seems. It is a nice referent for the illiteracy I am attempting to explain here; nevertheless, rather than taking a literary route, our focus will remain on the ideology of the absent presence of a ghost-like community, the ghosting of text from reader. Moreover, the unavailability of text to the reader is similar to the absence of the meaning to the reader; however, the ability or inability of action as a result of the reading is more salient to the concept of reflexive invisibility.

In addition to material invisibility, we must recognize *reflexive invisibility*. In this category, the self’s reality becomes invisibilized between a continuous, lived experience of reality and the disrupted and externalized reality. In the absence of rupture, invisibility will prevail in continuity. In Boolgarhi village, the victim’s mother told the court that the victim her daughter faced repeated harassment from two of the accused men. But the victim had lodged no police complaints of incidents of harassment, and it became easy for the family of the accused to repudiate those allegations. That inaction is easy to understand when we observe the experiences

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<sup>96</sup> See Neuhouser’s (2013) discussion on the *amour propr*—the self-love that drives humans toward recognition.

and conditions of the communities in a village where they perceive the police to side with the upper-caste communities. There is a spiral of self-silencing and self-invisibility, a form of mystification that is not imposed by narration but by an entire ecosystem. Thus, it becomes impossible for a media prosumer to understand that they have been alienated from that ecosystem.

The framework of Bourdieu's habitus helps us understand how social media users may consider themselves literate enough to articulate on specific subjects. In this framework, a field may be seen as a co-creation by the producer and the consumer of a message.<sup>97</sup> Thus, social media make an artifact visible to a user to allow them to respond to it, and also because by responding, a user becomes visible. Hence, the production of consensus is at once a factor of visibility and articulation, and invisibility and silence. The structural space operating between a television channel and its audience, for example, both predetermines a kind of outcome and provides a choice to disagree simply by switching to another channel, or invisibilizing the channel.

And yet, the inclusion of the media prosumer in the ecosystem becomes crucial to their literacy. Reading and writing as metaphors form the methodology of this demystification, for our literacy. Reading lies at the heart of literacy.<sup>98</sup> Reading is possible if the story is illuminated to the reader. Furthermore, in the practice of literacy founded on the assumption of reading, we need to acknowledge the intervening, connecting role of *comprehension*. If the ability to understand is the pivot of a media prosumer's literacy, I find somewhat superfluous the argument

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<sup>97</sup> I will return to habitus as a demystifying methodology to explain spaces between visibility and invisibility.

<sup>98</sup> For *Reading Capital*, see Althusser et al. (2015). Pierre Macherey's (2022) essay on that work suggests that reading is not simply the act of decoding, but the operation of thought itself, in all its cyclical and circular historical and material complexities.

in new scholarship that media literacy must be *actionable*, since it is laden with riders that place the burden on the agency of the resistant receiver of media texts to receive, filter, resist, and disseminate. Several practices, already in operation around the world, do not indicate that this newly proposed process is underway.

Literacy cannot account for the immobilization of the victim's father in Boolgarhi. While reading and writing are the two stated outcomes of literacy, understanding the text we read and write is perhaps significant in that it occupies the space between literacy and action. Reading and writing are tangible—*visible*—while comprehension is assumed—*invisible*. A literate villager may mechanically manage to read a legal document, even affix his signature at the bottom, without clearly understanding the text in its context. The father appeared to better deal with the tacit agreement he had made with the District Magistrate and the police, allowing them to cremate his daughter's body. Back in his village and backed by a large number of people in his community, he retracted. It is this vulnerable space that often gets overlaid by narration—easier to comprehend.

Hence, participation is the sole guide for consensus in this ecosystem of articulation, and consensus is confounded by the language of emojis, memes, visuals, and so on. The use of senses seems complete with the arrival of social media, where articulation is a combination of emotion, thought, facts, opinion. In this ecosystem, the articulate can be silenced in order to create consensus.

## **The immobilizing spaces of Boolgarhi**

In 2020, four upper-caste young men, all in their twenties, allegedly raped a lower-caste woman, 19 years old, in her village Boolgarhi in Hathras district, about 5.6 miles from Hathras town in India's northern state of Uttar Pradesh.<sup>99</sup> The named perpetrators were arrested and prosecuted and a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe concluded in December 2020 that gang-rape and murder had allegedly occurred. On the morning of September 14, the woman and her mother were working in the tall sugarcane fields quite near their home, when her mother, barely 100 yards away in the thickly planted field, heard the victim's screams, rushed to the location, found her in a pool of blood with her tongue chopped off. She called her son, and on a motorcycle, they took the victim to the nearest police station. They would later allege that the police delayed in filing a report, as the victim lay there slipping in and out of consciousness. Eventually, the police took her to the local hospital in Hathras. Upon examining the victim, the hospital authorities asked the police to take her to the larger Jawaharlal Nehru Medical College hospital in the larger town of Aligarh, about an hour away.

The process by which both the first and the second tragedies in the Boolgarhi case revealed themselves to India Today's reporter Pandey was serendipitous. Tanushree Pandey was the first television reporter to arrive at Boolgarhi. She was a young reporter with India Today TV, a publicly owned English-language news channel under the India Today Group, a large news group formed by journalist Aroon Purie. In June 2020, Sushant Singh Rajput, a popular

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<sup>99</sup> The Indian legal system does not permit the publication of a rape victim's name, even if she dies later. I would like to adhere to that tenet in the main document. In the independent video recording of the victim's statement in the hospital, the YouTubers use the name Manisha for her. Later media references refer to her as Asha, which is a media-anointed pseudonym in the absence of a real name. (Asha translates to *hope*.) A 2012 rape victim was similarly called Nirbhaya, *fearless woman*. Many prominent Indian news media platforms stretch this patriarchal erasure to most crimes of a sexual nature that involve female victims, even if the crime is not rape.



Hindi film actor had died in Mumbai, and news media channels launched speculative debates whether his death was a suicide or a murder by his actor-girlfriend. The police ruled out murder. Journalistic resources in Mumbai, home to a large section of Indian cinema production, continued to speculate in the middle of a worsening pandemic crisis—so much so that Pandey’s channel assigned her to travel from her office in Noida (in the National Capital Region adjoining New Delhi and now a major hub for television news channels) to Mumbai.<sup>100</sup> In her sojourn, she covered the Covid-19 pandemic and Rajput’s death. By the time she was recalled in September to her headquarters in Noida, most channels had grown weary of the spotlight on the actor.

Then, the Boolgarhi gang-rape presented itself as the next big national story. Pandey received a tip-off on September 25, 11 days after the attack on the victim, through a telephone call from an unknown number. The caller claimed to be the brother of a rape victim in a village outside the town of Hathras. She followed this tip after approval from her editors. In this story, Pandey became both an actor and a reporter. She told me the call from the victim’s brother, Sandeep, was perplexing:

[He] told me some of the culprits were out, and they were threatening the family ... and they were Thakurs. I Googled [to understand] what’s really happening ... because news like *that*, I did not see it anywhere, and it wasn’t getting even a mention in the national news [media] (T. Pandey, personal conversation, December 26, 2022).

After she waited for hours to see the victim’s body at the New Delhi hospital, the authorities told her and other reporters that the body had already left. Out of sheer journalistic instinct, Pandey called her editorial desk to seek their permission to travel to Boolgarhi. After reaching Boolgarhi where *nothing was happening*, she and other reporters retired for the night. Then, after dinner,

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<sup>100</sup> Aaj Tak is the national Hindi channel under the India Today Group, while India Today TV is the English news channel under that group. Often, the same reporters report for both the channels in the respective languages.

she told her cameraperson that they should go back to the village, *just to look around*. When they arrived there, the police deployment had dramatically increased. As they debated with the police officials to permit her to enter the village, the ambulance passed them by. The ambulance, arrived, at least two hours after Pandey and her cameraperson reached from New Delhi, along a “green corridor,” a special police effort to facilitate an ambulance’s free flow through traffic.<sup>101</sup>

Then, a second crime, an infringement on rights, as the Allahabad High Court termed it, occurred as the police proceeded to burn the victim’s body in a ground nearby. Pandey repeatedly questioned a police officer, on camera, why they were burning the body while also trying to intervene and stop the act. This was a dramatic moment in the footage. A still shows a close-up shot of police officers with the body aflame in the background.<sup>102</sup>

Since news studios are closed overnight, they did not show the video footage of this turn of events live. Viewing the matter as urgent, Pandey uploaded a series of short videos. In one of the videos, the officer repeatedly tells her it was not up to him, and that he was merely acting, as



**Figure 20.** The camera tries to peep between police personnel standing guard and expose the burning body. This serendipitous moment was the rupturing of an ordered surface. (Courtesy: ThePrint <https://theprint.in/in-pictures/anti-caa-stir-delhi-riots-hathras-gangrape-photos-of-what-happened-beyond-covid-in-2020/575770/>. The picture, below, was taken by a reporter, Manisha Mondal, and published by the news portal *ThePrint*, in her story “UP Police cremates Hathras gang rape victim at 2.25 am, keeping protesting family away.” Screenshot by author.)

<sup>101</sup> It is rare for traffic in India to yield to an ambulance.

<sup>102</sup> See Mondal (2020).

he must, on orders he received.<sup>103</sup>

Later, the court would instruct the state to draft a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for the cremation of bodies involved in crime. In July 2022, the state government of Uttar Pradesh filed an affidavit that proposes new guidelines for cremation in cases of deaths during criminal proceedings and accidents.<sup>104</sup>

Pandey picked up the case from the New Delhi hospital. Pandey is a source to the inside story of how one of the biggest media revelations of the year almost remained hidden. Pandey wrote a first-hand account in her report a day later (see Pandey, 2020c). In Robert Merton's terms, Pandey chose an insider-outsider status, using her liminal position to be both involved in the story and report it. In the process of performing this illuminating role, she became the target of a political and media campaign that tried to undermine her story. Over eight months in 2022, I held several informal interactions with her. A Zoom conversation on December 26 was particularly useful.

In the following subsections, I describe moments in the incidents of Boolgarhi and cast them in visibility and suturing terms. To recapitulate, those are the elements in the process by which news brings our world to us and embeds it in our reality. Boolgarhi's *immobilized movements* are also the conditions and experiences of the proximal community—the victim, her family, the rapists, the village. These passive actors exist amidst the immutability of a social order, while being surrounded by their agency in the forms of modern systems of recourse.

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<sup>103</sup> See Pandey (2020b).

<sup>104</sup> See Suresh (2022b).

Within the stories that are available to the reader as news reports and analyses, and are cited amply throughout the chapter, I cast the texts and contexts of the un-transformative spaces.

There are four divisions in my analysis. First, the alleged gang-rape and murder bearing the stamp of the caste conditions of Boolgarhi. The second violation includes the creation, by the police and the local magistrate, of nebulousness around social practices and shining the light away the correct legal practices. The police and magistrate try to convince the family that cremating the body in haste is the right thing to do—not that it is the convenient thing to do. The third and the most discussed aftermath of the gang-rape was the police’s forced cremation of the victim’s body while maintaining a silent cordon. Fourthly, a visible-invisible, articulate-silent local community— when local youth uploaded amateur videos in an attempt to call for justice for the victim—and a journalist attempted to rupture a well-sutured social order. Politicians and their supporting media platforms attempted to discredit both.

I capture six moments that depict the dark and immobilizing spaces which Boolgarhi’s victimized communities occupy. “The Alleged Violations” describes the narrative confusion around the incident. “A Cultural Condition” examines a moment that presents the practice of caste system in Boolgarhi. “The Politics of Disruption” describes how Tanushree Pandey’s disruptive reporting was interrupted. “Continuity and the moment of untruth” explains the implications of constructed uncertainty on the delivery of our truths. “The Absent Presence of *No*” pushes further at the way in which our world revolves around the dark uncertainties that determine our truths. A revelation of how, finally, our constructed truths are more sharply delineated comes from “Invisibility of the Local,” which examines how the local is discredited although it is the most proximate to realities; however, those realities are different from our

truths. Then, the section “The Ghost of Boolgarhi” discusses the aesthetic settings of the immobilizing spaces.

**The alleged violations.** Above, I added *allegedly* because the hospitals did not perform a rape test despite the victim’s dying declaration that named the rapists. It is a convention among journalists to use words like *allegedly*. (Pandey, too, used it frequently in her conversations with me.) It is an ethical word. It fairly tells the reader that this is one side. It tells the reader that the journalist is objective, fair. It is therefore a word that builds trust with the reader. Whether we dismissed the former or the latter, of course, depended on whom we trusted. I hearken back to our trusted theorist Luhmann (1979), who analyzed trust as necessary in reducing complexity in



**Figure 21.** A non-institutional actor must use a collective name (The Dalit Voice) to self-legitimize the veracity of images: Here, evidence is visible to the local spectator\*, but invisibilized for the distant media prosumer. (Image courtesy: Twitter/@TheDalitVoice. Screenshot by author.)

social systems. Indeed, the building of those systems might need trust as a pillar, as I argue through this dissertation—without it, our news media would not have operated with so much

success. In our case, a non-institutional actor, a Twitter account that uses a collective account name “The Dalit Voice” presents a picture of what seems to be the victim and evidence. In an age of distrust of fake news, this allegation may easily be discredited as false.

Ironically, the word *allegedly* creates ambiguity. Indeed, ambiguity pervades journalism—not only in the sense of mystifying our world through its constructions of truths but in its very language. People found a large *mysterious* ball of metal on Japan’s shores on February 22, 2023. But was it *mysterious* or was it simply *unknown*? A report alone must determine that distinction. In his chapter “Noncontingency, or the Emergence of World View” in his book “about the way in which communication creates what we call reality,” psychologist Watzlawick (1977) observes that uncertainty provides a “powerful stimulus to the quest for structure and order” (p. 45). This is inevitable, of course—when a journalist does not have sufficient facts to prove to the reader, for example. On the other hand, when the terror attacks on the World Trade Center occurred on September 11, 2001, there was no use of *allegedly* to describe the horrible incident. The visuals spoke—there was no ambiguity as to what happened. Ambiguity was created later when the same journalists had to answer the question *who did it*. Various theories were proffered, ranging from the more obvious, that it was Al Qaeda, to some that were less obvious, such as the idea that the U.S. government itself was somehow involved.

Still, it would seem that in our social contract with the news media, trust must be left undefined. As Bernard Barber (1983) so astutely points out to us, John Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice* (1971/1999) uses the word but leaves it unindexed and undefined. As he later states, the public has grounds for both trusting and distrusting [scientists’] commitment to effectively self-regulated responsibility (p. 160). Erosion of trust would mean that we would like more supervision and checks on our institutions. The use of *allegedly* in journalistic narration appears

to be on the decline, and with reasons that we can easily see. The ambiguity does not stop—it is *created*. Perlman (2009) writes that using the word as an adjective to qualify a person can create unnecessary stigma around a person especially in crime reporting—*alleged murderer* has unambiguous and damning connotations. As a verb used in quotes, it is less stinging: “The police allege he broke into the house.” This, then, becomes an *alleged crime*. What if the police *deny* the crime and yet a reporter can see the crime? The irony of the word *alleged* lies in the idea that in order to trust a report, we must first either destabilize our notions of the crime itself, or stop seeking certainty—to which Luhmann would object as unnatural.

Such is the structure of rape that it is firstly a crime, secondly a violation, and thirdly a reminder. Therefore, in its most manifest level, it is the interruption of the smooth functioning of a society, and thus easily surmountable by institutional intervention such as interrogation by the police, activists, and courts. It is a psychological event next. As something in a personal context, social privileges such as counseling are selectively available for its quiet internalization. The third level is the cultural.

The benevolence of culture affords various accommodations. At once, it is a beautiful conceptualization: A dance form is one form of a desirable treat and is a part of culture. Popular music may be shunned by those who prefer to appreciate the high art in a culture, but it is still an eminently justifiable form of the culture. The dispute between high and low art distracts us from less justifiable forms. The caste system is a less desired form of culture—it is undesired in modern pursuit but embedded enough to be un-presented. When presentation becomes inevitable, it must be bracketed as an aberration. Bracketed under cultural specificity, like the chest-thumping belligerence of the Balinese cockfight, it, too, finds the asylum of validation.

Caste violence is rife in India, and the state and the district of Hathras are not strangers to it (eg., see Joshi, 1980). The government has branded the caste system as a social practice, but on the ground, it must remain cultural or risk disruption. But, despite decades of fighting it at a social level, activists and governments have been unable to remove the system from the culture. If the veneer of continuity must be maintained, culture must keep the narration of rape maintained at the first and second levels. At a social level, rape becomes a step towards dismantling continuity.

**A cultural condition.** As I have mentioned initially in this chapter, disruption has consequences. The cultural consequence of disruption is that when disruption is discredited as an irritant in a larger pursuit of modernity, it perpetuates a condition: On the day the rape victim died in the New Delhi hospital, hundreds of members of the Dalit political party Bhim Army, led by its vociferous leader Chandrashekhar Azad, demonstrated in the hospital premises, demanding justice.<sup>105</sup> He was arrested. The hospital arranged an ambulance and the police organized a “green corridor” to transport the victim’s body back to her village. As the news media gathered, the body was transported out of a back door. Thus, the rape victim, her family, the rapists, and their family find themselves stuck between social realities and the law. The law does not permit caste discrimination. However, if violations are repeated and the perpetrators defend their actions by taking shelter in social order, ambiguity prevails.

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<sup>105</sup> Dalit is traditionally a non-caste, ineligible to be included in the caste structure.



The rape victim's family is born to a community called Valmiki. In accordance with the Hindu caste system, the Valmikis are not even a part of the caste system—they are *Dalits*, beneath the caste system. They still perform their roles in manual scavenging, the most modern method in which is cleaning cities' sewers by descending into manholes and manually extracting human excreta and other wastes from the clogged drains. Although the government banned



**Figure 22.** Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad addresses a protest rally in New Delhi. Social media rallied under the hashtag #DalitLivesMatter. As much as he and his supporters tried to disrupt order, invisibilizing constraints prevailed (Courtesy: Twitter/@ShilpaBhartiy.)

manual scavenging, that would leave the Valmikis stranded and untrained in other jobs. The Boolgarhi family performed labor on agricultural fields, though. It is during that very act, amidst the thick and tall sugarcane growth, that the crime took place.

The accused men belong to the Thakur community, a rich, land-owning community in northern India. Thakurs belong to a dominant, land-owning caste in northern India. The caste system is prevalent all over India but is particularly deep-rooted in the state of Uttar Pradesh, whose current Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath is a Thakur. Thakur oppression against Dalits is rampant in the state. A year before the Boolgarhi rape case, in another high-profile incident, BJP Member of [the state's] Legislative Assembly (MLA) Kuldeep Singh Sengar was convicted and

sentenced to life for the rape and murder of a 17-year-old girl, and at his behest, her father was murdered (Dhingra, 2020). Although the condition manifests itself in everyday routine—a distant location in a village, a separate temple, and a separate water source are examples, its worst countenance surfaces when the community seeks justice. If Thakur men rape a Dalit woman, the local enforcement and judicial forces feel immense pressure to side with the Thakurs. Alternative stories are then stitched to discredit original accusations, creating doubt and confusion, and finally, leading to legal acquittal.

India's Constitution writer B. R. Ambedkar's (1936/2014) book argues that the immoral caste system, sustained by religious scriptures, must be dismantled. Yet social practices often defy modern political constitutions and institutions—a potent rationale why they must be maintained under sutured modern surfaces. In practice, the institutions deeply recognize its pre-modern practices in that local police personnel may heed the words of the land-owner communities, while denying justice to the landless. The social location of the Dalit community is thus immobilized: They, unlike the fluid “upper” castes, continue in their oppressed circumstance. In Boolgarhi, the rape victim's family, unable to emerge from dire poverty, faced the constant threat. That kind of threat is normalized, sutured both in narration and the continuity of living, as we see in the aftermath of the incident.

I have alluded before to Cornel West's book *Race Matters*, which, among other things, “demystifies” American conservatism, accusing it of embracing freedom movements around the world but neglecting the “authoritarian and violent racial-caste practices and values” at home (p. 47). Likewise, Dalit writer Suraj Yengde (2019) laments the lack of any depth in the portrayals of the caste system in India. There is a commonality between West and Yengde in their assault on the representatives of the oppressed classes—those West calls *invisible people* (p. 45). Yet,

Yengde writes from a less privileged worm's-eye view, describing his stirring experiences of the oppressions of the caste system growing up in a segregated ghetto in modern India as a Dalit, or traditionally untouchable. He reminds us that the Dalit struggle runs across economic strata and there are “many shades of Dalits.” Just so that we do not forget how pervasive the caste system's discriminative practices—popularly termed *casteism*—are, Yengde reminds us:

In India, casteism touches 1.35 billion people [the entire population of the country]. It affects 800 million people badly. It enslaves the dignity of 500 million people. It is a *measure* of destruction, pillage, drudgery, servitude, bondage, unaccounted rape, massacre, arson, incarceration, police brutality and loss of moral virtuosity for 300 million Indian Untouchables” (pp. 5-6).

Although modern literature terms Dalits as belonging to the lowest rung of the Hindu caste system, they were traditionally excluded from the caste system, treated as untouchables, and performed scavenging and other cleaning tasks. Untouchability was abolished by law in 1955. However, despite the continued environment of liberal democracies through most of India's independent years, the caste system has remained as a powerful instrument of control. The term caste system must be seen in a sense that is broader than the original four profession-based divisions—Brahmin (teacher), Kshatriya (warrior), Vaishya (trader), and Shudra (cleaner of waste—a job that the scriptures consider unholy if it is performed by the three “upper” castes)—which the Hindu scriptures make. Caste-based discrimination that is systematized competes with other fractures—based on land, financial worth, and urbanity, for example. By this I mean, it is discrimination that is at the root of the system, rather than caste. Between the three “upper” castes, there is fluidity of power. The Brahmins were traditionally at the top rung of the caste system, but today, land-owners in villages wield power over landless laborers, Hindu apartment owners in cities routinely reject tenants on account of their religion, and in general, it is a power game between the haves and have-nots.

Scholarly articles have rightly identified the Boolgarhi (alleged) rape as a caste (and, expectedly, a gender) issue (e.g., Kumar and Bakshi, 2022; Arya, 2020). Muralidhar (2022) writes about the challenges for marginalized communities in India to seek justice, and the related challenges for lawyers who seek to represent those communities. The communities for whom legal aid is “an absolute necessity [are] invariably those below the poverty line and a ‘high risk group’” but that the quality of such legal aid is a concern (pp. 423-424). Further, victims are vulnerable to intimidation, violence, and social and economic boycott (p. 429). Dhar (2020), who terms the Boolgarhi rape a caste crime, laments the absence or rejection of caste as a central theme in this crime with the sweeping brush of “A rape is rape, why do you bring caste into it?”

While conditions are immutable, their documentation in scholarly and institutional narrations persistently resist them. Pretexts of law and order and national security stitch over social conditions, the modern over the un-modern. Between aesthetics and experience lie the dark spaces of Boolgarhi.

**The politics of disruption.** Thanks to the Boolgarhi crime, politics and journalism became a thorn in the social order’s flesh. In an unsubtle invisibilizing maneuver, the police blocked political opposition leaders and independent mediapersons from entering the village. Politicians and the news media, including several independent YouTubers, attempted to descend upon Boolgarhi. Among them was Siddique Kappan, a 38-year-old independent journalist from the southern state of Kerala for the news portal *Azhimukham*. He was arrested on October 7.

Invisibilizing potentially disruptive voices must combine perception with its visible desirability. Opposition parties and Muslim names are easy targets because, like the farmers of Lakhimpur Kheri, they are inconvenient disruptors. On the contrary, seemingly pliant, *mainstream* voices like Pandey are unlikely troublemakers. Kappan was charged for the creation



**Figure 23.** Kappan and other journalists, arrested, tied to one another with a rope as the state police escort them away. This moment defines the muting of dissenting voices in general but particularly those of independent journalists, who might disrupt a well-sutured order of things. (Courtesy: Twitter/@MediaIndiaGroup. Screenshot by author.)

of a website called “Justice for Hathras” in the aftermath of the gang-rape (Rashid, 2020).

Kappan traveled toward Hathras on October 5 along with three of his colleagues. They were arrested en route at a highway toll plaza and charged with sedition. Kappan and his colleagues could talk to a lawyer for five minutes 43 days after their arrest and detention in jail under a severe law called the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), in which obtaining bail is difficult. The Enforcement Directorate began a probe against Kappan. A court finally released him on bail in December 2022.

As a Muslim journalist, Kappan was particularly in the limelight after he was incommunicado for two days following the arrest and no one was permitted to meet him for months (Goyal, 2021; Agarwal, 2021). The pamphlets he carried called for justice in the Boolgarhi rape, but he faces charges for raising funds for terrorist acts, knowingly holding property derived or obtained from the commission of a terrorist act, deliberate and malicious acts

intended to outrage religious feelings and insult religious beliefs, destroying digital evidence, and breach of confidentiality and privacy. Kappan is the visible Muslim who is also the invisible and *desirable* enemy of the state.<sup>106</sup>

Full-blown politics had erupted in New Delhi; later, on October 1, Priyanka Gandhi, a prominent politician representing the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, was similarly detained at the state border for violating a police restriction on gatherings at Hathras. She and her brother Rahul Gandhi defiantly started to walk toward the village. The police finally allowed them to visit the victim's family on October 3.<sup>107</sup>

**Continuity and the moment of untruth.** Of course, a more familiar form of our condition as media prosumer is our location between truths and untruths. We have lost the ability to determine truth as our trust has eroded in its institution of delivery. Our climactic moments of truth are confounded by the denouement of alternative truths. We remain suspended between belief and disbelief, not knowing.

Over the few days after the series of incidents, the two incidents that had hit the headlines—the rape and the forcible cremation—resulted in social media outrage with hashtags such as “HathrasHorrorShocksIndia.” In parallel, running counter to that version of the story, was the claim that no rape had occurred. Pandey was soon the target at the hands of the ruling political party and some sections of the news media, who tried to discredit her. The political pressure from Modi's party (also the ruling party in Uttar Pradesh state) shook Pandey. However, it should be unsurprising to most people who understand the contemporary milieu in India.

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<sup>106</sup> A study by the independent news portal *NewsLaundry* on the contents of the statement of objection reveals that the police may have exaggerated Kappan's readiness to protest by a great deal. See Suresh (2022a).

<sup>107</sup> The Gandhis made a second attempt two days after the police sent them back. See Rahul Gandhi, Priyanka (2020).



**Figure 24.** As Pandey questioned police officials about the forced burning of the victim’s body, she also kept uploading videos on Twitter. Even in the face of visible evidence of the body, a massive police cordon seemed to physically block the cremation from our vision. This screenshot is taken from the Twitter timeline of Amit Malviya, BJP’s IT Cell chief who wrote discreditingly about Pandey. (Courtesy: Twitter/@AmitMalviya. Screenshot by author.)

Mediated spotlighting of such incidents destabilizes social norms, weakens political rhetoric, and manifests the kind of disruption that upends majoritarian agenda. The illiteracy stemming from a norm of invisibility makes for a condition of normalcy. When the might of a ruling political party puts pressure on an individual journalist, it tends to leave its mark. Although her editor had backed her, and although she declined to tell me the consequences of her reportage upon her return to her India Today office, Pandey left the India Today Group in 2021 and joined *ThePrint*, an independent news portal run by well-known journalist Shekhar Gupta. There, she co-investigated four additional cases in Uttar Pradesh where the police “forcibly” burned victims’ bodies (Taskin and Pandey, 2021). Two days after the cremation on the 30th, the police declared the village a “Covid hotspot” and barred the media from entering it.

The only means of communication for Pandey with the victim's family was via telephone. The victim's father, in a video that Priyanka Gandhi (of the Congress party) shared, claimed that he was under government pressure. Pandey then recorded a call with the victim's brother Sandeep, where he can be heard telling her that his father was facing pressure from the governing BJP. Pandey asked him to help her reach the father, obtain a recording of the father's statement to that effect, and send it to her. On the evening of October 2, it became clear to Pandey that either her cell phone or Sandeep's was put under surveillance and that a conversation was then leaked to the BJP and to a section of the media: She received a call from Nupur Sharma, the editor of *OpIndia*, a news portal with a known BJP bias and somewhat of a reputation among news media platforms for spreading misinformation.<sup>108</sup> Sharma claimed to be in possession of an audio clipping of Pandey's conversation with Sandeep and it indicated that Pandey was coercing the victim's family.<sup>109</sup> The portal ran a story that blamed Pandey for trying to coax Sandeep. Soon, the BJP's national IT Cell head took *OpIndia*'s headline and tweeted: "India Today journalist pesters brother of victim for a confession video of father saying 'there is pressure from administration'" (Malviya, 2020).

The accused family and their caste-community kept the pressure up on the victim's family, having galvanized caste support from four neighboring villages (Arya, 2020). Rajvir Singh Pahalvan, a former MLA from Hathras belonging to the BJP, held a meeting and proclaimed that no rape had happened (Nandy, 2020). Several organizations including the upper-

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<sup>108</sup> For example, see Singh (2022): In Singh's report, a well-known journalist Sucheta Dalal's tweet protests an *OpIndia* story as false. Also see Chaudhuri (2018): This report by a fact-check platform disputes another *OpIndia* claim as false.

<sup>109</sup> This meant either the victim's family's mobile phone or Pandey's phone was put under surveillance, but the police has denied it.



caste organization Rashtriya Savarna Sangathan and the militantly pro-Hindu nationalist Bajrang Dal took out rallies in support of the accused men. BJP's Malviya and the police suggested that there was no rape, the latter making the claim on the basis that according to the autopsy report, "no sperm was found on the body" (As BJP supporters malign reporter, 2020).

We see weaponization of rhetoric rampantly available in this case. Seemingly independent voices on social media claimed that the victim's family was misleading us all. One such social media user, Arun Yadav [@beingarun28], tweeted:

MEDIA PROPAGANDA: Hathras police cremated Hathras victim's body without even informing her family

TRUTH: Victim's family did her last rites themselves [pic.twitter.com/sok0DvCcwz](https://pic.twitter.com/sok0DvCcwz)

Yadav even presented a claimed video as evidence. Yadav's Twitter account no longer exists. A BJP leader, Priti Gandhi (in her Twitter account @MrsGandhi), shared the same words in her tweet, but wove it to indicate that the news media platforms were wrong and that "#JusticeforManisha" was not being ensured. (By naming the victim, even in a hashtag, Gandhi was breaking a law.)<sup>110</sup> A fact-check portal called *AltNews*, owned and run by independent professionals, ran a story that debunked these claims, titled: "Video shared to make misleading claim that Hathras victim's family did her last rites."<sup>111</sup>

Stuck in the confused space between Pandey's narrations and the hyped narrations that attempted to discredit her, the media prosumer must make decide where their truth lies—decisions they did not need to before such divided narrations. This space must claimed by our

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<sup>110</sup> See Gandhi (2020).

<sup>111</sup> See Chaudhuri (2020).

knowledge of technology. If a fake news story shows us a manipulated video, we know technology is used. However, we do not know which the fake product is. These dark spaces of uncertainty are troubling to the media prosumer. They must gravitate toward one side by making decisions that are founded on either the logic of disruption—which the institutional and independent news media narrate by intervention—or the logic of continuity—which the institutional and independent mediated narrate by countering the disruption, telling us those disruptions are unnecessary attempts at disturbing our well-sutured world.

**The absent presence of *no*.** Was the Boolgarhi rape victim’s tongue severed or not? Some media reports said the victim’s tongue was found severed. One version states that as the rapists strangled her, they also cut off her tongue, removing the only means of articulating her violation to anyone else. Another states that she bit her tongue as she was being strangled. Later,



**Figure 25.** The district authorities held what was supposed to be a private meeting, away from cameras, with the victim’s family and their supporters from their caste. One camera breached the scene. In it, the authorities tell them that old customs like the disallowing of after-dark cremation must be shunned—it is a rational enough reason to burn the body. Communities in his home state of Rajasthan have already discarded it. What he does not mention that in the complex matrix of Indian castes and regions, the custom is not universally practiced. (Courtesy: Twitter/TanushreePande. Screenshot by author.) Also see Pandey (2020a).

the media reported that the police denied the tongue had been severed at all. The irony in all this is the debate whether her tongue was missing or not ties our voices—it creates doubt, and that deniability is all that is required. Deniability generates the fundamental doubt among a story’s consumers—which version is fake? The victim’s *no* was silenced in more ways than one.

On their arrival, the police burned her body amidst local protest—even after the family refused to give their permission for the cremation. (It is against the religious custom among several Hindu communities to cremate a body after sunset.) The family locked themselves in, refusing to witness the midnight cremation and afraid the police might physically coerce them to the location. In front of the family’s house, a protest crowd from fellow-Dalit community members of the area had gathered. The police wielded their batons to move the protesters into a gated area while the ambulance drove to the nearby cremation ground, a small field cut out of sugarcane fields where the victim had been raped. The victim’s father alleged that as they rode from the hospital to the village, the police tried to coax him to agree to the hasty cremation. It appears that surrounded by authorities, the father acceded. Now, finding strength in numbers in his caste-community assembled outside his house where they had forcibly stopped the ambulance, the father, a diminutive man, took back his *alleged* acceptance.

A police official tried to convince him: “*Aap lead le nahin rahe ho, baahar waale aakarke aapka kaam bigaad rahe hain. [You are not taking the lead, so outsiders are impairing your work. Broadly: You are being indecisive, so outsiders are influencing your decision.]* Inside their house, the District Magistrate took his time talking to the family and trying to convince them that such cremation was required. It was a lesson in morality from a well-read authority figure to those less privileged, less literate. “*[Samaj ki reeti, rivaj, paramparaein samay ke saath badalti hain. [Old social customs and traditions change with time.]*” In that preaching, he

insinuated the allegation: “*Kuchh galtiyaan hui hain aapse [Some mistakes have happened from your side].*” In the video, he does not explain what those “mistakes” were. He frames his understanding of the family’s reluctance on their traditional religious customs. “The District Magistrate told the family, ‘*Ho chuki hai hamari baat [This has been discussed discussed].* We can’t delay the cremation.’ ... What could he have done? I mean ... he was wearing torn slippers. It was an extremely poor family” (T. Pandey, personal communication, December 26, 2022).

The Hindi sentence *ho chuki hai hamari baat* needs a word in explanation. It is a commonly used passive-voice statement, translating to “*A discussion has taken place between us.*” In the absence of a referent, it is assumed that *a matter has been discussed*. But further ambiguity lies in the connotation that it does not tell us what the outcome of such a discussion was, and whether something is *agreed upon*. So, the sentence is often used in cases where a potentially contentious decision is involved, pointing to an unseen, therefore unquestionable, force with which *the matter has been discussed*. There is one more ambivalence here. In much of Uttar Pradesh and neighboring Bihar states, the word *hamari (our)*, a derivative of *hum (we)*, is used as a singular pronoun to denote *my* and not *our*. We will never know whether the District Magistrate, using that nuance to his advantage, simply meant *I have spoken to him*, because the original discussion remains hidden from us and no document of the agreement exists. In the absence of text, the context offers the implication.

As Pandey stood on camera with a burning pyre behind her, she asked the Crime Branch police official in charge: “Tell me what’s happening [behind me].” The official kept it simple: He had been assigned a duty, and he did not know anything more. He did not acknowledge that the body on the pyre was the victim’s. Pandey persists, repeatedly asking him whether it is

indeed a body that is being cremated, and if so, whether it is the victim's. The official does not confirm, insisting he has no authority to speak. The official added: "*Iss desh mein hamare jaise police afsaron ki koi haisiyat nahin hoti hai [Police officials like me in this country have no status].*"<sup>112</sup>

Chief Minister Adityanath spoke with the father over the next few days and assured a job for the victim's brother, a sizable monetary compensation, and a house. Barely two days after the cremation, the police claimed there was no sign of rape on the victim's body—now hidden and absent. The police official that Pandey spoke with was carefully ambiguous. Local media coverage was blocked by police officials under the pretext that such coverage would exacerbate social relations. What initially appeared a clear-cut incident finally turned into a media story. At the denouement of this story, confusion and haze prevailed until the CBI settled the matter nearly three months later and made its interpretive conclusions. Between media text and an alternative institutional text lay the following questions: *Was the victim raped? What were the "mistakes made" by her and her family? Did she have sexual relations with one of the perpetrators of the murder?*

The Boolgarhi victim's father's inarticulate methods of saying *no* to midnight cremation is an example of his reflexive invisibility, and of how this void operates in communities—how the District Magistrate's reiteration, "*Ho chuki hai hamari baat [It has been discussed between us],*" comes back to haunt the father, who needs the company of his community to realize the import of the nuanced—albeit popular—sentence. The meaning of the text eludes him because of

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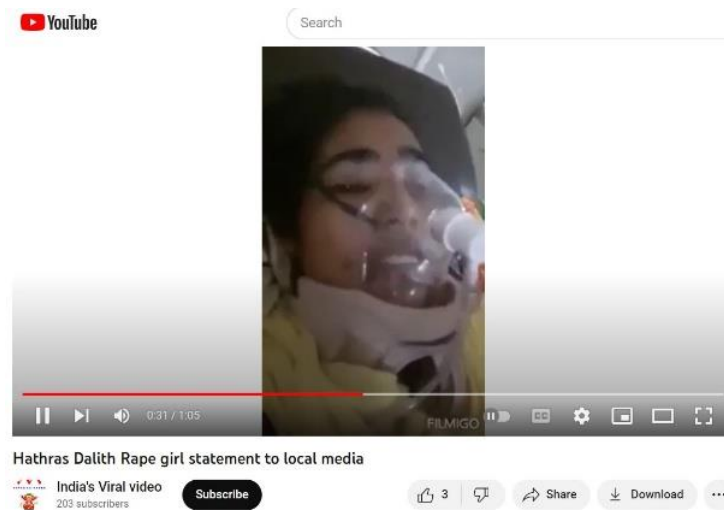
<sup>112</sup> The Hindi word *haisiyat* can only be described here as social/official status or importance; *haisiyat nahin hoti hai* would then connote that the person has no locus standi based on the absence of *haisiyat*. Terms like *haisiyat* are often steeped in social hierarchies that determine a person's worth in a situation.

the material context. That volte face marks the pivotal peripeteia in the news story. If he had succumbed to the pressure and remained adherent to that agreement, there would have been no aberration—the male members of the victim’s family would have permitted a midnight cremation without having the opportunity to see her face. It would have been a link in the chain of continuity. The disruption occurred at the moment when he went back on that said agreement and flipped sides when the community bolstered his sensibility. It was this new reading that made the following action—the forcible burning of the victim’s body as the family remained self-confined inside their house—disruptive and unethical.

From the series of happenings in Boolgarhi, we may infer that the conditions of the rape victim’s family and our conditions as media prosumers are relatable. Both swing between realities and narrated realities. Confused, neither they nor we can firmly determine where to locate our truths. Both are actors. One enacts the incidents, steering the course for their construction into events, while the other determines their consequences. We share the media events on social media. We are moved by our emotions. We particularize our emotions as reactions to a human tragedy, as we would do while watching a Shakespearean tragedy. These are individuals who have suffered at the hands of individual and social forces. But we are removed from the locality, and therefore immobilized. We cannot act—we pretend that our social media prosumerism is out action. We believe that once someone takes notice, something good will ensue. That is perhaps our perceived contribution to the larger good.

That is our perceived literacy. In it, our *no* lies in our emotional response to the rape victim. We articulate and yet we are silent. We speculate, using our rational logic, that between the slick and the official, and the unappealing and the unofficial, the latter must be the fake.

**Invisibility of the local.** Serendipity and journalistic instinct played a big part in the revelation of the most insidious part of this incident—the clandestine burning of the victim’s body.<sup>113</sup> The first reports came from local, voluntary, self-styled social media narrators.<sup>114</sup>



**Figure 26.** The video by “India’s Viral Video” defies a law in India that prevents pictures or names of rape victims to be shared. Villagers took out a protest march in Hathras where banners with the victim’s name were boldly displayed as Manisha. This presents a problem: On one hand, the police claimed there was no rape. On the other, the media protected the victim’s identity. (Courtesy: YouTube/India’sViralVideo. See India’s Viral Video, 2020.). Screenshot by author.) Also see Pandey (2020a).

Neither hospital had conducted a rape test although the victim was bleeding profusely: The police told a reporter that the victim had not claimed rape in her initial statement. On the 22<sup>nd</sup>, eight days after the incident, the District Magistrate recorded her statement. Despite a severed tongue, the victim managed to speak, and stated that she had been gang-raped. A week later, independently, local youth who ran YouTube channels met the victim at the Aligarh

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<sup>113</sup> Although Pandey and other journalists (possibly based on her witness version) have claimed that the body was burnt, the police did not acknowledge what they burnt that night on the pyre.

<sup>114</sup> For the first such video on record, see India’s Viral Video (2020). Normally, scholarly literature might not recognize such independent videos as legitimate sources. This would be a mistake. In the spirit of this very study, I argue that delegitimizing independent videos amounts to their rejection, or terming them *fake*. It is impossible, of course, not to also imagine the impending confusion if such videos must be sifted through scrutiny of genuineness. The converse would entail mere assumptions, however, based on our assumptions of institutional trust in a source.

hospital and recorded a statement, which, too, alleged gang-rape. This turned out to be her dying declaration and led to the arrest of four Thakur men from her village, Sandip Singh, Ramu Singh, Ravi Singh, and Lavkush Singh.<sup>115</sup> A forensic test, conducted eight days after the rape, revealed that the sample did not contain sperms and confirmed the police's claim that there had been no rape. Her vertebrae were broken and her condition progressively worsened. On September 28, she was moved to Safdarjung Hospital (even though the hospital recommended the more nationally renowned AIIMS hospital, which adjoins Safdarjung Hospital), 125 miles away in New Delhi. There, the victim died of the strangulation and cervical injuries during the incident, leading to a cardiopulmonary arrest, as the autopsy report by the hospital revealed. Tears and wounds were found in her vagina.

When the local YouTubers uploaded the report, rustic rough at the edges and lacking the aesthetic polish and relative linguistic accuracy of the institutional media, the police promptly dismissed them as “fake news.” *Fake news* has become a favorite term for politicians—who may embolden government institutions—to make whipping boys of what may not *appear* genuine because it does not conform to the aesthetic standards of institutionalized media. Fake news is also a common term that we have started to employ when even visible evidence may not be institutionally legitimized. The following screenshot is from the YouTube video from a local group of youth. We may observe that this account has 203 subscribers. There are relatively few views of this video—121 until the screenshot was taken.

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<sup>115</sup> India's Viral Video (2020) was the first and only video in which the victim's face can be at least partly seen. Another channel, Latest News (2020), picked up and broadcast the same video. The former channel on YouTube has 198 subscribers, while the latter has 145. Local journalists, who run YouTube channels, first captured the story. An example of their coverage includes a protest by members of the Valmiki caste—to which the victim belonged—in Hathras town. See Hamara Hathras (2020).



In defining how we learn from our media, which we presume to be our media literacy, we must consider two fundamental kinds—the scholastic or academic, and the social. Arguably, media literacy must belong to the latter. Brian Street (1995), who wrote on cross-cultural approaches to literacy and proposing an “ideological model” of literacy, argues:

Literacy, then, has come to be associated with crude and often ethnocentric stereotypes of ‘other cultures’ and represents a way of perpetuating the notion of a ‘great divide’ between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ societies that is less acceptable when expressed in other terms (p. 7).

Street might agree that social *illiteracy*, therefore, is the lack of an ability to practice the understanding of one’s world. Specifically, our social literacy—the methodology by which we learn about our world—is dependent on the mediated realities of the other in relation to our own conditions. What we consume as those realities stitch up our understanding of the world, a presumed externalization of our own. In a previous chapter, I have termed this ideological exercise the social practice of literacy.

This social-ideological-mediated form of literacy is fraught with various media dependencies—the availability of a story to be told, presence of the storyteller and their resources, and visibility of the incident (in which it must first be narrated to the storyteller). First of all, that is an imperfect system, full of loopholes in its implementation. Secondly, by narrating disruptive incidents, news stories ignore the continuity of conditions. Thirdly, such continuous narration is a technological impossibility since it is not possible for the multitudes of communities’ unique conditions to be narrated in a stream-like manner. Therefore, our literacy, dependent on mediated narrations, does not grant us the power to understand our world *in toto*. Illiteracy is inevitable, except when we presume our literacy in the spotlighted—and often haphazard, yet like a ritual—manner in which stories are told.

This meta-story reflected social conditions and disrupted the continuity of news as it sutures our mediated understanding of our world. However, the meta-story also indicates why invisibilized realities present the problem behind trust: Like the problem behind fake news, this problem lies in the duality of narration. While the victim's family told Pandey that the government's party was pressuring them, and that a rape had occurred, a rape test was not conducted. If it was, the results were not made known. A few days following her death, the main accused, Sandeep Thakur, claimed to have known the victim—police verification of mobile call records validated this claim—and that her death could have been a case of honor killing.<sup>116</sup> Police officials called mediapersons over tea and planted the *what-if* story, the root of doubt: *What if the victim's family had killed her as an honor killing because she was in a relationship with the Thakur man?* (T. Pandey, personal communication, December 26, 2022).

Between the amateur and the professional, our natural tendency seems to be to prefer the professional. We make a presumption of social accountability when it comes to the official. Therefore, we trust the bigger, the institutional, the professional. Shaky smartphone camera narration is hardly a match in our aesthetic acceptance for the sharp images on our television screens or the authoritative writing in newspapers. In the amateur lies an unheard voice, often that of resistance, of authentic representation. Such is the arrogance of the defined legitimacy of modern aesthetics. According to this logic, it would seem that if a video is uploaded by an individual who does not belong to a media institution, it must first be denied legitimacy.

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<sup>116</sup> Honor killing is a form of murder by a family member to restore the honor and dignity of the family after a member, usually a woman, loses her sexual virginity, marries outside her caste or religion, or otherwise transgresses social control over the woman's life and body. In general, this killing is founded on gender-, caste-, or religion-based notions "to restore a family's collective reputation that has been damaged by the victim's violation of very strict norms regulating female sexuality, and they are viewed by the assailants as a legitimate punishment, often condoned by local communities and tolerated by state agencies" (Oberwittler and Kasselt, 2014, p. 652).

Independent web journalists are known to campaign for social issues by using mobilizing technologies such as hashtags—even a cheap smartphone aspires to uncover the dark secrets of society. We would expect that when visibilized, a perceived abnormality of a condition may lead to literacy, therefore to enlightened transformation. An external trigger is needed to help the conditioned experiencer understand their conditions and demonstrate that knowledge. Localized social media groups inform, amplify, edit, distort, misinform, and disinform. As I have explained in an earlier chapter, WhatsApp groups, which have penetrated the rural markets of India mounted on inexpensive smartphones at very low data rental prices, have been a cause of both information and disinformation. Non-localized social media's communicative spaces nudge media user communities' understanding of different perspectives of the world around us. Sometimes these are opinions that can either masquerade or be consumed as news. And lastly, the news media platforms come with their technological and ideological features that provide selective visibility to both specific news items and to communities where those news items are located. These stories are snapshots, temporally and spatially fixed.

Indian journalist and author P. Sainath (1996) rightly remarks in his acclaimed book *Everyone Loves a Good Drought* that media stories ignore conditions of communities in preference to snapshots of events that seem frozen and devoid of what we may call the context of existing conditions. This type of context cannot be defined in temporal or spatial terms alone, but in terms of continuity, as against disruption. The news media's processual problem of ignoring continuity in preference to disruption is exacerbated when it comes to communities invisibilized by media and marginalized by societies. In postcolonial India, a majority of communities continue to live amid accepted social hierarchies as though they are pre-ordained. Forced identities such as caste may not always be an explicit marker. Often, the divisions may be

professional, with no overt recognition of the idea that caste has historically demarcated professions—a manual scavenger’s family background is vastly different from that of a businessman. The news media’s journalistic struggle with reporting continuity is that on one hand, they must be authentic bearers of those conditions and on the other, they intervene in the reflexive invisibility and provide the representation and articulation to the self-muted.

There are two ways in which the media invisibilize conditions: One, through processes, and two, through structures. Processes of the media are both self-set and autonomous. Breaking the process at any point means a disruption in the narration of a story. The process includes setting the agenda, of seeking all available facts and insights, cutting them to format and size, making various determinations from audience to length or duration of the story, distributing it on various platforms. In contemporary digital times, the story is the core product to be distributed on various platforms—newspaper, television, radio, related websites, and various platforms on social media. Revealing all sides of a story normally means an editorial commitment to all available sides from available sources, within an available time frame. Unavailability cannot disrupt the process after a reasonable time frame, and therefore, an editor decides whether it can be reasonably permitted to be disseminated. Availability depends on various factors of convenience (such as proximity and access).

Availability of elements—perspectives or answers to necessary questions—within a story contribute to only one side of the problem. Availability of a story is the other problem. News platforms are located in large hubs, where conditions are relatively superior. The backdrop of news shows is rarely a squalid village, but a blown-up photograph of a swanky, glitzy part of a large city. The urban-rural divide is a blind spot among media systems in modernizing media-

societies such India that do not have the reach to access realities from behind this iron curtain.

What is unavailable is invisible and absent.

## **Conclusion**

In much of India's Hindu belief, fire represents destruction of evil. As a part of the Hindu festival of Holi, communities in North India get together and burn logs and leaves. This ritual is called *Holika Dahan*—the burning of Holika, an *asuri*, or anti-goddess—and marks the death of Holika and the salvation of a child, her benevolent nephew Prahlada. Several communities in South India venerate the fire-ritual as *Kama Dahana*—literally, the burning of lust, and according to scriptures, the day the Hindu God Shiva burnt the love-god Kama. Both these rituals symbolize the destruction of tyranny and the restoration of order.

The burning is Boolgarhi's meta-story. As the body burnt on the pyre and the restoration of the order of continuity was interrupted by a mediated spectacle, the spaces between victims, perpetrators, protectors, and reporters were blurred by narration. Surely, this cannot be the literacy that modern societies dream of. Modernity was supposed to offer the panacea of existence by rational debate—a syllogistic form by which we can explain our truths by reason.

In *Capital*, Karl Marx remarks: "In its mystified form, [Hegelian] dialectic became the fashion ... because it seemed to transfigure and glorify the existing state of things" (Marx et al., 1924/1971, p. 143). Mystification works similarly—examples are the narrations of nationalism or political ideology or, indeed, social order. We may see in the Boolgarhi case that the possibility of discursivity itself, let alone discursive transformation, remains undermined by social inequities.

**The ghost of Boolgarhi.** Ghosts occupy an amphibious medium in which they can traverse between the real and the unreal without actually making a difference to the way the

world works. Ghosts are a useful metaphor to explain the value of reflexive invisibility with reference to the media prosumer. In their amphibious, ghost-like role, a prosumer indulges in their routinized construction of various ideological narratives. Similarly, media prosumers operate in an *amphibious medium* where they seek and/or incidentally arrive upon messages and act upon them, sharing them further, and re-producing them. Reflexive invisibility is thus antithetical to action and, like Barthes's beholders of art, immobilization is the result even in the flexibility of movement.

Movement must be differentiated from action. Movement cannot in itself effect transformation except in a most fundamental, logistical form. If action ensues, it must be in the external world of the media and social media. The practice of expression lies at its heart, prodded by a constant but invisible, inarticulate intervention by algorithms. Once a user has articulated a message, it is up to the structures of algorithms to determine how much articulation to offer. Like social layers that inform habitus, algorithmic layering determines which news story or peer post a user must view—and then leave it to the user to respond.

The ghost must remain metaphorical to us at least until we can realize its potential as an agency. In the ghost that fascinated Derrida lies the haunting seamlessness of its *condition*, unchanging, uncertain, capable of movement but incapable of changing anything. If we indulge the concept that ghosts may or may not exist, they may be described as living objects that are normally invisible. Further, these objects are not altogether absent but merely foregrounded by other objects. But our very inability as subjects to discern whether they exist is problematic. The haunting of this invisibilized presence may seem disturbing as a curse, and on the contrary, not “seeing” them may leave us undisturbed. If they are invisible, or we believe they do not exist, ghosts do not occupy space in our minds.

Ghost-like algorithms and bots pervade our discursive space, invisible and silent. The lingering pervasiveness remains one of the biggest challenges for media literacy in fulfilling its commitment to help a learner *see through* the media (as we can—the legend goes—see through ghosts). In this amphibious, ambiguous space, a media prosumer is beset with external narrations that overwhelm their own. Here, the presumed form of literacy is pitted against the reality of conditions—that is the problem with reflexivity. News narrations enable the media prosumer in amplifying and diminishing stories.

The Boolgarhi report is a lesson in literacy, if literacy is the ability to understand, manifest, and make meanings. Between the victim's dying statement that she had been raped by the four men and the suggestion by the police that there was no rape, and between Pandey's eyewitness documentation and her demonization at the hands of the BJP, mediated narration has shown us its vulnerability in acting as the instrument of literacy. A journalist shone her camera the light beneath the surface of illiteracy—and paid the price.

When social media channels—such as the local youth in Boolgarhi—act as news platforms, they must simulate the same form, rationality, and media logic. However, they operate with the absence of any legitimacy accorded by modern institutions. We must therefore question how, in the absence of such legitimacy, an individual is expected to distinguish between platforms that are legitimized and those that are not. There are no markers unlike in the so-called physical world, where, if I receive a newspaper at my doorstep, or if one is sold at a newsstand, I automatically assume that it is somehow sanitized by official legitimacy. If I watch on cable television a channel that proclaims to be a news channel, my presumption would be similarly reasonable. I am normally able to identify advertisements as legitimate promotional material. I can only selectively or occasionally realize news stories that emerge from public relations. I only

selectively (in the case of newspapers, often in news portals, but in news channels) know who the news editor is. Even so, I may not know what they reject routinely as irrelevant. Only people who understand the processes may recognize the deep problems in what we normally will not know unless we probe with purpose and determination: Who owns the platform, what are its implicit affiliations, what lies in the edited portions of news stories, and what is it foregrounding and what is it leaving in the shadows? The human at the other end of the cable, or the supply chain, is bound by the vagaries of human nature, but also by various other limitations that are uniquely human.

The ghost is not illiterate. It bears the burden of being unable to articulate, thus hiding its experiential knowledge. If a diviner extracts that knowledge, they can transfer it to other people. Serendipitously, a reporter disrupted a conditioned existence. By its definition, disruption causes change—in an event or in knowledge. The alleged rape was not the disruption in Boolgarhi. The reporter’s exposé of the rape and its continued consequences for the victim caused such a disruption. It disrupted the amorality of the condition, as though planting an event in the moral compass of the society and made evaluation compulsory.

**Epilogue.** On March 2, 2023, the local court acquitted the four men accused of gang-rape and murder—Sandeep (20), Luv Kush (23), Ravi (35) and Ramu (26). The court found prime accused Sandeep guilty of culpable homicide not amounting to murder under section 304 of the Indian Penal Code and of offenses under the “Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities Act),” a law that prohibits atrocities against lower-caste persons. He is sentenced to life in prison. Contradicting the dying declaration, the court said that medical records did not indicate rape, injuries did not indicate the involvement of multiple perpetrators, the victim’s initial statement to the police did not claim she was raped. The court also held that it



was possible politicians tutored the victim to lie about the gang-rape. The victim's family stated that it would move the state supreme court, the Allahabad High Court.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Extracted from media reports: See Jain (2023); Singhal and Mathur (2023)

## CHAPTER 6

### TOWARDS DEMYSTIFICATION OF MEDIA ILLITERACY

#### Introduction

To overthrow the power of the literal work is not to erase the letter, but only to subordinate it to the incidence of illegibility or at least of illiteracy. “I am writing for illiterates.” As can be seen in certain non-Western civilizations, ... illiteracy can quite well accommodate the most profound and living culture.

-*Jacques Derrida*<sup>118</sup>

In the initial chapter, I promised the reader to introduce in detail the construct of media illiteracy. We have contextualized the aesthetic methodology by which mediated narrations construct our truths. Hence, institutional (political, government agencies, news media systems) and non-institutional forms of (interpersonal, social media) communication collaborate to build an ecosystem of mystification—a narrative construction. Narrated truths both build and limit our understandings in ways that we have seen in the previous chapters, not merely leading our comprehension in specific directions but also acting as social and institutional sutures in their presentation and “absentation”—rendering absent.

Form defines literacy: The alphabet is the form on which we mount our understandings. We may recall the aesthetic form by which the Grecian urn “narrates” our truths. Moreover, we depend on visibilized truths alone—a natural phenomenon by which narration operates. We depend on the form of mediated narration to grasp content and understand our world. Mediated interventions that purport to help us understand our world better are the very instruments that render our media illiteracy.

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<sup>118</sup> From Derrida’s (1967/2002) *Writing and Difference*, p. 237.

Derrida's (above) claim that illiteracy can ensconce itself effectively in societies should inform us that there must be something unconvincing about the current applications of media literacy. The crisis in media literacy practice is that it has not dismantled those ideologically packaged instruments for our reading and writing of the world. It destabilizes our trust in truths: Media literacy is a modern instrument in that it teaches us to be skeptical. However, we are unsure how to act on our skepticism. Media literacy may not have all the answers.

Hence, I suggest that we should view media literacy as a form of demystification. We do not have the tools to demystify the ecosystem, merely the strategy to decode specific narrated texts, reject texts we are told are unreliable. That perspective would help our understanding of the ideological process that makes up media illiteracy. Perhaps it is the best we can do. Below, I attempt to organize the prosumer's journey, facilitating future practitioners of community media literacy—that is, agencies and trainers who locate themselves amidst communities—to problematize that journey and construct pedagogic or training models on that understanding. Finally, I will question why adding a community perspective to media literacy can strengthen its practice.

### **Visibility and meaning**

In the preceding chapters, we observed that the construction of India's Potemkin village comes in a desirable format and no rupture is possible in this tapestry; in the news anchor's narration of a crime, victimhood is flipped from farmers to politicians, but it is done in a recognizable format; in the aftermath of the brutalization and murder in Boolgarhi, the local community, the YouTubers, and Pandey try to rupture the suture, with limited success. The rupturing, where it is available, struggles to present itself to us the media prosumer. This form of unstructured visibility does not add to our known literacy but dismantles it.

This interplay of visibility and invisibility, absence and presence is important in the narrations, and an application of the visibility-invisibility / presence-absence model that evolved from my arguments is warranted.

A reader of Roland Barthes may recognize that he was initially the master-scholar on myth and later became a poetic, almost stoic observer of the camera. Although Roland Barthes's (1970/1989) later work, *Empire of Signs*, seeks to challenge and decenter the authority of the myth and moves forward from his earlier work *Mythologies*, the premise remains intact. The poststructural Barthes suggests that the experienced reality and the written text are at loggerheads with each other, as the latter glosses over the former, defeating the purpose of historical documentation. (Barthes, 1957/1991; Barthes, 1970/1989, pp. 88-94). However, I am merely implying that the evacuation of stable meaning is also the decontextualization of text. The existentialism in the later Barthes (1982), particularly in *Camera Lucida*, is stark. In it, a photograph seems autonomous in its representation of the existence of something—a text and a context. The photograph is faithful in its reproduction and yet it must bear ideological contextualizations and interpretations. Unlike the photograph, its evaluator must take a position that includes their own context.

Barthes's concepts of *studium* and *punctum* in aesthetic work are particularly significant to the use of invisibilization and absencing in the study of media illiteracy because the process may be understood using how the invisibility and absence contributes to narrations, conditions, and interpretations. The studium, the concretized, political, linguistic, or cultural meaning, foregrounds the background, or context, the punctum, the hidden social reality made relatively inconspicuous precisely because of its seeming banality. Thus, the relationship between *studium* and *punctum* is also the relationship between art and life, between the aesthetics and ethics

embedded in the reading of news *as* art. The resolution could lie in a triangulated approach, in which both illumination and enablement of social action ensue.

The meanings behind these historical and contextual experiences constitute *studium*, which must both foreground and soften the *punctum*, the hidden and stark reality—the certain must diffuse the uncertain. The naturalness of appearance is a prominent feature of the performance of reality. It is harder to justify whether a performance is autonomously and inherently powerful or whether its producers and actors make it so. Therefore, as Barthes (1977) writes in *Image Music Text*, “[t]he press photograph is a message” (p. 15). It simultaneously indexes a caption, a title, and an article that accompanies it. It is situated in a frame that tries to persuade us to believe it. In my work, I have looked at explaining the implications of the structure, however, not yet reaching Barthes’s interpretive levels of the obvious, symbolic, and “significance,” staying within the realm of the production of the ideological.

We also observed in the preceding chapters the use of aesthetic value in three different narrative ways—building spectacle, performance, and social order. The crowds in Ahmedabad, conditioned by repeated avowals of jubilation, are different from the farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri, who, in turn, are different from the Boolgarhi family. In one case, the show of modernization is the purpose. In another, it is the display of nationalism. In the third, it is maintenance of social order. In Ahmedabad, the aesthetic construction hides its history, in Lakhimpur Kheri, a fleeting occurrence, and in Boolgarhi, its unchanging present. However, the cases present to us similar ideological features. In each case, the media prosumer swings between Barthes’s *studium* and *punctum*, the performance and the reality, the aesthetic and the emotional appeals, the cultural and the individual. In each case, the uncertain and invisible spaces in which

communities exist has been a common feature—between visibilization and invisibilization, articulation and silence, image and reality, presentation and representation.

In Ahmedabad, it would seem that everybody—Modi, Trump, the media, and the crowds that thronged the streets and the stadium—were reconciled to the construction of the Potemkin village. The affectations of the studium and the punctum—the form and the experience, the structured interpretations and the unstructured personal interpretations—are thus reconciled. Similarly, in Arnab Goswami’s narration, there are three actors—the narrator/anchor, the viewer, and the experiencer. Goswami’s narration is faithful to the sutured reality, and vice versa. In this tango, the viewer—the media prosumer—must appreciate the value of the images and the story that are presented to them, as well as vicariously experience the tragedy. The question Goswami must play on is simply, *whose tragedy?* The experiencer, trapped in their conditions, is the spectator of the actual incident. This miniscule population’s response to the punctum, the detail of the presentation, may be vastly different—it may protest the airbrushed version of their realities. But the documentation of those responses—representation and presentation—becomes both peripheral and personal. This population of these experiencers/spectators is similarly small in Boolgarhi. It is that very community, the object of spotlighted gaze, that lives in conditions that Pandey sought to penetrate by ripping the suture. The institutional re-suturing of those conditions presents to us, the media prosumers, with a repairing mechanism. The disruptive puncturing of the conditions should also be the puncturing of our illusion—our punctum—but its sewing together restores our perspective that must remain aesthetic.

Still, whether the spectators/experiencers seem to struggle or relish their existence is moot. When the studium becomes an overwhelmingly dominant form of constantly narrated truths, the punctum stays personal or within families or small communities. The suturing of our

truths over their realities completes the media prosumer's literacy/illiteracy. The media prosumer, in their habitus-like condition, constantly absorbs and disseminates the sutured stories. Like their other uncertainties, their literacy is ambiguous and incomplete. They exist between mediated presentations and media's claims of representation. Only by personal experience can we verify the reality—such is the limitation of what we choose to register in what we learn.

Literacy scholar Henry Giroux's (2022) claim that our contemporary world suffers from a "climate of ignorance, irrationality, and misinformation" seems like a sweeping indictment. But illiteracy—as I have been arguing—is the inability to read and write, not necessarily ignorance. I submit that at the very least, there should be two interpretations—the lack of literacy and the denial of literacy. While ignorance is an absence, illiteracy can be an inability. Here, inability is a constructed social norm—the antithesis of privilege and *able-ness*. If media literacy claims to provide that agency, I hope to convince the reader that current practices in media literacy may not adequately address this illiteracy. A product that costs 50 cents to make in China or Bangladesh or Nigeria could be priced at, say, \$5. Yet there is no system that reveals that reality to us because our system presumes that what we (are made to) know is all we need to know. Surely, this cannot be called ignorance. An individual is made aware, from the label, that the product is made in another country, and yet revealing the actual cost might make the individual question the quantum of profiteering that ensues from exploitation of labor in a global context, and so forth. A parallel scenario concerning the media would be their failure to reveal inconvenient sides to a narrated story, the failure not merely to provide a panoptic view of it, but to refuse to let us go inside. However, this is accomplished by the use of binaries—either we are literate or illiterate.

This is an artificial binary, I argue. It assumes there is no continuum. Like a film set where we shine the light selectively, creating shadows of absent presence, these binaries are aesthetic products. Like the Grecian urn, we learn about something that distracts us from what we could have known. This is done simply by moving on to the next interesting story, or by telling us it's all we need to know about something. How else would a *value* be added to something? How does Republic TV in India mythologize Rahul Gandhi as an idiot and Narendra Modi as a superhero?

To illustrate the problematic nature of literacy that modern societies have assigned to ourselves, let me cite a particularly thorny example: In an informed society, are the so-called anti-vaxxers media illiterate? Our society may presume that they are illiterate on the unstable basis of texts that institutions make available to us, delegitimizing and invisibilizing those that may challenge a pre-determined institutional goal. Social discourse on such critical subjects is limited and subject to attempted suppression—without which a larger goal (say, of containing the pandemic) would not be achieved, or things can get chaotic. This invisibilization of the other then becomes a template that governments and institutions may apply to political-economic or ideological ends.

The accusation that our *current* environment is irrational may appear as though we have gravitated from being rational to being irrational. Rather, our irrationality is merely being exposed as we begin to understand the existence of the proverbial cloak. First of all, as a modern institution, our media operate on positivist notions of rationality founded on the visibility of empirical evidence to each story. Hence, our various understandings, too, are founded in this rationality. The following are the assumptions we must make when we discuss media literacy. Secondly, literacy is linked to modernity as a rational instrument and fulfills the institutional



demands that go along with modernity. Third, conventional literature on media literacy has developed on institutional grounding, thus employing the same rational structures to scold us for irrationality.

Critical inquirers may question the transformative aspect of the existence as a prosumer. After all, Marx's exhortation was that the purpose of philosophy is to not merely interpret the world but to change it. Yet, critical theorists must base their methods on the presumption that people at large are committed to change. However, the presumption may fail the test in practice. Meanwhile, we continue to live in the absurd world where everyone claims to state the truth. An example is the success of propaganda or demagoguery. If we must dismantle the notions of media literacy built on the premise of rationality, we must first question the flawed idea of rationality—specifically, question whether rationality is possible in an irrational world. Yet we must continuously dwell in the uncertainty between presumed autonomy and doubt, acting with the rationality that our structures have provided us.

Modi's India has routinely asked us to recast the heroes and villains of history. In the process, we may be compelled to believe we have been illiterate through the previous years of our life. In December 2021, anchors and some of their panelists on news channels appeared appalled at the idea when far-right Hindu monks campaigned to kill two million Muslims from a public platform in Haridwar, a holy Hindu town at the foothills of the Himalayas, at an event called *Islamic Bharat Mein Sanatan Ka Bhavishya* (“*The Future of the Sanatan in Islamic India*”), nudging forward the notion that Muslims will become the majority in India and the Hindu victimization that began with the invasions through the centuries continues. Even emotion must be packaged in a bottle of the same rationality that represents thought and not fate or destiny; a disruptive idea must be sold in the same rationality that is a feature of continuity.

Our social media environment adds to this confusion: While amplifying messages, it does not care for institutional legitimacy. Politicians routinely appeal to voters' rationality: When Donald Trump, campaigning before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, declared his intention to "drain the swamp" of usual Washington politics, or when Gandhi proclaimed peaceful protests against the British through *Satyagraha*, or when Modi justified his demonetization decision to his citizens by invoking Hindu scriptures.

Media prosumers operate on an axis of rationality as the media offer a constant cloak of rationality to their narration. In the presentation of life as art, certainty—the studium—is sought and promised. The uncertain, ambiguous, immobilizing, invisibilized spaces—the punctum—in the examples must not be viewed in isolation. It seems the world is in a churn, uncertain whether to trust or not to trust the institutions we grew up with; ambiguous about our dialectical roles and about our quest for truth in our media-prosumer society; immobilized between lived experiences and presentations; stuck in a limbo between the desire and pressures of visibility and the conditions and pleasures of invisibility. It is not as though we are all seeking any radical transformation, and yet we have learnt the art of rejection of one presentation over another.

### **Media illiteracy**

The sutured, mystified form in which mediated narration presents our self-perceived truths should be seen as our media illiteracy. It is a mediated construct of the field of visibilization-invisibilization and presentation-absentation. If we can thus see illiteracy as a construct, then it is reasonable that we do not categorize literacy and illiteracy as strictly demarcated conditions. Literacy, manifested in various forms of reading and writing, is a task in modernity: Like Derrida's "I am writing for illiterates," I am arguing that literacy is a demand of modernity that asks us to trust in something *other* than what we trusted earlier.

Mediated narration aids in an understanding of our world through visibilization and invisibilization—a technological phenomenon with ideological underpinnings. Just as visibilization accompanies presentation, invisibilization goes with absentation. We notice in Ahmedabad, Lakhimpur Kheri, and Boolgarhi an interplay of mediated interventions and prosumer interpretations. This interplay between production and consumption of texts is apt because the faculties of reading and writing—literacy—together constitute our prosumerism. My concern here is with the aesthetic form that aids in the meaning-making and its ability to construct in our minds a sense of certainty.

Furthermore, in the age of the media prosumer, the reader and re-writer of those texts, i.e., the prosumer, performs a social role. As a learner who shares the learning, the prosumer must first perceive illiteracy in their environment—that is, discover a gap in the understanding of others. For example, a news show or an independent YouTube video may question a chapter of history. This discovery may motivate them to share it forward. If the prosumer naturally feels the need to become literate and spread that literacy, as we must assume we all do, then we must understand the process that triggers that conversion.<sup>119</sup>

Moreover, certifications of our literacy are framed around its application. Learning the alphabet is not considered literacy—it is reading and writing using the alphabet that makes us literate. Thus, the test of literacy is assessed by knowledge—what we learn because of literacy—and not by literacy itself. However, our modern illiteracy merely speaks to our lack of understanding. For example, our media (for, what modern literacy is not mediated?) offer us the

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<sup>119</sup> Scientists point in the direction of natural affinity to learning among humans. Particularly, see psychotherapist Carl Rogers's (1961) book *On Becoming a Person*.

opportunity to understand our world through processes that are opaque: Not many of us are aware of the selectivity involved in the production process of news stories. Likewise, we may not be aware how news media obtain and compile their information. We are deeply engrossed in what is presented to us and lose the ability to wonder about what is not. The value of appearance, like that of performance, is a mainstreaming device—the suture.

Breaches occur regularly in this mystifying media framework. I will mention only two glaring and well-publicized examples. In 1980, Janet Cooke, a 25-year-old reporter at *The Washington Post*, used her Black identity to write the story of an eight-year-old African-American boy, a third-generation heroin addict. The story wrote about how, every day, his mother's lover "fires up Jimmy, plunging a needle into his bony arm, sending the fourth grader into a hypnotic nod."<sup>120</sup> The story turned out to be false—the *Post* forced Cooke to return the Pulitzer Prize she had won for the story. Between 1996 and 1998, Stephen Glass, a reporter at *The New Republic*, wrote and published 13 fully or partly fictitious news stories in the periodical.<sup>121</sup> They were published because Glass could manipulate his way around internal fact-checking processes. Despite a multilayered gatekeeping process, his personal influence prevailed over which newsworthy story reflected public agenda.

I have deliberately chosen these examples from previous decades to show that although such aberrations came to light repeatedly, we are told that our societies continue to be media-illiterate. They are instances of misinformation, in essence, instances of breach in the system by which the media narrate our truths. They may shake our trust but that is an easily resolved

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<sup>120</sup> See Cooke (1980).

<sup>121</sup> On the CBS show "60 Minutes," Glass describes how he managed this breach. See Leung (2003).

problem when we see them as aberrations. A somewhat self-contradictory proposition of current media literacy practice is that misinformation is particularly rampant in our current environment of narrative overload. Obfuscating this problem is the welter of confusing public communication that is a combination of facts and untruths, information and opinion. Media literacy practice itemizes specific infringements. School pedagogy may teach students what confirmation bias is, how to avoid fake news, how to detect satire, and so on.

Thus our rationality is kept in place. We may expect that current media literacy practice is well-positioned to resolve these breaches in an ad hoc and itemized manner, explaining how and why the breach occurred. The best result may be that if media prosumers were routinely exposed to such individual and institutional machinations, they can detect such aberrations when they are perceptible in the suture. Again and again, the suture is repaired because we see the rip in it as the aberration.

The fracture between spectator and prosumer informs this illiteracy. Even in the best media literacy practices of today, which may be intended to help us understand media processes, we must rely on the evaluation of texts that are produced by the news media whose processes we may object to. When news anchors tell us Modi, Rahul Gandhi, Trump, or Biden is lying, we must accept it or reject the claim because we have no tool of our own to verify. We may, of course, use an available technological fact-check tool, but with the flood of texts we receive each day, that is hardly practical. We have no alternative sources except those sources that we discredit as non-legitimate actors—such as independent social media texts. The suture, having assumed the power of certainty, is dismantled if we were to realize that we are dependent on narrations for our truths. With media literacy's evaluations of available and visible texts, rather than unavailable and invisible texts and communities, they merely become *post facto* objects of

study. Thus, these tools are handy but like Chat Generative Pre-Trained Transfer (ChatGPT), they, too, rely on information that is *available*. In the digital age of 3D printing, virtual reality, and all the convergence of the real and the virtual, our interaction seems to be far more immersive than the para-social interaction of the 1950s.<sup>122</sup> Yet we cannot ignore the notion that our real experiences are gravitating toward virtual, not the other way around—our local (real) understanding is defined by distant (virtual) narration.

**Uncertainty and the media prosumer.** We live in a maze, an omnopticon-like hodge-podge of news, opinion, entertainment, and emotion. This prosumer experience acts in an amphibious field. It is a field in which uncertainty is constructed. It is not the Marxist dialectical existence societies were meant to inhabit.

In *Social Literacies*, a helpful book on the use of literacy in development, Brian Street (1995) writes about the literacy experience of Fijian natives (“by no means naïve and mystical”). Christian missionaries utilized a natural (culturally cultivated) ambiguity to train the Melanesian community. In this ambiguity, the same words may bear different meanings. In Street’s argument, there is something “inherently ambiguous” in the very mode of writing: It is essentially a cultural ritual. To the missionary’s wife, a piece of writing was meant to represent an order with which to view her relationship with the writer, with whom she was willing to comply. This was a rational, technical, unambiguous understanding of writing. For the community’s chief, its meaning was “*mystified* and made awesome” (p. 97-98, emphasis added). Intervention and mystification may thus create uncertainty about our pre-existing literacy.

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<sup>122</sup> A reception-driven psychological phenomenon in which the television user is claimed to “interact” with the screen. See Horton and Wohl (1956).

As Niklas Luhmann (1994) points out, modernity is paradoxical. On one hand, modern societies are driven by roles for humans. A search for certainty seems natural to them—a refuge in something that brings certainty and stability, therefore something deterministic, stable, and universal, like a religion, or strong leadership that is less contingent, more *certain*. On the other hand, contingency and uncertainty are foundational features of modern science, whereby even seemingly insignificant events or riders can cause imbalance or change. A social impatience surrounds our societies in which contingency is pitted against an assumed inevitability.

Throughout this work, I have been interested in observing whether and how there is a change in the prosumer's existence in a field of narration in which certainty is ruptured by uncertainty, then sown back to certainty. The practice of media literacy seeks to resolve uncertainty with certainty. That act mirrors that of the mediated narrations. Both index the premise that modern narrations are nothing if not built on trust. As modernity theorists Barber (1983) and Seligman (1997) point out, this is a problematic assumption on which our modern societies function. They are founded on trust in the boundaries, prescriptions, and options provided by our institutions governed by the constitution, the law, legislations, news media, and even social authority (such as the caste order, as we saw in Boolgarhi). Therefore, when there is breach of trust, we should experience a catastrophic breakdown.

In the field, the prosumer is set in perpetual motion, constantly producing and consuming, influencing and being influenced by the symbolic interactions with each other. Secondly, the prosumer operates in a field of forces of production and consumption, one in which fact, fiction, information, and opinion are conflated. Thereby, presentation and representation, image and lived experience, and genres of communication are confounded in this field. Presented reality is re-presented as it is re-produced. We are all expected to be media prosumers, consuming and

producing mediated texts, influenced by and influencing our mediated environments, ensconced in an uncertain flux.

Here, I will borrow the concept of *habitus*, since habitus may come closest to explaining this flux. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who introduced the processes, symbols, and notions of cultural forms of reproduction, defines habitus as the “subjective but not individual system of internalized structures,” is a useful idea to examine the structural ways in which media prosumers operate in their presumed literacy (Bourdieu, 1972/1977, p. 86). His principle of habitus suggests the *uncertainty* of agency and its occupation of the collaborative space with structures.

Hence, structure-agency and subjectivity-objectivity are not dichotomous binaries. Rather, they are related in practice. Bourdieu defines “objective” not as unchanging, but as unchangeable at the hands of individual efforts. Structures present themselves as practical activities, as realities:

The conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. (Bourdieu, 1980/2010, p. 445)

Further, the result of this human endeavor is not predefined by structure but determined by practice. Human practice leads to embodiment and internalization of structures, leading to what may seem to be autonomous action. In fact, such practice is comprised of actions that symbolize the structures. One cultural representation of this thesis lies in the different practices by various classes in society.



This seems like a viable resolution even in our interactive, digital communicative age. Habitus is also helpful in connecting us with the liminality of absence-presence and visibility-invisibility. I turn to this concept to document the complex relationship between subjective and objective action. Like Bourdieu, I find the notion of the dichotomous existence of structure and agency problematic in our understanding of how media prosumers read, interpret, and produce texts. As Bourdieu argues, the differential outcomes of practices are not *that* different because they are underpinned by such ideological constructs as common sense and reasonableness. Action that emanates as a tactical response to a dominant strategy is not automatic, but a result of a constantly evolving understanding of structure. If results are not predetermined, although structure is offered as objective to the experiencer, action in response to it should be capable of evolving in further practice. Therefore, we may agree that habitus includes a combination of essential and evolutionary existence.

The media prosumer enters the field of literacy-illiteracy in a habitus-like system of narrations. The aesthetic values of experience and appreciation may interact in deriving meanings from them. The media prosumer may encounter a *sense* of constancy when, on our smartphone, we scroll down an online news aggregating platform, say, Google News, we see a constant flow of news stories; on social media, we see the constancy of other people's and our own lives on our screens. On the other hand, as social media users, we consciously consume and produce media texts, thus amplifying visible, articulate stories, adding our own claim to further represent the voice of the object of the story. In their presumed literacy, media prosumers exist in habitus. These spaces are occupied by an active-passive continuum—like Bourdieu's habitus. The media literacy-illiteracy field of flux may be offered as continuous and routinized.

In this field, the trouble is that we may never understand a prosumer's position. Akin to the field in Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle,<sup>123</sup> the field in which habitus is set is arguably too dynamic to be understood from an outside position and needs to be experienced as a practice in order to be understood. (So, Bourdieu's *dispositions* is nice wordplay!) A study by Fiske and Dawson (1996) examined the "conjectural [but not causal] connection" between the popularity of violent images in the media, violence in society, and capitalistic ideology. A group of homeless people built meaning in their own environment (a church where they are housed) from viewing violent images in the Bruce Willis starrer *Die Hard*. Through informal interviews and observing viewing preferences (R-rated violent movies), reactions to the artifact were recorded. Unexpectedly, violence—for example, when a terrorist kills a tycoon—evoked cheer amongst the audience. Thus, the articulative dynamics within communities, stemming from collective experiences, may inform us better. We will come to communities in a later section.

Although it must be clear that the media prosumer acts within a system and a field of flux, the origination of uncertainty as a project of modernity may need a brief explanation. Here, I turn to British media studies scholar Nicholas Garnham. Garnham (2000) points to the roles of humans as autonomous individuals and as creators of social culture. He suggests that in practice, it can only be *both* and not either, working in "complex, shifting, and often contradictory ways across the tensions of the divide and the relationship upon which the ethical dilemma is posed" (p. 6). The Enlightenment project was therefore an enquiry into the possibilities of constructing viable communities for autonomous, reflective moral agents and thus, under the conditions of modernity, combining happiness and virtue.

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<sup>123</sup> whereby we cannot measure a particle's velocity, or movement, and its position at the same moment.

Central to this project, Garnham says, is *doubt*. Because of the limited rationality of the human, total emancipation is impossible. Within this limited scope, the practice of emancipation is a combination of the individual and the social—autonomous individuals and humans as creators of social culture. Both the practice of daily life and the practice of media are subjects of this simulated autonomy, bound by alternating constancy, doubt, and the ability to express. Expression can be articulate or silent because the interventions—editors, algorithms, and in general the technology and political economy of the media—are designed to lend our voice to us. This is somewhat like moving our lips with no sound coming out, but we cannot hear, do not know we cannot hear, and thus do not realize our silence. This is the kind of liminality the Boolgarhi victim’s father found himself in.

Thus, the system in habitus, as uncertain as it may be, appears to offer us the sense that it offers not so much a dialectical arena as a field of uncertainty. Suppose a narrated text appears on their Facebook timeline. A prosumer may simply share a post unthinkingly or add a comment in agreement or a counter-comment or take the post in a different direction—or none of these. Our modern roles, it would seem, are so purposefully defined as to bring transformation by dwelling in our liminal spaces—in itself a tautological argument. Bringing orderliness in this flux and uncertain field is the antithesis—yet, the ideological media field purports to bring rationality and certainty to it using trusted values. To the contrary, the field of a prosumer’s operation appears chaotic and unseemly.

If literacy is reading and writing, illiteracy must therefore be the lack of it. However, our new illiteracy is constructed in ways in which it becomes the consequence of the dismantling of our truths—as though we have *lost* our presumed literacy. Our trust shifts from one source to another, from institutionalized narrations to those of communities or individuals. For example, if

we always thought vaccines are good for us and nothing more, and new arguments threaten that knowledge, it is not merely the information that destabilizes our understanding, it is also the means, the form, the source in which our trust is destabilized. We may ask whether this is because institutional narrations failed to tell us earlier the side effects or whether those narrations were incomplete because the institutions were themselves unsure or unaware. Similarly, if we “witness” a murder that a news channel shows us via a camera, and it is clear who the perpetrator is, but then a new form—perhaps a verbal narration of the same incident—is offered to us by the same channel, and claims that in fact, the perpetrator we see there is the victim, then our understanding is destabilized because we recognize we may have been seeing it all wrong. We do not realize it—we simply recognize it. That is a constructed form of illiteracy because it is a deconstruction—or reconstruction.

We recognize letters of the alphabet in order to understand information that is being transmitted to us through words and sentences. Similarly, in understanding our world, we recognize forms and formulations using the conduits that our modern systems make available to us. Thus, this recognition is responsible for our literacy. Our literacy that was constructed in one way can be unstable if it is challenged. Rather, it is destabilized.

## **Mystification and demystification**

If mystification aims to simplify our world through narration, demystification must do the opposite. I find it useful to probe demystification from the approaches of its most celebrated scholars, Roland Barthes and Henri Lefebvre. Both of them viewed demystification as a strategy towards a solution to overcome mystification. Mystification is what “those in political or social power may be seeking to confuse and deceive” (Kelly, 2000, p. 81). In this dissertation, I have argued that the actions of institutions such as news media are often embedded into processes that offer common sensical notions of our truths. In doing so, I have argued that the genesis of our illiteracy is a form of mystification that is enabled by the systems and processes of modernity.

Lefebvre is one of the foremost critics of mystification; his evaluations date back to the 1930s. As interest in mystification grew largely in the 1950s, he examined “a wider social suspicion that the producers of imagined or constructed narratives are deliberately mendacious” (Kelly, 2000, p. 82). To Barthes, mystification is a structural problem perhaps because he sees linguistic structures in the mystification. In *Image Music Text*, he writes that the denotative status of a photograph is that its spectator derives perfect, common-sensical meaning in the analogy it presents—its aesthetic value (Barthes, 1977). It is the most *certain* of the meanings. Furthermore, the certainty of the denotative meaning is carefully fixed rather than opening up a confusing medley of connotative meanings.

To Barthes, the demystification of aesthetic value entails the restoration of the link between a work of art and its historical and social connections. Both Barthes and Lefebvre suggest strategies that are essentially tools of empowerment of the beholder, or what Kelly terms “myth-consumer.” Writing in *Mythologies*, Barthes’s (1957/1991) strategy is demystification by illumination—that is, clarifying to the viewer the historicity of why the mystification happens.

But Barthes's treatise on myths is replete with the attributed value of aesthetics and spectacle. After emphatically arguing that mythmaking plays an essential role in construction of dominant ideology, Barthes stops short of recommending social action as a strategy.

To Lefebvre, the problem is resolved by the strategy of social action. Given their Marxist borrowings, their approach may conceal the assumption of a symbolic social order in the way mystification functions. "For Lefebvre, mystification is not a process by which the innocent are duped by the devious, but rather a collective process by which social relations, including power relations, are acted out in everyday life in the domain of ideology" (Kelly, 2000, p. 87). To him, absence, too, defines a form of control. Leisure—the absence of the humdrum of life—is an example of how something to be cherished is actually a form of mystification. An example of Lefebvre's approach to mystification is embedded in the aesthetics of visibility: A town dweller strolling through the countryside is fascinated by the beauty without necessarily being aware of the processes that produce it. Revelation of the ethics (my term) of a peasant's difficulties might add to the understanding of the townie (Lefebvre, 1947/1991). Of course, this demystification takes away from the mystique of the myth, and hence from the intended aesthetic value.

Nowhere is the enablement of mythification more visible today than in the practice of social media. Social media have added another dimension to social-action role of the myth-consumers. In acting both as a source and a consumer of news messages, they are now also the myth-maker and the myth-amplifier. In practice, legacy media pick up popular narratives from social media and weave news stories around them, and in turn social media further visibilize those narratives. Such a process entails the role of a media user to, on one hand, deconstruct messages and construct meanings, and on the other, construct and disseminate messages.

In an earlier section, I alluded to Axel Honneth's idea of recognition. Honneth's chapter "Recognition" begins with the Prologue of Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, where the first-person narrator is somebody that "'one' looks straight through ... quite simply 'invisible' to everyone else" perhaps because "the person reporting his invisibility is black; for those who look through him in this way are, in passing, referred to as 'white'" (Honneth and Margalit, 2001, pp. 111-114). Below, I will draw a linkage between (in)visibility, recognition, and demystification.

Honneth's concept of recognition and Ranciere's capacity-power, contemporaneous and both critical of modern notions, are comparable. Ranciere (2009) in particular is often recognized as an iconic scholar of spectatorship in media studies. He connects spectatorship to knowledge and reinstates ideological context into the exploration of text.<sup>124</sup> In critiquing the thesis that to be a spectator is "to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act" (p. 2), Ranciere questions the implied presumption that art somehow immobilizes the spectator and therefore an active community is one that does not tolerate "theatrical mediation" (p. 3). Just the reverse, he argues—the drama on stage or screen instigates action once the spectators leave the theatre, "where they become active participants as opposed to passive voyeurs" (p. 4). Notwithstanding his recognition as a modern stalwart, Ranciere is found in paragraph in this work because although performance is crucial to our study, the interplay between visibility and invisibility and a recognition of the narrative field of truths takes precedence over investment in the symbols associated with the theater. Doing so would need long-winded unpacking.

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<sup>124</sup> Adorno showed in his notes before their 1970 publication of *Aesthetic Theory* that aesthetics are essentially products of ideology and are themselves ideological. It might be the case that the detachment of context in subsequent theoretical movements limited his iconic work's bigger influence at the time of its release.

We must first acknowledge, as Honneth suggests, that invisibility is “literal and figurative” (Honneth and Margalit, 2001, pp. 111-112). Its resolution, recognition, may ensue when there is expression, or “cognitive identification and expression” (p. 116). But recognition is challenged by the “streetlight effect.” Since we cannot perceive something we can’t see, we look for an object where there is light. If *the* object is unavailable, *an* object helps us construct *the* object in our minds. The streetlight deflects and distracts the observer’s visual attention away from hidden objects, making the object unavailable for any evaluation. Invisibilization is a reinforcement of *control* over its invisibility—its mystification.

Just as the media are carriers of presence, creating recognition and awareness, they are also the carriers of absence, creating invisibility and illiteracy. Regardless, mystification must be seen not as the creation of nebulosity, but as the construction of certainty—a resolution to satisfy the social angst we discussed in the theory chapter. The form of mystification that we are interested in for our project is the kind Amy Kaplan (1988) writes about, the development of expertise as “a representative of the commonplace and the ordinary, at a time when such knowledge no longer seemed available to common sense” (p. 13). In that sense, mystification is a form of acquired wisdom. This is the kind of wisdom that news anchors, political demagogues, and self-styled maintenance personnel of social order bring. In this sense of the term, common sense is closely associated with mystification. In that frame, we may view mystification as a form of continuity—an ideological process that is embedded in our mediated lives. Common sense not only explains but explains *away*.

The maze of factors that we should consider in media literacy warrants a methodology that provides for complexity. I have the backing of African American studies scholar Cornel West’s (1990) essay, “The New Cultural Politics of Difference.” West offers a methodological



explanation of the recognition of difference. Identity politics plays a big role in this new recognition—inclusion cannot be practiced through artificial means. People with privilege seek to align themselves with demoralized, demobilized, depoliticized, and disorganized people, and recognize—and visibilize—particular histories, contexts, and pluralities that are variable and constantly shifting. Yet the hurdle with this new movement is that it must rely on the same institutional systems that it defies—a challenge in representation and invisibility. This seems like a familiar problem, which we have discussed earlier.<sup>125</sup>

The methodological resolution in West's essay lies in demystification. After considering Heidegger's destruction, which, he says, offers no tools of analysis (a familiar critique); Derrida's deconstruction, which is binary, dichotomous, and salutary, not granting the reader purposeful agency; and Rorty's demythologization, whose mapping is too variable to be critical enough to highlight gains, losses, and costs. Demystification emerges as the most inclusive—perhaps by default. It tracks complex power structures, addresses representational strategies, and suggests a “transformative praxis,” accentuating human agency in all its complexity without leaving any loose threads hanging (pp. 520-521). Three strands of West's essay resonate closely with issues of media literacy: The recognition of the materiality of struggle, devaluing claims of representation, and the hypothesis that demystifying texts could be a liberating force. West's pragmatism and a new social or communal politics of media literacy might agree that a Freirean liberation may lie in resistance, in discourse, representation and intervention. There is some overlap in the co-creational aspect of this interventional learning. Moreover, West's strategic challenges in the new cultural politics of difference—intellectual, existential, and political—are

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<sup>125</sup> See Alcoff (1992); Tuck and Yang (2014). Also Spivak (1988).

also the problems of media literacy. The first challenge is to resolve the representation-intervention conflict. The second is to determine whether to resist or co-opt institutions and their access to finance and data. The third is a political and policy challenge—to forge coalitions of cooperation. I find that we may borrow from West’s demystification argument using our aesthetics handle.

One of the main reasons that the practice of media literacy is problematic is that it presents a paradoxical situation. It must divide our world into binaries of truths and non-truths, and thus, in doing so, mystification only perpetuates. A late discovery in my process of scouring literature is a decades-old book, *How Real is Real? Confusion, Disinformation, Communication*. Thought-provoking works such as this should have prepared us better in arranging media literacy into our systems decades ago. Of course, there is no way to tell whether, had Rwandans been better media literate, whether they could have prevented the media-generated wave of xenophobia that led to the genocide of 1994. That argument is moot because we are not sure understanding of what is going on is in itself a solution. Organized social action is possible by what can only be termed community literacy.

In any case, in that delightful book, author Paul Watzlawick (1976) brings up some delightful instances of paradoxes that we may encounter. A paradox, as we know, is a self-contradiction: Like “No generalization is completely true, including this one.” Watzlawick narrates a paradoxical situation where an imaginary Being has the reputation of predicting human choices with almost total accuracy. Being has often correctly predicted your choices. As far as you have known or heard, Being has never made an inaccurate prediction about your or others’ choices. Now, Being shows you two boxes: Box 1 contains \$1000. Box 2 contains either \$1 million or \$0. You may go straight to Box 1 or 2. So where is the problem? Should you not

definitely open Box 1 first? When Robert Nozick wrote about this experiment, urging academics to test it on students, the condition was that rather than go with an argument, subjects must conclusively prove that the other side is *absurd*. None of the subjects could.

The fracture between the mediated and the *unmediated* is that the mediated does not appear “absurd.” The absurdity test is applicable when we consider *intervention* as a process of demystification to achieve media literacy. How do we know what we know, and why do we not know what we do not know? Proving the absurdity of the alternative—*that is all ye need to know*—is the only way to we can legitimately claim to reach the truth.

### **A methodology to understand media illiteracy**

One way to understand the uncertain spaces of absence-presence and visibility-invisibility is through visual and linguistic grammar. Imagine a community that is far removed from media gaze and removed from media access. Imagine in diametric opposition a community that is constantly in the glare of media lights and constantly consuming its own realities repackaged as media narratives. Most of us live between these two extremes. This varying visibility—I imagine a swinging lightbulb as I look down from my metaphorical lighting director’s perch—must be explored as the liminality between our (mediated) truth and our reality (conditions).

*Firstly*, visibilized and invisibilized realities may be responsible for controlling literacy and illiteracy levels. *Secondly*, material absence does not mean absence per se—it may mean its invisibility to our material senses. *Thirdly*, presence/absence is reified by visibility/invisibility. That is to say, when media visibilize an object, a community, or a reality, they in effect shine a

light on something that had remained darkened and enable their presence in the audience's world.<sup>126</sup>

In *Invisibilization of Suffering*, Benno Herzog (2020) presents suffering as being rendered invisible by contemporary culture. He rightly argues that it is only possible to infer, not study, the invisible (p.153-154). We resort to what he calls the "streetlight effect," looking for an object where there is light, an object available for our examination. If *the* object is unavailable, *an* object substitutes for it. Doing so further invisibilizes the hidden object, creating a condition of absent presence, which may in simple terms be described as a human phenomenon whereby our presence may be altogether unacknowledged.<sup>127</sup> The streetlight thus deflects and distracts the beholder's attention away from objects that are hidden, making the object unavailable for evaluation.

A second way to view absent presence is in ideological terms: Giroux (1997) emphasizes the need for pedagogy to recognize the absent presence of authority. He reiterates his rejection of positivism because it is "wedded to the celebration of facts and management of the 'visible'" (p. 72). He premises his argument on his observation that the traditional education system either ignores "the significance of human agency and subjectivity" or only considers structural determinants that "lie outside of the immediate experiences of teachers, administrators, students,

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<sup>126</sup> In its fundamental form, absence may be a result of external control, say, by physically excluding ethnic groups. But as Marx-revivalist Louis Althusser (1971) argues in the chapter "Cremonini, Painter of the Abstract," it is possible to "paint" the presence of ideological structures that determine living conditions within ideological structures by drawing "visible connexions that depict by their disposition, the determinate absence which governs them" (pp. 236-237). Analyzing Althusser's thesis on "materialism of absence," Toscano (2014) adds: "[P]erhaps the thorniest problems that such a materialism without matter raises, which leads us back from abstraction towards praxis, is: whom is this visibility for?" It may be a pertinent question with which to probe our news media.

<sup>127</sup> Gergen (2002), in his empirical analysis of absent presence in mobile communications, states: "One is physically present but is absorbed by a technologically mediated world of elsewhere" (p. 227).

and other human actors” (p. 71). He argues for a reinterpretation of ideology as the construction of human agency and critique, and texts as “a process and a product” that can become the medium for critical communication pedagogy (p. 91). In either case, invisibilization is the exercise of external control over *invisibility*: Just as the media are carriers of presence, creating recognition, they also carry absence, creating invisibility.

Here, we will view the collision of information-as-truth and reality-as-truth—that is, the conflict of presentation and experience—in terms of availability and visibility. Information that is invisibilized by the media but visible in material surroundings is both absent and present. Specifically in the case of media literacy, where mediated messages are the controlling factor, absent presence and illiteracy may be related in some ways. Visibilized and invisibilized realities correspond to absence and presence in the following ways:

1. *Invisibilized absence*: Realities absent in the media and absent in an individual’s material surroundings.
2. *Invisibilized presence*: Realities present in the media and absent in an individual’s material surroundings.
3. *Visibilized absence*: Realities absent in the media and present in an individual’s material surroundings.
4. *Visibilized presence*: Realities present in media and present in an individual’s material surroundings.

In this framework, we may argue that 1, absent absence, signifies illiteracy and 4, present presence, signifies literacy, while 2 and 3 are liminal levels of literacy/illiteracy on a scale of learning. Absent presence, as in 2, may indicate an individual’s inability to relate a text available in the media to personal realities, while present absence, as in 3, may indicate that an individual’s realities are not available in the media. Absent absence indicates unavailability and

invisibility. Absent presence indicates that media-represented realities are unavailable. Present absence indicates unavailable media texts and available but unrepresented material realities.



Figure 27. The in-between, illiterate existence between presentation and reality.

For example, as an institution that is absent in physical terms but present in influence, news media are arguably organized in larger circles of influence than communities. In countries like India and elsewhere especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, enormous cultural and economic disparities exist between city-centric media and the rural hinterlands where the vast majority of the population lives. In those contexts, communities and media may be mutually invisible to each other. Communities may be invisible to the media but the media may be visible to the communities. Media may be unavailable for representation, whereby communities are invisible to the majority of media audiences. Yet media texts are available to those communities.

Let us also consider the cultural dimension of absence/presence in terms of cultural location of a community and its tension with pedagogy. Macedo (2005) approaches critical pedagogy from his personal identity, as an immigrant who felt “culturally schizophrenic: being present and yet not visible, being visible and yet not present” (p. 11). Even without overt hierarchies, classes (and races, and castes) may often find better expressions and agency within

their groups rather than between groups. But the visibility/invisibility struggle is linked both to struggles of intersectionality to the “prototypicality” of an individual’s membership in a community—a paradox of intersectionality, as Razzante et al. (2021) call it. Further, this linkage is mutually consequential: Suppose a learner from a small village is found reading in a public building in a bigger village surrounded by noise and distraction rather than more conveniently at home. We may ask her why. Her response indicates no struggle: “Because our street doesn’t have electricity.” And why is that? “Our portion of the village is not connected so we can’t draw it.” And why is that? “Because we are *Dalits*.” Only after we indulge in a back-and-forth probe might she begin to understand and unpack the oppression from an interlinkage of caste and poverty, and within the inner circle, of gender and familial structures.

It should be undeniable, especially for critical and cultural theorists, that the very process of reading-writing, of learning-dissemination, should be wrapped in social structures.<sup>128</sup> But as Foucault wrote, modern power is capillary, operating in the least visible parts of our social-individual system through everyday practices. As investigators of media literacy, we cannot ignore the identity of the teacher in a community and the osmosis of learning. Intersectionality of identities may pave the way for a complementary relationship between a teacher and a learner.

A media literacy training program delivered to a tightly knit Dalit community in an Indian village is designed in a faraway city. Furthermore, the mediated texts of examination are also stitched together there. There is a relative lack of recognition in that one may not fully recognize the experiences of the other. A local trainer may be better conscious that disparity, and in that sense, the trainer is the interpreter of meanings. Yet both the learner and the trainer enjoy

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<sup>128</sup> As Shuman (1993) writes, collaboration in literacy carries within it structures of power.

and suffer individual consequences of their intersectionality. This is the trainer's *insider-outsider* location. This is already well-designed in critical communication pedagogy, but media literacy practice in community settings can adopt it and redesign it suitably.

Let us now suppose that the trainer for our learner from the previous example is a Dalit man belonging to the bigger village, delivering a media literacy program to communities of women in that and neighboring villages. It is possible that the Dalit learner shares similar experiences of oppression with the trainer, but may not share with him because he is a man. It is also possible that she expresses only “shared experiences” in the presence of women from the “upper” castes. Therefore, beyond issues of visibility of a community, the paradox of intersectionality is also about what and how much of sharing actually surfaces.

Giroux (1997) urges us to interpret texts as tools of emancipation—and decode how media visibilize texts by relying on the audience's “common sense.” If media literacy should be a project of co-creation of learning, the trainer and the learner share and represent their realities to negotiate absences and presences of stories in communities and communities in stories. The trainer may approach the space from a larger media-represented world. The learner may arrive at it from their local circumstances and locus. In adopting a critical method, the trainer strategizes to move the two representations closer on their shared platform. In other words, sharing in community media literacy learning is goal-oriented, strategic, and temporary. Temporarily sharing a narrative context challenges the prescriptive model and adopts one that collaboratively moves toward an emancipated presence. Conceptualizing media literacy in this framework may be helpful in exploring how it can be put to pedagogical, normative, and practical uses. The trainer and the learner share and negotiate absences and presences of media texts and community



stories. Temporarily sharing a narrative context challenges the prescriptive model and adopts one that collaboratively moves toward an emancipated presence.

A visibilized-presence condition may appear to be the aspired position. That appearance is deceptive because the rider of self-perceptions and reflexive invisibility, which we have discussed, may intervene. Moreover, while absence/presence and visibility/invisibility go hand-in-hand, they do not adequately address *availability/unavailability*, that is, whether an individual, object, or text is available. regardless of their absence or presence, articulation or silence, visibility or invisibility. Hao's (2011) narration of his experience as a transnational student in a classroom exemplifies a self-preferred form of silence that may problematize articulation in a situation where identity is the key factor. While learners may use silence as a performance, they may exploit it as a strategy for social existence. This value of appearance, like that of performance, is a social suture—a mainstreaming device—based on the availability of a visual to the viewer, and vice versa. Thereby, unavailability of a community to the mass media means unavailability of mediated messages to the community. This binary sets us up for the available unavailability of an individual, object, or text. That pushback must be acknowledged heartily. Whether communities or individuals, the right to invisibility needs consideration in our age of surveillance that is both a panopticon and its theoretical opposite, what we may call the “omnopticon.” A spotlight can be thrust in our faces at any time, but a more general floodlight ensures that we are aware of a constancy in surveillance. In recognition, the transition from absence to presence must be seen as a transition in awareness. A high level of abstraction is recommended when we adopt the demystification model into a method of delivery. Nevertheless, this is not to deny the deconstructive role of media literacy.

Articulation and visibility are both performative and real, both material and symbolic. Conceptualizing media literacy in this framework may be helpful in exploring how it can be put to pedagogical, normative, and practical uses. Material reality may be invisibilized and remain un-narrated. The absence of material presence is not the absence of material, and therefore invisibilization is not absence, but a form of absent presence.

### **Media literacy and communities**

Regions whose local practices of oppression, economic sustenance, and so forth, may suffer from a lack of research and visibility. Critics and artists may opt out of these regions because they may be less accessible, less communicative, or less known. Thereby, communities are directly invisibilized not merely by structural institutions, but by the very critical forces that promise to offer discursive or other forms of resolution to social issues.

Invisibilized communities and texts seemed to discover each other in the Congress party's *Bharat Jodo Yatra*, the marathon on-foot journey we discussed earlier. The journey of learning unmediated realities reveals a fascinating panorama of experiences. Covered live by the party's YouTube channel, each vignette seems like a spotlight in our historical and cultural understanding of India. In one instance, Gandhi re-inaugurated a small lane in a village in Karnataka state. The lane had remained in disuse since 1993, when communal clashes between caste members in the village had divided it, and the lane was the dividing line. After this re-inauguration, the Congress claims, the village is reunited with itself. If this is true, the social impact of *real*—unmediated—presence is the kind of provider that virtual, or mediated, narratives cannot possibly render.

After the initial disinclination of a pliant news media system that is largely antipathic or apathic to the opposition to cover the tour on mainstream channels and main sections of

newspapers, the impressive crowds along the tour forced some of the reluctant platforms to pay attention. In their coverage, there is justified skepticism, mostly remaining on the surface of realpolitik, especially where Rahul Gandhi is concerned, having narrated him for about eight years as an immature idiotic politician. The sizable crowds and their response to Gandhi speak otherwise, hailing him—live on Congress cameras and those of tens of independent video channels that are covering the tour—as a leader of the future. Emboldened, Gandhi himself, in his periodic speeches along the tour, delivers scathing assaults on Modi’s policies, the increasing authoritarianism, and other facets of what he believes are popular peeves and that the media have been suppressing in their support to Modi. Jairam Ramesh, the media head of the Congress and one of the members on the journey, told Nabila Jamal, the reporter from *India Today* news channel whom I introduced in an earlier chapter:

It’s the *real* Mr. Gandhi. It’s not a *new* Mr. Rahul Gandhi. It’s an *unmediated* Rahul Gandhi, connecting with the people, talking to the people. People are talking to him. There is nobody like this [pointing to the channel’s microphone] to distort his message. He’s talking to [people] and they are not going to distort what he says. They are not going to give a headline to what he says. That’s the basic difference between talking to people directly and talking to people like you. I don’t know what line from this conversation you will take to sensationalize the interview. (India Today, 2022b)

This is an ironic twist to narrative construction, because when such a construction is assumed to be mediated, communities appear to have understood the gaps it leaves. Both the narrative-setting politician and the narrative-consuming publics seem to learn from one another in non-mediated proximities.

Another side to this visibility is self-invisibilization. We see a representation in Radha Hegde’s protagonist Kumari, On the other hand, Hegde’s protagonist lives a life that is not available to her agency: The media realities that define her community are not her own. She does not communicate her reality. If we conjecture her as a media prosumer on social media, she may

shed the light elsewhere—not to the ugliness of her dark conditions but to more *general*, more *available* ones, texts others can understand and appreciate. The corpus of realities of a local context indexing the larger picture is known only to those who experience them without routinizing the experience in habitus-like fashion. What is absent in texts, documentation, and discourse is therefore merely invisible to the media and to research. This collection of realities is a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. Only media prosumers are left, both visible and present while being absented by their own texts, since those texts present realities they learn from the media.

For media literacy, this complementarity is significant as the potential filler of what gets left out in between the two spaces. The space between the mediated and the unmediated is thus a metaphoric representation of the existence of media prosumer communities in which media literacy programs intervene to endorse which side is the more real. Co-creation in media literacy programs can only be contextual to nations and geographies that often live in clusters with high levels of sharing. For example, about 65 percent of Indians live in villages, which are structured with huts and houses in close proximity. There are few secrets, and families get together to group-solve one another's problems. Yet local governance is in the hands of democratically elected *panchayats*. Habitually, panchayats take moralistic, mostly conservative decisions. Importantly, political decisions are often made collectively—there are instances of whole villages voting for one party. Caste and religious divides are visible. People of the same caste and religion live in clusters within a village. News consumption habits often depend on how they are represented in politics—the upper castes have conventionally voted for the ruling, majoritarian BJP, while the lower castes have voted for other parties.

The oppressed are afraid to assume and exercise freedom, while the oppressors are afraid of losing the agency to oppress.<sup>129</sup> For example, in India, a controversy around the *hijab*, the Islamic headscarf worn by women, exemplifies the fear of freedom. In early 2022, a mandate among some schools and a later court verdict endorsing a ban on the hijab led hijab-wearing women to fight legally for the freedom to wear the headscarf, but not religiously to fight the freedom *not* to wear it. The women preferred wearing visibly religious identity in an environment where making themselves invisible was a personal choice. The media have continued to frame the hijab problematically, both as an oppressive tradition and as a representation of individual choice. However, the idea that media literacy is capable of solving *real* problems, not notional ones, remains problematic.

Localized efforts could successfully shed light—*illuminate*—the darkened spaces that marginalized communities occupy. Locality is important simply because it can address the issues that centralized narrations carry. *Firstly*, in communities, deep-rooted practices of discrimination range from access to practices of economic or social, regional or linguistic segregation. This means learners in training may share similar identities—castes, gender, locations, and so on—and learn to decode mediated information for a greater benefit that improves their lives. On the other hand, and *secondly*, the vulnerability of revealing and sharing personal experiences in a public—even safe—environment is problematic. Moreover, local revelations are also problematic to national coverage. In Boolgarhi, YouTubers uploaded the victim’s statement revealing the names of her assailants; the delayed medical report showed no evidence of rape;

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<sup>129</sup> The celebrated work of Paulo Freire recognizes illiteracy as a material struggle embedded in a cultural/ideological struggle. This struggle brings with it a “fear of freedom” (Freire, 1970/2005, p. 36).

the police discredited the YouTube statement; the court dismissed it; the Indian government is keen to regulate who can upload videos on YouTube channels. Local mediation and emancipation can fuse only when there is institutional approval.

bell hooks (1994) argues that pedagogy must promote, above all, well-being through empowerment. Therefore, our next problem should be to explore whether media literacy pedagogy can be extended to communities. Exploring new avenues of learning primarily through the experience of a diverse class of students is a form of holistic learning through inclusion of new ideas into not merely a body of knowledge, but into our lives. To hooks, engaged pedagogy is an instrument to *create engagement* as a tool to creating knowledge that generates the practice of freedom. Participants in a group are likely to practice the new enlightenment. Dialogue becomes key to this critical form of pedagogy. While monologic processes assume consensus, dialogic processes result in engagement.<sup>130</sup> Critical pedagogy, the key to “pedagogy of the oppressed,” engages in dialogic, participatory co-creation of knowledge. This collaboration entails sharing of individual interpretations of the world from the perspective of the intersectionality of identities.

Fassett and Warren (2007), regarded as the foundational authors of the term, view critical communication pedagogy as a solution to the problem of “deproblematized” practices. In other words, critical pedagogy must problematize issues such as identity towards an understanding of the world that is free from structural trappings of the academy. Fassett and Warren recommend 10 “commitments” for teachers in specific geographic, cultural, social contexts and in specific

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<sup>130</sup> Emancipation should no longer mean an escape from power, but a resistance against what Biesta (2012) calls “taken-for-grantedness” (p. 8). As he rightly points out, emancipation as a process of demystification occupies a central role in monological approaches where a truth is assumed to be objective.

pedagogic forms. These commitments presume a classroom setting, which comes with its own ideological commitments.

This is all complicated by the insiders and new group readjustments, where messages reach individuals and communities and are often interrupted by community leaders such as administrators of WhatsApp groups—and thus, new forms of communication that aim at individuals who are also members of traditional community hierarchies. Even if pedagogy can miraculously resolve media illiteracy, albeit unconvincingly, the problem, of course, is to standardize the dialogic model in sociological rather than pedagogic practices. The standardization problem is a problem of social disparities and discriminating practices. The classroom integrates what the society divides—putting the society in the classroom remains a challenge among the vast communities in countries like India where they have leapfrogged in technology only to perpetuate the discriminatory social practices.

## CHAPTER 7

### CONCLUSION

I have argued that media literacy is ineffective, that media illiteracy is our seeming and presumed ability to read and write media texts. That is, our illiteracy lies in the fact that we do not know if we are media-illiterate—whether and when truths are hidden in and sutured by the algorithmic maze or political or neoliberal agendas. Using three examples of mediated narration in conditions of lived experience, I have argued that modern processes suture the irrationalities of contemporary society using the thread of narration. The dressed-up city of Ahmedabad, Goswami’s forwarding of interpretation as objective truth, and the simulacrum of order in Boolgarhi attempt to establish continuity. But they are in fact sutures that falsely bind fragmented realities. I hope that the illustrations expose that what is presented by the nationalistic-corporate-media complex to us, the media prosumer, is the opposite of opportunities for genuine negotiation of meanings (as the British cultural studies would have hoped). To create a better world, our media need to highlight failures so that we might struggle to fix them. Instead, I have demonstrated that this mess of our current media environment only constructs “non-struggles.”

There is an internal consistency to the three illustrative cases. Those examples, in combination, are my attempt to delimit the examination so that we may continue our inquiry into such consensus-dependent interventions. *First*, placing narration at the center of inquiry has been a fruitful fulcrum in this study. Perhaps the most prominent factor of internal delimitation lies in aesthetics, as the title of this work should have indicated to the reader. In the empirical chapters, I used forms of aesthetic analysis to demonstrate the ways in which invisibilizing narrations suture over the actual experiences within communities in India. This aesthetic maneuver of



invisibilization runs across the landscape: The urban narration hides the rural, institutional narration hides the non-institutional, presentation hides absentation.

We learned about the existence of the Boolgarhi villagers, the proud approval of the Ahmedabad crowds of showcasing the glitzy bits of their city to the world, and Arnab Goswami's narrative performance of the incident in Lakhimpur Kheri. We observed that narrative intervention is a common factor in each—the news media and state agencies in Boolgarhi, the visual texts of Ahmedabad, and the news rhetoric on Republic TV. Aberrant, non-institutional data was met by the “mainstream” narration with course correction. Heretofore, our discipline of journalism and mass communication has failed utterly to account for this dimension, leaving such matters to the humanities' primary focus on the fictional, narrative domain of mass media “texts.”

*Secondly*, aesthetic value is central to my arguments. Interrogating aesthetic value is crucial for understanding media spectacles, news narration, and journalistic practice. In each case it is an enabler, a catalyst, a methodology. There is a linkage to aesthetic value in each of themes in this dissertation. I hope it is evident by now that: One, in mediated narration, aesthetics form the very methodology that enables (in)visibilization and performance. Two, the news media's processes use aesthetic value render the invisibilization that delineates the desirable from the undesirable. Three, media illiteracy is a product of these aesthetic maneuvers and processes by which mediated narration selectively *renders* texts and *presents* the world to the media prosumer.

In a general sense, the ideologically fraught question of how people within societies choose reaffirms my approach to aesthetic value. A narrative organization of collective desire, even at the cost of some freedoms, builds consensus. Aesthetic value plays a crucial role in directing us towards the desirable without interfering with its ethics. As I have indicated above,

our gravitation as literate societies toward the desirable seems almost instinctive. It is powerful enough to undermine our prior ethical frameworks. Whether we must categorize this gravitation as an ethical form, where the desire to be modern must be seen as an exercise of utilitarian ethics, I must leave for future inquiry. In this work, I am not interested in the way aesthetics is traditionally studied in design, art, or (typically) the visual medium. Rather, my interests lay in how the concept of aesthetics embeds itself in narration *to* the media and *by* the media.

A *third* thread of internal consistency is the continuity-disruption dialectic. Disruption is a social irritant. It comes in the way of the stability we desire. Continuity is far more settled. The requirement that a film, a news story, or a social condition must be sutured, as our editors and ideologues would tell us, is evidence enough of this claim. Through this work, I have attempted to show how continuity is narrated. Each of the three examples illustrate this claim. However, although disruption is a corrective measure as perceived by the disruptor (for example, Pandey, or Goswami, or global news reports of the slum behind the painted wall in Ahmedabad), institutional interruption in each case is the reversal of the disruption. Our modern institutions seem to always hold the right explanations to dispel the uncertainties that disruption brings. The visibility-invisibility liminality is hence also a conflict between continuity and disruption. The three displays of continuity and disruption are also threaded through a shared desire for stability. This is the shared concern that requires some grounding since it is a derivative, a discovery from the examples, rather than a premise.

The specific locations of my examples in contemporary India may seem to limit the theoretical applications of my work. However, I propose that there is much here that pertains to the study, specifically, of news globally, and more generally, of the ideology of mediated narration. The ways in which nations project themselves through the so-called soft power may be

alluring theme: Western media studies positions Bollywood as a metonym for India, but this elides the primarily rural nature of India, not quite modern in the sense of what we mean when we invoke Hollywood. The amount of urbanization “needed” to be modern has yet to happen in India—this aspect is crucial to understanding the media practices of Modi’s India. Set in a broader postcolonial context, we may extend the *uncertain* locations in which countries like India find themselves, neither accepted as a developed nation nor treated like an underdeveloped nation. This extension offers itself to the theme of uncertainty and liminality that are presented in my work. Furthermore, the metaphor follows us through our three examples. After having traversed the three examples, I take an overview of their applications in general, and this divide—the blind spot—is the appropriate handle because it represents the well-known contrasts in the divide and their stitching-over. I mentioned earlier that almost two-thirds of India is rural, and it is perhaps significant that two of my three examples are located in rural India. My rationale is that in the mediated narration of India, by India, to India, is an urban-to-rural transmission.

Therefore, the examples I have picked display that aspect. As I have indicated before, each of the cases is a *presentation* rather than a representation. It presents something while it absents something else. In each case, there are conflicts and contrasts between image and reality. Moreover, there is some linearity to the three cases in respect of their rurality.

The starkly different urbanity of Ahmedabad is a palimpsest. Here, I invoke a literary metaphor. A palimpsest is a medieval manuscript in which, when paper was a precious resource, one textual layer replaced an earlier one. I have utilized the otherwise historical understanding the Potemkin village as a palimpsest of desirable *present* over undesirable history. The conflicts and the social contrasts in this palimpsest are absented with smooth and pleasurable exteriors. It

is an urban setting because a rural setting is too rugged, unpolished, *unprepared* for the dissemination of pleasure. In that conflict, a whole hyper-visualized, hyperbolic Potemkin village presents itself. A pleasing and desirable visual narration ensues as the media capture the overwhelming crowds and images of political power, popularity, and prowess. The visuals *are* the narration. Sometimes, one cannot tell whether the scene is from the Houston or the Ahmedabad event—so close are the images. The image tries to obliterate contrast. A carpenter who uses a chisel and a planer to level and smoothen the surface of wood, joins pieces together and uses a veneer to make the surface appear seamless, the narrations embedded in India's Potemkin village similarly levels, stitches, and glosses over. The Trump event reinforced the invisibilized presence—perhaps a *visible absence*—of the palimpsest of Ahmedabad as India's Potemkin village presents itself as the synecdoche of India.

Walls play an important role in the interplay of Potemkin villages. Such is our mediated experience that as a media prosumer not located in that city, I have no idea whether the sophomoric wall paintings of the Modi-Trump (India-U.S.) friendship have been painted over, or weathered and discolored, or still preserved. One of my sources in Ahmedabad tells me that the walls are long gone, while another does not know. These are public walls, which often find themselves in disrepair after their immediate purpose is served. Just as news reports have forgotten the walls and decorations of India's Potemkin village until the next guest arrives, the paintings, too, must wait for the next guest. The absent presence of both the literal and the metaphoric wall is fascinating.

The incident of Lakhimpur Kheri is rural but its presentation is urbane, told from the sophisticated and fast-paced studios in a metropolis. There is a colonial disdain in the voice of the dominant, even while it is not actually the colonist's voice. There had been more obvious

colonial domination, of course: Anti-colonial media flourished in defiance of colonial laws that forbade the newspapers from criticizing the British. The absencing there was overt. Now, the colonialism is internal and better accepted—whatever lack of consensus remains can be achieved through political demagoguery and mediated narration. In an earlier work, I have used the term “internal imperialism,” in a critique of India’s post-liberalization (in 1991) political economy, that a shift in media control mechanisms was giving rise to forms of “internal imperialism,” in which a politically centralized but culturally diverse society perpetuates forms of communicative domination (Nanjundaiah, 1995). While bearing in mind that that essay’s context, time, and approach are very different from my current work, it is salient only in order to argue that the voice of domination continues. Goswami’s narration of the Lakhimpur Kheri incident is an example, as I have demonstrated, where there is a patronizing token accorded to the existence of farmers while also hinting that the political class are the victims and the farmers the perpetrators. There is suspicion in his treatment of the farmers’ voice. What Rao called the media’s “elitist bias” is a handle, an instrument, and a part of the *construction* of a majoritarian form of modern India. Hers is a frame in which an aspect of reality is highlighted, while in my work I demonstrate how reality itself is adjusted. Unlike an intent to highlight social contrasts, colored gels are mounted on two spotlights. One is the aspirational and modern India, while the *other* is undesirable, inconvenient. Therefore, even though overwhelming video evidence is present, it does not feature on Goswami’s show—perhaps it is discredited, like the YouTubers of Boolgarhi. There is a gap between the facts and the truths that remains *un*-presented. The presentation is an act of absencing: Visibilized absence (absenting) of farmers in Lakhimpur Kheri takes on both manifest (audiovisual) and ideological forms.

The Boolgarhi incident is set in a deep rural pocket. The media converted the rural story into an event that is also located in the same village. Both action and narration occur in the same location. The village is absent from the urban media prosumer and must remain absent. Boolgarhi is caught with its pants down, so to speak, naked, not dressed (up), *unprepared* for visual narration. This is the dark liminal space where there is recourse to laws but not necessarily to justice, to the media but not to becoming a part of the myth—a presence without visibility. The urban media prosumer is unaccustomed for Boolgarhi—it is a world that exists in the past, pre-modern India. It is an embarrassing contrast to the kind of reality they would like to present to the world, as a diligent prosumer who shares and re-produces content. Institutional voices such as the police and the media attempted to douse out local independent voices such as YouTube videos who try to make their presence felt. The revelation, journalist Pandey's conversion of the event into a media spectacle, was aberrant to existing systems—hence, a disruption. The social and institutional systems must stitch back the rupture: As we noticed, burning the body at midnight and discrediting the journalist attempt to achieve that reinstatement. The invisibilized presence of the Boolgarhi village lies between the media stories that attempted to visibilize them and the reinstatement that attempted to deprive presence even in the face of the visibility.

To retrace the steps of this project, I introduced the work and situated it in rationale, specifically foregrounding the inadequacy of media literacy as the reason. In making the argument that media illiteracy is a construction, I promised to delve into the ideological underpinnings. I offered foundational scholarship to build up to the argument. Limiting the work to a contemporary, postcolonial, modernizing context of a contemporary India that is changing into a neo-authoritarian nation while staying embedded as an electoral democracy, I illustrated the narration of the ambiguous and finite modernity that is rooted in traditional cultural values

and Western concepts. Such narration is faithfully rendered in news—in particular, in news anchor-led storytelling. This is an aesthetic rendering with selective visibilization/invisibilization. It takes the form of a presentation of an incident as an event, its conversion into a media spectacle, and its eventual embedding into myth. Thus, media prosumers understand their literacy—their understanding of the world via mediated narrations. I argued against this misconception, arguing that selective visibilization/invisibilization is (selective) illiteracy. Synthesizing my positions on the fluid relations of visibility and presence between communities and stories from each other, I built a demystification of media illiteracy and applied it specifically to communities. The reader must remember that the location of these communities is primarily intended to be rural India. However, it is my belief that my community model of media literacy can offer itself for communities in general.

Media literacy projects might propose that the achieved status is somehow the stable status. The cultural project, Bourdieu (1979/1984) says, is to lead us from being illiterate to literate via the stages of semi-literate, common reader, and bibliophile. A proliferation of media-literate communities is needed to achieve change. A final theoretical twist in all the illustrations of uncertain intervening spaces is that the formal complementarity of media literacy and media illiteracy led to one of the most unexpected but fairly profound syllogisms that has emerged from this project—that our literacy is also our illiteracy. First of all, when we use the term media literacy, we allude generally to the understanding of our modern institutions in general, their roles in modern societies vis-à-vis our own in the maintenance of order and stability. We expect them to be faithful, not manipulative, in their roles. Yet when we experience a breach in that suture, we cry foul, and our trust is compromised. In addition, because the news media claim to represent truths, we expect media platforms to both protect our interests and communicate what

is wrong with the practices of our societies so that we can right them. Secondly, that duality speaks to selective invisibilization—an inevitable phenomenon primarily because it is not based on institutional or political intervention alone. It is structurally embedded in our systems. It seems to work for everybody—that is perhaps the most obviously problematic feature of ideology. We may believe our understanding of our world is limited only in certain directions; however, media illiteracy (or literacy) is not limited.

As Bourdieu might, I argue that media literacy efforts should be the training of reading and writing in destabilized and uncertain environments. Equilibrium is not elusive—it is a false veneer that sutures over contrasts: Bourdieu writes that the bourgeoisie’s strategy to maintain their position of constant acquisition of wealth is the reconversion of their economic capital into educational capital. In my argument, the purpose of media literacy projects should be to be to destabilize existing paradigms.

My work recommends charting out a new direction in at least two ways. Before I explain them, a disclaimer: As I have mentioned before, the endgame of this project is not to provide reductive solutions for media prosumers to directly adopt and become media literate. There cannot be a simplistic template of how to fix complex problems, the flaw is so many of the media literacy textbooks and educational programs that flood our intellectual marketplace. The intent of this work is that it should help the advancement of media literacy scholarship and practice. Even within the small function of helping media prosumers identify fake news, media literacy practice has failed us not because there is any dearth of earnestness. In India and elsewhere, governments are pinning the blame on the intermediaries (social media corporations). Simultaneously, they would also like to have control of data so that they can punish peddlers of fake news. However, fake news persists rampantly and effectively.



In current practices, generating awareness that fake news exists and in what forms is the focus. Although a few before-after experiments are available, the long-term effectiveness remains unknown. There are still no longitudinal studies that showcase the efficacy and effectiveness of media literacy even in pedagogy. If busting misinformation were a successful and enduring methodology, each one of us would be a fake news-buster. Thus, *firstly*, the argument I have made in this dissertation is that we have not yet discovered the *thing* to be resolved—the thing I call media illiteracy. My hope is that this work helps in that direction.

*Secondly*, if media literacy were to help communities overcome material struggles, the problem lies with their own agency, as we saw in the case of the discredited independent videos in Boolgarhi. That is why the best that this work can offer future investigations of media literacy is an illumination, shining the light from my perch especially to media literacy pedagogues and other practitioners and drawing their attention where to look and what to fix in their end-user level of practice. Community media literacy is a known focus in India, and there are commendable ongoing efforts (for example, FactShala, the privately funded and independent fact-check training program). However, training programs need to be widespread, even universal. The research that leads to pedagogic delivery models (such as syllabi) can gain from the demystification model. The critical communication pedagogic model is especially useful in communities because it allows a mutual exchange of insights and understanding, rather than the usual prescriptive approaches. This pedagogic model can also address the problem of social hierarchies. Postcolonial scholarship has chastised authoritarian practices of the colonists. Yet, steep hierarchies exist within even microscopic units of our societies. Moreover, the new majoritarian politics and its narrative agencies are trying to both refuel those forms and fuel new forms of hierarchy. We witnessed this trend in the narration of the Lakhimpur Kheri episode. My

work identifies the relatively new direction in which critical communication pedagogy can take media literacy training practices among communities.

One area I chose not to pursue is the more recent phenomenon of social media. And yet, my inquiry lays the groundwork for such a turn: What are the aesthetics of social media? What do the denizens of social media choose to visibilize and invisibilize? What forms of power do these actions index? This study has not invested itself deeply in that practice. Of course, we have adequately covered the implications of and on that new institution and form of public communication. Still, a study devoted to the ideology of the nudging and provocative nature of social media communication using a similar approach and methodology might be fruitful. For example, I wonder whether social media not only destabilize cultural contexts but restructure the individual-cultural-social dynamics. The decentering of the subject would seem particularly intriguing in terms of how consensus is influenced and assumed. As tempting as this line of inquiry is, our work could not accommodate it. Secondly, the interdisciplinarity must be tested by its scope and implications across disciplines. This is both a limitation of this project and scope for other disciplines, particularly the ones I have mentioned here.

The campaign for so-called “health literacy” is a frequent field of study in media literacy: It is one of the most obvious fields of learning in the decade of the deadly Covid-19 pandemic that has dismantled our belief systems. People around the world experienced common symptoms after they lined up at hospitals to receive the hurriedly approved inoculation against the coronavirus. As they shared them on social media platforms, they realized their learning from their government agencies was either incomplete or untrue. Those symptoms often proved fatal, serious, or even strange. Governments provided data, numbers, and percentages, and summarized the inferences regarding those mRNA vaccines in language we could understand. Summarily,

vaccines were either mandated or recommended if we were to stay out of pandemic-related diseases. Yet it seems now that they held back information. No government told us that what it held back is its right to decide what we need not know in the interest of the much-maligned concept of “the larger picture”, or “the greater good”: A major section of a society must be immunized before the pandemic loses its strength and dissipates. Conversely, the healthcare systems had no mechanisms that would ensure our collective safety in the absence of such selectivity while also dealing with the incomplete information that was available to them from pharmaceutical trials and such other experimentations. In the process, a new uncertainty evolved among people toward systems that claim to protect us. In hindsight, several European governments have brought mRNA-manufacturing companies to question. This is likely to prove to be a corrective measure, not merely in the direction of legal justice, but an attempt re-stitch public trust in modern systems.

Lastly, we come to the theme of foundations of democratic political systems. New literature on our societies’ neo-authoritarian drift is now widely available, and in the course of late discovery, I came upon an optimistic new book by Michael Holm and R. S. Deese (2022) called *How Democracy Survives*. The book declares that democracy will continue on this path to recover each time from the throes of disasters like authoritarianism. That might sound like a truism, given that history is supposed to repeat itself. Increasingly and especially over the past decade, we find that democracy falls not in some kind of *coups de tat*, but is being voted out, as ironic as that may sound to the champions of electoral democracy. We are accustomed to having stability as a frame of reference in our societies, and our gravitation toward authoritarian forms of governance seems to indicate that we desire something in moderation, even it is a compromise.

I hope this work has uncorked several bottles, but its limitations are several. The most severe one, in my opinion, is that it has not done justice to all the ramifications that emerge from it. The dismantling and critique of cultural and technological stances as structured ordains is a direction that this study could not take: The new exciting domain of AI and its new products, such as ChatGPT, is a tempting and open field of poststructural, postmodern observation. What does the seeming autonomy of the content we consume do to our subjectivity? By taking over our literal acts of reading and writing, does machine-generated content create less critical minds? Will the institution of technology make education more or less impactful? What new forms of myths are being woven by machines?

Throughout this dissertation, the geographic location of India has served well as a case in point because it checks the right boxes. My nation of origins is a large-sized constitutional democracy where, according to the critical and journalistic references I have provided, political institutions have repeatedly appropriated other institutions and people's fundamental rights. Still, as I mentioned in a previous paragraph, India should be seen not only as a convenient example of a more generalizable pivot for inquiry. The forms of governance, society, culture, and literacy levels may vary, but my hope is that this work can be calibrated to be equally relevant in other similar environments. As an extension, I recommend that postcolonial scholarship in relevant disciplines of social sciences and humanities focus on this environment of the reemergence of authoritarianism in postcolonial nations such as India. Perhaps internal imperialism is an apt term to use, extend, revisit, and renew in exploring what new forms in the environment of digital and social media communicative practices are responsible for the perpetuation of in our postcolonial societies. I also see the portability of this subject to the authoritarian playbook per se, including

environments such as Hungary, Turkey, and even western Europe where ultra-right forces have entered the mainframe of electoral choice.

Perhaps this work's most dramatic bearing is in the increasing drift toward authoritarian politics. Under Modi's India, the secular principles of human equality and freedom are being dismantled. This is not a disruptive cataclysmic event. Institutions are beginning to cite Hindu principles as claimed by the RSS. Although judges swear by the areligious constitution, several top judges are giving out theocratically colored judgments. An example is the much-cited Ayodhya judgment from the Supreme Court in 2019. Hindu nationalists—led by prominent BJP leaders—razed a mosque in the town of Ayodhya, where, the Hindu epic *Ramayana* states, Lord Rama was born. The court case related to the construction of a Hindu temple at that very site, essentially replacing the mosque. The judgment permitted the construction. Unusually, without naming the judge who wrote the judgment. An addendum to the judgment, written by an unnamed judge, states that it was clear to the court that Lord Rama was born at the disputed site; therefore, he was a real person and not merely the protagonist of the epic, as a court would normally view him.

The limitation of academic work is that its timeline to completion leaves an historical gap. Historical events are unfolding as I finish revising this dissertation. On March 3, 2023, a bench of judges in the Allahabad High Court (state supreme court) headed by a Muslim, Shamim Ahmed, hoped that since Indian Hindus worship cows, the Indian government would decide to ban cow slaughter throughout the country, noting that “anyone who kills cows or allows others to kill them is deemed to rot in hell for as many years as there are hair upon his body” (Upadhyay, 2023). The irony in such antithetical judicial pronouncements should not be lost on the reader as they browse the various examples I have provided in this work.

On March 23, 2023, arguably Modi's most acerbic critic—Rahul Gandhi, the Congress leader that his party has propped up as the main contender to Modi—stands convicted in a criminal defamation case. He is guilty of using the name Modi inappropriately in the run-up to the 2019 general election. No doubt referring to unrelated fugitives called Lalit Modi and Nirav Modi but hinting at Narendra Modi's possible enablement and cronyism, Rahul Gandhi, in his wisdom, had jested in a public rally: "Why do all thieves have Modi as their surname?" On March 23, a local court in the city of Surat in Modi's home state of Gujarat sentenced him to two years in jail, but granted him bail (Mollen and Biswas, 2023). A two-year prison sentence is exactly the criterion to disqualify a political candidate from contesting elections—so this conviction comes as a tailwind to deft authoritarian strategy that stymies political opposition. Rahul Gandhi is expelled as a Parliamentarian. Several other leaders also face arrests and enforcement raids, a trend that has increased sharply this year. As I write and edit this document, there is no doubt that news will keep flowing in each day bearing more astonishments and shocks for minds like ours that are steeped in specific democratic values. The linkages between the narrative construction of our world and the elimination of national political opposition must be viewed in tandem.

To state that this project is incomplete would be to state the laughably obvious. I have only considered the presentations of ideological *narration* here, but its flip, learning to build resistant *narrative*, remains an organizational, ground-up struggle in which publics, groups of communities, continue to participate in the hope to make changes in the hateful societies we seem to have uncorked. Privilege may remain the fulcrum on which resistance will occur, and what better privilege could there be than literacy? Early in my work, I wonder, *is media literacy the repair?* Is it too deeply embedded in the same institutional systems as it purports to pull us

out of? I have endeavored to critique the notion of media literacy by juxtaposing its binary, media illiteracy, and suggest that literacy and illiteracy coexist in an unstable field that is selectively mystified while claiming to demystify our world. I argue that this is an ideological problem, not merely an institutional one, and that the best we can do as scholars is to understand and disseminate our understanding of the processes of visibility-invisibility, absence-presence, and literacy-illiteracy. A question thus looms over us: *What lies beneath it all?* What makes literacy desirable and illiteracy undesirable? Perhaps it is the recognition that literacy might help in our acknowledgment of the need for a stable society, for certainty. Destabilization is not merely the recognition of a prosumer's ideological position, but a practical irritant in the flow of societies over time that is frowned upon by the dominant. It should be reminiscent of all the other acquisitions that we have been told are good—strength, long life, knowledge, and so forth—literacy purports to offer us the agency to understand the universe we are supposed to operate in. It is a common form of learning that our prior knowledge of how to live a long life or what foods to avoid in order to keep fit is periodically dismantled because new knowledge arrives. In that sense, an interrogation of media illiteracy should be seen as a synecdoche as well as a microcosm of the inquiry of our chaotic world's seemingly stable institutions that are founded on highly unstable and easily changeable human behavior. I have used trust in my work as an example because it is applicable here. (I find the term *institutional trust* a delightful little transferred epithet—trust cannot be institutionalized. Its erosion is caused only by human distrust.)

When institutional and individual voices collide, it seems the prosumers of society are caught in a field in which truths oscillate, in liminal spaces between the pre-modern, postmodern, and the un-modern. The field is marked by uncertainty, instability, and rupture, and yet it is the voices of certainty, promising stability, suturing over chaos in desirable continuity, that allure us.

Integrating skepticism with trust is perhaps the most destabilizing act of all. I wonder if it has not resulted in an environment of learning in which we are unable to distinguish fact from fiction, true knowledge from conspiracy theories, but above all, construct from phenomena.

Gutenberg invented the printing press and an institutional ordering of our world resulted. Jeremy Bentham designed the perfect prison, and the Panopticon resulted. Proponents of social media gifted us the capacity for infinite and unfettered interactions, and a chaotic and uncertain dismantling of our understanding of the world has surfaced. It has challenged stability and orderliness, which we have assumed are our default status, to use a digital-age term. Perhaps the expectation of modern thought is that the selection of what-we-must-know must be carefully constructed in a complex way—simultaneously keeping the happy social-media age confluence of subjectivity-objectivity and the colorful tapestry to cover the chaos underneath. Thus, new forms of communication can help the new system of majoritarian-authoritarian-sociocultural occupation successfully *present* a stable environment to us.



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