ABSTRACT

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| Title of Dissertation: | ANTI-MEDIA POPULISM: MEDIA CRITICISM BY RIGHT-WING ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN INDIA |
| | Prashanth Bhat, Degree (Doctor of Philosophy), 2020 |
| Dissertation directed by: | Dr. Kalyani Chadha, Philip Merrill College of Journalism |

This study explores the anti-media populist sentiments expressed by emerging right-wing alternative news media in India. News websites, television network, and the 'online digital work' done by right-wing supporters—are the key constituent elements of India's burgeoning right-wing news sector. The articulation of negative sentiments about the news media's role in society is a central feature of these right-wing news outlets. What dominant criticisms do the right-wing alternative websites make against the mainstream press? How does the right-wing television express its criticism of the mainstream media? What do online Hindu nationalists say about their plausible association with the right-wing alternative news outlets, including websites and television? How do online Hindu nationalists plan to counter mainstream media's 'liberal' bias? Answering these questions contributes to the understanding of the expressions of media distrust articulated by the Hindu nationalists associated with the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India.

Through a thematic analysis of 545 media-related articles published on right-wing portals, *Swarajya.com* and *OpIndia.com*, an ethnographic qualitative content analysis of media-related debates aired on the right-wing television network, *Republic TV,* and in-depth interviews with 24 Hindu nationalists active on Twitter, this dissertation examines the discursive strategies employed by right-wing actors in India to discredit and undermine professional journalism.

This study found several dominant themes of media criticisms articulated by right-wing alternative news outlets. For instance, they accuse the mainstream press of suppressing the voices and opinions of the Hindu majority while favoring minorities and working against India's interests by tarnishing the country's global image. Further, they charge the traditional media with controlling public opinion by withholding crucial information, censoring right-wing views, and spreading 'false narratives.' Additionally, they advance the claim that the professional media act as the mouthpieces of the establishment as represented by the Congress party while opposing the BJP. Hindu nationalists also share a belief that the news media do not offer balanced, diverse, and impartial coverage.

Further, right-wing actors characterize news reporters as individuals who are 'corrupt,' 'unethical,' and working to advance their self-interests. Broadly, these expressions of media distrust are articulated and disseminated with an intent to attack the professional integrity of journalists and to position themselves as the challengers to the hegemonic power of the established media. These criticisms parallel those expressed by right-wing alternative sites in the Western democracies such as Sweden, Germany, Norway, and the U.S. Likewise, there are similarities between the

presentation styles and the editorial tone adopted by the right-wing television network, *Republic TV* in India as well as the *Fox news* in the U.S.

Insights into the dominant criticisms articulated against them and their professional work by Hindu nationalists will offer journalists an opportunity to develop counterstrategies and narratives. The findings of this study will also provide scholars of comparative studies, a comprehensive look at the anti-media populist sentiment prevailing in a non-Western democracy such as India. In doing so, this study unpacks the distinct social, technological, historical, economic, and political factors aiding the right-wing actors in India in their efforts to de-legitimize the professional media. Finally, to the scholars interested in understanding the relationship between the right-wing populist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and India's established media, this study argues that a 'double strategy' is at play---where on the one hand the mainstream media is discredited through criticisms articulated by the right-wing alternative news outlets while on the other hand, the professional media is co-opted through various coercive measures into providing favorable coverage to the Hindu nationalists and the BJP government.

These organized efforts by the right-wing actors have created a worrisome environment for professional journalists who resort to self-censorship instead of risking their personal safety and losing their livelihood. As a result, despite being one of the largest media markets in the world, content produced by various mainstream news outlets in India is increasingly looking homogenous and bereft of diverse views. Such homogenization of the mainstream news content and pro-government stance undermines the watchdog role of the media in the Indian democracy.

ANTI-MEDIA POPULISM: MEDIA CRITICISM BY RIGHT-WING
ALTERNATIVE MEDIA IN INDIA


by


Nandikoor R Prashanth Bhat


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Advisory Committee:
 Professor Kalyani Chadha], Chair
 [Professor Linda Steiner]
 [Professor Sarah Oates]
 [Professor Shawn Parry-Giles]
 [Professor Krishnan Vasudevan]

# Dedication

       I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Yashoda and Ramamurthy, my wife and best friend, Priyadarshini, my little angel, Mukta, and my mentor, Dr. Kalyani Chadha.

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# Chapter 1: Introduction

The articulation of negative sentiments about the news media's role in society has emerged as a central feature of populist rhetoric across the world, particularly among movements on the right (Holt, 2018; Haller and Holt, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). Indeed, the idea that professional journalists working for the mainstream news media, withhold or conceal information that does not suit their "politically correct" agenda, is often expressed by right-wing populist politicians in many countries. For instance, in the United States, President Trump has referred to the media as the "Enemy of the People" (Grynbaum, 2017) while Frauke Petry, the leader of the German right-wing populist party, Alternative for Germany (AfD), had called the establishment media "Lügenpresse" (liar press) and "Pinocchio press" (Binder, 2015). Similarly, far-right politicians such as Geert Wilders from the Netherlands, Nigel Farrage from the UK, Viktor Orban from Hungary, Rodrigo Duterte from the Philippines, and Jair Bolsonaro from Brazil have long characterized professional journalists and the mainstream press as being "biased" and "part of the corrupt establishment" (Boadle and Slattery, 2018).

In support of their accusations of news media bias, right-wing forces often cite survey reports, which indicate that only a small number of journalists identify themselves as leaning towards the right (see, for example, Gold, 2014). Consequently, they argue, that since the political dispositions of news reporters are overwhelmingly skewed towards the left, they tend to favor left-liberal perspectives (Otto and Köhler, 2018). Moreover, populist ideology views journalists as part of the corrupt elite that lacks contact with common people and fails to relate their problems and concerns. Such criticism of the mainstream media has come to be known as "anti-media populism" (Krämer, 2017),

where traditional media are constantly portrayed as an "unreliable source that should, but is unwilling to, represent the ordinary people and their needs" (Hameleers, 2018). Put differently, professional journalists are depicted as individuals who collaborate with the ruling elite and betray common people (Engesser et al. 2017).

That said, anti-media populism is by no means a new phenomenon. The United States has had a long history of partisan media outlets. Since the 1940s, Republicans in the U.S. have articulated similar sentiments by accusing the American press of "liberal media bias." This widely entrenched belief that most news reporters are "liberal," has motivated U.S. conservatives to establish ideologically driven media or what Holt (2020) calls the "right-wing alternative media." Prominent among them are magazines such as *Human Events* and *National Review*, TV network, *Fox News*, and websites such as *Breitbart* and *Daily Caller* (Bauer and Nadler, 2018). Likewise, the American-right had also used radio to advance its conservative agenda. For example, in the post-Reagan period, Rush Limbaugh developed what Brock (2004: 261) called the "hate radio," which provided his listeners "right-wing propaganda, relentless attacks on liberals and liberalism, sexism bordering on misogyny, overt and subtle racism and gay-bashing" (2004: 265). In fact, right-wing forces in the U.S. have long believed that the pursuit of openly ideological news programming was important not only to fight the liberal media but also to hone their core ideas and to popularize them across the country. Articulating this belief at the launch of his *Regnery Press* in 1947, conservative publisher Henry Regnery said:

> Men don't live alone. It is the ideas that shape history, and in the war of ideas, liberals and leftists dominate. So long as they control the means of communication, they don't have to worry too much about a slight set-back in

Washington. If we want to do anything, we must work on the level of ideas (Nash, 1998: 129).

These right-wing publications wielded tremendous influence in American politics by formulating and shaping the views of future politicians so much so that speaking at the thirtieth anniversary of National Review, Ronald Reagan who was then the US President, said:

National Review is to the offices of the West Wing of the White House what People magazine is to your dentist's waiting room (Hemmer, 2016)

For Republican policymakers, articles published in these outlets helped develop strong arguments to inspire their core constituents and to convert neutral voters into supporters (Smith, 2007). Besides, by popularizing the idea of liberal media bias, the right-wing alternative media in the United States primed Republicans to reject liberal media and seek out only right-wing sources of news (Hemmer, 2016). Evidently, expressions of media criticism are not a novel phenomenon among right-wing groups, particularly in the U.S.

With the rise of the Internet in the 1990s and its rapid proliferation in the last one decade, there has been an upsurge in right-wing alternative media, which have also been variously described as "far-right media" (Atton, 2006), "right-wing media" (Faris et al., 2017) "immigration-critical alternative media" (Holt, 2016) or "alt-right media" (Marwick and Lewis, 2017). Relying on digital platforms to establish a new media infrastructure on the political right, these news outlets seek to provide an alternative to the legacy media sources in times of high-choice media environments (Heft et al., 2019).

Prominent among them are *Avpixlat* and *Fria Tide*n in Sweden, *Breitbart, Infowars, Gateway Pundit,* and *Daily Caller* in the US, *Document* in Norway, *Novopress*

in France, and *Kopp* in Germany. These offer right-wing ideologues in their respective

countries, a platform to freely articulate their ideas and views, and spread their ideology.

In recent years, they have become vital players in the realm of cultural debate and have

made an audible impact on public discourse in many established democracies (Holt,

2017; Nagle, 2017). For instance, in the United States, representatives of the *Breitbart*

*News* and *Gateway Pundit* have received press accreditations to the White House.

*Breitbart* editors and writers such as Stephen Bannon and Julia Hanh were hired as staff

members of the Trump administration (Terris, 2017). By cultivating millions of readers

and audience members as well as close ties with the right-wing populist politicians, these

outlets have become a new force in the media landscape.

One of the common traits of these right-wing alternative news sites is their vocal

mistrust of cultural and political elites and what they claim to be the liberal bias of the

mainstream press (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a). These traits overlap with the populist

communication articulated by right-wing politicians, thereby creating a strong

interdependent relationship between them (Wodak, 2015; Bhat and Vasudevan, 2019).

Some scholars worry that these outlets and their social media appearances offer new

online architectures, which may foster further polarization of political views or

'balkanization' of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2007) and contribute to the "difficulty of

consensus" (Levendusky, 2013: 612) in politics. The main concern is that such a media

environment leads to fewer shared facts, extremism, and disregard for others' points of

view, leading to conflicts in society. The rise of such outlets over the last one decade

coincided with the decline in trust, revenue and audiences for the traditional news media,

lending credence to the belief that the ideologically-motivated and committed audience of

the right-leaning media may be gradually avoiding the mainstream news media (Newman et al., 2017).

The surge in the number of right-wing alternative media is a significant development because researchers now argue that online platforms act as agents of self-socialization (Arnett, 1995) by providing an environment wherein individuals can socialize themselves into a right-wing populist world view. Others argue that such online opportunities cultivate 'homophily,' which is the "tendency of similar individuals to form ties with each other" (Colleoni et al., 2014: 318). This could further manifest in the rise of "filter bubbles," which expose individuals only to consonant media content (Pariser, 2011). These online technologies, they claim, provide opportunities for individuals to avoid using mainstream news media altogether and instead patronize right-wing alternative media that provide "coverage of events and issues that are selected and framed in a way to confirm an ideological predisposition" (Krämer, 2017: 1302). Besides, citizens are most likely to prefer information sources that are consistent with their political beliefs (Hameleers et al., 2017; Iyengar and Hahn, 2009; Stroud, 2011), i.e., selective exposure, which creates a conducive environment for the rapid expansion and proliferation of the right-wing alternative media.

Moreover, recent studies demonstrate that compared to individuals with liberal or leftist orientation, the online right-wing media sphere tends to be more insulated in that conservative media producers are more likely to cite other conservative media sources and less likely to engage with professional news sites (Benkler et al., 2018). This being the case, the right-wing alternative media are able to create what Hemmer (2016, xiii) calls "alternative knowledge systems" that provide their audience and readers with an

alternative interpretation of news events and a "different way of weighing evidence, different network of authorities and different conception of accuracy." Besides, many of these alternative right-wing media tend to present news using a "populist master frame" (Caiani and della porta, 2011) where elites, including certain politicians, experts, and journalists are depicted as the culprits, whose self-interests harm the silenced majority (Hameleers et al., 2017). Such attempts to undermine the credibility of experts and journalists could drastically alter people's perceptions of reality and activate negative stereotypes of the elite and the societal out-groups, thereby contributing to "media-based othering" (Krämer, 2014: 55).

Recent electoral successes of conservative parties and the surge of right-wing movements and governments as evidenced by Brexit and the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections have drawn scholarly attention to the activities of the right-wing alternative news outlets (see for example Romancini and Castilho, 2019; von Nordheim et al., 2019; Noppari etal., 2019). Two major lines of inquiry have attracted considerable academic interest. The first line of inquiry is the examination of networked disinformation flows between right-wing alternative media and the mainstream press, particularly during the presidential campaign and elections in the United States (see, for example, Faris et al., 2017; Anderson and Revers, 2018). The second line of inquiry focuses on the exploration of the relationship between right-wing alternative media outlets and populist political movements (see, for example, Krämer, 2018, Falcous et al., 2019; Davis, 2019). This form of inquiry is invested in examining the degree to which such media support populist communication. In addition to these major areas of inquiry, a niche group of researchers have turned their attention to the criticisms made by alternative right-wing media against

the mainstream press and how they are articulated in various political contexts. They examine the discursive strategies employed by these media to criticize professional news reporters and to challenge the journalistic authority (see, for example, Fawzi, 2018; Holt, 2017; Haller and Holt, 2019; Nygaard, 2019; Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a).  Studying the nature of this criticism and how it is articulated enables scholars to understand the appeal of such ideologically driven media and to find out why some groups do not trust the media. Such studies contribute to a more nuanced and informed conversation about the complexity of media criticism raised by right-wing actors.

However, such explorations of right-wing alternative media outlets and their relationship with the mainstream press have largely been confined to those operating in Western democracies (see, for example, Holt and Haller, 2017; Burack and Snyder Hall, 2012; Major, 2015; Carlson, 2017). Research findings beyond Western contexts are sparse. Given that news infrastructures and media landscape are subject to important contextual conditions and distinct social and political factors in respective countries, national case studies are critical to our understanding of the role played by right-wing alternative media in specific political information environments. Such case studies also offer novel insights into the similarities and distinctions between discursive strategies employed to criticize the mainstream press in various media systems. However, despite the recent rise of right-wing populist forces in the Global South, particularly those in Asia and Latin America, the emergence of right-wing alternative news outlets and their articulation of anti-media populist sentiment remains largely an understudied phenomenon. To fill this gap in the literature and to provide a non-western perspective, this dissertation explores the exponential rise of right-wing alternative media in India and

examines how media criticism and expressions of anti-media populism are articulated by such media.

Much of the information pertaining to press criticism from right-wing forces in India is gleaned from reports published by advocacy groups, media watchdogs, and mainstream news articles. To date, there is no comprehensive research on the institutionalized response of the *Hindutva*[1] forces to the alleged liberal media bias in India (see: Chadha and Bhat, 2019 for a notable exception). Research on media and right-wing populist forces in India have focused on the social media communication of political actors including Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, and the use of digital spaces for political campaigns and mobilizations by the Hindu nationalist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allied organizations (see for example Mohan, 2015; Udupa, 2016, 2018, 2019; Pal, 2015; Jaffrelot, 2015; Sinha, 2017; Rodrigues and Neimann, 2017; Neyazi et al., 2016; Rao, 2018).

Since there is a lack of substantial research and knowledge on right-wing alternative media in India and their negative perspectives on the established media's role in the country's public discourse, scholarly debates about the media activism of Hindu nationalists sometimes tend to be dominated by polemics rather than based on empirical research, data analysis, and systematic observations. For example, while we know impressionistically and through news media, that right-wing alternative media criticize

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[1] Hindutva—is the political ideology of Hindu nationalism. It literally means "Hinduness." Distinction must be drawn between Hinduism-the religion and Hindutva—the political ideology of the BJP and its Hindu nationalist allies. Hindutva ideology views India as a fundamentally Hindu nation. As Prakash (2007: 178) points out, the BJP and its right-wing allies expect the state to "embody and represent Hindutva as the nation's unity and universality," where Muslims and Christians are to be "violently assimilated into the nation or excised as foreign elements." Some of the extreme Hindutva elements aspire to set up a "Hindu Rashtra" (Hindu nation) while the moderate Hindutva supporters demand a more stringent application of secularism so that Muslims and Christians are assimilated into the national body.

professional journalism, very little is known about the nature of such criticism. How is journalistic authority questioned by the constituent elements of the right-wing alternative media? What are the main points of criticism of the press? What are some of the recurring themes in the criticisms made against news reporters? What discursive strategies do they embrace to counter professional media? Untangling the answers to these questions could provide valuable insights into the mediatized politics of Hindu nationalists and reveal the underlying factors contributing to the anti-media populist sentiment in India. Given the close relationship between right-wing alternative media and the success of populist political forces in other countries (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Meagher, 2012; Skocpol and Williamson, 2016), the emergence of such ideological news outlets coupled with the distrust of the media, is bound to have serious implications for the character and quality of journalism and democracy in India. Against this background, through a scientific investigation of this phenomenon, this dissertation aims at providing professional journalists a clearer understanding of the kind of criticisms made against them, which may enable them to devise strategies to counter them as and when necessary.

In the following chapter (chapter 2), I provide an overview of the historical background of the Hindu nationalist movement in India. Here, I trace the origins of the movement and its affiliate organizations, including the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Later, the relationship of these Hindu nationalist outfits with India's mainstream news media are discussed. This includes a brief analysis on BJP's ability to harness the power of the Internet and mobile technologies to its political advantage. Finally, I introduce the emerging right-wing media sector in India. Here, I offer insights into the reach of the

three constituent elements of the right-wing media, i.e., the portals, television network, and the digital work performed by online right-wing supporters.

In the next chapter (Chapter 3), I review the literature around right-wing populism and media. Here, I investigate the key terms and concepts used in this study: populism, alternative media, and media criticism. Later, I provide a discussion on the relationship between the mass media and right-wing populism. This is followed by a section on the role of digital technologies in providing opportunity structures for right-wing populist communication. This includes a review of recent empirical works and studies exploring the use of social media and mobile technologies for the diffusion of ethno-religious, nationalist, and populist communication in various parts of the world. In the final section of the literature review, I explore the literature on concepts such as 'positioning' and 'counter-sphere' to draw a theoretical framework for my study.

Chapter 4 will explicate the mixed methodology used in this dissertation. Methods included thematic analysis, ethnographic qualitative content analysis, and in-depth interviews. In this chapter, I will explain the rationale behind using these methods as well the selection of right-wing news portals—*OpIndia* and *Swarajya* and television network—*Republic TV* for my analysis. Later, I will offer insights into the study's design, data collection, and recruitment ethics I have adopted all through this research.  Chapter 5 offers the presentation of my findings from the analysis of media-related articles published in right-wing news portals—*Swarajya* and *OpIndia.* This includes dominant themes of media criticisms articulated by both the websites and the discursive strategies they employ to challenge and delegitimize the mainstream journalism.

In Chapter 6, I present my findings based on the analysis of media-related panel discussions and debates on primetime talk show 'The Debate' aired on right-wing television network—*Republic TV*. These findings provide unique insights into the workings of *Fox news*-style partisan news network in India and the dominant repertoire employed by the channel to discredit professional journalism. The next chapter (Chapter 7) includes in-depth interviews with 24 online Hindu nationalists regarding their views about India's mainstream press. These interviews reveal the ways in which online right-wing supporters interact with professional news media and journalists in digital settings. Findings offer novel insights into the counterstrategies adopted by online Hindu nationalists to counteract the perceived 'liberal media bias' of the established media. These strategies provide a crucial understanding of the political information environment currently prevailing in India.

In the final chapter, I conduct a discussion on the findings of this study by situating the media criticisms expressed by right-wing portals, television network, and online Hindu nationalists within the broader context of the current political and media scenario in India. I also explore the parallels and distinctions between the anti-media sentiments expressed by right-wing forces in India and those articulated by similar actors in other democracies, particularly in Europe and the United States. Lastly, I provide conclusions and recommendations as well as discuss the limitations of this study and offer suggestions for future work. The conclusions I draw from the findings offer the mainstream news media in India an understanding of the dominant criticisms made against them by powerful right-wing forces in the country. These insights help professional journalists develop better communication strategies to counter accusations of

bias. The findings also offer scholars of comparative studies a deeper understanding of the anti-media populist sentiment in India and the relationship between hegemonic political actors like the Hindu nationalists and the commercial media. Scholars will also find this study useful in their efforts to explore the possible emergence of a transnational pattern and typology of the anti-media populist sentiments articulated by the right-wing forces across the world.

# Chapter 2: Background

## 2.1. Hindu Nationalism and Right-Wing Populism in India

The transformation of right-wing populist, Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the last three decades from relative insignificance to being the ruling party has been one of the most important developments in contemporary Indian politics. From winning merely two Parliament seats out of a possible 543 in 1984 to a victory in 176 seats in 1998, BJP has emerged as a dominant political force in India. In the 2014 elections, BJP under the leadership of Narendra Modi won 282 seats in the Parliament and unseated a Congress Party-led centrist coalition government mired in endless corruption scandals and an economic slowdown (Chakravartty and Roy, 2015; Rao, 2018). In the 2019 general elections, BJP, led by Modi, returned to power with an even bigger mandate, thereby cementing its hegemonic position in the Indian politics.

The answer to the question on whether BJP is indeed a "right-wing" party, lies in its core ideology--Hindu nationalism or *Hindutva*. It is an exclusionary form of ethno-religious nationalism, originated and evolved in India during the first years of the twentieth century in reaction to the perceived threat from the West (Christian missionaries and British colonizers) and the threat of Muslim minorities to the Hindus (Brosius, 2005; Bhatt, 2010). This movement became the basis for the establishment of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in 1925, which in the subsequent years, became the largest Hindu nationalist organization in the world (Jaffrelot, 1999). Members of this group often deify one of its founding members, Nathuram Godse, who was responsible for the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi (Rao, 2018).

After India's independence, RSS started expanding its network for an "effective division of labor" (Jaffrelot, 196, 123) by establishing organizations that could focus on specific social categories. Thus, in 1948, the RSS cadres based in Delhi started Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) for students. Similarly, in 1964, RSS, in association with the Hindu clerics established Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) with an intent to bring Hindus across the world on to one platform. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is a political offshoot of the RSS (Jaffrelot and Therwath, 2007). With an intent to promote Hinduism in the diaspora, RSS expanded overseas, particularly in the UK, Canada, Kenya, Uganda, Netherlands, Trinidad, etc., through different names such as Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh (HSS) (Bhatt, 2000). Its sister organization—VHP—has been at the forefront of expanding Hindu nationalist movements across the world. VHP currently boasts its presence in at least 30 countries ("Hindus Abroad," n.d.). It is through VHP that Hindu nationalism made its entry into the USA. Launched as VHP-America (VHP-A) in 1971, the organization grew rapidly at a time when a large number of qualified Indian emigrants arrived in the USA (Kurien, 2001).

Together, all these organizations are collectively part of the *Sangh Parivar,* which means 'family of the Sangh,' that is the RSS. According to an estimate, the *Sangh Parivar* functions through a dense network of about 50,000 local *shakhas* or branches where physical and ideological training is provided to over 2.5 million activists (Therwath, 2012). Despite their overlapping principles, goals, methods, and personnel, these seemingly disparate groups are united by the Hindu nationalist ideology of the *Sangh*. The range and diversity of these organizations indicate that *Hindutva*'s ambitions go beyond winning elections. They believe in what Marcuse (1965) has called a "long

march" where it is crucial that the "right" people end up in the right positions and that a new form of narrative about the state of affairs comes into place. Anderson and Longkumer (2018: 372) too point out that the Hindu nationalism is interested in capturing more than just the political power and is committed to "root-and-branch societal transformation-in the form of a Hindu renaissance and to this end, have made inroads into education, development, the environment, industry, culture, and almost every other aspect of public life." These groups believe that India must be preserved by ensuring fivefold unity, i.e., one land, one race, one religion, one culture, and one language (Fenton et al., 1993). In the last few years, this *Hindutva* ideology has pervaded the political language of even the principal opposition party--the Indian National Congress so much so that its leader, Rahul Gandhi, is now being accused of embracing a type of "soft-Hindutva" that involves a commitment to Hindu-causes by "choreographing conspicuously Hindu-inflected campaign strategies and photo opportunities" (Anderson and Longkumer, 2020: 3) such as visiting Hindu temples and shrines to offer prayers (Bhatia, 2018).

Indeed, Hindu nationalism's inward-looking, anti-elite, and xenophobic attitudes are associated with populist political parties, particularly those on the right. For instance, Mudde (2004) describes populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into homogenous and antagonistic groups--'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the general will of the people." In other words, it entails the opposition between "the good people" and "culprit others" (Hameleers et al., 2017: 482).

Drawing on Mudde (2004)'s definition, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) conceive of populism as an "ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice." According to this definition, populism can be understood as a 'thin' (less elaborate) ideology that allows propagators of that ideology the flexibility of enriching it with 'full' (more substantive) ideologies such as socialism, nationalism, or liberalism (Mudde, 2004).

That said, populism as a political practice is adopted by both left and right-wing parties. Underscoring the differences between them, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2013) contend that while left-wing populism, i.e., --the type that is mostly visible in Latin American countries, has a socio-economic and inclusive dimension where populist parties favor political representation of groups that have been discriminated against and whose voices have not been taken into account by the 'establishment.' Meanwhile, right-wing populism that is seen in parts of Europe and Asia has a "socio-cultural dimension" that tends to favor "own people" and exclude "aliens" from its policies and government provisions. In other words, while materialist politics is a salient feature of left-wing populism, right-wing populism is primarily centered on cultural issues and identity politics, which typically emphasize the opposition of the ordinary-native people to cultural minorities or immigrants. The authors go on to argue that right-wing populists typically have a "national preference" wherein they contend that the country's "own people" should have priority in jobs, housing, and welfare. Donald Trump's "America First," Narendra Modi's "India First," and Marine Le Pen's "France First" slogans are

some examples of this tendency.  In sum, most right-wing populists in their political rhetoric claim that the 'outsiders' gain something at the cost of the 'natives.'

In this dissertation, I engage with the definition of right-wing populism provided by Anton Pelinka (2013), which encompasses all the characteristics of right-wing populism mentioned above. The author defines right-wing populism as "any kind of populism directed against ethnically and/or nationally and/or religiously defined 'other'" (2013:7). Explaining further, he states that right-wing populist parties aim primarily at the "exclusion of or discrimination against (sub-) societies or different social groups and follow a narrow ethno-nationalistic and potentially racist agenda while claiming to speak on behalf of 'the people' –but the people they are speaking for are defined by the exclusion of others."

Applying this definition and understanding of populism to the Indian political context, it is evident that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) can be designated as a right-wing populist party. True to right-wing populist-style politics, the BJP rose to popularity by claiming to represent the Hindu majority against forces that had supposedly "denied them their history, culture, and the economic benefits of the post-independence period" (McGuire and Reeves, 2003:98). Presenting themselves as representatives of the 'people,' BJP leaders have long associated themselves with opposition to an English-speaking ruling class or anglicized elite, which has been identified with the Nehruvian development model of the Congress party. The party also accuses the "left-leaning" intellectual apparatus including the English-language media of being subservient to foreign models and ideas, including Marxism and communism, and opposes the "left" interpretations of Indian history, which "constructed Muslim dominance during the

medieval period not as a period of national humiliation but as one in which a rich composite Indian culture was forged" (2003:98)

Most importantly, BJP's populism is also expressed in the "us" vs. "them" narrative that underpins all constructions of "the people" and their "enemies" in populist politics. Through the vilification of minorities -- notably Muslims and Christians -- as 'un-Indian' and as recipients of privileged legal treatment and beneficiaries of discriminatory state policies, BJP's discourse is aimed at pitting the Hindu majority against them. Those in opposition with its vision of Indian society are either portrayed as anti-national minorities or "pseudo-secularists" who are swayed by foreign ideas and misunderstanding of Indian history and culture. Thus, its espousal of *Hindutva* politics and association with violent trajectories of Hindu nationalism clearly place the BJP in the category of right-wing populist parties.

## 2.2. Indian Media Landscape – An Overview

An overview of the media sphere in India, including the role of state broadcasting, offers an opportunity to fully understand the broader implications of the right-wing alternative media and their criticism of the professional media for Indian journalism. In this section, we look at the brief history and the current trends in the Indian media before we examine the relationship between Hindu nationalism and the mainstream press.

Journalism in India has emerged during the era of the British East India Company with the establishment of an English newspaper, Bengal Gazette, in 1790. In the ensuing years, several English language newspapers were set up, including the Times of India, in 1838. The expansion of British colonial rule in India has made English medium education

available to the Indians. Since the English language was pre-requisite for entry into the news administrative professional created by the colonial project, many middle-class Indians, particularly in the urban areas, pursued their education in institutions with English as the medium of instruction. As a result, a large number of Indians made their way into debates over Indian politics and public life. For the Indian readers of the English colonial press, access to public debates, "transformed their political understanding of British colonialism" and enabled the development of "national Indian consciousness that transcended regional differences" (Athique, 2012: 16).

The rise of the English press inspired the rapid development of a vernacular press in several Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, Gujarati, Telugu, and Tamil from 1818 onwards (Neyazi, 2018). The development of movable typefaces in Indian scripts enormously extended the readership of 'native' press and books in India. Besides, the vernacular press facilitated a different kind of discourse from the English newspapers, enacted what Athique (2012) calls a "bifurcated public (p.16). So, while the English language press was patronized by the officially recognized native elite who were generally liberal and made "reform-minded critiques" of the British colonial project, the vernacular press read by a large number of middle-class Indians from smaller towns, produced content that was much more antagonistic to the British presence (Orsini, 2002). In that sense, the English language press has come to symbolize the elite who were admitted into colonial public life while the native press frequently expressed its explicit opposition to the British worldview, thereby created two public-spheres within the country. Besides, the lack of 'reliable' Indian intermediaries to monitor content published

in local language press allowed them to freely express anti-British sentiments for several years (Jeffrey, 2002).

The introduction of the Vernacular Press Act in 1878 by the British officials led to the seizure of publications and arrests of journalists who challenged the colonial rule (Thomas, 2010). Several prominent members of the Indian National Congress, including Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, had contributed to the 'nationalist' newspapers, which supported the call for full independence of India from British rule. Thus, newspapers, particularly the vernacular press, played a vital role in the rise of anti-colonial nationalism during the colonial rule (Thussu, 2000). After India's independence in 1947, the new government focused its efforts on mobilizing a unifying national identity on cultural grounds so as to bring together a large number of linguistic, religious, and ethnic imaginaries co-existing in the country (Rao and Wasserman, 2007). As a result, the postcolonial government-maintained state monopoly over broadcasting agencies instituted by the British through All India Radio and, subsequently, the state television broadcaster, *Doordarshan* (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980; Thomas, 2010). The content of the Indian state media included programs on scientific progress, discussion on state policies, and 'educational content' for various sections of society, including farmers, students, and the rural population. This development communication approach was in tandem with the developmental socialism embraced by Congress Party led by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and later, his daughter, Indira Gandhi. As a result of such tight control of the state over broadcasting, over the years, state television broadcaster, *Doordarshan* was classed as a "condescending state mouthpiece with scant regard for the desires of its audiences" (Athique, 2012: 42). While the state monopolized

the infrastructures of broadcasting, the English and regional language newspapers were owned mostly by family-owned Indian business houses.

The economic reforms initiated in 1991, also known as "liberalization," had radically altered the Indian media landscape. Following the fall of the socialist world economy, India pursued a policy shift that sought to deregulate certain domains from the control of the state (Rodrigues and Ranganathan, 2014). This included opening up the media sector to private investment, including foreign investment. In particular, the deregulation of the television sector gave rise to rapid growth in private entertainment-based television channels, new media technologies, and 24-hour news channels (Chadha and Kavoori, 2000; Chadha, 2017). Thus, by the end of the 1990s, half a dozen round the clock news channels had emerged in India, which drastically transformed the nature of television news in India. These channels presented news in a format and style that was radically different from the state broadcaster, *Doordarshan*, which had long provided an "itemized listing of the official government line on various matters in the form of news" (Athique, 2012: 61). Several media conglomerates, including Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, had invested in television news channels that offered their audience news, celebrity gossip, and political scandals in a fast-paced format that has become a characteristic of the global phenomenon of 'infotainment' (Kohli-Khandekar, 2008; Thussu, 2008).

Indeed, over the past three decades, the Indian media has witnessed transformative changes that are reflected in the growth of the media outlets. As of 2018, India has over 400 television news channels, 118,239 registered publications, including newspapers and periodicals (http://rni.nic.in/all_page/press_india.aspx). In fact, India is

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one of the few countries in the world where the print media readership has actually witnessed a steady growth in the last few years. For instance, in 2019, the overall newspaper readership has grown from 407 million readers to 425 million readers. Among them, 397 million readers subscribe to Hindi and other regional language newspapers, and only a small fraction read English dailies (Malvania, 2019). Similarly, among television news channels, Hindi, and other regional language news channels garner several times higher viewership compared to English news channels ("The Economic Times trumps," 2019).

Despite its relatively low readership and television viewership, the English language press in India has wielded tremendous and even outsized influence on the public discourse since they serve the social, economic, and political elites, including bureaucrats, politicians, and entrepreneurs in urban areas. Neyazi (2018: 54) contends that because the Indian elite who assumed power after India's independence continued to patronize English, it was perceived as a "language of modernity" as opposed to Hindi, which was considered the "language of the masses." Since the 'national elite' in the Indian public sphere depended on English language media for their information, they have been able to dominate the national discourse much more than Hindi or regional language press.

## 2.3. Hindu Nationalism and Media

Like their western counterparts, the BJP and its right-wing Hindu nationalist supporters are critical of the mainstream news media and accuse professional journalists of belonging to the "left-wing," politically correct, and elite group who are distanced from the 'people.' However, notwithstanding their accusations of 'liberal media bias,' some scholars of media studies have long argued that the BJP has been able to secure

favorable coverage from the vernacular press, particularly the Hindi-language media because non-English speaking journalists found themselves to be culturally proximate to the idioms of *Hindutva* (Hasan, 1998; Rajagopal, 2001).[2] They cite Hindi-language media's coverage of the Ram Janmabhumi-Babri mosque controversy[3] in the 1990s to make the argument that the vernacular press has enabled "Hindutva forces to gain national significance" (Neyazi, 2011: 78). On the other hand, BJP drew sharp criticism from the English language media for its historical revisionist efforts and communalism—which laid a foundation for an uneasy and tense relationship between the party and the mainstream press (Udupa, 2018).

In subsequent years, BJP and its parent organization—Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) tried to influence the dominant public discourse through pro-BJP newspapers such as *Pioneer* and affiliated publications such as *Panchajanya* and

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[2] Scholars of media studies have also extensively written about how BJP, despite its opposition to the mainstream media, has been able to use popular entertainment to its political advantage. Rajagopal (2001) for instance, claims that the serialization of Hindu epics like *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* in the late 1980s and early 90s created "conditions whereby new forms of politics might flourish," which the BJP has been able to take advantage of. Making a similar argument, McGuire and Reeves (2003) posit that in India where a powerful mix of history, mythology and religion pervade the reality of everyday lives, the BJP has been able to harness the momentum created by the telecast of Hindu mythic epics to cultivate a nationalist discourse. Moreover, they aroused "popular excitement around Hindu nationalism as a political sensibility but also less conspicuously woke Hindutva into the everyday lives of television viewers" (Udupa, 2018: 454).

These television series provided a popular base for the Hindu nationalists as their broadcasts coincided with the BJP's *Ram Janmabhumi* (birth place of Rama) movement, which was aimed at rebuilding a temple at the birthplace of Hindu deity Lord Rama by demolishing a 16th century mosque alleged to be standing on the temple's original site. This movement catapulted BJP into the national scene making the party a major stakeholder in Indian politics.

[3] The Ram Janmabhumi movement, led by the Hindu nationalists, was aimed at rebuilding a temple at the Ayodhya, the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Rama, by demolishing a 16th century mosque believed to be standing on the temple's original site.

*Organiser*. However, these outlets have had limited impact and reach with the readers outside right-wing circles. Therefore, BJP, in its initial days, continued to rely on mainstream news coverage for the diffusion of their ideas. Such reliance led to an interdependent relationship between BJP and professional journalism. In fact, BJP spokespersons, including Narendra Modi, frequently appeared on prime-time television news debates, wrote columns in popular mainstream dailies, and even paid visits to newsrooms to interact with journalists (Nag, 2016).

## 2.4. Modi and Media

News media's coverage of the religious violence in the state of Gujarat in 2002 was a turning point in BJP's relationship with the mainstream news media. The negative press received by Hindu nationalists during the riots solidified their disdain for professional journalists. In this communal violence, about 1,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed. Narendra Modi, who was then the Chief Minister of the state of Gujarat, came under sharp criticism from the media for not doing enough to control the violence. He was accused in the media of "inaction, complicity, and even giving direction to the violence" (Sinha, 2017: 4161). Incidentally, these were the first large scale communal clashes after the launch of 24-hour television news channels in the country. For the first time in the history of communal riots in India, "violence was carried live" on television. Even the newspapers were sensational and revealed the identities of the communities involved in the carnage (Rodrigues and Ranganathan, 2015). Predictably, media coverage, particularly by the television news channels, drew flak from the BJP and its followers (Ahmed, 2010). Right-wing supporters accused the press of pro-Muslim bias

and "unfairly demonizing Hindu organizations and their supporters" ("Hindu Vivek Kendra," 2002).

This 'trial by media' for Modi following the violence made him a hero for the right-wing activists in the country, and when in 2012 he was cleared of complicity in the riots by the Supreme Court of India, his supporters severely criticized the "liberal press" for demonizing him for more than a decade. Political commentators close to the BJP wrote articles and op-eds criticizing the mainstream media for unfairly targeting Modi. For instance, Surjit Bhalla wrote in the *Indian Express:*

> The English-language media is the vehicle through which double standards in India are propagated. The simple reality is that the English press is out to get Modi (and the BJP) at every opportunity (Bhalla, 2015).

Others accused the media of working closely with the Congress party in order to vilify Narendra Modi. In this regard, a right-wing commentator wrote:

> It was now that the mainstream media lost the plot. A large section had been co-opted by the Congress and by 2013 was fully embedded into its ecosystem. Some columnists were so obsessively - and often viciously - anti-Modi that they achieved three unintended objectives: one, they eroded their own credibility; two, they generated unexpected support for Modi among readers who felt he was being unfairly maligned; and three, they caused widespread revulsion in the public for mainstream media (Merchant, 2015).

Thus, while in his early political career, Modi had been on reasonably friendly terms with the media, the news coverage of the Gujarat riots "changed the Modi-media equation" in substantial ways (Sardesai, 2014: 226). Modi's opposition to the mainstream media was solidified after his famous television interview with well-known Indian journalist Karan Thapar on *CNN-IBN*, a 24-hour English news channel. Uncomfortable with the questions related to his role in the 2002 riots, Modi walked out (Mukhopadhyay, 2013). Among Hindu nationalists, the media trial of Modi "enhanced his status, both as a

victim and as an invincible man of integrity who passed a trial by fire" (Sinha, 2017: 4162). Modi started projecting himself as a "victim" of an orchestrated media campaign and began to decry the press, particularly the English language media, as the "enemy" (Karri, 2019). Gradually, he shunned the mainstream media and avoided all TV interviews where he would be asked about his role in the Gujarat riots because he felt that whatever he said in reply could "overshadow the positive message he wanted to put across" (Price, 2015: 150). In subsequent years, he started attacking elite journalists by accusing them of false representation of facts, alleging corruption, and referring to them as "news traders" (Sonwalker, 2016; Khera, 2019). Avoiding press conferences and limiting media interviews, Modi instead chose to 'interact' directly with people through Google Hangouts, web TV, televised Town Hall meetings, 3D hologram technology, and mobile applications including his own, NaMo app (Chadha and Guha, 2016; Zain, 2019; Jaffrelot, 2015).

He also used social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube to cultivate what has been referred to as the 'one-step flow of communication' (Bennett and Manheim, 2006) with the people, particularly the youth and first-time voters. These social platforms provided a "deep and intimate identification between Modi and potential voters who participated in building Modi's platform" (Sinha, 2017: 4165). Besides, social media allowed him to bypass traditional media and enabled him to seek a fast, unmediated, and direct connection to the people. He often crowdsourced his speeches, based on comments and suggestions collected from his social media platforms, which introduced what some scholars have called a "plebiscitary dimension" to political communication (p. 4177).

Few contend that this kind of communication is typical to populist politicians like Modi where on the one hand they want to be "informed about people's opinions and problems, and, on the other hand, they aim at spreading their messages without interference or delay from the elites" (Canovan, 2002: 34). This mode of direct, personalized engagement with the public by circumventing the traditional media has allowed Modi to create what Moffitt (2016: 88) calls "perceived intimacy, with followers, giving the appearance of direct accountability and representation." Meanwhile, despite his active presence on social media, studies that examined Modi's tweets showed that he did not engage with the traditional media and never linked to a news story from the mainstream press, highlighting his aversion towards professional journalism (Rao, 2018). His evident lack of engagement with the mainstream press highlights his belief that "social media are a self-sufficient form of media outreach and that traditional news media no longer play a role" (Pal et al., 2016: 59).

Using social media, Modi was able to position himself as a tech-savvy leader who was in sync with the goals of the middle-class, also known as the "aspirational class" that strongly desires economic development and upward mobility. It allowed him to seek the support of voters outside his core Hindu nationalist vote base (Sridharan, 2014). Unmediated communication offered by cyberspace also provided him an opportunity to work towards an image-makeover and transit from being perceived as a Hindu nationalist icon to a "man of development" (Sen, 2016). This new image gave him a national appeal (outside his home state of Gujarat), leading to what was described as a "Modi wave" (Singh, 2014), and positioned him as the credible Prime Ministerial candidate during the 2014 parliamentary elections (Mahapatra and Plagemann, 2019). Thus, digital media

played a salient role in magnifying enthusiasm for Modi and obscuring his association

with the Hindu nationalist movement (Rajagopal, 2014).

Despite Modi's lack of engagement with them, India's mainstream news media

provided extensive coverage to his speeches and public appearances, especially during

the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns. On his part, Modi exploited the business logic of

the news media by using "low" language[4] in his speeches, which Moffitt and Tormey

(2013) identify as an important element of populist style. Such populist rhetoric drew

considerable television viewership, thereby compelling India's highly competitive 24-

hour TV news channels to air all his election speeches live (Sardesai, 2014). As a result,

Modi got nearly 35 percent of the prime-time news telecast during the election campaign

as opposed to his opponent, Rahul Gandhi, who was covered in the news only 4.33

percent of the time (Rukmini, 2016). His exclusion of mainstream news media,

particularly the English language press from the campaign trail, was widely appreciated

by right-wing commentators. One such writer opined:

> We saw this towards the latter stages of Modi's election campaign, where he
> studiously ignored the overly self-important Delhi media and a few high-profile
> editors and TV anchors who saw (and still see) themselves as god's gift to Indian
> democracy – never mind their relative irrelevance. Instead, his first interviews
> were all to the Hindi media (India TV, ETV, etc.), which gained TRPs[5]. When the
> English media started whining about this exclusion, he gave them a few
> interviews - and they behaved like pussycats. By making himself scarce, Modi
> made himself a hot commodity, forcing the media to ultimately dance to his tune.
> His silence is thus actually a studious effort to cut the mainstream media (MSM)
> down to size by letting it scream and shout itself hoarse - and destroy its own
> credibility. He will focus on the 99 percent that is outside MSM in two ways: by

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[4] During the 2014 election campaign, Narendra Modi created an alphabet primer based on alleged
corruption scandals of the Congress party led UPA government. Saying that the Congress party had given a
new lexicon of corruption to India, he claimed, "Now a student will learn A for Adarsh scam, B for Bofors
scam, C for CWG scam.." Throughout the campaign, he mockingly referred to his political opponent Rahul
Gandhi as "Shehzaada" (Prince) and "Naamdar" (dynast). Opposition parties criticized Modi for stooping
too low in his public statements.
[5] TRP stands for television rating points.

being more accessible to them and showering benefits on the smaller and more grounded regional media, and by opening up direct channels of communication with the people independent of the mass media (Jagannathan, 2014).

Notwithstanding the extensive coverage received during the election campaign, Modi continued to avoid interacting with the country's mainstream media even after he became the Prime Minister in 2014. Positioning himself as a "son of a tea seller" and an 'outsider' who is fighting the corrupt elite, including the media, Modi had once said:

> Modi's image has not been created by the Khan Market gang[6]or Lutyens Delhi, but 45 years of his toil... good or bad. You cannot dismantle it (Bharadwaj, 2019).

As PM, Modi effectively cut off all communication with professional journalists, choosing instead to direct his communication through social media, mobile apps, and his fortnightly radio monologue *Mann Ki Baat*[7] aired on the government-run public broadcasting agency. His employment of unmediated channels of communication created a perception that he is the most interactive Prime Minister the country has ever had (Pal et al., 2016; Inamdar, 2019). Departing from the tradition, he refused to appoint a media adviser and stopped taking press crews with him on his state visits. His government has reportedly set up a special team of 200 members who are tasked with monitoring television news channels across the country and to produce reports on "pro-BJP" and "anti-BJP" news coverage (Sharma, 2018).

Due to a combination of political and economic pressures, several corporate media owners have reportedly asked their employees hitherto considered anti-Modi or anti-BJP to either temper their criticism or to quit their jobs (Vij, 2014; Ohm, 2015). In

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[6] Khan market is a posh shopping locality in New Delhi. This is close to the residences of India's top bureaucrats and politicians. It has become an idiom that may loosely be equated with the Beltway Washington consensus.
[7] Loosely translates to "speaking my mind," or "words from my heart."

their interviews with Maheshwari and Sparks (2018), political journalists working for major Indian news outlets revealed that acquiescence to the new political elite (Modi administration) was now the preferred mode for reporting, and several reporters were fired from their jobs for refusing to comply. Commenting on this grim situation, a senior journalist wrote:

> The de-legitimation of mainstream media has been achieved by communicating directly with citizens and voters, by leaning on private sector media outlets in ways that lead to increasing self-censorship, and by giving interviews to only those journalists with whom the prime minister is comfortable. While not addressing a single press conference during his tenure, in the final weeks before the elections, he gave several interviews, at least one of which was shown up to be pre-scripted (Ninan, 2019).

News reports critical of the government could have serious financial implications for the media organizations. For instance, in 2019, the Modi administration penalized three major English newspapers for unfavorable reports by cutting off government advertisements, resulting in a 15 percent drop in the revenue for those media groups (Ghoshal, 2019).

## 2.5. Emerging Right-Wing Media in India

### 2.5.1. Right-Wing Alternative Websites

In addition to constraining professional journalists from being critical of the administration, the BJP, through its financial and political clout, enabled the establishment of several right-wing media alternative outlets. Members of the Parliament, as well as corporate interests associated with the party, provided financial backing to the establishment of openly ideological news media (Crabtree, 2019). First among these outlets are news sites such as *Swarajya.com, OpIndia.com, tfipost.com, Satyavijayi.com, Thetruepicture.org, Mynation.com*, and *Indiafacts.org*, which profess to oppose what

they claim to be the mainstream's media's liberal orientation (The Hoot, 2015). Using the

online opportunity structures and affordances of the internet, these sites have sought to

"reorient India towards a majoritarian philosophy with a deep contempt for secularism"

(Khan, 2015). On their part, right-wing alternative websites claim to remedy the

ideological imbalance in the public discourse. Articulating the same, the editorial director

of *Swarajya.com* writes:

> Until about a decade ago, only one side controlled the media. Even during Atal
> Behari Vajpayee's tenure (1998-2004), the media was by and large anti-BJP.
> There were no counter-narratives. Most media—both TV and print—were
> controlled by interests politically aligned to the Congress-Left ecosystem created
> after Indira Gandhi's fateful alliance with the left in the second half of the 1960s.
> This ecosystem's stranglehold in both media and academia ensured that there was
> only one dominant narrative about India. With digital taking center-stage over the
> past decade, new voices sprang up to question the mainstream narrative
> (Jagannathan, 2020).

There are about ten such right-wing alternative news sites in India, of which at

least two are among the top 1000 most visited portals in the country, according to Alexa,

a firm that tracks website traffic ( see: https://www.alexa.com/siteinfo/opindia.com).

Several members of the Parliament, CEOs of corporate companies, economists,

entrepreneurs and retired bureaucrats who are considered close to the BJP and the Hindu

nationalist movement, have associated themselves with these right-wing alternative

portals. While a few of them support these sites financially by investing capital, others

have become members of the editorial board, lending credibility, and bringing a veneer of

respectability to these outlets (Kumar, 2020). These sites are open about their ideological

inclinations and position themselves as an alternative to the mainstream news media. For

example, *tfipost.com*, a right-wing alternative portal, describes itself as follows:

> It (tfipost.com) was started to provide the youth of the country a platform for
> coming together and exchanging perspectives. The mainstream media narrative of

India is highly tilted towards the left. Hence an average newsreader of India gets to read news with "liberal" doses of "left-arm" spin. TFIPOST was created to provide an alternate Center-Right narrative (https://tfipost.com/about-us/)

Employees working for these portals maintain that they were being transparent by being open about presenting news from a right-wing perspective. In an interview to a newspaper, Nupur Sharma, the editor of *OpIndia.com*, said:

We have declared ideological inclination, which we have made clear at various places. I have very honestly told you that it is the leftist narrative that we are up against. We do not claim to be ideologically neutral, unlike many in the mainstream media who are leftist but pretend to be centrist or neutral. We are right-leaning and will continue to be so (Manish, 2018).

In the last five years, these alternative right-wing media sites have gained in prominence both in terms of their readership as well as their role in shaping public discourse. Representatives of these sites are often invited to conferences, seminars, and symposiums organized by non-partisan media watchdogs where they engage in televised discussions on media bias and news credibility with the members of the mainstream press (see or example: "#Mediarumble: Calling out our own," 2019).

In addition to the perusal of openly ideological news websites, there are numerous pages and groups on Facebook with a right-wing orientation, which don't produce news articles or opinion pieces of their own but simply act as online congregation spaces for Hindu nationalists (Gittinger, 2018). These pages often post content produced by right-wing alternative media, which is then multicast (many-to-many) and rebroadcast by followers of these pages through social media features such as 'likes' and 'shares,' thereby expanding the reach of such content.

### 2.5.2 Right-Wing Television

Besides news portals, politicians affiliated with the BJP have launched a 24-hour news channel—*Republic TV* along the lines of *Fox News* in the U.S. to offer a "nationalist" narrative. Before its launch in 2017, several right-wing commentators openly expressed the need for a *Fox News*-like pro-BJP television network in India to counter the "liberal media." For instance, in an article titled, "Why the BJP needs its own *Fox News*?" a right-leaning columnist wrote:

> I guess the Indian media, like other left-liberal institutions, has gone unchallenged for a long time. Starting with the state-owned media, the channels have promoted leftist, and now far-left oriented narratives stifling any other alternative viewpoints…..The fact that it took Fox almost twenty odd years to establish itself against *CNN* has a message for 'Right of Center' sympathizers and especially the BJP. It will be a long-drawn process, and while it may not take twenty years but a credible alternative mainstream 'Right of Center' English news channel will require genuine investment of quality journalism and credibility in reportage (Sethumadhavarao, 2016).

Riding on a nationalist wave, *Republic TV* became the most-watched English television news channel in the country within its very first week after its launch (Ahluwalia, 2017). Prior to the 2019 parliamentary elections, the channel also started broadcasting news in Hindi. While the television network is owned by a Member of Parliament belonging to the Bharatiya Janata Party (Daniyal and Venkataramakrishnan, 2017), much of the channel's success can be attributed to its star-anchor, Arnab Goswami, who assumed editorial control of the channel after his departure from *Times Now*. Known for his "hectoring style" (Crabtree, 2015), as well as anti-liberal positions, he rose to popularity with his sensationalized coverage of emotive issues such as Pakistan, Kashmir, and Hindu-Muslim divide, all of which resonate with the right-wing

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audience.  Arnab's controversial style of journalism has led some to describe his shows as "Sean Hannity on steroids" (Cole and Stinnett, 2017).



*Figure 1: A billboard advertisement for Republic TV*

In fact, in an interview to a newspaper before the launch of *Republic TV*, Goswami made his ideological affiliations very clear by declaring, "I'm patriotic and nationalistic and so will the channel be" ("Controversial Indian TV anchor…", 2017). In fact, in his very first newscast on *Republic TV*, Goswami said, "I am a nationalist and I want to say today and that I believe, that being a nationalist is a prerequisite to being a journalist" ("Brash and Bigoted..", 2020). Since its inception, some media watchdogs

have noted that discussions on *Republic TV* have not only tended to focus on potentially

polarizing, divisive, and controversial issues but that they have also targeted opposition

parties and their leaders (Jawed, 2017). They have also pointed out that the majority of

the guests on the channel's shows are either directly or indirectly associated with the

ruling-BJP, making the program extremely partisan in tone (Sam, 2017). Besides,

Narendra Modi, who generally avoids press conferences and media interactions, gives

interviews to *Republic TV* and regularly attends their events. In this regard, a senior

journalist writes:

> Most of the time, Goswami vociferously supports the Establishment (BJP). There
> are occasions, as in case of the unbridled violence of Gau rakshaks (cow
> vigilantes), when he does question the passivity of the police and the involvement
> of the right-wing *Hindutva* government. But these are aberrations. On the whole,
> the credibility he lends to the nationalist cause is such that there is little distinction
> between Goswami and the state (Surendran, 2016).

Choosing jingoism and high-decibel brand of nationalistic news coverage over

nuanced and balanced reporting, Goswami's brash, aggressive, and partisan-style

journalism has earned him fans and enormous following among Hindu nationalists who

have long complained that the established media such as *NDTV* were slanted towards

liberalism. Seeking to defeat the "Indian media cabal operating out of Delhi"

(mainstream media), Goswami frequently attacks journalistic notions of objectivity and

professional media's claims of neutrality. In this regard, in an interview, he said:

> When a Pakistani terrorist group kills my soldier, I shall not try to look at it
> through this distilled lens of objectivity and say I must understand the perspective
> of the militant terrorist and call him a militant or a gunman...I would say he was a
> terrorist and he has killed my country's soldier. If that violates a few rules of
> journalism, then I would like to violate a few more rules of journalism. I don't
> believe in this fake objectivity. I'm an Indian, and I will be on the side of India
> ("Controversial Indian TV anchor…", 2017).

In addition, Goswami's on-screen tirades also frequently target feminist activists, NGOs, pro-environmental groups, public intellectuals who express dissent against government policies as well as members of establishment news organizations whom he calls 'Lutyens," media—in a contemptuous reference to the British architect who designed much of colonial New Delhi— for what he contends to be their lack of patriotism, (Surendran, 2016; Pande, 2017). Some other journalists have gone on to accuse the channel of spreading "fear" and attempting to "brainwash" the audience (Mehrotra, 2017) while others contend that its hyper-nationalist coverage has normalized propaganda (Bhushan, 2019). A few have even accused him of abandoning journalism altogether. To register their protest against the channel's right-wing bias, several opposition parties have refused to appear on his talk shows and boycotted his channel from their regular press conferences (Agarwal, 2017). Notwithstanding the boycott and criticism of its populist-style television reporting, *Republic TV* has managed to remain the most-watched English news channel in a highly-competitive media market (https://www.barcindia.co.in/statistic.aspx) with over 400 24-hour television news channels.

### 2.5.3 Online Hindu Nationalists

In addition to facilitating the establishment of web portals and television, BJP, in the last few years, has managed to cultivate a sizable online support base (Therwath, 2012). This mirrors similar practices in the West, where organized right-wing forces have utilized digital social media, especially Twitter, to forward their agenda and gain public support. Social media platforms in general, have played a key role in the spread of right-wing discourse in many established democracies so much so that a few scholars have

described their use as "a necessary precondition for the success of right-wing populist movements"(Schroeder, 2018: 56), which provide a platform for "emotionalizing nationalism" (Fuchs, 2016:181). Taking advantage of the rapid proliferation of the Internet and mobile technologies in India, BJP, since 2007, has invested its resources in analyzing electoral data and creating digital strategies for social media publicity. To align its traditional political knowledge and vast organizational capacity with digital affordances (Chadha and Guha, 2016), the party established an information technology (IT) cell. Tasked with designing and executing a national marketing strategy by using social media, mobile apps, text messages, emails, and customized ringtones, the IT cell thrived from online volunteerism from Indian citizens both within the country and abroad (Shukla, 2014). According to an estimate, by 2017, the BJP had more than 100,000 online volunteers spread across the country and the diaspora locations (Udupa, 2019). These ideologically motivated volunteers have played an important role in influencing potential voters by using "targeted micro-messaging" during the 2014 Parliamentary elections, which has been described by journalists as "multimedia carpet bombing" (Sardesai, 2014: 44).

Apart from centrally recruited online volunteers who are formally associated with the party's highly-organized and centralized IT cell, there are many more urban-educated tech-savvy youth who have taken up the discursive task of composing social media posts in favor of BJP on their own will (Poonam, 2018). Over the last few years, BJP's IT cell has thus evolved into a significant wing of the party with a small team of fully paid employees stationed in New Delhi but drawing support from a huge number of volunteers. Udupa (2019), who studied the communicative practices of these online

Hindu nationalist volunteers, found that many of them were engaged in "fact-checking to contest the mainstream media narratives, archive the confrontations for evidence and future use, create memes, tweets, and offer repetitive summaries of Hindu first ideology and boost the Internet traffic for *Hindutva* reasoning through tags, retweets, mentions, and likes, complemented the crafted bots of *Hindutva* with actual human labor and confront opposing views with an arsenal of stinging ridicule accusations and abuse" (p. 3150).

Twitter is one of the social media platforms where *Hindutva* online volunteers are most active (Chaturvedi, 2016) and use it as a discursive space to contest mainstream media narrative. The platform's features, such as "following" and "follow-backs," create a semblance of interactivity between the BJP and its supporters (Mohan, 2015; Pal, 2015). Incidentally, Narendra Modi's Twitter handle (@narendramodi) 'follows back' accounts of several online Hindu nationalists implying "reciprocity to his followers, and thus, by extension, a seat on the table" (Pal et al., 2016: 56). Besides, Twitter is a public domain where many-to-many broadcasting of content is possible, and retweets and trending topics could lead to interactions with strangers, i.e., outside one's immediate "friend" circle (Murthy, 2013). Therefore, BJP finds it a suitable platform to spread its message among social media users, particularly the neutral and first-time voters. More importantly, the country's elites, journalists, influencers, and activists widely use Twitter, and this makes them relatively accessible for laypersons. Unsurprisingly, online Hindu nationalists use the platform to take part in "narrative-setting" that involves the promotion of the policy decisions taken by the BJP government and countering any

criticism, including critical reporting taken up by the mainstream news media (Bansal, 2019).

Besides, these online Hindu nationalists identify particular journalists for concerted attacks, including professional and personal vilification and allegations of bias and financial corruption. Terms such as "paid news" and "presstitutes" are used to refer to media figures who are considered Modi's critics (Govil and Baishya, 2018). Women journalists are often bullied and threatened with rape for highlighting the failures of the state (Dias, 2016). Such constant trolling by a large number of Hindu nationalists has resulted in what organizations like Reporters without Borders have called "an unparalleled amount of self-censorship by journalists in India" (RSF, 2018).

A common trait of these three constituent elements of the emerging right-wing media in India, i.e., the web portals, the television network, and the online Hindu nationalists is their fundamental distrust of mainstream news media and their relentless efforts to critique and undermine trust in established media. Significantly, instead of suggesting changes to professional journalism, they seek to create an alternative media space by establishing their own institutions that compete with mainstream news organizations.

# Chapter 3: Literature Review

Scholarship on criticism of the mainstream press by right-wing alternative media spans literature about populism, alternative media, and journalism studies. Therefore, it is imperative to explore existing research on these interrelated and somewhat overlapping areas of study to fully understand the notion of anti-media populism and to situate this phenomenon in the context of today's media dynamics. This chapter aims at summarizing theories and results present in the relevant literature. Also, I will examine the theoretical concepts of 'counter-sphere' (Major, 2015) and positioning (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010) to develop a framework that offers useful explanations and analysis on how anti-media sentiments are expressed through right-wing alternative media. In the following section, I will review the literature around the important components of my analysis of the media criticisms articulated by right-wing alternative news outlets: populism, right-wing populism, and the mainstream news media, and alternative media.

I begin this chapter with a brief overview of the literature on populism and the populist worldview. Here, I discuss various definitions of populism and draw a distinction between right and left-wing populism. In the next section, I explore empirical research on right-wing populism and the mainstream news media. Several scholars have studied the role of established media in the mediatized politics of the Right, albeit in the context of Western democracies. These offer useful insights into the strategies embraced by right-wing actors to gain maximum visibility in the traditional media. I then discuss expressions of media distrust perpetuated by right-wing populist forces in various parts of the world. The role of the internet and mobile technologies in redefining the relationship between the mainstream media and populist forces will be discussed in this section. Next,

I explore scholarly understandings of the 'alternative media' and a brief review of literature that argues that right-leaning news outlets can also be defined as 'alternative' so long as they perceive themselves as correctives to the mainstream. Finally, I discuss the concepts of positioning and counter-sphere so as to offer a theoretical framework for this study.

## 3.1. Understanding Populism and Populist Worldview

Before embarking on an examination of anti-media populism, I begin by exploring the notion of populism and its approach to the mainstream media more generally. Acknowledging that populism is a multilayered phenomenon and the attempts to define it are fraught with issues of context, some scholars of communication and political science have tried to come up with operational definitions to describe the phenomenon. For instance, Albertazzi and McDonnell (2008) defined populism as an "ideology which pits a virtuous and homogeneous people against a set of elites and dangerous 'others' who are together depicted as depriving the sovereign people of their rights, values, prosperity, identity, and voice" (p.5). Meanwhile, Engesser et al., (2017) characterize populist actors as those who "pitch themselves as challengers of the elites and as advocates of the people. They aim at wrenching the sovereignty from the elites and at restoring it to the people" (p. 1281). Mudde (2004) offers the most widely used and accepted definition of populist ideology, which considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups- 'the pure people' and the 'bad, corrupt elite' and which calls for the unrestricted sovereignty of the people. Other authors have conceived of populism as a communication style (Bos et al., 2011), a political strategy (Weyland, 2001), or a tool for political mobilization (Jansen, 2011).

Broadly speaking thus, populism has been considered a "thin" ideology with a focus on the distinction between 'the people' and a 'corrupt elite' with an emphasis on the will of the people (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017). These definitions and descriptions offer some distinctive characteristics of populism. First, within the populist ideology, 'people' are characterized as a homogeneous or monolithic group (Canovan, 1981; Taggart et al., 2000). Second, the elite are portrayed as betrayers of the people's 'sovereignty,' while populists project themselves as champions of the people. Thereby, populists claim that "they (and they alone) are able to represent the true will of the people" (Müller, 2016:3). The third characteristic of populist ideology is the horizontal opposition between 'pure people' and 'others.' Here, the exclusion of the outgroup or the 'others' is mostly a constitutive element of the right-wing populist discourse. Some scholars identify populism with economic policies such as industrialization and Keynesian economics, while others associate it with a style of political leadership defined by "mass mobilization, demagogy, and a strong executive" (Waisbord, 2013), indicating the prevalence of populist ideology within both left and right-wing parties. While populist movements from both the ideologies demonstrate some common features in terms of their performative styles, they differ in their outlook and representation of the society (Stavrakakis and Katsambekis, 2014).

For example, based on a comparison of four prototypical cases of right-wing and left-wing populist parties in Europe and Latin America, Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser (2013) contend that right-wing populism is exclusionary in its ideology, whereas, left-wing populism tends to be more inclusionary. Their analysis found left-wing populism in Latin America to be favoring political representation of groups that have been

discriminated against and whose voices have not been considered by the 'establishment.' Conversely, right-wing populism in Europe is focused on the rights and privileges of the 'pure people' or natives. These parties were found to be trying to win the support of the voters not by defending economic policies in favor of the working class, but rather by promoting the exclusion of all non-natives including religious and ethnic minorities and immigrants. While the former predominantly had a socio-economic dimension (poor and working-class), the latter was primarily fixated with socio-cultural dimension (immigrants, culture, race, ethnicity, religion, etc.)

Likewise, in an extensive survey of right-wing discourses in Italy and Germany, Caiani and Della Porta (2011) have observed that "extreme-right discourse is exclusivist because it focuses not only on corrupt political elites but also on other groups including ethnic and religious minorities, refugees, immigrants, political adversaries, etc." (p. 19). Evidently, both left and right-wing populists claim that actions of the government should reflect the 'general will of the people' and that the political elite has corrupted politics to deprive the people of their power. However, their understanding of who constitutes 'the people' varies widely. Right-wing populists claim that there is a group of 'others' in the society who do not belong to the 'people.' In many cases, these 'others' are migrants, who are foreign to the virtuous culture of the people (Albertazzi and McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004; Otjes and Louwerse, 2013). Put differently, right-wing populism defines 'the people' narrowly--in religious, ethnic, cultural, or similar terms, and argues that the interests of the native-born are to be favored over those of the outgroups (Krämer, 2018).

## 3.2. Right-Wing Populism and the Mainstream News Media

The role of mass media in the success of populist ideas is an important area of research because populism as an ideology or a worldview is "articulated discursively" (Hawkins, 2010). Who sends what type of messages, through which communication channels, how often are such messages sent, and under what circumstances are some of the questions that have animated media scholars studying populist discourse. Indeed, a burgeoning strand of literature has paid particular attention to the use of traditional media by populist actors to advance their ideas and styles (Mazzoleni, 2008; Ellinas, 2010; Esser and Strömbäck, 2014). The recent rise of right-wing populist parties in the U.S. and Europe have drawn special academic interest in exploring this relationship.

In general, mass media have been understood to have made a vital contribution to the rise of right-wing populist forces by providing them with "favorable opportunity structures" (Fawzi, 2019:147). For instance, an analysis of the news coverage of 2016 U.S. presidential candidates found that mass media's 'high-volume' coverage helped propel Donald Trump to the top of the Republican polls (Patterson, 2016). However, scholars maintain that more empirical evidence is needed to conclusively establish the cause and effect relationship between news media coverage and the success of right-wing populists in the political arena (Bos et al., 2011; Manucci, 2017). Investigations into traditional media's role in the ascent of such forces have at best indicated that "media could be co-responsible" for the electoral success of right-wing leaders (see for example Walgrave and de Swert, 2004), and that news coverage acts as a catalyst in advancing their populist agenda. Scholars have therefore argued that news media should be seen as one of the several factors contributing to the rise of right-wing populists and not the only

determining factor. They maintain that since media action is intertwined with other institutional and structural factors, news coverage is part of a multitude of elements that favor the rise of right-wing populist movements (Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Moffitt, 2016). While direct effects of media coverage on the success of right-wing movements may be difficult to establish, scholars nevertheless broadly agree that by providing visibility, traditional media, are believed to play a vital role in legitimizing, normalizing, and mainstreaming right-wing populist forces (Stewart et al., 2003; Strömbäck 2008). Moreover, mass media are also understood to be instrumental in shaping the trajectories of right-wing movements because populism is essentially a "performative style, which goes beyond mere words or ideology" (Moffitt, 2016: 87). Consequently, right-wing populism finds its best articulation through communication channels, particularly the medium of television, to transmit its political performance.

Based on numerous country-specific studies, scholars such as Mazzoleni et al., (2003) and Moffitt (2016) have identified some key tactics employed by right-wing political actors to optimize the use of traditional mass media. These tactics demonstrate their ability to exploit the media's financial vulnerabilities as well as their business logic so as to gain maximum visibility, get free and favorable coverage, and attain political legitimacy. In recent years, commercial imperatives introduced by media abundance, ubiquity, competition for audiences, and advertising revenues have prompted journalists to privilege sensational events, crime, and sex stories. This has resulted in an emphasis on "sensational and superficial news" and stories that tend to focus more on personalities than on policies (Ellinas, 2010; Thussu, 2015). Entman (1990) labels this tendency as

"production bias," which "grows out of the media's need to manufacture news that attracts and retains mass audiences" (p. 49).

To survive in the hypercompetitive environment, news media increasingly look for content that is dramatic, emotional, spectacular, and entertaining. As a result of the blurring lines between information and entertainment, 'infotainment' has become a central feature of contemporary mass media (Thussu, 2015). Right-wing populists who adopt a mediagenic style of communication and use colloquial and emotional language, and black and white rhetoric, customize their public actions and discourse to tap easily into this media's hunger for scandalous and controversial stories (Manucci, 2017). Articulating the same, Mazzoleni (2003) argues:

> It is a truism that media simply cannot ignore what is newsworthy, and clearly newsworthy are the politicians who defy the existing order, with their abrasive language, public protests, and emotive issues (p. 6-7).

Not surprisingly, they garner extensive media coverage, which in turn legitimizes their slogans, normalizes their incendiary rhetoric, and strengthens their public status (Betz and Immerfall 1998). Further, describing this interplay between populist political logic and media logic, Moffitt (2016) states:

> Populism effectively marries the tendencies of media logic with the central processes of political representation and decision-making at present. Its appeal to 'the people' versus 'the elite' and associated 'others' plays into media logic's dramatization, emotionalization, and spectacularization of news events (p.76).

In addition, scholars observe that shifts in journalistic values and newsroom practices have also aided the right-wing populist cause. News coverage, with its focus on scandals, often produces a negative and cynical view of politics in which politicians appear to be self-serving (Mutz and Reeves, 2005; Mazzoleni, 2014). Such cynicism spread by the media along the lines that "all politicians are corrupt and self-serving" and

that "the political process was beyond the public's control" (Bennett, 1999: 9) arguably provides a fertile ground for the diffusion of anti-elite, anti-establishment politics and discourse espoused by right-wing populists (Betz and Immerfall, 1998; Mazzoleni and Schulz, 1999).

Moreover, most right-wing populist movements are often single-issue forms of political action, which tend to focus their communicative strategy on one or very few controversial issues such as xenophobia and national pride. They simplify issues and make politics seem easier to grasp for those who may not have the time, patience, or inclination to understand complex policy implications. This accounts in part for the basic simplicity of populist messages and makes it possible for their easy diffusion among audiences (Mazzoleni, 2003; Moffitt, 2016).

Overall, commercial logic driving the traditional media is deemed to be a "key trigger" for the aspirations of right-wing populist actors and gives them a "competitive advantage" over mainstream politicians seeking media exposure (Manucci, 2017). Thus, in many ways, traditional news media get unwittingly co-opted into right-wing populists' communication and outreach efforts.

## 3.3. Right-Wing Populism and Media Criticism

Despite using traditional media as a tool for their political goals (Stanyer et al., 2017), right-wing populists tend to be deeply critical of the mainstream press (Esser et al., 2017; Jagers and Walgrave, 2007). In their discourse, they associate mass media with the political and cultural elite and portray professional journalists and corrupt politicians as being part of the same establishment (Wettstein et al., 2018). Here, it is important to understand the analytical distinction between constructive media criticism and

disapproval of media from right-wing actors. In general, media criticism has been considered essential in a democratic society, and scholars have long encouraged media organizations to engage with their readers and audiences to enhance the credibility and quality of news and to improve journalism (Wyatt, 2007). In contrast, media criticism from right-wing populists has been identified to be "destructive and hostile," and which involves "emotional judgment that seeks to create mistrust" (Figenschou and Ihlebæk, 2019: 903).

Such anti-media discourse appears to resonate with right-wing audiences. For example, a study from the Pew Research Center (2018) in eight countries found that citizens with anti-elite attitudes and right-wing political orientation have less trust in the mainstream news media. Likewise, Fawzi (2019) conducted a survey in Germany, which found a relationship between right-wing populist worldview and negative attitudes towards the traditional media. In her analysis, the author argues that although right-wing populism receives a large amount of media attention in several established democracies, the nature of such coverage is generally negative or skeptical, which could be why the supporters of such parties tend to perceive news media's portrayal of their preferred political parties as "incorrect and unfavorable, and criticize the allegedly biased and unfair media coverage" (2019: 151). Further, she maintains that since mass media are "organized in established institutions," and most news reporters are well-educated, they do not represent the general population in terms of socio-demographics and political attitudes. This, the author speculates, could be one of the factors why citizens supporting right-wing populists might not perceive themselves to be fairly represented by journalists.

Such criticism or even hostility of right-wing populist actors towards professional news media has come to be known as "anti-media populism" (Krämer, 2018), where populist groups consider mainstream news media to be part of the "elite conspiracy." Put differently, anti-media populism is an idea that is built on the belief that "liberal media betrays the people and conspires with or is instrumentalized by the ruling elite to manipulate the people" (p. 454). Besides, right-wing populists argue that their ideas are not received favorably in the mainstream media and are often condemned as racist or sexist and that what they consider to be truthful discourse is censored in the name of 'political correctness' (Fawzi, 2019, Moffitt, 2016). Such articulations of anti-media populism are widely used in political contexts and found in utterances such as "enemy of the people" and "lying press" from right-wing populists in various parts of the world.

Further, this expression of anti-media populism has been amplified by right-leaning partisan news outlets. Scholars such as Atton (2006, 2015), Hintz (2015), Holt (2020) and Rauch (2019) term such outlets-- "right-wing alternative media," because they provide perspectives that diverge from those visible in the traditional media and represent a "perceived corrective" to the discourse emanating from the dominant mainstream press in a given system.

## 3.4 Alternative right-wing media

The question of whether right-wing news media can be considered 'alternative' has been a topic of intense debate among scholars of media studies (Rodriguez, 2000). That is because, for many years, alternative media has been regarded as a platform for the empowerment of groups who are otherwise sidelined or marginalized in the public discourse. For instance, scholars of alternative and activist media have paid attention to

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the alternative press that blossomed amid the counterculture of the 1960s and activist-produced media for gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and other progressive causes more recently (Waltz, 2005; McMillian, 2011). Such media were understood to have created opportunities for the underrepresented groups to freely voice their views and resist hegemonic societal discourse. Indeed, this conceptualization of the alternative press as an oppositional force to the mainstream news media's representation of reality has been inspired by left-leaning intellectuals like Antonio Gramsci, Naom Chomsky, and Stuart Hall. In fact, positioning the media as part of the power structure in the society, Herman and Chomsky (1988) have long argued that American mainstream media tends to report news to foster "consent" for the interests of social and political elites. Alternative media, therefore, has come to be seen as a force that resists the dominant discourse and provides a discursive space (and thereby empowerment) for the socially, culturally, and politically excluded. Pirate radio, activist publications, documentaries, and radical work on the web--all constitute examples of this vision of the alternative media.

Consequently, most researchers (with some exceptions, see for example Atton, 2004; Atkinson and Leon Berg, 2012; Rauch, 2015) have focused on political movements such as Occupy Wall Street, Arab Spring, Euromaidan and their activist use of alternative media in support of democratic political goals (Penney and Dadas, 2014; Lokot, 2019). Given the predominantly "progressive" qualities ascribed to counter-hegemonic alternative media in much previous research, there appears to have been a reluctance among scholars to apply the term "alternative" to right-wing news media despite their anti-elite stance. Instead, they were referred to as "junk news," "fake news," "hyper-

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partisan media," "conspiracy media," and "propaganda outlets" (see, for example, Rae, 2020).

Articulating the reason for not considering such outlets as 'alternative,' Downing (2001) argued that right-wing media embody repression through top-down structures that limit critical self-reflection by producers and feedback from audiences. Expressing a similar view, Couldry (2002) has argued that "one of the central values of, say, neo-Nazi media is to close off certain others' abilities to speak of their experience, as part of the constructing or sustaining a community with closure" (ibid, emphasis in original). However, expressing a different point of view, scholars such as Rauch (2019), maintained that right-wing media can promote "repressive ideologies without repressing participation by their audiences" and that many right-wing media producers have embraced "horizontal communication and decentralized networks" (p. 21). Claiming that since the media on both ends of the political spectrum can, and do, encourage audiences to participate and that such processes are no longer unique to left-wing activism, the author argues that right-leaning news outlets should be considered 'alternative.'

Along the same lines, few scholars argue that the broad spectrum is best understood and analyzed in relational terms. In this regard, Holt et al. (2019: 3) posit that the term 'alternative media' can be used to refer to any media that publish "different voices trying to influence public opinion according to an agenda that is perceived by their promoters and/or audiences as underrepresented, ostracized or otherwise marginalized in mainstream news media." They maintain that any media that claims to oppose what they see as "dominant, influential, and agenda-setting news media," which shape the worldviews of citizens in ways that they don't agree with, qualify to be 'alternative.'

Since such outlets can be found on both sides of the political divide, the authors argue that right-wing news outlets can also be denominated as 'alternative' media. I argue that applying the aforementioned definitions and conceptualizations of alternative media to the context of the current research, the emerging right-wing news outlets in India, which claim to bring news and perspectives that are often "ignored or suppressed by mainstream media" (see for ex: https://www.opindia.com/about/) can be referred to as 'alternative.' Therefore, in this dissertation, I refer to right-leaning partisan news outlets in India as 'right-wing alternative media.'

It is only in recent years that scholars, mainly from Europe and North America, have been making quick strides to fill the gap in the literature on alternative media on the right, which have shed some light on the interactions among right-wing audiences, conservative media, and mainstream journalism (see for example Starbird, 2017; Heft et al., 2019; Hemmer, 2016; Bhat and Vasudevan, 2019). While a few scholars like Wojcieszak (2010) and Levendusky (2013) have explored whether the use of right-wing alternative media has exacerbated political polarization, others like Atkinson and Berg (2019) looked at the role such media outlets played in mobilizing support for populist movements. Further, Heft et al. (2019) looked at the content produced by right-wing alternative sites in six countries to explore the commonalities between them. Within the research related to right-wing alternative media, media criticism expressed by such outlets has drawn particular academic attention. Given the overlap of such criticism with those expressed by right-wing populist politicians, this topic has been widely discussed within the scholarly community.

For instance, Holt and Haller (2017) explored how PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans against the Islamization of the Occident) criticizes the German mainstream press in its Facebook pages. Through an analysis of 892 Facebook postings, the authors found both contesting and affirmative references to the mainstream press. PEGIDA's Facebook posts not only denounced traditional journalism for its "liberal bias" but also included links to articles that substantiated its own positions on immigration. Similarly, Figenschou and Ihlebæk (2019) analyzed content from six Norwegian right-wing alternative sites and found three dominant themes of media criticism that are promoted on these sites. First, Norwegian mainstream media are accused of being "biased, partisan, or deceitful." The second criticism is that "access to the news media is limited and conditional," and final criticism is that journalists are elite and "distanced from the people" (p. 902).

Further, the authors found that right-wing alternative media attacked the mainstream press from multiple positions. First, the analysis found that representatives of right-wing alternative media played "victim" of press censorship, i.e., they contend that the legacy media rejects their opinion pieces by calling them, racists or misogynists. Second, traditional news media is criticized from an "insider" position with an in-depth knowledge of the journalistic code of ethics. The third is the "activist" position wherein the legacy media is called out for its "double-standards." This kind of activism is accompanied by calls for a boycott of the mainstream press. Fourth, a "citizen-centric" position is adopted to position professional journalists as "elite" and "too distanced from the people." Finally, established media is criticized from an "expert" position where right-wing alternative media, by providing "alternative news sources," offer proof of "biased, partisan, and deceitful" coverage (p. 903).

Nygaard, who analyzed content published in right-wing alternative sites from three different Scandinavian countries, found that such media were highly dependent on the mainstream press to generate their own content (2019). In addition, this study found that facts and statements that appeared in the legacy media were utilized by the right-wing alternative sites as the basis for their interpretations and judgments highlighting the complex and paradoxical relationship between both the mainstream and right-wing news sources. Such empirical investigations into the workings of right-wing alternative media and their media criticism can help scholars and journalists to understand and study the role of these news outlets in mainstream political communication. Through an exploration of skepticism expressed towards the mainstream press by the emerging right-wing alternative media in India, this dissertation aims to make an important contribution to the growing body of knowledge on right-wing populist communication, alternative media, and media criticism.

## 3.5. Theoretical Framework

In the next section, I examine the phenomenon of media criticism and the rise of the right-wing press in India through the theoretical lens of positioning theory and conservative counter-sphere.

### 3.5.1. Positioning Journalists as "biased."

Political communication and media studies scholarship has provided several theoretical frameworks to conceptualize media practices and discursive strategies of right-wing groups. For instance, Koopmans and Olzak (2004) employ framing theory to study the relationship between media framing of right-wing violence and the rate of violence against different target groups. Others, such as Forchtner et al. (2013) have used

agenda-setting theory to examine the ability of right-wing parties to use new media technologies to highlight issues such as immigration, national identity, and opposition to a corrupt system. Evidently, numerous theories exist that attempt to describe, categorize, and make sense of right-wing discourse. Positioning theory is one such framework that is well-suited to understand the phenomenon of right-wing criticism of mainstream media in India

Proponents of this theory, Moghaddam and Harré (2010), suggest a referential grid with persons and conversations as subject matters of social science. With such a person/acts referential grid, the social realm could be envisaged as a composition of three basic processes: conversations and other close-order symbolic exchanges, institutional practices, and the uses of societal rhetoric---all forms of discursive practice (Davies and Harré, 2007; Moghaddam et al., 2008). Of these three, conversations constitute the essential element of social reality. In them, our daily reality is reproduced and transformed (Tirado and Gálvez, 2007). It is through discursive acts that the social world, including most mental phenomena, are produced. In essence, mental phenomena, like attitudes or emotions, exist in the relevant discursive activities themselves (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). Within discursive acts and conversations, social acts are generated and reproduced. This is achieved by two discursive processes, one of which is positioning, and the other is rhetorical re-description (Van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). The latter can be understood as the discursive construction of stories about institutions and macro-social events that make them comprehensible as societal icons (Davies and Harré, 1990). The former is the concept that forms the basis for the theoretical framework through which I look at right-wing criticism of professional journalism in India.

The concept of position and positioning has several sources. Some scholars trace its origins in the field of marketing, where positioning refers to communication strategies that allow one to 'place' a certain product amongst its competitors (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010). The usage is also close to the way in which it is employed in the military, where a position is always taken against the position of the enemy. Important texts addressing this theory can be found in Van Langenhove and Harré (1999), even if the founding concepts come from Davies and Harré (1990) and Harré and Van Langenhove (1991). They share a social-constructionist approach to demonstrate how communication shapes identity. Authors such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Davies (1989) put to use the idea that the range of social behaviors open to people differed, depending on how they were categorized.

More recently, Moghaddam and Harré (2010) focused on narratives and political processes through the application of positioning analysis--that is how rights and duties are distributed among the actors in the course of complex discursive interactions--both personal as well as those in the newspapers and television media.

Although positioning theory originates in the field of social psychology, it has been applied in other areas of study including sociology (Andreouli, 2010), conflict resolution and international relations (Moghaddam et al., 2008), political science (Konaev and Moghaddam, 2010), gender studies (Korobov and Bamberg, 2010), communication, and linguistic studies as well as rhetoric.

Van Langenhove and Harré (1999) define positioning as a "discursive practice where, in a given conversation, the speaker takes up or adopts a position." They argue that within the persons/conversations grid, the phenomenon can be understood as the

discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts and within which the members of the conversation have specific locations. Elaborating further, they claim that 'position' in a given conversation must be understood as a metaphorical concept through reference to which a person's 'moral' and personal attributes as a speaker are compendiously collected. As a consequence, one can position oneself or be positioned, say, for example, as trusted or distrusted, confident or apologetic, dominant or submissive, ethical or unethical, and so on.

Along the same lines, Moghaddam and Harré (2010: 2) define positioning as a "theory about how people use words (and discourses of all types) to locate themselves and others. They contend that often, positioning has direct moral implications, such as some person or group being located as 'trusted' or 'distrusted,' 'with us' or 'against us,' 'to be saved' or 'to be wiped out.' Explicating the discursive aspect of positioning, the authors claim that at the heart of all conflicts is the form of words people use to position themselves and ''the enemy'' with respect to rights, demands placed on others, and demands placed on them by others. According to them, it is with words that we "ascribe rights and claim them for ourselves and place duties on others. These may be as mundane as the rights and duties that shape the workplace politics, or as grandiose as those claimed by imperialists or ethnic cleaners" (2010: 3).

These definitions imply that a 'position' can be specified by reference to how a speaker's contributions are perceived with respect to their moral and personal attributes as well as their role. Therefore, when one is positioned as a weak individual, one's cry of pain is hearable as a plea for help. But positioned as a strong individual, a similar cry can

be heard as a protest. Evidently, the social force of an action and the position of the actor

and interactors mutually determine one another (Van Langenhove and Harré 1999;

Davies and Harré, 2007). Further, the proponents of positioning theory stipulate that

discursive action takes place within a specific local moral order of speaking and acting.

The impact of an individual's speech-act within this context is relative to the rights,

duties, and obligations that obtain within the moral order in which the conversation

unfolds (Raisanen and Stenberg, 2011). In other words, in a conversation, the

interlocutors locate themselves and others according to storylines, which render their

actions intelligible to themselves as social acts.

For example, one can be seen as acting as a teacher in the way her/his talk takes

on a familiar form: the storyline of instruction, of the goings-on in the classroom. In

essence, the act of positioning refers to the assignment of fluid 'parts' or 'roles' to

speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions

comprehensible and relatively determinate as social acts (Davies and Harré, 2007). That

said, positioning could lead to different understandings of the same utterances in a

conversation. For instance, in a conversation between a teacher and a pupil, the rights to

make certain kinds of remarks will be differentially distributed between the speakers.

This is what is meant by identifying 'teacher' and 'pupil' as positions. The same

utterance will have different social meaning when uttered by the person in the teacher's

position from that which it has been uttered by the person in pupil's position (Van

Langenhove and Harré, 1999).  Once a determined position has been taken, the individual

perceives and interprets the world from and through that strategic position. The concrete

images, metaphors, narrative lines, and concepts are relevant to the particular discursive practice and where they have been positioned (Tirado and Gálvez, 2007). Situating itself in this scholarship of positioning theory that has been applied in a variety of settings, this dissertation examines how right-wing alternative media position mainstream news media in India. Given that media skepticism has become the central feature of right-wing discourse across the world, right-wing supporters typically position themselves as "victims" and others (journalists) as part of the conspiring elite, and as enemies of the 'native' people (Moffit, 2016; Holt and Haller, 2016). Using this theoretical framework, I explore how Hindu nationalists engage in positioning the mainstream press.

In this context, journalists are plausibly assigned the roles of 'political propagandists/actors' by referring to their criticism of the right-wing government as evidence for the same. Moreover, by accusing journalists of being biased, right-wing alternative media would be employing a variety of "personal positioning" (1999: 20), where the latter is accusing the former of deviance from what was expected from them in terms of their roles as news reporters. At the same time, the Hindu nationalists and their allied right-wing alternative media would be indulging in 'strategic positioning' or deliberate self-positioning (1999:27) of themselves as 'victims' of 'biased' news reporting. This is tactical because positions are understood to be "ephemeral clusters of rights of access to particular repertoires of action, and/or duties of access to others" (Harré and Moghaddam, 2003).

Right-wing supporters, by deliberately positioning journalists as "propagandists" (Lane, 2019), would be practicing what they see as their right to repertoires of action,

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which includes criticizing professional journalists on their own media platforms. Once positioned as such, journalists are denied their rights to criticize the government. In fact, several recent studies of right-wing criticism of media have made similar observations albeit in a different political context, where right-wing parties position mainstream media as "liar press," thereby denying journalists their and legitimacy and credibility (see for example Nygaard, 2019; Koliska and Assmann, 2019). In some cases, such positioning has led to self-censorship among journalists, which is another way of denying them their rights of access to repertoires of action, which includes journalistic criticism of the government.

To be sure, positioning theory posits that positions, when challenged, can be negotiated and repositioned (Moghaddam and Harré, 2010). Right-wing alternative media by seizing the role of "victim" and by deliberately positioning journalists as people causing this victimhood, will also be able to deny reporters their rightful position as victims of online right-wing trolling. That said, journalists could always contest this positioning instead of uncritically accepting it. However, so far, mainstream journalists in India have not demonstrated professional unity to challenge plausible right-wing positioning. Increasing partisanship, fear of government action, and online right-wing activism has led to a situation where such positioning of journalists as "biased" and "corrupt" remains largely unchallenged.

In summary, positioning theory offers an ideal framework for the study of right-wing criticism (a form of discursive activity) of journalists where Hindu nationalists plausibly locate themselves as victims. Such positioning would allow them to ascribe rights to themselves (to criticize/troll news reporters) and place duties on journalists.

### 3.5.2. Conservative Counter-sphere

Theoretically, discursive arenas created by subaltern and marginalized groups have been described as counter-publics. Criticizing Habermas' (1964) public sphere as too utopian, Fraser (1990) argued that the concept of the public sphere was developed under the assumption that the deliberative space was singular. She contended that such a conceptualization doesn't consider the fact that public spheres were "governed by protocols of style and decorum that were themselves correlates and markers of status inequality" (p.63). In other words, the Habermasian public sphere doesn't recognize that several groups, such as women and those from plebian classes, are excluded from the public sphere. These exclusions lead marginalized groups to form their own discursive arenas, which she calls "counter-publics."

The workings of such counter-publics have been widely explored by scholars. Kaufer and Al-Malki (2009), for instance, characterized the Arab-American press as a counter-public that emerged in the post 9/11 scenario to contest the anti-Arab discourse propagated by the Bush administration in the United States. Similarly, Leung and Lee (2014), who analyzed Hong Kong's recent political protests, demonstrated the role of alternative media in the formation of an active online counter-public while Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) examined audience comments on news websites as constituting a subaltern counter-public vis-à-vis the mainstream news.

That said, there is no scholarly consensus on whether hegemonic groups like right-wing political parties and populist movements, particularly those that have formed state and federal governments, can be considered counter-publics merely because they define themselves so. While scholars such as Downey and Fenton (2003) and Dalhgren

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(2006: 152) argue that such media outlets that position themselves in "opposition to the dominant mainstream" should be considered 'counter-publics' others take a different view. Major (2012; 2015), for instance, points to the sphere associated with the American right-wing movement, arguing that "conservatives, despite their frequent claims to the contrary, were, and are not a marginalized group," (2015: 485). Consequently, their discursive activity in his view, "signifies a reactionary stance coming from a dominant group," (2015: 485), and should be designated as a "counter-sphere" even though it attempts to mirror many of the features of a subaltern counter-public," and provides "spaces for withdrawal and regroupment," where the group develops its own identity and counter-narrative, which it then employs in "agitational activities," directed at other external publics (Major, 2015).

I suggest that right-wing alternative media, like their American conservative counterparts, claim marginalization within public discourse, can also be understood in similar terms. The Hindu-nationalist BJP has not only led multiple coalition governments in the 1990s but won a landslide victory in the 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. Additionally, the party, which currently includes over 88 million registered members (Pillalamarri, 2015), is also in power in several Indian states. In fact, the right-wing movement in India as a whole has experienced considerable growth over the past two decades (Hansen, 1997). Given this situation, Hindu nationalists in India can hardly be considered subalterns. Therefore, in this dissertation, I posit that its discursive sphere should be understood as a conservative counter-sphere.

Important constituent elements of this counter-sphere are the growing number of right-wing news portals such as *Swarajya.com*, *Opindia.com*, the 24-hour television news

channel, *Republic TV,* and a vast number of online Hindu nationalists.  But whereas the

contours of Hindu nationalist politics and its implications for Indian polity have been

extensively documented, until recently, the Indian Right's discursive activities and its

relationship with the mainstream media have largely remained understudied.

Some notable exceptions include Mohan's (2015) exploration of the online discourse

practiced by the supporters of the BJP, particularly, the abusive tweets and posts on the

Facebook groups maintained by some of these Hindu nationalist groups. In his paper, he

argues that the discursive strategies used by the so-called "Internet Hindus" on social

media often correlated with the BJP's own media and communication strategy (2015: 4).

Similarly, Gittinger (2015) has examined cyber-activism by Hindu nationalists who use

online spaces to promote Hindutva ideology and rally support for Prime Minister,

Narendra Modi. However, these studies do not examine the institutionalized response by

Hindu nationalists towards mainstream news media. In other words, existing studies have

not examined the media criticism articulated by right-wing alternative media in India.

This dissertation aims to fill this gap in the literature and contribute to the emerging body

of scholarship focused on mapping the rise of right-wing media outlets in India and

analyze the nature of mainstream media criticism is voiced by these outlets.

# Chapter 4: Methodology

## 4.1. Research Questions

This dissertation attempts to explore the articulation of anti-media populism by emerging right-wing alternative media in India. To accomplish this goal, this study examines the discursive strategies employed by the three constituent elements of the right-wing alternative media, i.e., the websites, television network, and online Hindu nationalists, to critique the mainstream press. The following research questions have guided my investigation:

**RQ 1:** What dominant criticisms do the right-wing alternative websites make against the mainstream press?

**RQ 2:** How does the right-wing television express its criticism of the mainstream media?

**RQ 3:** What do online Hindu nationalists say about their own plausible association with the right-wing alternative news outlets, including websites and television?

**RQ 4:** How do online Hindu nationalists plan to counter mainstream media's 'liberal' bias?

Multiple methods were employed to address the aforementioned research questions. In order to gain insight into the nature of the anti-media populist sentiment expressed by right-wing alternative websites (RQ1), a thematic analysis of the articles published in Swarajya.com and OpIndia.com were conducted. Second, media-related shows appearing on Republic TV were examined using ethnographic qualitative content analysis (ECA) method. This analysis was aimed at studying and describing media criticism (RQ2) as it was visible through the way Republic TV relates to mainstream media in its prime-time shows. Finally, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were

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conducted with 24 online Hindu nationalists who openly supported the BJP on a social

media platform, in this case, Twitter. These interviews were aimed at understanding their

views of professional journalism in India (RQ4) and the nature of interactions they have

with news reporters on Twitter.  In addition, these interviews intended to unpack the

plausible association of online Hindu nationalists with the right-wing alternative news

outlets (RQ3). Triangulating different data collection modes are aimed at ensuring that

the findings and interpretations of the expressions of media distrust by these three

constituent elements of right-wing alternative media are credible. Next, I will explain

each of these methodological approaches in greater detail.

## 4.2. Thematic Analysis

### 4.2.1 Selection of the Websites

To understand the nature of media criticism made by right-wing alternative

websites, I conducted a thematic analysis of media-related articles published in

*Swarajya.com* and *OpIndia.com*--two of India's most-read right-wing web portals. These

websites were chosen for analysis because of two major reasons. First, they are explicit

about their ideological affiliation and even openly state that on their website. For

instance, *Swarajya* describes itself as the "big tent for right of center discourse"

(https://swarajyamag.com/users/profile), and claims to believe in "celebrating and

promoting India's cultural heritage." Although in its editorial philosophy, it claims that it

is "not a mouthpiece of any political party or individual," even a cursory look at the

website will give a clear sense of the portal's ideological moorings. Moreover, the

executive editorial board of this site includes several well-known right-wing figures

associated with the Narendra Modi-led BJP government. For instance, Swapan Das

Gupta, the current Member of the Parliament from BJP, and Surjit Bhalla, who served as a member of the economic advisory council to the Modi government, are on the editorial board of *Swarajya.*

Similarly, *OpIndia.com* describes itself as a platform that gives importance to "alternate discourse and right-liberal ideas," which the site claims were "always treated as anathema and actively suppressed" by the mainstream news media (www.opindia.com, 2014). In fact, on its site, it describes itself as a "news and opinion website that brings you reports and narratives from a perspective that is often ignored and suppressed by the mainstream media of India."

The second reason for the selection of these sites is the web traffic (number of unique visitors) they enjoy among similar right-wing portals in India. *Swarajya* attracts over 4 million unique visitors to its site every month, while *OpIndia* receives about 3.5 million visitors each month (www.similarweb.com, 2019). In addition, as of May 2020, *Swarajya* has 672,041 followers on Facebook and 204,000 followers on Twitter while *OpIndia* has over 227,000 likes on Facebook and 346,300 followers on Twitter—far exceeding other right-wing news portals.

### 4.2.2 Data Collection from the Websites

Articles from *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* that discussed the mainstream news media appearing between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2019, were initially selected for the analysis. Data was collected for two years to ensure that the sample chosen for analysis is rich and is not affected by any single major news event that is likely to be an object of considerable attention. On *OpIndia*, these articles were accessible through the "media" section of their website. On *Swarajya,* media-related articles were gathered by

using the search terms "media," "MSM," "journalism," "newspaper," "mainstream media," and "TV news" through the search bar on their website. During the aforementioned time period, Swarajya published 59 articles on mainstream news media while *OpIndia* produced 543 pieces. Given that *OpIndia* offers a sustained critique of the mainstream news media as opposed to other right-wing alternative media sites that focus on social, political, economic, and cultural issues (Bhat and Chadha, 2020), it is understandable that it produces more mainstream news media-related articles compared to *Swarajya*.

From both the sites, a total of 602 articles related to the established media were collected. This data set was then refined through further reading to eliminate articles related to "social media," "media streaming," and "digital media," which showed up in our initial data set due to the search terms. Such articles were removed from the data set because they were irrelevant to the focus of this research. This produced a final data set of 545 articles from both the portals put together. Articles were retrieved from the news sites by securing the uniform resource locators (URLs) for each of them. From this rich amount of data collected, each article was read and coded. Equal attention was paid to each data item (article) to identify interesting aspects in them that may form the basis of repeated patterns (themes). This method (thematic analysis) was employed because, through this approach, it was possible to unpack broad themes of media criticisms made by the right-wing alternative websites and the type of discursive strategies they employ to counter the alleged bias of the mainstream media.

### 4.2.3 Coding and Emergence of Themes

Widely used among a range of research questions and epistemologies, thematic analysis is a method that has been employed to identify, analyze, organize, describe and report themes found within a data set (Nowell et al., 2017). This approach is useful in identifying interesting points in the data that might lead to the formation of themes across the data set (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Here, a theme is understood as an "implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas containing codes that have a common point of reference and high degree of generality that unifies ideas regarding the subject of inquiry" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016: 101). Known for its highly flexible approach, this method of analysis is considered suitable for highlighting similarities and differences and producing themes identified in the textual data. Further, scholars such as King (2004: 268) have argued that it is a suitable approach for "summarizing key features of a large data set as it forces the researcher to take a well-structured approach to handling data, which can be a great help in producing a clear, organized, final account of a study."

Thematic analysis entails a reflective process that involves constant moving back and forward between phases (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). Since it is an iterative process, from my data set, each article was subjected to immersive reading, re-reading, and coding. This helped familiarize me with the length and breadth of the content. Data was further analyzed through an inductive approach, which involved reading through the entire data set multiple times so as to discover patterns, themes, and categories in it. As Patton (1990) argues, using this approach, findings emerge out of the data through the analyst's interactions with the data (Patton, 1990).

Following Creswell and Creswell (2014)'s prescription of a systematic process to code the data where specific statements are categorized into themes that represent the phenomenon of interest, articles from the data collected were coded focusing on the following questions: What are some of the recurring themes emerging from the media-related articles published on *OpIndia* and *Swarajya*? How did the right-wing alternative media refer to the established media and the news reporters working for them? What is the nature of their coverage of online Hindu nationalists and *Republic TV*? After the initial coding, which allowed me to simplify and focus on specific characteristics of the data, the entire data set was further analyzed to see if the codes combine to form a dominant theme. These themes were reviewed and refined to check if they work in relation to the data set and to verify if additional data within themes have been missed in earlier coding stages. Throughout the process, I took notes and maintained a reflexive journal that helped me keep track of the emerging trends, what the data mean, and how they relate to each other.

A theme, as Braun and Clarke (2006: 82) contend, "Captures something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set." In other words, they capture the essence and spread of a meaning that occurs in multiple and varied contexts. These themes are used to explain large portions of a data set and capture implicit ideas "beneath the surface of the data" (DeSantis and Ugarriza, 2000). After a detailed review and coding of articles from the final data set, eight major themes emerged from this analysis, which will be discussed in the findings section (Chapter 5). These findings will also include quotes from the

articles analyzed, i.e., extracts of raw data for the readers to understand specific points of interpretation and prevalence of the themes.

## 4.3. Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA)

### 4.3.1. 'The Debate'

Media-related shows appearing on Republic TV were examined using ethnographic qualitative content analysis (ECA) method. This analysis was aimed at studying and describing media criticism as it was visible through the way Republic TV relates to the mainstream news media in its prime-time show--'The Debate' hosted by the channel's CEO, Arnab Goswami.

Content from this television channel was selected for the analysis because of a) the network's clear affiliation with the BJP and b) its popularity as the most-watched 24-hour English news channel in India. Among the channel's owners are Rajeev Chandrasekhar, Member of Parliament belonging to the BJP, and entrepreneur Mohandas Pai, who is a vocal supporter of Prime Minister Narendra Modi (Ramesh, 2017). Besides, Republic TV's co-founder, Arnab Goswami, is a self-proclaimed "nationalist," who is well-known for taking jingoistic positions on highly emotive and controversial topics such as separatism in Kashmir, rivalry with Pakistan, terrorism, patriotism, military, and communal tensions between various religious groups (Bhutia, 2016). As soon as it was launched in May 2017, Republic TV became the most-watched English news channel in the country and has maintained its top position with respect to television viewership. Given the clear ideological dispositions of the promoters of the television network as well as its high viewership, the prime-time show, "The Debate," aired on Republic TV, was selected for this analysis.

**4.3.2 Data Collection**

In order to assess how Republic TV portrays India's mainstream press, media-related debates and panel discussions conducted on its prime-time show "The Debate" were collected for the time period between January 1, 2019, and December 31, 2019 (one year). I chose to select a wider time period for this analysis in order to gain access to the rich amount of data pertaining to Republic TV's treatment of the mainstream news media. Using the search term "Lutyens' media" in the channel's YouTube page (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCwqusr8YDwM-3mEYTDeJHzw), I obtained access to all videos referring to mainstream news media that were aired on 'The Debate' during the selected time period. Primetime show ('The Debate') was chosen for analysis because it is the flagship program for the channel and attracts the largest number of audiences. The final sample consisted of 32 unique episodes of 'The Debate.' Given that the duration of each show is about 50 minutes, excluding the ads, a total of 1600 minutes of prime-time recordings were obtained for analysis. These recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai, a video transcription software. These transcriptions enabled me to observe, not merely view, or listen to the show and allowed me to clearly identify what each speaker had said. In addition to analyzing the transcriptions, videos from the data were watched multiple times in order to take notes on the facial expressions, voice, and words of the news anchor and the panelists. Watching the videos also helped put visual symbols and camera techniques used by *Republic TV* into the right context. Such a comprehensive look at the data is vital for a "rigorous and holistic account of accounts" (Fields, 1988). The data collected were analyzed using an ethnographic qualitative content analysis method.

### 4.3.3 Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA)

Data was analyzed employing an ethnographic content analysis (ECA) method. It is a qualitative method, which involves a reflexive movement between concept development, sampling, data collection, coding, analysis, and interpretation (Altheide, 1987). Moreover, ECA lets scholars approach data without preconceived categories, and allows themes to emerge inductively, and enables investigators to adopt a methodological stance that is not only flexible but also "systematic and analytic" (1987: 68). Further, it is embedded in constant discovery and continuous comparison of relevant situations, settings, styles, images, meanings, and nuances (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Put differently, ECA is well-suited to document the communication of meaning, which is assumed to be reflected in various modes of information exchange, format, aural and visual style, as well as in the context of the report itself.

Following a "long preliminary soak," in this rich data to use Hall's (1975) term, in order to see 'what is going on' (Morse and Field, 1995), I took a closer look at these newscasts. The process of watching these shows included open coding since it does not limit the definitions or range of categories (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). Since the research goal was to understand how media criticism is articulated on Republic TV, videos with recurring themes were grouped into a category. Using axial coding, I further refined the preliminary themes that emerged from the initial open coding. Finally, I have developed five broad categories into which these media criticisms can be grouped. These broad categories/themes will be discussed at greater length in the findings section (Chapter 6).

## 4.4. In-depth, Semi-Structured Interviews

In order to understand how online Hindu nationalists counter India's mainstream news media and the discursive strategies they employ to articulate their aversion towards professional journalism, I have conducted semi-structured interviews with them. Interviews are a basic tool of qualitative methods in a range of disciplines, including communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and human-computer interaction (Spradley, 1979; Wengraf, 2001). Researchers typically use interviews as a method in order to find out what is on "someone else's mind" and to "gather their stories" (Patton, 2002). Since it is difficult to observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions of participants, it is important to ask questions and obtain answers from them. In that sense, interviews help unpack the meanings people give to their actions and the world around them. As Boellstorff (2012: 92-3) states, interviews "provide opportunities to learn about people's elicited narratives and representations of their social world, including beliefs, ideologies, motivations, justifications, and aspirations."

Interview as a research method typically involves formally approaching a participant, suggesting an interview, and conducting a conversation from the frame of an interview, where the researcher's role is primarily that of the asker of questions (Gubrium and Holstein, 2001). This method provides an opportunity to lay open thoughts, feelings, knowledge, and experience of the interviewee and offers a chance for open-ended prompts and follow-up questions that allow informants to "reflect and deliberate that bring to mind further thoughts" (Boellstorff, 2012: 96). Therefore, interview was considered a well-suited methodological approach to find out the views of the online Hindu nationalists on India's mainstream news media.

### 4.4.1 Recruitment

Given the vast number of online Hindu nationalists who populate Twitter, selecting and choosing a small sample of them for my study was a challenging task. To overcome this challenge, I first collected a list of all the Twitter followers of Mr. Subramanian Swamy, a prominent right-wing politician and a Member of Parliament belonging to the BJP. He is a well-known voice of the Hindu-right on Twitter, and a list of his followers was a good starting point to identify the respondents for my study. As of December 2019, Swamy had over 8 million Twitter followers. By using Tweepy, a Python library used for accessing the Twitter application program interface (API), a list of his Twitter followers whose accounts had a minimum of 1,000 followers was obtained on a Microsoft Excel sheet. This enabled the removal of bots and fake accounts from the data set. Besides, accounts with a large number of social media followers typically act as important vehicles for disseminating information. Further, this list was sorted to ensure that the accounts of celebrities, including politicians and journalists, were deleted from this data set. This produced a final list of 1,253 unique accounts. Among these, 30 were randomly selected using Microsoft Excel.

Further, to determine if these 30 accounts indeed belong to individuals subscribing to the Hindu nationalist ideology, their Twitter profiles were checked to see if they use terms such as "Hindu nationalist," "BJP supporter," "Bhakt,"[8] "Right-winger," "BJP-fan" or "Proud to be followed by PM Modi" etc. in their Twitter bio. Additionally,

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[8] The Sanskrit term *Bhakt* means "devotee." In the current context, it has been used to denote supporters of the Hindu right wing. Modi supporters are often referred to as Modi *Bhakt*—meaning Modi devotee or Modi fan, to equate their following with the devotee's blind following of the deity (Govil and Baishya, 2018; Khan, 2015). While a few Hindu nationalists oppose the usage and term it 'Hinduphobic' (see: Sharma, 2020), others appropriated it and claim to be proud Bhakts of Modi.

I looked at images, logos, and symbols used in their Twitter profiles, which indicate their association with the BJP and the Hindu nationalist movement. More recently, scholars such as Crosset et al. (2018) have begun to consider Twitter bio as well as images and symbols seen on user profiles as some of the indicators to determine online identity. They contend that such information provides "an occasion for users to define their aspirations and enemies" (p.8).

After securing approval from the University of Maryland's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to conduct this study, I have contacted 30 online Hindu nationalists using my personal Twitter account (@journoresearch) for an interview. Using Twitter's direct message option, requests were sent out to them to participate in this study. Among the 30 who were contacted, only eight responded and agreed to participate in this study. This was unsurprising given that most online Hindu nationalists distrust 'elites,' including academics. Also, factors such as social desirability, fear of being identified, and plausible consequences, including discrimination, might have led some of the respondents to back off from being part of my study. To overcome this challenge and to dispel respondents' feelings of caution, I informed them that their identities would be pseudonymized and that I was undertaking a serious study to understand their perspectives. Since a referral from a friend of the subject could help provide a foundation for trust, I adopted snowball sampling to reach out to more online Hindu nationalists (through friends/referrals of those I had already contacted and interviewed). Indeed, several scholars (Bergeron and Sen, 1998; Sarantakos, 1998; Valentine, 1993) recommend snowball sampling to access 'hard to reach' populations. This enabled me to secure interviews with 24 online Hindu nationalists. Most of the interviewees were men

(20 out of the 24 participants). All of them were based in urban areas and had jobs in the services sector (ex: software engineers, tax consultants, and professionals working in pharma companies).

All the interviews were conducted via Skype video or WhatsApp audio call. This minimized the logistical challenges involved in conducting face-to-face interviews with the participants. The interviews often lasted 40-45 minutes. With prior permission from the participants, interviews were audiotaped. Notes were also taken as a back-up option. The audio files from the interviews were transcribed using Trint, an automated transcription service. To protect the identity of the participants, all interview responses mentioned in the findings are pseudonymized. The findings include general themes discussed in the interviews and reproduce extracts from these conservations, which provide an in-depth understanding of their criticisms of the mainstream press in India. A sample of the questions that were asked in these semi-structured interviews are listed in Appendix I.

# Chapter 5:  Findings (Right-Wing Alternative Websites)

This chapter comprises the results of the analysis of media-related articles published in India's leading online right-wing portals—*Swarajya.com* and *OpIndia.com.* Launched in 2014, *OpIndia.com* describes itself as a website for "alternative discourse and right-liberal ideas." It is the most-visited right-wing news portal in the country, receiving 4.63 million unique views in May 2019, compared to the next most visited right-wing portal, *Swarajya.com,* that garnered 3.22 million unique visitors during the same time period. Both the sites enjoy considerable support within the ruling - Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), many of whose leaders redistribute and share news stories produced by these portals. This chapter includes findings from the thematic analysis of the media-related articles published in these right-wing news websites. The findings include discursive strategies deployed by *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* to discredit the established media and undermine the credibility of professional journalism in India.  A total of 545 media-related articles published between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2019 (two years) were analyzed from both these sites put together. Major themes emerging from this analysis are as follows.

## 5. 1. Highlighting Media 'Errors'

An overriding theme that was noted in the media-related articles published by *OpIndia* and *Swarajya* included those that questioned the credibility of the mainstream news media and their reporting. Journalistic slip-ups, sloppy verification, poor research, and inaccuracies in news reports were highlighted and portrayed as "media lies" and "misinformation."  In particular, *OpIndia* published an annual report of such "lies" that appeared in the established media in support of its argument that the news media were

corrupt, biased, and unprofessional. While it is outside the purview of this dissertation to determine if these 'mistakes' were an outcome of a sloppy practice or something more sinister, they were nevertheless highlighted as examples of "fake news."

Thus, for example, on November 20, 2018, *OpIndia* published an article that attacked the 24-hour English news network, *NDTV*, for referring to a politician accused of electoral misconduct as a "BJP leader." The article stated that the politician had resigned from the party a few days before the report was published and suggested that *NDTV*'s description was not a genuine error but rather a deliberate attempt to defame the BJP. Containing tweets from online Hindu nationalists who "discovered" this error in the headline, the *OpIndia* article stated:

> This isn't the first time *NDTV* has spread Fake News. We have documented *NDTV*'s incompetence extensively here at OpIndia.com ("NDTV Changes Headline," 2018).

In another article published on July 30, 2018, *OpIndia* criticized the Times Group (one of India's leading media conglomerates) for producing a news report on one of its websites that misquoted Subramanian Swamy, a BJP Member of Parliament in a story about a controversial aircraft purchase deal. In the story, Swamy was quoted as criticizing the BJP government's actions while he had actually criticized the version of the deal negotiated by the previous government. And though the outlet publicly apologized for the error, *OpIndia* sought to represent the mistake as an intentional attempt to deceive the public. As the site put it:

> It is interesting how a media agency can attempt to pass off an old statement as a current one, without even giving its readers the context, it was said in, thereby misleading their readers ("Times Group Deletes Report," 2018).

Most of these articles included screen captures and images of supposed errors made by the media, including misquoted statements, wrong photo captions, 'misleading' headlines, and news reports based on insufficient information. These right-wing alternative sites also included hyperlinks to the article or a video from the mainstream media to provide sufficient context for their criticism. Further, *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* included video links to similar "errors" made by the media organization or the news reporter to discredit them as "habitual offenders." Also, both the sites frequently used headlines such as "*NDTV* spreads fake news again," and "*Indian Express* caught lying again" to advance their claim that the content published in the mainstream media should be regarded as deeply suspect.

Likewise, in another article, *OpIndia* admonished *Navbharat Times,* a highly circulated Hindi newspaper, for publishing two different versions of a news story involving the launch of India's superfast train, *Vande Bharat*, in two different editions. In the Delhi edition, the newspaper claimed that a man had committed suicide by jumping in front of the train. In another edition, the publication reported that the incident had actually occurred a month ago, during the train's trial run. Subsequently, *Navbharat Times* regretted the inconsistencies in its reports and published a clarification regarding the same. However, the right-wing site contended that this was not a reporting error but a genuine attempt to spread negative propaganda against the BJP government. In this regard, *OpIndia* stated:

> This also raises questions on the credibility of the incident published by the newspaper. Responding to questions asked on social media regarding this anomaly, *Navbharat Times* journalist Narendra Nath Mishra said that it was a mistake that was rectified in the Delhi edition. He informed that Noida edition is printed earlier hence the error remained, which will be corrected later…..People deliberately giving their lives by coming under running trains can't raise

questions on performance on a train, and Navbharat Times report on both the editions seems to be designed to spread negative information about the newly launched train ("Navbharat Times published," 2019).

Retraction of articles, corrections, and public acknowledgment of errors by mainstream news organizations were also used by *OpIndia* as a vindication of the right-wing argument that the news media were not professional and, therefore, not a credible institution that disseminated accurate information. Corrected news articles were highlighted as evidence that mainstream media publish 'fake news' and, therefore, cannot be trusted. In this regard, *Swarajya* and *OpIndia*'s response would seem to be similar to that of right-leaning media outlets in Europe, which "epistemologically" position themselves as exposers of established media's "fake news" (Holt, 2015: 13).

Further, both the media sites have launched their own 'fact-checking' initiatives to challenge the claims made by the press. Interestingly, however, all the articles that were 'fact-checked' by both the right-wing sites were those that included critical reporting of the Modi-government, the BJP, and its affiliated Hindu nationalist organizations. Through a combination of 'fieldwork' and 'reporting' by some of its own staff members as well as voluntary 'investigations' conducted by online Hindu nationalists, both *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* called out so-called 'inaccuracies' in journalistic coverage and painted them as media's deliberate attempts to spread lies, 'propaganda' and 'misinformation.' For instance, when mainstream media reported on the killing of four Kashmiri Muslim students at a regional university by their fellow students, *OpIndia* contacted the local police station to 'fact-check' media's claims. In this regard, the site wrote:

> *OpIndia* contacted the Gangwad police station to find out the truth, where we learnt that the matter was not communal at all and neither were the students

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targeted for being Kashmiri. Gangwad police station made it clear that both sides are Muslims in this case, so there is no question of it being communal. The police categorically denied the report of *The Wire*, in which Bihari students have called Kashmiri students as terrorists ("Leftist Portals and Politicians," 2019).



*Figure 2: A snippet from OpIndia article criticizing the mainstream media*

Denials and rebuttals from official sources, inconsistencies and gaps in news reports, and acceptance of errors by news organizations were heralded by both these sites to convey their message to their readers that the mainstream media published fabricated stories and were, therefore, not credible sources of information. In fact, such attacks on the press mirror global efforts by right-wing anti-media populists to:

> "call out" legacy media "mistakes" –aimed at challenging mainstream media's claims to "being an authority" (Carlson, 2017: 7) that have been traditionally based on adherence to professional values like accuracy and facticity.

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## 5. 2. Naming and Shaming Journalists

Articles and news reports produced by editors, television news anchors, and journalists associated with the mainstream press, particularly those regarded as anti-BJP, were also closely monitored by *Swarajya* and *OpIndia*. Prominent among such journalists were Rajdeep Sardesai, Rana Ayyub, Siddharth Varadarajan, Vinod Dua, Sagarika Ghose, Barkha Dutt, N Ram, and Ravish Kumar-- all widely perceived by Hindu nationalists as anti-BJP and anti-Modi (Saberin, 2018). A significant number of articles published by both the right-wing sites included criticism of individual journalists for their alleged involvement in corruption, sexual harassment cases, fabrication of stories, and plagiarism. These accusations were used as evidence to support the right-wing argument that mainstream journalists who are self-righteous and often take the moral high ground on issues, were in fact, deceitful, corrupt, immoral, unprofessional, and unethical. For example, on January 18, 2019, *OpIndia* published an article accusing N Ram, the chairman of a prominent English newspaper, *The Hindu*, of plagiarism. In the article, *OpIndia* included the 'original' piece from which Mr. Ram is accused of 'stealing' content. In its criticism, *OpIndia* stated:

> In this article, he has shamelessly taken the work of a defense journalist called Manu Pubby and not only passed it off as his own but also presented a skewed version of his reportage. The article proudly proclaims that the article is based on documents accessed by *The Hindu* exclusively....While N Ram has maintained the shoddy standards of *The Hindu*'s reportage, what is most tragic is how he has stolen from another journalist without giving any of the others their due credit ("N Ram of the Hindu," 2019).

In a similar example, *OpIndia* highlighted the accusations against senior journalist Shivam Vij for faking quotes and making up interviews. On Twitter, when a Kashmir-based academic accused Shivam of publishing an 'interview' he never gave him, *OpIndia*

provided extensive coverage to the allegations to underscore the journalists' "lack of professional ethics." In such articles, both the right-wing sites provided links to previously published critiques of the same news organization or the journalist to reinforce their accusations of media actors being unethical, unprofessional and immoral.

In addition to providing coverage for professional 'misconduct' of journalists, both the sites highlighted financial irregularities, fraudulent practices, and tax evasions by media organizations. When the Editor's Guild of India expressed concern over the Modi government's selective targeting of media organizations that are critical of the BJP, *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* responded by criticizing them for shielding corruption under the pretext of media freedom. For instance, in its long and detailed report on the corruption cases against Prannoy Roy and Radhika Roy, the founders of 24-hour English news channel, *NDTV*, *OpIndia* contended:

> The point and scope of enquiry against *NDTV* is not at all linked to any activity related to their reportage. And most importantly, no media house or even *NDTV* can hint at any kind of censorship of content. Clearly, the charges of imperiling press freedom are out of place and unwarranted in *NDTV*'s case. The channel has continued to run without any encumbrance from the end of the government. In such a scenario, it is unfortunate that the halo of journalism and principles of press freedom are being misused to play the victim card by *NDTV*. This is especially so when there are serious charges of illegality in a series of transactions involving the top brass at *NDTV* ("NDTV is under investigation," 2019).

Another tactic employed by the right-wing sites to undermine the credibility of individual journalists is to monitor their social media posts to look for inconsistencies and contradictions in their views. If their latest views were in contrast with their previous ones, articles were published with archived tweets and videos to highlight their 'hypocrisy' and 'double-standards.' For example, on September 5, 2019, *OpIndia* published an article with old and latest tweets as well as videos of *NDTV* journalist,

Ravish Kumar, discussing the country's economic growth rate. In his tweets during the

Congress party's government, Kumar supposedly downplayed low economic growth

while in his latest tweets, i.e., in 2019, he criticized the Modi-government for the same.

Embedding his tweets (old-archived and latest) as well as his old and new newscasts,

*OpIndia* wrote:

> But it seems Ravish Kumar's analysis on the economy has changed with change with the government at the centre, because in 2013, he had said that there is nothing to worry about a GDP growth of 5%. He had asked whether people were worrying too much, as several only few countries were growing at even a 5% rate, and growth rate most countries were below this. A composite video of both comments of the *NDTV* journalist, showing his opposite comments on GDP during UPA and NDA government, has gone viral on Social media ("Just days before Ravish Kumar," 2019).

Finally, *OpIndia* and *Swarajya* also used mockery, ridicule, and personal

targeting as strategies to shame professional journalists. Using insulting and

condescending words, the sites published long tirades aimed at demoralizing news

reporters. In their articles, right-wing alternative sites referred to reporters and editors as

"propagandist-in-chief," "controversial news reporter," "#metoo accused," "so-called

journalist," "abusive journalist," and "fake news peddler." In some cases, negative

controversies related to the family members of journalists were given prominent coverage

to target them. For instance, on December 24, 2019, right-wing sites carried articles

accusing writer Bahar Dutt, the sister of television journalist Barkha Dutt, of plagiarism.

Even though the controversy had nothing to do with the professional work of Barkha

Dutt, the sites mentioned her relationship with the writer multiple times.

In some cases, journalists were ridiculed for their lack of knowledge or expertise.

Seemingly benign errors by news reporters are brought up in order to contest their moral

authority and to project them as incompetent and ignorant individuals. For example, on

October 3, 2019, Vijaita Singh, a journalist from *The Hindu*, was mocked for her

supposed lack of understanding of the distinction between 'revenue' and 'profit.' In the

article, *OpIndia* published a long list of tweets from online Hindu nationalists ridiculing

her. The article targeting the journalist read as follows:

> Clearly, *The Hindu* 'journalists' do not seem quite well-versed with the concept of competition and free-market...Today's episode is another feather in Vijaita Singh's stellar journalism career thus far. In the past, she has peddled misleading information on Jammu & Kashmir following the abrogation of Article 370, which attracted a strong condemnation by a Police Officer from the state ("The Hindu 'journalist' cannot," 2019).
> In sum*, OpIndia* and *Swarajya* used every opportunity to highlight scandals involving journalists in addition to using mockery and humiliation to name and shame them.

## 5. 3. Media as Biased and Opposition-friendly

*Swarajya* and *OpIndia* dedicated a significant number of articles to the projection

of the mainstream media as being loyal to the principal opposition party, Congress, and

its "left-liberal" allies. These articles focused on how journalists skewed their reporting to

help their preferred party while being unfairly critical of the BJP. They argued that the

mainstream news media in the country have long been co-opted by the Congress party

and its left-liberal ecosystem. Right-wing alternative sites alleged the mainstream press of

publicizing the failures of BJP governments in various states while ignoring and

overlooking similar omissions in states administered by non-BJP political parties. For

instance, on January 1, 2019, *OpIndia* published an 'investigative' article comparing the

way in which mainstream media covered lynchings of Muslims by cow vigilantes in BJP

ruled states vis-a-vis Congress-ruled states. Titled, "This is how 'secular' media covered

two similar crimes during BJP rule and Congress regime," the article read as follows:

> When an unfortunate death occurs in a BJP ruled state, the headlines often scream about how a Muslim man was lynched by 'cow vigilantes.' The subliminal

messaging being that the "Hindutvavadi" BJP is encouraging mobs to lynch Muslim men. However, when the same crime happens in a state that is ruled by Congress, the headlines mellow down drastically…Since the BJP has taken reigns, the media has tried to project the party as anti-minority and Congress as the Messiah. They have repeatedly asserted that BJP is actively trying to sabotage Muslims of the country (Mohta, 2019).

Similarly, in an article titled, "The media and the questions it never asked Aravind Kejriwal," *OpIndia* alleged that the mainstream press received large advertisement contracts from Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), a political party that opposes the BJP. The right-wing site accused the press of being obligated to provide favorable coverage to AAP due to the ad revenue. In the article, *OpIndia* maintained:

> Since our newspapers don't ask a few simple questions to Delhi chief minister Arvind Kejriwal, could we the readers pose a few and then judge if the two could be acting in concert? Accomplices hiding in plain sight?... Readers can't see the "deep state," which nurtures both but the telltale evidence of Kejriwal's "dole" to newspapers in the form of government advertisements—around Rs 1000 crores on publicity in five years—is in plain sight (Shukla, 2019).

Furthermore, numerous articles focused on how certain journalists were friendly with the Congress party and questioned their claims to 'neutrality.' In these articles, such journalists were referred to as "Congress-friendly media" and "Congress-loyal journalists," and were accused of being 'soft' on Congress. When television news anchor, Rajdeep Sardesai, addressed a gathering organized by the All India Professional Congress (AIPC), an organization affiliated to the opposition party, *OpIndia* publicized it as a proof of his bias. In this regard, *OpIndia* wrote:

> It is rather surprising to see how 'journalists' like Rajdeep Sardesai brave to put up a 'neutral' and 'unbiased' face every day despite having no shame in piggybacking the Congress party to promote their economic interests. The credibility of the mainstream media is already at a critical low. With journalists claiming to be 'neutral' making an appearance at the political events of the Congress party, it does not bode well for the credibility of the media, which has already taken a beating following the advent of the social media ("After Karan Thapar," 2019).

Likewise, *Swarajya* accused the established media of not posing tough questions to Rahul Gandhi, the leader of the Congress party. Accusing the media of adopting "double standards" in their reporting, *Swarajya* argued that reporters refuse to scrutinize the opposition. In this regard, the right-wing site wrote:

> Do the journalists, especially in the Delhi circles, fear making Rahul Gandhi look bad during election season? After all, if the last five years are any evidence, the media has been all too happy to try to take Modi down and derail his agenda while going easy on the opposition. In a free and fair democracy, where the media is the fourth pillar, shouldn't there be tough questions asked of both the prime minister and the chief of the competing party, the opposition? ("Election 2019," 2019).

Within this theme, a trend that was prominently visible were attempts by right-wing sites to question and compare frames adopted by the media in its coverage of the Modi-government vis-à-vis Manmohan Singh-led Congress government that had governed the country until 2014. In these articles, both the portals argued that the press were trying to whitewash corruption scandals during the previous regime and portray a favorable image of the Congress while being overly harsh and critical of the Modi government. *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* contended that the media did not give credit to Modi, where it was due despite his "good governance" and "corruption-free" administration. Admissions by journalists that they had failed to predict Modi's electoral success were cited by right-wing portals not as examples of self-reflection by news organizations but as evidence of their inherent antipathy towards the BJP. This was evident after Modi's victory in the 2019 parliamentary elections. When several journalists wrote op-eds and addressed seminars on how the media failed to predict BJP-led National Democratic Alliance's victory, *OpIndia* circulated those accounts. For example, on May 31, 2019, *OpIndia* published an article titled, "Shekhar Gupta admits that journalists

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chose to ignore the positive effects of Modi government's welfare schemes," which read

as follows:

> Prior to the historic victory of the NDA in the elections, the left-liberal section of the media was spreading the theory that there was widespread resentment against the Modi government among the general people. The allegations of high unemployment, farmers' problems, economic slowdown, etc. were cited as the reasons why Modi will not come back to power. It was claimed that various schemes of the government didn't reach and benefit most people in India. But now Shekhar Gupta has confirmed that they peddled such lies by deliberately ignoring the benefits that people had obtained from various schemes of the government ("Shekhar Gupta admits," 2019).

Similar articles were published by both the websites that questioned mainstream

news media's alleged efforts to shield Congress party and its leadership from scrutiny

and criticism. These portals also contested the media's efforts to hold the government

accountable for the implementation of its social welfare schemes, development and

infrastructure projects, and tax reforms. Aimed at highlighting the mainstream media's

so-called pro-Congress bias, these articles and newscasts thereby attempted to align the

traditional media with the corrupt establishment or the 'congress ecosystem,' which was

out to get Modi.

## 5.4. Media Criticism by Influential Personalities

Another key theme revealed in this analysis was *Swarajya* and *OpIndia'*s attempts

to emphasize criticism of the news media by popular personalities, celebrities, as well as

influential individuals such as academics, retired military generals, politicians, public

intellectuals and supreme court judges. Indeed, reports about news media apologizing to

celebrities as well as criticism of journalists by politicians were frequently carried by

these sites. In doing so, the right-wing websites were relying on the professional

credentials of these famous individuals to undermine the credibility of journalists and the news media.

For example, when Bollywood actor Kangana Ranaut found fault with the journalists for running a smear campaign against her for working in a movie with nationalistic overtones and patriotic themes, *Swarajya* gave it extensive coverage. In the article that appeared on July 11, 2019, the news portal published a video release from the actor and wrote:

> After Entertainment Journalists' Guild of India announced the boycott of actor Kangana Ranaut over her spat with a journalist whom she accused of targeting her for making a film on nationalism, the actress has released a video on Twitter in response.
> In the video, Ranaut takes on a section of the media and compares them to "deemak" or mites eating away the nation. She says that such media persons harm the respect of the nation and attack the unity and integrity of the country constantly. She also accused them of spreading fake news. Ranaut continued, saying that such journalists openly proclaim and preach their gross, vulgar, and anti-national views and expressed discontent that there was no provision to punish such people ("Don't want anti-nationals," 2019).

In another instance, on January 28, 2019, *Swarajya* ran a story detailing the manner in which the U.S. Democratic Congresswoman, Tulsi Gabbard, "slammed" the media for their "religious bigotry" and malicious campaign against her.

*Figure 3: Swarajya.com highlighting media criticism from famous individuals*

In a similar vein, *OpIndia* published a rebuttal by a former Indian army officer to an article written by an op-ed writer, Sagarika Ghose, in which she characterized war as a "naked display of government power" that is glorified by spectacle-driven television. In the *OpIndia* piece, the former army officer wrote:

> Ms. Sagarika Ghose talks about war as if she's witnessed one firsthand, deriding the television coverage of it as "glamorizing it as part of a militarist syndrome obscuring the blood, grime, the waste of lives…" The closest first-hand experience she's had to war is probably clawing with others at a sale at Marks and Spencers. Unlike her spouse, who has some combat experience on the streets of New York. People like her hear big words and develop some notions during the years they spend in elite institutions, hugely subsidized by taxpayer's money. Then they spend the rest of their lives, making a living off selling trash based on these notions to cronies in their entitled ecosystem (Agarwal, 2019).

When publicizing media criticism by influential personalities, right-wing news sites also used words and phrases such as "misogyny," "sexism," "patriarchy," "mansplaining," "bigotry," and "hate speech," which are typically employed by progressive movements and causes. For example, when popular model and actress, Lisa Ray, criticized *The Telegraph* for using a picture that highlights her "sex" appeal alongside an interview of her on how she overcame sexist stereotypes, *OpIndia* wrote:

> The irony is that these 'woke' media outlets are the first ones to berate others, reminding them of not being feminist enough, all the while indulging in rabid forms of sexism themselves. Sexism runs deep within the premises of The Telegraph, and this newspaper has a history of being sexist time and again. What's amazing is that this fact doesn't seem to affect its popularity amongst its liberal readers. Not too long ago, the liberals' darling newspaper had mocked Union Minister Smriti Irani as 'Aunty-National' in one of its lead articles ("Model-actress and," 2019).

Among other such stories run by *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* that involved criticism of the mainstream media by notable figures was a piece in which the chief justice of India admonished news media for "irresponsible reportage" on the court-supervised National Register of Citizens program[9] ("CJI Ranjan Gogoi Hails," 2019) as well another in which judges from the Supreme Court rebuked the media for spreading misinformation on the detention of children in Kashmir ("SC says misinformation," 2019). As evidenced by these examples, it is clear that the right-wing alternative sites offered their platforms for the dissemination and amplification of media criticism by influential individuals and arguably used this critique to further their own anti-media rhetoric.

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[9] National register of citizens (NRC) is a registry of Indian citizens. It is an official record of those who are legal Indian citizens. The Modi government announced that the administration will identify all legal citizens of the country through the NRC so that illegal immigrants can be traced and deported.

## 5.5. Media as 'Anti-Hindu'

An important theme that emerged in the thematic analysis of *Swarajya* and *OpIndia's* media-related articles was their attempt to characterize the mainstream press as being anti-Hindu or 'Hinduphobic.' Indeed, both the sites published numerous articles that made the argument that the 'left-liberal' press "peddled," anti-Hindu sentiments and spread negative perceptions about the Hindu religion. These criticisms included accusations that the media demonized the Hindu community, ignored their legitimate concerns about 'misrepresentation' of their religious practices, traditions, rituals, customs and culture, and overlooked crimes committed against them by minorities while favoring and supporting Muslims and Christians. This accusation is identical to the media criticism made by European right-wing media, which charge the traditional media of being "biased against any immigration-critical perspective, covering up problems related to immigration, and ostracizing individuals who espouse political views deemed controversial" (Holt, 2016; Holt and Haller, 2017: 44).

Using phrases such as "Jihad apologists" to refer to the journalists, both *OpIndia* and *Swarajya* alleged that the press, particularly the English language media, always paint the Muslim community as the victim and attempt to send Hindus on a "guilt trip" for not being accommodating enough of the minorities. For example, when the Supreme Court of India awarded the disputed Ramjanmabhoomi site in Ayodhya to the Hindu community, *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* published a series of articles accusing the media of propagating a false history and narrative for several decades. In one such article, *OpIndia* wrote:

> They are the ideological backbone and the intellectual shield that the most violent section of the Muslim community depends on for nourishment. In the aftermath of

the Ayodhya verdict, the conduct of the media and the Jihadi elements in the media was no different. The media launched a 4-point agenda: Guilt trip the Hindus for winning a 500-year long battle, paint Muslims as the victim – 'Hindus took something away from the Muslims', subtly wonder why the Muslim community was not rioting on the roads, and if they are lucky, cajole the Muslim community to run amok, causing riots, so they can demonize Hindus further and use the riots to beat Hindus into ideological submission, and exploit the Ayodhya win of the Hindus and the guilt they were working hard to invoke, to arm-twist Hindus into submitting to some unrelated demands of the Muslim community (Sharma, 2019).

Similarly, established media were criticized for "bashing" Hindu festivals and spreading 'Hinduphobia' while "glossing over uncomfortable truths about the festivals of the other religions." The right-wing sites alleged that such negative coverage of Hindu traditions was actually a "concerted effort" to make Hindus feel guilty about their cultural practices. In an article comparing media coverage of Hindu festivals vis-a-vis Muslim and Christian festivals, a writer for *OpIndia* argued:

> The media articles on festivals have a distinct pattern. If one notices the headlines and the body of the articles, one would easily notice that the words associated with Hindu festivals are rape, sexual harassment, violation, water scarcity, smoke, pollution, choking, animal abuse, patriarchy, regressive culture and such. But with Eid, Easter, and Christmas, the words that are perpetuated are peace, love, blessings, brotherhood, and joy. This is a deliberate attempt to paint Hindu festivals with negativity and hate, a subtle message of Hinduphobia (Jain, 2019).

Indeed, both the portals published essays written by Indic and Hindu religious scholars providing detailed explanations for the ancient Hindu rituals and traditions. In these essays, the authors also alleged that the media deliberately interpret these rituals out of context to paint Hindu practices as 'unscientific' or 'illogical.' Yet, another criticism made by the right-wing sites is that the established media exaggerate and even lie when reporting on religious intolerance, mob lynching by cow vigilantes, and violence against religious minorities. They contend that the media shielded the identity of perpetrators when the criminals were Muslims. For example, *OpIndia* charged the media of giving a

"Hindu spin" to the death of a 10-year old Muslim boy who had died due to the rituals performed by Islamic religious healer. The right-wing site accused the press of referring to the Muslim healer as a "tantrik[10]," leading to the perception that the crime was committed by a Hindu individual ("10-year old boy," 2019). In most cases where members of the Hindu community have been accused of inciting violence against minorities, the right-wing sites either sent their staff reporters for 'investigation' or dialed the local police station to 'verify' the claims made by the press. For example, when the *Indian Express* reported about Muslim youth being beaten up by five Hindu men, *OpIndia* called the local police station and published a "fact-check" report that concluded that the attack was due to "road rage" and that the victim's religion had nothing to do with it. In its report, *OpIndia* claimed:

> *OpIndia* called up Dahej Police station and confirmed that there was no communal[11] angle in the incident. The police confirmed that it was a road rage incident and a complaint has been registered against unknown assailants. Faisal, in his statement to the police, has not mentioned that it was a hate crime ("Indian Express communalizes," 2019).

Here it is important to note that the police force and other law enforcement agencies in India cannot be trusted as unbiased institutions. In certain states, particularly in northern India, police have long been accused of abusing and mistreating Muslims. In fact, a recent survey report has revealed that half of the Indian police associate Muslims with crimes--indicating the anti-Muslim prejudice prevailing among the law enforcement officers in the country (Kuchay, 2019).

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[10] Tantrik is a Sanskrit term used to refer to Hindu ritual practitioners.
[11] Religious (communal violence is commonly used to refer to religious or sectarian violence)

In addition to highlighting the 'anti-Hindu' articles and news reports, tweets, Facebook posts, and social media comments by journalists were closely monitored to check for negative remarks about Hinduism. Such remarks were then used by right-wing sites as proof of negative attitudes towards Hindu culture, traditions, customs, and religious practices among mainstream journalists. The monitoring of social media posts was undertaken in collaboration with online Hindu nationalists who archived the "offensive" social media posts and took screenshots of the comments as "evidence." Several online Hindu nationalists highlighted such 'negative' posts on Hinduism via Twitter, which were later published on right-wing sites. For instance, on September 26, 2019, *Swarajya* published an article accusing a news producer of posting Hinduphobic comments on his Facebook page. Since the comment was in the Tamil language, an online Hindu nationalist well-versed with the language translated it to English for the readers of *Swarajya*. Likewise, *OpIndia* carried an article criticizing *NDTV* journalist, Ravish Kumar, of mocking 'Deepotsav' (Hindu festival of lights) and Hindu god Rama on his Facebook page. In a similar example, journalist, Aatish Taseer, came under the right-wing criticism for his 'derogatory' tweet in which he supposedly referred to Hindus as "cow urine drinkers." Accusing him of 'Hinduphobia,' *OpIndia*, averred that he "carries the same hatred in his heart for Hindus that Jihadists carry" (Bhattacharjee, 2019).

In their articles and reports, right-wing alternative sites alleged that mainstream journalists were working with "global forces" including international nonprofits, Christian evangelical organizations, and foundations to constantly malign and vilify the Hindu community, and to portray them as the "aggressors." Right-wing sites accused

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India's English language media of working with American-business tycoon, George

Soros, Ford Foundation, and Rockefellers Brothers Fund to produce "atrocity literature"

and 'Goebbels propaganda" against Hinduism and by extension the BJP and its allied

Hindu nationalist organizations (see, for example, Sharma, 2019b).

Arguably, this positioning of journalists as anti-Hindu constitutes a significant tactic

adopted by right-wing alternative sites in their articulation of anti-media sentiments.

## 5.6. Media as 'Anti-National'

Another recurring pattern that was visible in *Swarajya* and *OpIndia*'s media

critique was their attempt to define the mainstream press as being anti-India. In

articulating this notion, right-wing sites found fault with the media for characterizing

patriotism as 'hyper-nationalism' and 'jingoism.' Indeed, both the websites carried

several articles, which argued that the 'left-liberal' press propagated an anti-India

narrative particularly, in their coverage related to India's hostile relationship with its

neighbor, Pakistan. The right-wing sites argued that by 'peddling' such an anti-national

narrative, the mass media were tarnishing the country's global image and were providing

material for certain "vested interests" involved in anti-India propaganda. In addition to

denouncing reportage on the Indian government's military presence in Kashmir as "anti-

national," right-wing portals accused journalists of working with separatist organizations

to deliberately spread lies about the country. An article published in *OpIndia* on August

10, 2019, exemplifies this trend. Titled, "7 times *NDTV* and its journalists peddled

narratives that went against Indian national interests," the article provided a long list of

news reports, personal interviews, and social media posts of journalists that "defamed"

India and "endorsed" the Pakistani government. Citing one such interview given by

*NDTV* journalist, Ravish Kumar*, OpIndia* wrote:

> Following the Pulwama terror attack, in an interview given to German media
> house Deutsche Welle (DW), Ravish Kumar had said that Indian TV channels are
> not reporting the conflict, but using the conflict to increase the prospect of the
> ruling party in the upcoming elections. And the Pakistani media had started to use
> this as a proof that India is pushing for a war with Pakistan ("7 times NDTV,"
> 2019).

Similarly, when a Pakistani journalist shared a news story produced by an Indian

journalist regarding the prevalence of hate speech against Kashmiri Muslims in public

discourse, right-wing sites cited it to argue that the mainstream press were providing tools

to Pakistan to further anti-India and anti-Hindu propaganda (see for example: "Pakistani

journalist uses," 2019).

Furthermore, right-wing portals alleged that the established media "eulogized"

and "humanized" terrorists by focusing on their educational and family background.

*Swarajya* and *OpIndia* contend that such features generate sympathies for terrorists and

normalize their actions. They alleged that by "softening their image," journalists were

trying to create an impression that terrorists were fighting against "oppression and not for

jihad" ("Not just semantics," 2019). For example, on November 19, 2019, *OpIndia*

strongly objected to a news agency describing Pakistan-based terrorists as "associates,"

and "suspected militants." Accusing the Indian media of behaving like a propaganda-

wing of terrorists, the right-wing site wrote:

> The aim is rather simple – to water down the threat of terrorism in Kashmir and
> brand it as some sort of armed resistance against oppression from the state, which
> it clearly is not. Hence, while the terms militancy and terrorism used in the
> context could seem like mere semantics, they are far more. By calling terrorists as

'associates,' PTI[12] almost makes it sound like JeM is a corporate structure which has official positions, like bomb blast manager, vice president of the land mine department, etc. What is worse is that PTI called Pakistani terrorists as militants, watering down their nefarious terror acts as well ("News agency PTI turns," 2019).

Indian journalists writing op-eds for western media outlets such as *New York Times, Washington Post, The Guardian, Atlantic, New Yorker, Los Angeles Times, Al-Jazeera, NPR, CNN,* and *BBC* also came under sharp attack by these sites for "slandering" the Indian government and advancing a pro-Pakistan narrative. This trend was particularly evident in the aftermath of the Modi government's decision to withdraw autonomy (Article 370 of the Indian constitution) from the state of Jammu and Kashmir, a Muslim-majority region that has historically been claimed by both India and Pakistan. Referring to the columnists as "deplorable" and "brown sepoys of the Western colonial masters" as well as questioning their patriotism, *OpIndia* contended:

> They have been undermining Indian national interests at the international level. Their conduct has absolutely zilch to do with values. They are supporting Jihadists here. For all their commitment to women's empowerment, gender equality, religious tolerance, and peaceful coexistence, when the time comes to prove their mettle, they never fail to sacrifice it all at the altar of Radical Islam. Liberals have made it clear once, and for all, their alliance with Radical Islam comes first. Everything else is secondary ("Deplorable 'journalists' further," 2019).

In another instance, Rana Ayyub, a well-known columnist, had 'smuggled' Dexter Filkins, a correspondent for *The New Yorker*, into the Kashmir region. Filkins' access to the region allowed him to gather sufficient material from the ground, which led to a widely-read piece in the *New Yorker* titled, "Blood and Soil in Narendra Modi's India." Besides attacking the article for spreading "distortions, lies, and illusions," both

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[12] Press Trust of India, also commonly known as PTI is India's largest news agency. It is a non-profit cooperative among newspapers. The agency employs more than 400 journalists to cover even small towns in the country and produces about 2000 stories and 200 photojournalism projects a day.

*OpIndia* and *Swarajya* censured Rana Ayyub for "violating the law of the land" for

sneaking a foreign correspondent into the Kashmir region ("Showing complete

disregard," 2019). Such interactions between Indian journalists and international media

were thus used as examples for right-wing alternative sites to 'prove' that mainstream

press in the country were 'unpatriotic' and 'anti-national.'

In fact, both the sites dedicated a number of articles to critique the western media

for 'meddling' in India's internal business. Attributing what the websites referred to as

"nefarious motives" to international news organizations, right-wing sites alleged that

outlets such as *New York Times* and *Washington Post* provided "one-sided and biased

coverage" on controversial issues such as Kashmir and minority rights in India.

Numerous rebuttals and rejoinders aimed against columns and opinion pieces appearing

in international media were also published by *Swarajya* and *OpIndia*. Discrediting one

such article that appeared in the *Washington Post, OpIndia* wrote:

> It's understandable that progressives don't like Narendra Modi. He is an antithesis
> to everything they claim to believe in. And that's alright, but relying on Fake
> News propaganda and supporting Jihadists in the process while shaming Indians
> for believing in national borders is rather nauseating to put it blindly. The authors,
> quite clearly, have no stakes in the matters they are meddling in, and they do not
> have adequate knowledge about ground realities either (Bhattacharjee, 2019c).
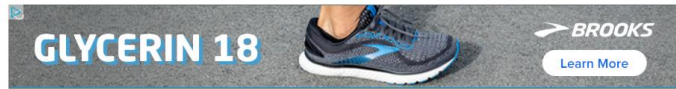
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## The New Yorker Report: A work or propaganda created to hurt US politicians as much as Narendra Modi and India

*The American Mainstream Media, in recent times, has made it abundantly clear that Corporate Media is little more than the propaganda wing of the USA's political establishment.*

5 December, 2019    K Bhattacharjee

Also Read

*Figure 4: OpIndia accusing the New Yorker of anti-India propaganda*

## 5.7. Media as Entitled Elite

Journalists, particularly those working for the English language media, came under sharp criticism from right-wing alternative sites for being 'elitist,' 'entitled,' and part of the 'corrupt establishment.' To be sure, both these websites associated the term 'establishment' with the Congress party and liberal activists, who have been influential and held positions of power in the country since India's independence. It is argued that these 'elite' journalists who come from wealthy backgrounds and flaunt their "Oxbridge" (a portmanteau of Oxford and Cambridge) accent try to shape public discourse and narrative in and about India and Hinduism. This sentiment is articulated in an article published in *Swarajya* titled, "The Hypocrisy of the Indian Elite and the Reactionary Brutality behind their Liberal Veneer," which read as follows:

> Macaulay's Children, as some like to call them, have a genteel aura about them, often speak in clipped tones, are the life and soul of Lodhi Road and Khan

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Market, love reminiscing about their boarding school and Oxbridge days, pride themselves on keeping up-to-date with the latest developments in US politics, and are on the very finest terms with every newly-arrived Western correspondent or researcher finding their feet in a strange new land. In bookstores and literature fests, as well as embassy receptions is where one is most likely to encounter this species, which is occasionally known to talk about Indian politics, waxing eloquently on Marxist theory, postmodernism, or sometimes even subaltern studies (Sharma, 2019b).

Within this strategy to position, the media as 'elite,' writers for *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* maintained that journalists do very little field work and try to gauge the public mood and gather information by talking to their taxi drivers, domestic help and household staff. In other words, media figures are critiqued for being cut off from the everyday reality of the common people. In making this criticism, both the websites also advance the argument that journalists who are part of the anglicized postcolonial elite, patronize and look down on the masses. Employing "us vs. them" language, both the sites positioned elite media as being against ordinary people. For example, in a series of articles published on right-wing sites after Narendra Modi's victory in the 2019 parliament elections, the media was characterized as an elite institution that could not endure the fact that "dirty unwashed masses" re-elected the BJP. In an essay titled, "Dear *New York Times*, India has chosen Modi 2.0, deal with it," an author for *OpIndia* wrote:

> *NYT*'s hatred for India stems partly from the inherent colonialistic culture that never stops looking down at the "poor unwashed Indians" and partly from the leftist elitism that holds every aspect of an indigenous civilization as backward. So, when India chooses a government that not only accepts but proudly asserts its Indic culture, civilization, and Hindu beliefs when India shreds the old bondage of caste, community, and social fault-lines that have been used as sticks by the likes of *NYT* to beat us down with, when India gives a thumping, unprecedented, overwhelming victory to a man who has made every single Indian feel proud of their nation, identity and heritage, the *NYT*'s heartburn is expected (Sanghamitra, 2019).

In a similar "open letter" addressed to the *Guardian,* a writer for *Swarajya*

asserted:

> You live in far-away lands, from where you have absolutely no chance of seeing
> and experiencing the Indian government as any ordinary Indian can. You can at
> best rely only on third-party information, that too from a section of elite who have
> repeatedly been exposed as ignorant and incapable of gauging the sense and
> sensibilities of *Bharat*. Yet, you seem to show the temerity to question the
> collective wisdom and judgment of around 250 million Indians (which is nearly
> four times the population of the UK), who have voted for the incumbent
> government (Naredi, 2019).

Additionally, right-wing portals gave prominence to events and reports that

portrayed journalists as 'entitled' and 'arrogant.' These included details of news reporters

and editors demanding 'favors' from the government, including free housing and

transport, as well as exemption from rules that apply to other Indian citizens. In fact,

*Swarajya* and *OpIndia* welcomed Modi's decision not to take journalists with him to his

foreign visits, which the websites described as an "unnecessary expense" for the

government. They argued that since the previous governments led by the Congress party

treated journalists with such "etiquettes," the press were soft on them. The websites

provided extensive coverage and analysis to a 'viral' video in which Ashok Shrivastav, a

senior journalist, was seen lamenting the lack of "freebies" from the Modi government.

One such report in *OpIndia* read as follows:

> He revealed how the previous governments spent lavishly to treat the Indian
> media establishment during the official trips. Narrating an incident, Shrivastav
> said that courtesy of the external affairs ministry during the Congress government,
> journalists were allowed to order expensive cuisine, alcohol while they were part
> of the Indian media delegation. Srivastav said that after journalists were wined
> and dined during the flight when they reached their hotel room, an expensive
> alcohol bottle of Black Label would be waiting for them. He also said that many
> journalists had brought expensive alcohol back to the country as it would be
> sponsored by the external affairs ministry apart from the free air tickets and hotel
> accommodation. Interestingly, Shrivastav explained how everything changed
> when Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister of the country. Post-2014, no

media organizations or journalists are being allowed to fly with the official Indian delegation ("MEA sponsored free," 2019).

Similarly, when the Modi-government forcibly evicted journalists occupying sprawling government bungalows in Jammu and Kashmir, *OpIndia* published a detailed report highlighting the 'privileges' enjoyed by the media. The article contended:

> These journalists have been enjoying government bungalows, without meeting the necessary criteria, since it has been allotted to them by the previous government in lieu of their "journalistic services." However, since such benefits cannot be extended under any rule of the government, their stay is clearly illegal. And taking this into consideration, the government has now asked these journalists to vacate the government accommodation immediately. This decision has obviously irked the group of journalists who have until now enjoyed the entitlement given to them by the past governments ("NDTV, Reuters and AP," 2019).

Altogether, right-wing alternative news sites attacked the established media for its elitist attitudes and a sense of entitlement. *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* attribute the negative press received by the Modi government to his administration's denial of such privileges to the media personnel.

**Table 1: Expressions of media distrust by right-wing news websites**

| Theme | Dominant Criticisms |
|---|---|
| Highlighting errors | Factual errors, journalistic slip-ups, highlighted and portrayed as media lies, misinformation, and fake news. <br><br> Acknowledgment of errors is used to reinforce the belief that the press is not a credible source of information. |
| Naming and shaming | Publicizing journalists' involvement in corruption, sexual harassment cases, plagiarism, extortion, etc. <br><br> Highlight hypocrisy, bias, and double standards of journalists by pointing to the contradictions in their views and their partisanship. |
| Opposition-friendly | Journalists are pro-Congress and its 'liberal allies' <br><br> Media are less critical of governments in non-BJP ruled states |

| Criticism by influential personalities | Prominent coverage to media criticism by celebrities, bureaucrats, army veterans, and famous individuals |
|---|---|
| | Relying on the professional credentials of famous individuals to further anti-media sentiment |
| Anti-Hindu | Journalists are Hinduphobic and demonize Hindu festivals, culture, traditions, rituals, and religious practices |
| | Mainstream press paint Hindus as aggressors and minorities as victims. |
| Anti-India | Media publish stories that are against India's national interests |
| | Indian columnists work for the international press who present biased coverage of India |
| Entitled elite | English speaking media are too elite and have lost touch with common people |
| | Journalists demand unreasonable favors from the government |
| Criticism from media experts and right-wing media | Highlight 'insider view' of how anti-BJP, anti-India, anti-Hindu sentiment exists in India's newsrooms |

## 5.8. Criticism from Former Journalists and other Right-Wing Media

The final theme that emerged from the analysis of media-related articles published in *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* was the amplification of press criticism made by former journalists and other right-wing news media, including *the Organiser*, *Mynation.com,* and *Indiafacts.org*. Articles published in these outlets were often cited, especially with reference to media criticism. Extensive coverage was provided to right-wing television anchor, Arnab Goswami's attacks on the mainstream media aired on his 24-hour news channel, *Republic TV*. His aggressive style of journalism was encouraged

and rationalized as a "corrective" to the dominant narrative built by so-called left-leaning news anchors in India. His on-air tirades against journalists were analyzed by both the right-wing websites as a supplement to their own anti-media rhetoric. For example, Goswami's remarks about certain journalists writing "500$ sell-out piece for some American piece of crap" made its way to *OpIndia.* Likewise, his contention that Pakistan relies on Indian television news channel, *NDTV*, for its propaganda, was provided considerable coverage. In one such article *OpIndia* claimed:

During the course of the debate, a Pakistani panelist referred to the reportage by *NDTV* in order to help her spread the Pakistani agenda further and counter the position of India in Kashmir. Peeved at the mention, Arnab Goswami, in his inimitable style, told the Pakistani panelist that he was not aware of any Indian news channel by the name of *NDTV*, the emphasis being on the word 'Indian' ("Pakistanis just like to," 2019).

Furthermore, first-hand accounts of supposed media bias within newsrooms were also featured prominently by right-wing sites to reinforce their anti-media sentiments. Interviews were conducted with former journalists and editorial staff who have worked for mainstream news media to find out how anti-BJP, anti-Hindu discourse was encouraged in newsrooms. For example, *OpIndia* and *Swarajya* gave a great deal of coverage to the claims made by Ashok Shrivastav, a journalist working for state-broadcaster *Doordarshan*, regarding the organized media campaign to malign Narendra Modi and BJP during the Congress regime. In his book, titled, "Narendra Modi Censored," Shrivastav claimed that a special team was constituted by the state broadcaster to produce negative content against Modi. Relaying his claims, *OpIndia* wrote:

The book reveals that once UPA came to power in 2004, a special cell was constituted in DD News to run news stories, documentaries, programs, etc. to target Narendra Modi, especially around the 2002 post-Godhra riots. Not everyone was allowed to walk into this cell, which was housed in room no. 123….What embarrassed and shocked Ashok Shrivastav and some other journalists working at DD News no end, was when this cell distributed sweets in the wake of Narendra Modi, then the Chief Minister of Gujarat, being denied a visa by the United States back in 2005 ("Sweets were distributed," 2019).

Besides relying on media experts and former journalists, both *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* disseminated media criticism articulated by online Hindu nationalists. According to an estimate, by 2017, BJP had more than 100,000 Hindu nationalist volunteers spread across India and the diaspora locations. A vast number of them are involved in voluntary "online ideological work" that is not completely directed or bound by "party mentoring" (Udupa, 2019). Criticisms of the established media expressed by this large group of online right-wing supporters were included in the articles published by right-wing alternative sites.

Such reports described them as "social media users" and "twitterati," making their criticism sound neutral. Many Hindu nationalists contribute articles and op-eds for these sites while the official twitter handles of *Swarajya* and *OpIndia* follow the accounts of numerous members of this group. This relationship is evident in an *OpIndia* article in which 'social media users' called out an *NDTV* correspondent for 'illegally' selling the images from the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). This essay included embedded tweets of six prominent online Hindu nationalists who had 'investigated' and 'discovered' the correspondent's sale of images. Citing their tweets, the article claimed: After discovering the images, social media users have started to wonder whether it is legal and ethical and whether Pallava Bagla has obtained permission from ISRO and scientists before selling their photographs for personal benefit. The website of Getty

Images shows that Pallava Bagla has uploaded 3853 images, and 507 of them include the tag ISRO. It may be noted that he has uploaded photographs from many other scientific institutions from around the world, not just ISRO. Such images include inside of a nuclear reactor in Russia, inside and outside of Kudankulam Nuclear Power Plant, etc. ("NDTV journalist who," 2019).

Thus, right-wing alternative sites, as represented by *Swarajya* and *OpIndia,* used multiple discursive strategies to challenge journalistic authority, undermine media credibility, and to articulate anti-media populist sentiments in India.

## Chapter 6:  Findings (Republic TV)

Founded by former *Times Now*[13] Editor-in-chief, Arnab Goswami, *Republic TV* is one of India's newest entrants to the country's already crowded English news channel market. Among the channel's owners are Rajeev Chandrasekhar, a BJP member of Parliament as well as Mohandas Pai, a vocal supporter of Prime Minister, Narendra Modi (Ramesh, 2017). Understandably, clear political affiliations of the promoters militate against the independent character of the channel.

Launched in May 2017, the network went on to become the most-watched television news channel in the country within its very first week. According to a report from the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC), in its debut week, *Republic TV* recorded 2.11 million impressions, a figure that is calculated based on the number of individuals in thousands of a target audience who viewed an event, averaged across minutes (Ahluwalia, 2017).

A significant part of *Republic TV*'s instant success is the channel's co-founder Arnab Goswami, who is known for his combative, sensational, and blustering style of partisan journalism. His highly opinionated reporting and relentless outrage have made him a cult-like figure among English-speaking urban audiences--so much so that some commentators have described his primetime talk show as the "Dirty Harry of the Indian middle-class" (Bhutia, 2016). In his earlier stint at *Times Now,* Goswami hosted a hugely popular current affairs talk show, '*Newshour*,' which was severely criticized by media observers for polarizing the viewers with aggressive and noisy debates (Kohli-

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[13] Times Now is a 24-hour English news channel belonging to the Times of India group. Until 2016, it was India's most viewed English news channel. After Arnab Goswami left to start *Republic*, the channel's ratings dropped to the second place.

Khandekar, 2016). His panel discussions and live debates typically include anywhere between six to twelve guests, often speaking at the same time, and sometimes even screaming at one another, which leads to cacophony and confusion (Singh, 2016).

A self-proclaimed 'nationalist,' Goswami is known to provoke his panelists and audience by taking jingoistic positions on highly emotive and controversial topics such as separatism in Kashmir, rivalry with Pakistan, terrorism, patriotism, military, and communal tensions between various religious groups (Pandit and Chattopadhyay, 2018). His extreme right-wing positions and *Fox News*-style coverage of key issues has led to a few American scholars describing him as "Sean Hannity[14] on steroids" (Cole and Stinnett, 2017). Defending the hyper-nationalistic tone in his debates, Goswami had once said in an interview, "I don't believe in this fake objectivity. I'm an Indian, and I will be on the side of India" ("Republic" of hate?" 2017). Nationalism and patriotism remain paramount to his current affairs talk show so much so that even fellow journalists were branded as "pro-Pakistan" when they received appreciation from controversial figures of that country. His onscreen attacks on Pakistan and constant warmongering have supposedly led to concerns among diplomats that it could put pressure on the Indian government to take drastic and escalatory military action (Marlow and Philip, 2017).

In the panel discussions, in a quintessential megalomaniac style, Goswami often claims to speak on behalf of all the Indians as their "judge, jury and executioner" ("Arnab Goswami openly," 2017). On his talk show 'The Debate' aired on *Republic TV*, he regularly reads his own take on important issues, which he describes as his "address to the nation," and demands answers from his panelists using phrases such as "the nation

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[14] American talk show host and conservative commentator appearing on Fox news.

wants to know," thereby positioning himself as the journalist speaking at the behest of 'the people.' Openly taking sides while debating topics, Goswami highlights urban middle-class concerns wound in old prejudices and insecurities. Adopting stylistic elements such as alarmist music as well as unique camera angles and attractive colors of flashing images from mainstream entertainment, reality TV, and soap operas, Arnab Goswami's *Republic TV* transformed the way debates were perceived and conducted on primetime television news in India. In this chapter, I present the findings of the analysis of media-related debates conducted by Arnab Goswami on his primetime talk show--'The Debate.' The findings that follow describe the dominant criticisms of the established media made by him and his channel '*Republic TV'*.

## 6.1. 'Lutyens Media' are anti-India

The positioning of the mainstream news media or the so-called 'Lutyens media'[15] as working against India's national interests has been one of the most prominent media criticisms made by *Republic TV* in its prime-time show '*The Debate*.' Describing news outlets as "pseudos,'" "pamphlets of Pakistan," "friends of terrorists," and "anti-national forces" who make Indians hang their "heads in shame," the show's chief anchor, Goswami, frequently accused journalists of having "great affection for Pakistan" and being in "love with our enemy." He often contended that the Pakistani government used 'anti-India' and 'anti-army' articles written by the Indian media for its global propaganda against the country. Assuring the audience that he and his channel were "completely on

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[15] A term used to refer to Delhi-based journalists who are close to the establishment and power. It is used in the same way in which "Beltway Media" is used to refer to the influential media in the Washington, D.C. metro area. Lutyens has become a metaphor for entitlement and political power.

the Indian side unlike others," Goswami wondered if "left-liberal," journalists who wrote such articles were actually on the "payrolls of the Pakistani government." For example, when Caravan magazine, a well-known English news outlet, published an article that included the caste profiles of the Indian army personnel killed in a terrorist attack, a visibly upset, Goswami, went on air and issued the following edict:

> I ask everyone today at the Caravan magazine, how do you sleep well tonight after what you did? These people in the Caravan magazine should be asked questions. The pseudos' in the media should be asking questions to the two so-called journalists who were quoted by the Pakistani establishment by saying that these people, these Indians, say that Kulbhushan Jadhav[16] is a spy and that's why we should kill him. Imagine, there are Indian journalists who are helping Pakistan try to murder Kulbhushan Jadhav. We won't allow it, we know. But there are Indians who are working against our interests. We won't forget that. And these pseudos should not be asking questions to nationalists like me. For anyone who questions nationalism, neither was, is, or will ever be a journalist. And if you have questions over nationalism, then you are not truly a citizen of India. I truly believe that at a moment like this, some sections of the Indian media, especially the Lutyens media, should introspect at how they have betrayed the people of India and betrayed national interest for all these years. They have no right to ask questions….And what the caravan magazine has done is unforgivable. Pakistan Army joins hands with the caravan magazine, and India is outraged ("Pakistan and Lutyens," 2019).

Most of these 'debates' included panelists who were retired military officers and defense analysts who agreed with Goswami's attacks on the so-called "left-liberal press." Their endorsement lent credibility and legitimacy to the channel's positioning of journalists as 'unpatriotic.' In addition to questioning the patriotism and professional integrity of the mainstream news media and accusing journalists of not being on "our" side, *Republic* used ridicule and insult to discredit them. For example, in the same debate, Goswami attacked the magazine as a "Caravan of lies," "Caravan of sell-outs," and

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[16] Kulbhushan Jadhav is an Indian national arrested in Pakistan on charges of spying. India has denied that he is a spy. He remains captive in Pakistani prisons. His arrest has led to a major legal battle between both the nations in the International Court of Justice. Arnab Goswami was upset that an Indian media outlet, Caravan magazine, agreed with the Pakistanis that Mr. Jadhav was indeed a spy.

"Caravan of despicable untruths." He went on to state that even though the magazine is read by "no more than ten people who agree with each other," content published in it was being used by the enemy-nation to build an anti-India narrative. Additionally, he asked the viewers to start pondering over "why Indian journalists were helping Pakistan?" and answered the question himself by stating that "without money being involved, this cannot happen."

*Republic TV* also censured the news media for what it considers its "biased" reporting with respect to Kashmir. The channel alleged that left-leaning journalists overlooked attacks on the Indian army by violent protesters while emphasizing the army's reaction to such attacks and characterizing it as a violent crackdown on innocent civilians (see, for example: "Watch Arnab exposes," 2019). *Republic* charged that such "one-sided" coverage offered Pakistan an alibi for terrorism.

Besides, positioning news media as "anti-India," individual journalists were named and shamed, some even referred to as "traitors," particularly when their articles were endorsed by Pakistan's political establishment. For instance, when a video surfaced in which Pakistan-based terrorist, Masood Azhar, was seen praising former *NDTV* journalist, Barkha Dutt, Goswami used it as evidence to conclude that "she must have done something to win a terrorist's praise" ("Pakistan Government Praises," 2019).  Likewise, when a journalist sought evidence for the Indian government's claims of launching airstrikes on Pakistan based terrorist camps, *Republic* alleged that she was echoing the "Pakistani script." Reporters were criticized for their lack of patriotism not only based on the articles they published but also for their views aired on social media. For example, when Rana Ayyub, a noted journalist, tweeted against a group of Indians

burning Pakistan's national flag, Arnab Goswami upbraided her in 'The Debate' and questioned why she was "touchy" about the Pakistani flag ("Lutyens Echoes Pakistan," 2019). The tweets and Facebook posts of the journalists were flashed on the screen to spark 'outrage' among its viewers.

Western media outlets, including the *BBC, Aljazeera, Guardian, Washington Post*, and the *New York Times,* also came under sharp criticism from the *Republic* for what the channel described as their "propaganda" and "conspiracy" against India. The news channel's contempt for these outlets was particularly evident following international media coverage of the Modi government's decision to revoke Article 370 of the Indian Constitution, which provided autonomy to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Global media reports on lockdown and travel restrictions in Kashmir, the use of excessive power by the police and armed forces against innocent civilians, and the shutdown of the Internet and mobile services--were all described as 'anti-India' conspiratorial content intended to malign the country. In some cases, *Republic* 'fact-checked' international media reports by sending its own correspondents to the field to verify the claims made by these news organizations. Rebuttals and rejoinders from the Government of India and the Indian army were considered proof-enough to charge Western media outlets with spreading 'fake news.' When criticizing the global media for its articles on the Indian armed forces, the television network framed the debate as "India vs. Western media" and "India vs. fake news," thereby positioning international media as being "anti-India." Notably, *Republic* frequently used nationalistic "us" and "we," blurring the distinction between the channel and its audience where the anchor is seen speaking on behalf of an imagined national community. Such framing of the debates presumes that every

individual among "us" is a "patriotic Indian" who is in agreement with the *Republic TV*'s attitude towards the Indian army and the Modi government while professional journalists and the global media are explicitly cast into the role of 'offenders' who are determined to imperil "our" global image.

For example, on August 10, 2019, *BBC* published an 'exclusive video' from Kashmir that showed large groups of people taking cover while sounds of gunfire echoed in the background. The channel claimed that its correspondent witnessed Indian police opening fire and teargas to disperse the crowd. The video also included thousands of people chanting slogans such as "We want freedom," and "Go back India" ("Tear gas at Kashmir rally," 2019). Subsequently, the Government of India denied that such an incident occurred in the state of Kashmir. Three days later, Arnab Goswami conducted a prime-time debate on *BBC*'s reportage in which he began by deriding the network as an "Elizabethan organization way beyond its time," a "journalistic relic," a "colonial dinosaur broadcasting establishment," and a "Jurassic organization." Demanding an "unconditional apology" from the network to the people of India for portraying the country's military personnel as "bloodthirsty Indian forces," Goswami accused the *BBC* of advancing the Pakistani narrative. Suggesting that the *BBC* be renamed as "Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation," he wondered how a British news organization acquired video footage when there was a complete lockdown in the state of Kashmir. He went on to argue that since the Government of India denied this incident, the *BBC*'s footage was "doctored" or may have been provided to them by the Pakistani intelligence agency. Describing this critique of the *BBC* as a "national movement against fake news" and "India's campaign against fake news," Arnab Goswami said:

Please, *BBC*, open your mouth. Which reporter and camera person shot that video? What was the source of the data? Don't run away from me now, *BBC*. The figures you bandied about, what was the proof gathered from? What is your source? If it was fake news, a lie, a dirty or a motivated lie by a dying government-owned British channel, then I want to know, and India wants to know, what is your intention? Now, the *BBC* seems to be simply caught red handed. Someone should report it to Boris Johnson, who should lock up the entire management of the *BBC* in jail for shaming them yet again. The best thing for the *BBC* would be to acknowledge its lie, apologize and move on hoping that Indians forgive them. But tonight, we in the Indian media, at least some of us in the Indian media, enjoy catching these journalistic relics in the act of lying and fabricating facts….never has there been a more pleasurable moment for all of us than catching these falsifiers who preached so much in the very act of fabrication. And our campaign has just begun. Watch out *BBC* now... watch out. *BBC*, we are coming after you. We will make you squeal ("Western media peddles," 2019).



*Figure 5: A screenshot from Arnab Goswami's 'The Debate'*

An important pattern in the *Republic*'s positioning of the press as being 'anti-India' is the channel's efforts to discredit news coverage of issues related to caste discrimination, Islamophobia, low economic growth, rising unemployment, and

diminishing press freedom in the country. Arnab Goswami has consistently argued that

the so-called Lutyens media, out of their hatred for Modi and the BJP, has started

deliberately exaggerating these issues to create a "negative image" of the country. On

'The Debate,' he frequently charged that the established media "cherry-picked" facts to

weave an anti-India narrative at the behest of certain "interest groups." Calling himself an

"Indian nationalist journalist," Goswami accused journalists of "retrofitting facts to abuse

the nation." His tirade against journalists aired on September 2, 2019, offers a useful

illustration of such criticism, in which he said:

> The first question we must ask ourselves is, is there a cabal within the media that
> has formed an anti-India hypothesis? Do they try to retrofit the facts to abuse the
> nation? Question number one, you know, the hypothesis of Muslims being under
> mass attack, the hypothesis of people from certain castes being given second class
> status in this country, the hypothesis of the RSS being the leader of a murderous
> onslaught within the country, and the hypothesis of the institutions being in
> danger, that the judiciary has become an arm of the government, and that you
> can't eat or wear what you want--all these hypotheses--all retrofitting by a bunch
> of frustrated people who somehow could not have, through the Congress and its
> affiliated parties, a stranglehold on power in Delhi. Point number two, is this
> cabal within the Indian media compelled and motivated to sell a negative image
> of the country? ...And finally, of course, is this cabal of the media being used to
> sell in the context of 370, an anti-India agenda? And if so, I hate to say this, but I
> will say it, what do they get in return? Is there something they're getting in return?
> Relevance, perhaps? Maybe not material or kind of cash relevance, perhaps ("Is
> the Lutyens media," 2019).

Further, in the show, he went on to ask a rhetorical question by wondering if the

hatred for the Modi government among "Lutyens" journalists has turned into a "hostility

for the country," clearly painting them as anti-India. At the beginning of these 'debates,'

Goswami provided a few hashtags to the readers who could use them in their tweets and

Facebook posts to participate in a parallel discussion on this topic in their online spaces.

Most often, these hashtags were slanted and opinionated-such as--

#PakForLutyensMedia, #ShameOnAntinationals, #KashmirisExposeLutyens and

#Lutyensliars. These hashtags could be employed by online Hindu nationalists to cheer

for Arnab Goswami and *Republic TV*, as well as to voice their own criticism of the press

on social media platforms. This is potentially significant because ideologically motivated

online right-wing supporters could further amplify the anti-media sentiments expressed

on *Republic TV,* thereby reinforcing negative attitudes towards the press within their

social networks.

## 6.2. Mainstream Media are Partisan

Significant among *Republic TV*'s critique of the press was the charge that

"Lutyens" journalists were biased towards the Congress party headed by the Nehru-

Gandhi family. The channel alleged that the mainstream media were obsequious to the

Congress President, Sonia Gandhi, and her children, Priyanka Gandhi Vadra and Rahul

Gandhi, and criticized the "Lutyens cabal" for its alleged refusal to ask them "tough

questions" regarding the corruption charges against them. Further, *Republic* urged its

audience to ponder over why the "left-liberal" journalists who were often critical of the

Modi government have a servile attitude towards the Congress leadership and posed only

softball questions to them, such as those related to their hobbies and interests. On 'The

Debate,' Arnab Goswami opined that the "Lutyens lobby" were acting as "courtiers" to

the Nehru-Gandhi family because the established media houses with other business

interests had benefited from the corrupt policies of the previous (Congress-led)

government. He assailed mainstream journalists for their "absolute loyalty to the

Gandhis" and for "echoing the views of the party's leadership" instead of espousing

journalistic "objectivity." This, even as the *Republic* TV departed from the said

'objectivity' by conducting primetime debates on topics, which clearly indicated its pro-BJP slant.

These 'debates' included titles such as: "Has the Gandhi family reduced itself to a joke?", "Congress vs. Citizens," "Did Rahul Gandhi lose the political plot?" "Rahul Gandhi insults valiant forces," and "Biggest act of Congress treachery." In fact, in one of his primetime shows, Goswami shouted at one of his panelists, calling him a "Congress stooge" and asking him "not to behave like Rahul Gandhi" ("Rahul Gandhi oblivious," 2019). Notwithstanding its own partisanship, *Republic TV* focused on representing the established media as an ally of the Congress Party, thereby signaling to its audience to be circumspect of the information gleaned from such "biased" news outlets. For example, when the Congress Party, in its election manifesto, proposed to regulate the news media if voted to power in the 2019 general elections, Arnab Goswami questioned why the "champions of free speech" among the established media remained silent. In the primetime debate aired on April 6, 2019, Goswami said:

> The real issue is one which nobody in the Lutyens media is talking about. The clear clause in the Congress Party's manifesto that if Congress comes to power, there'll be complete government control over what is reported. Statutory regulation of the media has been promised. Shockingly, everyone in the Lutyens media seems to be okay with it. We here at *Republic* are not…. If this particular clause was in the BJP manifesto, what would have happened in the Lutyens media? There would have been morchas[17]. There would have been silent marches, and some TV screens would have gone blank...And, I am also concerned that the people who speak about freedom of expression the most, are silent about this today. That is the worry ("Congress for media," 2019).

Goswami went on to claim that the journalists from the elite media who had complete access to sources of power and the establishment in New Delhi during the

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[17] Morcha is a hostile demonstration against the government.

Congress-rule, felt "disenfranchised" under the Modi government. This, he argues,

explains their "hate and antipathy" for the BJP and Narendra Modi.

## 6.3. Mainstream Journalists as Corrupt

Arnab Goswami contended that many "Lutyens journalists," during the Congress

regime, acted as "lobbyists" for corporate firms, as well as European and American

defense companies, to "broker deals" with the corrupt ministers in the government.

Further, the channel alleged that several senior journalists from this "Lutyens cabal"

doubled up as "defense analysts" writing articles and participating in primetime TV

debates to promote their clients without disclosing their conflict of interest. For example,

when Enforcement Directorate (ED), a law enforcement agency, named three Indian

journalists in the AgustaWestland chopper deal scam[18], *Republic TV* gave it extensive

coverage and portrayed them as wily operators in the corridors of power. In its report, the

ED had mentioned that senior journalists associated with the *Indian Express* and an

online portal, *Print.in*, received large amounts of money from the defense firm in order to

influence the public opinion in favor of the deal ("Three journalists named," 2019). As

soon as the names of the journalists involved in this scandal were made public, Arnab

Goswami conducted a debate on the topic. Referring to these journalists as "*dalals*"

(brokers) and directly addressing them, he said:

> I will not stop till our team of journalists expose the *dalals*[19], who constituted the
> dirty brigade of top editors and reporters in the Lutyens media. I will take down
> these dirty editors and their dirty reporters, brick by brick. I will name them. That
> dirty editor and his reporter who took money should own up before it's too late. I
> am only giving them an advance warning. Some of them may file caveats in Delhi

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[18] Augstawestland chopper deal scam refers to a multi-million-dollar corruption case wherein $35 million
was allegedly paid as bribe to the Indian officials to purchase helicopters for Indian politicians. The scam is
alleged to have taken place during 2006-07 when the Congress-led government was in power.
[19] Dalal is a Hindi word for 'broker'. Right-wing actors have been using this term to refer to journalists who
they accuse of acting as lobbyists for corporate and vested interests.

High Court tomorrow saying *Republic TV* should not name them...The nation will get to know your name, remember…. Did you and your reporter meet Guy Douglas[20]? Did you? You should answer ("Arnab exposing Lutyens," 2019).

He went on to discuss how these journalists purchased expensive bungalows and farmhouses in the suburbs of New Delhi with the money made through such unethical means and demanded that they "quit the profession" immediately. He also asked the journalists named in the scandal to "never lecture others on journalistic ethics again" and argued that they could influence such high-level arms deals only due to their proximity to the "staggeringly corrupt Congress administration" that was in power before 2014. It is important to note that most of these corruption allegations have not been proven yet. Goswami also frequently reminded the viewers of the 2010 'Radiagate scandal' (named after Nira Radia, the lobbyist in question) in which audio files of phone conversations between several leading Indian journalists and a lobbyist for some of the country's top business firms, became public. On these tapes, some of India's well-known television and print journalists, including Barkha Dutt and Vir Sanghvi were heard giving advice to the lobbyist on how to place stories in media outlets and appeared to be acting as "intermediaries between the political interests close to the lobbyist and the ruling Congress Party" (Chadha, 2012). Journalists associated with *NDTV, CNN-IBN, Times of India*, and the *Hindustan Times* were heard suggesting publication of scripted interviews to promote the lobbyist's clients and offered to present 'news' to serve their business interests. Goswami emphasized that these tapes, which revealed the nexus between Delhi-based journalists, lobbyists, and politicians, offered evidence of the alliance between the "Lutyens media" and the Congress Party. He contended that since the Modi

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[20] The middleman who hired the journalists on behalf of Augstawestland to publish favorable articles.

government rendered these "power brokers and complicit media" irrelevant, "Lutyens journalists" have taken upon themselves the task of promoting a pro-Congress and anti-BJP narrative aimed at restoring the old order.

For example, in the run-up to the 2019 general elections, Goswami accused the so-called Lutyens' media of publishing 'fake' polls indicating the defeat of Modi to create an artificial "atmospherics" against the BJP. He also put forward a wild conspiracy theory stating that if these 'fake polls' don't come true, Congress and its allied "Lutyens media" could accuse the Election Commission of India and the electronic voting machines of "rigging" the election in favor of the BJP. In a primetime debate titled, "Lutyens desperate to see Modi out," Goswami said:

> Three media houses who trace their roots to Lutyens put out the results of what they say are Lok Sabha[21] elections well before half the elections are over. And, I've said this before--Lutyens lives in a vacuum that is known and inhabited only by itself. The outside world is unknown to Lutyens. The ground reality is alien to them. Why are these polls being put out? Instead of applying reality and logic, all of them start pouncing on these polls and sharing it. This is scandalous….You can't put out an exit poll in the middle of an election. Yet, knowingly some of the quote-unquote senior Lutyens journalists are merrily carrying out--fronting and sharing these polls on public forums. There is no decency left there anymore. I can understand that there will no be no messiah left for the Lutyens media if Modi comes back to power because, you know, they've been championing Rahul Gandhi every time he flops. They know that they are red-faced over Priyanka Vadra. They also put out an article saying-- 10 reasons why Priyanka will be the Prime Minister. But, she ended up becoming the biggest flop…. I'm only asking whether these fake polls are being pushed for a pecuniary benefit or personal benefit? ("Lutyens desperate to see," 2019).

Arnab Goswami followed up on this charge against the so-called Lutyens journalists after Modi's victory in the 2019 general elections. Continuing to position the established media as partisan and pro-Congress, he chastised journalists for

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[21] Loksabha is the lower house of the Indian Parliament. Members are directly elected by the voters. Political parties need to win a majority of the seats in this house to form the government.

"campaigning" for the Congress Party by spreading an anti-BJP narrative during the elections and asked if the "Lutyens media" will "continue in this mad fashion for another five years?" Goswami went on to posit that since India had re-elected Narendra Modi, whom the so-called Lutyens lobby "loathed," journalists from this lobby are worried and clueless on "what to do next." He claimed that Narendra Modi wasn't the Prime Minister who "toes the lines of those cocooned in their Press Clubs," which is why the "Lutyens journalists" have gone into "hysteria" and "shock" over his victory in the elections ("Time to call out," 2019). In a debate conducted on May 25, 2019, Goswami, in a flippant tone, mocked a so-called "Lutyens journalist" on his panel by stating:

> How much you wanted Rahul to serve? And, how much you wanted Mrs.Vadra to come and save you, and how lovingly you took care of them during the campaign. I saw an apology of an interview, to the point of embarrassing myself, where a person who runs a website now, a poor little website, says, "Rahul, how do we save the country?" And then, Rahul looks around and says, "you know, three transformational ideas, three big ideas." And the person has three big ideas. He says, "yes, three big ideas." And then the interviewer turns around and says, "See, look at the vision, this man has come of age." And then, this whole narrative has been built up about how this man has come of age. Now, what will happen to this group, which has done this with so much care? And, with so much love and affection for the Gandhi-Vadra family, what will they do now? What will they do? ("Time to call out," 2019).

Later in the debate, Goswami went on to urge the established media to "look back and introspect" over the "fake narratives" they had supposedly tried to build against the Modi government. Within this charge of the media being pro-Congress, the *Republic TV* accused the mainstream press of aiding the Party in attacking and maligning the image of honest bureaucrats and judges who work against the interests of Congress Party and its leaders. The channel alleged that the news media was an accomplice in mounting pressure and bullying and "blackmailing" judges and bureaucrats to give judicial verdicts in favor of Congress and its leaders in corruption cases pending against them. The

television network claimed that the "Lutyens lobby," including journalists launched vicious campaigns against judges and went after them like a "pack of wolves" by writing articles and op-eds against them if the judgments were not in favor of Congress Party and its liberal-allies ( see for example: "Save judiciary gang," 2019; "Lutyens lobby and," 2019). For example, when the media raised questions on the integrity of a judge who denied bail to senior Congress leader, P Chidambaram, Arnab Goswami demanded evidence of their accusations. Both Congress and the media had insinuated that since the judge denied bail to the Congress leader, the Modi government had rewarded him with a post-retirement job. Taking a jibe at the media on his show, Goswami said:

> You cannot allow this level of maligning. If you have evidence, show it to me. Show me a transcript, show me a conversation that proves the quid-pro-quo. But, how dare you say what you want without a shred of evidence on the matter ("Save Judiciary," 2019).

Further, *Republic TV* conducted 'debates' on how the so-called Lutyens media that supposedly received patronage from the Nehru-Gandhi family refused to hold the Congress Party accountable for its misuse of power during its six-decade rule since India's independence. Arnab Goswami accused these journalists of "airbrushing India's history" by "staying silent" on the religious violence, the imposition of the national emergency, forced sterilizations of millions of men, and press censorship during the Congress regime. He asked *Republic TV*'s viewers to take criticism of the Modi government by the established media with a pinch of salt because these journalists who were acting as "slaves" of the Nehru-Gandhi family were merely expressing their "loyalty" to their masters by trying to create a negative perception of the BJP ("Has Lutyens Fallen," 2019).

In fact, in some of the debates, talking straight into the camera, he asked the so-called Lutyens media who were increasingly becoming "irrelevant," to reflect on their own actions and stop being "servants of the Congress Party." Goswami's closing remarks in the debate aired on August 29, 2019, illustrate this critique of the established media:

> First of all, those of you in the print media, I want to say to you--nobody reads you. Secondly, there are some people who are interviewers whose only claim to fame is that people have walked out of their interviews. Nobody listens to you. Thirdly, those who used to have TV programs in the dynastic era, nobody watches you. Fourthly, most of you are jobless today because of what you've done. You need to look back at your own past. But, can you be so desperate so as to not take instruction from a political party like royal servants of that Party? ("Classic fake news," 2019)

In these 'debates,' Goswami displayed blatant partiality by openly siding with guests criticizing the Congress Party and the established media and by referring to them as his "protagonists." He also prodded his panelists to denounce professional journalism while hectoring, interrupting, and insulting talking heads who disagreed with him by calling them "shameless individuals" who were speaking "unadulterated rubbish."

## 6.4. Media as Entitled Elite

Another recurrent criticism of the established media made by *Republic TV* included the positioning of the journalists as a group of "arrogant, entitled, and self-righteous individuals" who "disregarded professional norms and journalistic ethics" to serve their own interests. Arnab Goswami maintained that 'Lutyens journalists,' i.e., those who lived in the 'cloistered diplomatic enclaves' of posh localities in New Delhi, were part of the establishment because they shared most of its left-liberal values and Western worldview. These values, he argued, diverged sharply from those shared by millions of poor and middle-class Indians living in small towns and hinterlands. Given the gap between the attitudes and beliefs of these media elites and a vast majority of

Indians, he contended that the "Lutyens journalists" have lost their ability to relate to the common people and take note of real issues confronting them.

Terming professional journalists as "Champagne socialists," and "reminiscences of the British Raj," sequestered in "Delhi-Noida beltway," Goswami claimed that these bunch of influential media figures have lost their connection with the rest of India both "metaphorically and literally." Painting their profile for his viewers, Goswami stated that most of these elite journalists were products of "nepotism," i.e., they were related to top bureaucrats and diplomats, and would have attended elite institutions such as the Doon School, St. Stephen's College, and Oxford or Columbia University, had club memberships, spent their summers abroad, and enjoyed the inherited property. This privileged upbringing, he bellowed, made these journalists feel like they were part of a "morally superior club" that viewed hard-working Indians with contempt and condescension.

Situating established journalists as a constitutive part of the "cocktail circuit" comprising influential bureaucrats, business tycoons, and politicians, Goswami declared them as being "Indian in blood and color but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect" ("Lutyens' media vs. Independent," 2019). He made the argument that the media figures with an "inflated sense of self-importance," used their access to the political class to benefit themselves ("Time to call out," 2019). In his brief commentary at the introduction of the primetime debate on the topic "Does India hate the Lutyens circuit?", Goswami proclaimed:

> For 60 years, this country, simply put, was run by a bunch of people who, in different ways, veer around one family. They get a system of favors, they are inefficient, and they're incompetent. They are not products of merit. They run the most corrupt institutions, and they put their friends in place. And this is like

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Caesars…All the poster boys of Lutyens were all a connection of a bunch of families. Some of them gained from British times. They genuinely felt that this old boys'[22] network would never go away ("Lutyens' media vs. Independent," 2019).

Ironically, Goswami himself had a master's degree from Oxford University and hailed from a family of politicians and bureaucrats (albeit they are not based in New Delhi) (Goswami, 2009). When a journalist who was on his 'debate' pointed to Goswami's own elite background, he boasted by saying that he was a self-made entrepreneur who "started as a reporter and worked hard to build a new age news organization, which became India's biggest television network," thereby setting himself apart from the so-called Lutyens journalists who, in his view, climbed their career ladders due to their family background and connections. Downplaying the discussion on his own background, Goswami quickly steered the debate back to accusing the established media being "entitled and snobbish" ("Time to call out," 2019).

In his primetime debates, Goswami went on to allege that there is a broad consensus and conformity in the mainstream media because those with a 'left-liberal' world view dominated the mainstream press. He maintained that those who disagreed with so-called Lutyens journalists and had contrarian views were ostracized, which is why "independent media like Republic TV" were working towards "saving Indian journalism from the clutches of this liberal cabal." In another primetime segment on a similar topic, Goswami railed that the "Lutyens media" typifies the "rot that has existed in this country for decades." In a highly opinionated tone, he stated that the 'Lutyens

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[22] Refers to social and business connections among alumni of male-only elite schools. Used to refer to an informal system where men use their influence to help others who went to the same school/college.

club' of which the established media were an integral part of are the most "detested group

in the country today."

In his long introductory comments, he issued the following edict:

Eight years back, being part of the Lutyens club was something like a chip on
your shoulder, something to be proud about, something to aspire to. Because
being part of the Lutyens club brought with it an established system of privileges.
You worked your entire life, or you enter this club either through connections,
opportunities, or through opportunism, whichever way--you are co-opted. This
club was entrenched and had its tentacles in all parts of society in India, which
was over-centralized for almost seven decades after India's independence.
Politics, bureaucracy, academia, journalism and media, culturati, literati, business
groups, and of course, socialites were part of this club….. If you got entry into
this group, you were part of the exalted circle. So, India was run by this cocktail
circuit that was contemptuous of the rest of the country. They were completely in
their own world. Absolutely feudal, oligarchic, or sycophantic---depending on
whether they were attending a court or if someone else was attending theirs. And,
as a result, resentment built up in this country where we felt that there was
absolutely no scope for merit, for a real democracy, and for the real federal nature
of this country to come up. This country was taken over by a group of people who
believed that they were the new Raj. They ruled this country for six and a half
decades. Occasionally, they lost power, but they somehow felt that they were so
influential that, even if they lost political power, they had the ability to
influence…... Because the instruments of power were still in their hands ("Has the
Lutyens fallen," 2019).

Furthermore, in his efforts to portray established media as entitled, Arnab

Goswami charged that news reporters and senior editors of well-known publications and

broadcast agencies "lived all their lives" off of the perks and freebies such as--subsidized

accommodation, food, and transport--provided by the government. The television

network alleged that this "parasitic freebie culture" has gradually spread to press corps

working in state capitals where reporters are rewarded with monthly allowances and free

health insurance for their "flunkeyism." Pitting the "entitlement" of the news media

against the country's hard-working "aspirational class," Goswami said:

There are a group of people in Delhi--who are a very small minority in Delhi, who
have no problem with the freebies. I have a serious problem with freebies. And, I

wish to ask all of you, tonight…. Can we start an agitation- "No more Freebies"? And, I ask you today, which media house in this country, got acres and acres of free land in the state of Uttar Pradesh before the last elections? That's a freebie… Let's investigate this--which journalist got free land and free flats in Greater Noida and Gurgaon? Now, the same journalists on social media have the galls to preach to us….Let me tell you more. Which journalists got freebies and huge amounts of land in Chattarpur[23] and built large farmhouses in the names of NGOs?[24] ("Will Arvind Kejriwal's," 2019).

It was argued that the resentment against the Narendra Modi government among "Lutyens journalists" was because of his efforts to crack down on this "freebie culture." Modi's refusal to take journalists with him on his state visits was cited as an example of how he was "breaching the walls of the privilege" and dismantling the so-called 'Lutyens' lobby.

On his show, Arnab Goswami also charged the established media of shielding "one of their own" even when they were accused of gruesome crimes. Claiming this to be part of a "systematic pattern," Goswami alleged that 'arrogant Lutyens media' quietly rehabilitated such "morally depraved journalists" and also defended them by writing articles and op-ed pieces to restore their public image. For example, when the Supreme Court fast-tracked the trial against senior journalist, Tarun Tejpal, who had allegedly molested his junior colleague, Goswami conducted a 30-minute debate on how his liberal friends from the "Lutyens" media were "supporting his despicable act" just because he belonged to their elite club and had "secular" credentials. Openly taking sides, he declared that the "People of India are celebrating that charges are being filed against Tarun Tejpal" and bellowed "Shame, shame on the Lutyens lobby. Shame on the

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[23] A neighborhood in the suburbs of New Delhi

[24] Acronym for Non-Governmental Organization (non-profit organization).

pseudos' for supporting him" ("Tejpal trial to be," 2019). Goswami went on to argue that

Tejpal's case was emblematic of a phenomenon where elite media figures use journalism

as well as their influential contacts to circumvent and even undermine the due process of

law. However, contrary to Goswami's claims, since the accusations of rape against Tejpal

first surfaced in 2013, the established media have provided extensive coverage to the case

so much so that a few media observers criticized the press for conducting a "media trial"

in a "salacious manner" (Krishnan, 2018). Several journalists have also found fault with

Goswami for misrepresenting mainstream media's coverage of the Tejpal case and

accused him of playing the jury and putting pressure on the due legal process

(Priyaranjan, 2016).

Overall, as evidenced by these examples, *Republic TV*, in its media-related

debates, has positioned the established media as part of the corrupt power elite, which

despite its dominance on the social, cultural and political discourse of the country, was

indeed cut off from the ground realities of the common people. Put differently, the mass

media were portrayed as an elite institution that acted as a mouthpiece for various

influential interest groups, including the corporate sector, instead of serving the

information needs of the 'ordinary' people. The television network also attacked

journalists for "freeloading" on perks like subsidized housing, free air tickets and hotel

accommodation in exchange for favorable news coverage. By arguing that journalists

who worked in the corridors of power, doubled up as fixers, power brokers, deal makers,

and lobbyists, *Republic TV* sought to undermine the credibility of the mainstream press.

**Table 2: Dominant media criticisms expressed by *Republic TV***

| Themes | Dominant Criticisms |
|---|---|
| Media are anti-India | News media publish 'biased' reports on Jammu and Kashmir<br><br>They exaggerate controversies related to beef-ban, press freedom, Islamophobia, and caste divisions to create a negative image of India.<br><br>The mainstream press is weaving an anti-India narrative at the best of vested interests. |
| Media are biased | 'Lutyens' media refuse to pose hard-hitting questions to the Nehru-Gandhi family.<br><br>Media are servile to the Congress Party because they benefited from the corrupt policies during the Party's regime<br><br>Modi has rendered the elite media, 'irrelevant,' which is why they oppose him |
| Media are entitled elite | 'Lutyens' journalists are products of nepotism.<br><br>Their elite background prevents them from relating to the everyday problems of Indians in rural areas.<br><br>Journalists enjoy freebies from the government in exchange for favorable news coverage. |
| Media spread 'fake news.' | 'Lutyens media' spread fake narratives and never retract or apologize.<br><br>Bad reporting, inconsistencies, media errors-are part of a motivated campaign to besmirch India, Hindus, BJP, and Narendra Modi. |

## 6.5. Media Spread 'Fake News'

In its efforts to discredit the mainstream news media, *Republic TV* advanced the argument that journalists produced "fake news" to satisfy the "leftist-agenda." By characterizing opinion pieces as "fake news," *the channel* tried to portray established

media organizations as lacking credibility and reliability, thereby persuading its audience to distrust the mainstream press. The television network's promotional video titled, "Spreading fake news in the garb of an opinion-piece? Watch Arnab Goswami expose fake news journos on the debate" is illustrative of this trend where op-ed pieces were branded as disinformation. Countering the mainstream news media's argument that opinion pieces can't be construed as "fake news," *Republic TV* asked its viewers to ponder over how journalists can "hypothesize an opinion-piece based on falsehoods?" During its primetime debates, captions and phrases such as "Coordinated Fake News Campaign," "Lies Smashed," "Fake news vs. Truth," "No Fact-check, No Verification," "Lutyens Lies Again" were repeatedly flashed on the top and bottom of the screen, which highlighted the channel's attempts to dismiss news articles with a perceived left-wing slant, those critical of the government, reports with factual errors, and those that did not name their sources--all as 'fake news.' Court verdicts in favor of the government's claims were also employed to attack the news media. *Republic TV* made the argument that by questioning the government's assertions, which were eventually proven to be true, news media have purposefully spread "fake news," "lies," and "propaganda."

*Figure 6: A screenshot from Republic TV's debate on 'fake news.'*

For example, when the Supreme Court of India dismissed petitions from Congress Party that sought a review of the government's purchase of Rafale fighter jets from France, *Republic TV* attacked the established media for spreading 'fake news' against the Modi government. The court's observations that no irregularities or corruption were found in the purchase of the fighter jets served as evidence for *Republic TV* to accuse the mainstream press of providing a platform to distribute a distorted version of the 'truth.' In his commentary, Arnab Goswami characterized this coverage not as a routine journalistic practice where news media cover accusations made by the opposition party, but as an effort to promote a 'deliberate lie' aimed at advancing a "left-liberal narrative." According to Goswami, the Supreme court verdict exposed "fake news" spread by mainstream journalists, who, in his view, contributed enormously to the spread of "fabricated stories" and "lies" on the defense deal. His efforts to characterize the media

as purveyors of "fake news" was evidently visible in the debate aired on November 15,

2019. In an aggressive tone, Goswami said:

> The biggest fake news story of the decade...I always said it was, and it has been proven and busted by the Supreme Court of India once again.... Those who wrote long pieces raising doubts over the Rafale deal have been shown the mirror. They lied. The lobby's review petition has been dismissed. And, Rahul Gandhi has been warned like never before....When the verdict smacks the lobby in the face, and when it is told to everyone that Rafale was fake news, these insignificant desperados still don't accept it. What has not been said in the verdict today? They have said everything...to essentially make the point that Rafale was fake news. And, when someone like the Supreme Court of India says that it was fake news, you should accept it and not be in denial. You should say to the people of India today with humility that ---"Yes, we lied. Because there was an election, we had no other issue, we had to lie, we had to build a campaign, and we lied. We took sections of the media and the lobby who helped us in lying. And, we tried to quickly magnify this lie using some digital media outlets whose editors are American citizens, and we generally thought that we could get away with it."

> But you can't get away with it. But you can't get away with it. What's a lie is a lie, right? The simple point we need to establish once again today to these people is, they lied. That's it. They lied. And they've been caught red-handed ("Rahul Gandhi oblivious," 2019).

Additionally, routine factual errors, and inaccuracies even when they were

subsequently corrected, were construed as deliberate attempts to conduct a "motivational

campaign" against supposedly regular targets of the left-liberals, i.e., --India, Hindus,

BJP and Narendra Modi. In fact, *Republic TV* conducted hour-long debates to discuss

these errors, during which, Arnab Goswami launched a scathing attack on the 'Lutyens

media' for spreading "fake narratives," "canards," and "delusional lies" at the behest of

their "paymasters." Referring to mainstream journalists as "professional liars" who have

"no credibility left," Goswami opined that these inconsistencies and errors were not just

'mistakes' but "planted-stories," which were produced as a part of the well-planned

global conspiracy to besmirch the image of Modi and India.  For example, in August

2019, prominent newspapers published reports that during a hearing, a certain judge from

the Bombay High Court had asked a left-wing activist why he had Leo Tolstoy's classic

*War and Peace* at his home. Eventually, this news report turned out to be inaccurate after

the judge and the sources present at the hearing claimed that no references were made to

Tolstoy's classic during the court hearing. Soon after the judge issued this clarification,

Arnab Goswami conducted an hour-long debate on how the mainstream press was being

"disrespectful of the facts" and charged them with running a "factory of falsehoods."

Sounding conspiratorial, he claimed that this 'mistake' was "intentionally committed" to

depict how India has become an intolerant society under the Modi-government where

people could not even own a copy of a literary classic. Demanding an apology from the

mainstream media, Goswami made the following remarks:

> Dear viewers, what do we do with these people now? Lots of news channels and their whole lobby--they're interested in berating a judge with some fake news. So, they jumped the gun and said that the judge is questioning *War and Peace* by Tolstoy being owned during the hearing of the Bhima Koregaon case. And then, a whole barrage of journalists, self-declared fact-checkers, Lutyens lawyers---all conveniently picked on this and said, "look at the situation in India today. Under Modi, the situation is so bad that you cannot have a copy of the Leo Tolstoy classic…. What exactly is happening with the Lutyens lobby? We need to analyze them and deal with them with some amount of sympathy.
>
> What they're actually trying to do is….one Radia journalist[25] says, "Is *War and Peace* anti-national now?"...I mean, you've got to be kidding me. There was no reference to Tolstoy. But I'm not concerned about the Radia journalist because Radia journalist is irrelevant.  I'm actually interested in knowing that the Jurassic-era dinosaur, BBC, actually put out an article on this with the headline saying, "Tolstoy's *War and Peace* lands an Indian activist into trouble. Same BBC, which proudly lied about Kashmir. And then, Huffpost puts out an article--which says, "Why did you have *War and Peace* at home? Bombay High Court's bizarre question to an activist"...And then, The Wire  put out an article, "Can you have *War and Peace* on your shelf? You see, the whole game of these people is to somehow establish that India is a country where you can't eat what you want, dress how you want, or read what you want. Especially after Modi has come,

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[25]  Radia journalist is a reference to senior editors such as Barkha Dutt, Vir Sanghvi and M K Venu whose telephonic conversations with a corporate lobbyist, Nira Radia, became public in 2010. These tapes appeared to demonstrate how Radia used the media to influence government decisions.

nobody can do anything...We want them to say sorry. But they don't have the basic decency to do that ("Classic fake news," 2019).

Furthermore, Arnab Goswami maintained that the so-called Lutyens' journalists working for supposedly left-leaning media outlets never apologized or retracted their "fake news" stories even when they were pointed out to them. In a debate on fake news with editors and writers of right-wing news websites, *Swarajya, OpIndia,* and *Postcard News* as his guests, Arnab Goswami said that while pro-BJP news portals have the decency to apologize and take down stories when proven to be factually incorrect, the left-leaning sites that claim to be "independent and neutral" don't acknowledge them. Siding with his guests from right-wing websites, Goswami attacked the editors of left-wing news portals for peddling "half-truths" and demanded an apology from them for doing so ("Who spreads fake," 2019).

Thus, by characterizing professional journalists as "anti-national," "entitled," "biased," and purveyors of "fake news," *Republic TV* attempted to undermine the established media. Through the framing of the debates in "us. vs. them" format, Goswami positioned journalists as 'corrupt and immoral' individuals who were conspiring with the country's enemies to subvert India's national interests. In portraying news media as such, he sought to question their professional integrity and advance the notion that mainstream news media could not be trusted.

# Chapter 7: Findings (Interviews)

The rapid expansion of social media in India, particularly in urban areas, has provided supporters of the Hindu nationalist ideology a discursive space for "self-expressivity and online sociality among ideological compatriots" (Udupa, 2018: 456). Specifically, urban educated youth with access to affordable smartphones, fluency in English and regional languages, and reasonable knowledge of online networks, have been courted by the BJP and Hindu nationalist organizations (Chopra, 2019; Chaturvedi, 2016). Although most of these online right-wing supporters are known to be English educated[26], belong to the upper castes, and are relatively affluent, recent journalistic accounts suggest that even semi-literate, lower-middle-class youth from rural areas are increasingly being recruited into the *Hindutva* project (Jadhav and Phartiyal, 2019). As a result, the discourse in India's virtual spaces, particularly on social networking platforms such as Twitter, is dominated by Hindu nationalists (Gittinger, 2018).

Also referred to as "Internet Hindus" (Overdorf, 2012) "Cyber Hindus" (Therwath, 2012), and "*Bhakts*"[27] (Joshi, 2020), these online Hindu nationalists use digital platforms for commenting, liking, sharing, tagging, tweeting, retweeting, and posting content related to the core issues of the Hindutva ideology (Udupa, 2018). Known to be vocal about their opposition to the mainstream news media, right-wing digital volunteers use social networking platforms, particularly Twitter, to articulate their

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[26] Educated in English medium institutions, which until recently were confined to urban areas.
[27] The Sanskrit term *Bhakt* means "devotee." In the current context, it has been used to denote supporters of the Hindu right wing. Modi supporters are often referred to as Modi *Bhakt*—meaning Modi devotee or Modi fan, to equate their following with the devotee's blind following of the deity (Govil and Baishya, 2018; Khan, 2015). The Hindu right-wing opposes the usage and terms it 'Hinduphobic' (see: Sharma, 2020).

criticism of professional journalism (Chaturvedi, 2016). This chapter includes findings

drawn from semi-structured interviews with 24 online Hindu nationalists that explored

their dominant critiques of the mainstream press as well as the discursive strategies they

employ in 'countering' the established media. Although this study includes in-depth

interviews with 24 online right-wing supporters, the actual number of Hindu nationalist

volunteers who use various digital platforms to perform their 'ideological work' is much

larger. According to an estimate, there are about 100,000 online Hindu nationalists

voluntarily defending the *Hindutva* ideology on various platforms, particularly Twitter

(Udupa, 2018; Chaturvedi, 2016). In-depth interviews with these online right-wing

supporters offer valuable insights into their perceptions of the mainstream news media

and the dominant criticisms they articulate to express their media distrust. The findings

that follow include the general themes discussed in these interviews. Extracts from these

conversations help us discern the discursive strategies they embrace to counteract the

established news media in India.

## 7.1. Media as Anti-Hindu

The notion that India's mainstream news media are 'anti-Hindu' or 'Hinduphobic'

is at the core of the media criticism made by online Hindu nationalists. Notably, this is

similar to the accusation made against the established media by right-wing alternative

websites *Swarajya* and *OpIndia.* According to online right-wing supporters, the mass

media, particularly the English language press, are involved in a "vicious campaign"

against the Hindu community by portraying them as the 'aggressors' and a 'violent'

majority out to attack innocent minorities. They claim that such framing is particularly

visible in the media's reportage of communal violence between Hindus and minorities,

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notably-Muslims and Christians. Many among them make the argument that violence against the minority community is "exaggerated" and "blown out of proportion," while similar attacks on Hindus are reported as "regular crime" stories. Prevalence of "leftist and Marxist" ideology among journalists is cited as a reason for such "blatant Hindu-hatred" in the media. Vishwas[28], a Hyderabad-based IT engineer, who describes himself as a "hardcore supporter of Modi," articulates this view:

> Recently, a large group of Muslims attacked Hindus in my native town, Bhainsa, in the state of Telangana. My family lives in that town, and through them, I found out that Muslims initiated the riots. But local TV news channels reported the violence as a communal clash between two groups, which is a false equivalence. National news channels didn't even care to report the incident. They chose to ignore it because Muslims were the aggressors here. However, in 2015, when a Muslim man was lynched in the state of Uttar Pradesh by self-declared cow vigilantes, both national and international media reported it as an example of how Muslims were being persecuted by the Hindu-majority in Modi's India.

Many members of this group also claim that when reporting incidents of violence, the duration of the coverage and the placement of the article depends on the religious identity of the victim. According to them, a disproportionate amount of coverage is given to violent events in which Christians and Muslims are victims while "completely ignoring" those in which Hindus are targeted. Put differently, online right-wing supporters contend that the mainstream press do not treat "all communal violence equally." Raghav, a Hindu nationalist, elaborated this further:

> If the victim is a Muslim or a Christian, the incident makes it to the front pages of all newspapers and is debated on primetime TV for several weeks. A stray incident in some remote corner of the country is highlighted to project all Hindus as a bloodthirsty majority out to kill the minorities. If Hindus are victims, then the report appears as a small item in the inside pages of a newspaper or as scrolling in TV news channels. Such selective outrage indicates that as far as the media is concerned, Hindu lives don't matter.

[28] Real names of all the online Hindu nationalists mentioned in this chapter are replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identity.

Furthermore, mass media are accused of withholding complete details and leaving out the identities of the criminals when reporting crimes committed by Muslims. Some even allege that journalists in their efforts to be "politically correct," replace Muslim names of the accused individuals with random Hindu names. This, they argue, is part of a "conspiracy" and a concerted effort to give a "Hindu spin" to the crimes committed by Muslims. Raghav recalls posting several tweets to protest against leading media organizations, *Times of India* and *NDTV* when the news outlets supposedly referred to a Muslim cleric accused of rape as a "tantrik"- a term used for Hindu ritual practitioners. "People who just read the headlines would probably think a Hindu committed that rape. It was a deliberate trick to defame us," Raghav said. Despite his 'protest' on twitter, the news organizations did not change the headline, which according to him, "confirms their anti-Hindu bias."

Another common criticism from right-wing supporters is that access to the news media is denied to Hindu nationalists because journalists with a "left-liberal" orientation view their ideas as 'regressive,' 'hate speech,' 'undemocratic,' 'communal,' and 'bigoted.' They claim that journalists favor those who articulate 'liberal' viewpoints and deny them the opportunity to publish articles that offer counter-arguments. They complain that although it is expected of professional journalism to include a diversity of perspectives, the mainstream media in India act as "thought-police" by boycotting, suppressing, and censoring Hindus, who seek media space to express their ideas and thoughts. Sharing his experience in this regard, Amish, a Lucknow-based chartered accountant said:

I have contributed several articles and blog posts to *Jagaran* and *Dainik Bhaskar.* These pieces were on topics such as healthcare for senior citizens and tips on financial planning for youth. But when I sent an essay highlighting the genocide and persecution of the Hindu minority in Bangladesh and Pakistan, there was no response from the newspapers. Most of them completely ignored it. Others refused to publish it, citing frivolous reasons like lack of space. So long as you toe the line, they engage with you. As soon as you present a Hindu viewpoint, they treat it as a taboo. Our media is rabidly anti-Hindu.

The accusation of censorship is accompanied by the charge that the media provide space for those who ridicule Hindu deities, philosophy, culture, icons, symbols, and art. Opinion pieces by authors and scholars such as Arundhati Roy, Audrey Truschke, Romila Thapar[29], and Wendy Doniger[30] , who supposedly 'mischaracterize' the Hindu religion, were cited as examples of how the media provided space for "Hindu-bashers" while not giving them an opportunity to represent their views. Hindu nationalists on Twitter also make the case that the established media, in its articles and television debates, portrays Hinduism as "primitive," "superstitious," "antiquated," and a "backward" faith while religious practices of Christianity and Islam are treated with "respect." Bhavik, a Bengaluru-based software engineer who calls himself a "proud Hindu-nationalist," explained:

> During *Diwali,* the media publish articles and conduct television debates on how fireworks can increase air and sound pollution. They also found fault with flying kites during *Makar Sankranti,* saying it will hurt birds. *Karwa Chauth* was described as a patriarchal ritual where women observe fasting for the well-being of their spouse. Journalists don't publish such negative and insensitive articles on Christmas or Ramzan. During New Year's Eve, reporters happily share images and videos of fireworks. Why are Hindus unfairly targeted? Since most journalists

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[29] Romila Thapar is an Indian historian who writes op-eds in major publications. She disagrees with the Hindu nationalist view that traces the origins of Hindus to the Aryans and the Indus Valley Civilization.
[30] Extracts from U.S.-based historian, Wendy Doniger's book --"On Hinduism" were published in prominent English newspapers. The Hindu-right opposes Doniger's work and claims that it is riddled with deliberate misrepresentations of Hindu deities and scriptures. After severe backlash, the publishing company decided to stop publication of the book. Hindu nationalists criticize the established media of providing 'excessive' coverage to her work.

are accessible on Twitter, I use the platform to call them out on their double-standards and hypocrisy. Often, they either don't respond or simply block me.

Online Hindu nationalists also find the Western media coverage of Hinduism problematic. They contend that international media outlets, including *the New York Times, Washington Post, BBC, Al Jazeera, Guardian*, and *Los Angeles Times*, seek out only extremist voices among the Hindus instead of reporting moderate Hindu opinions on events. This, they say, is done to retrofit quotes to suit their preconceived framework, which portrays Hindus as "extreme fundamentalists." Online right-wing supporters who follow foreign correspondents on social media speculate that international reporters confine themselves to New Delhi, where the same 'secular' and 'anti-Hindu' ideas are repeated to them at journalists' parties and elite social gatherings. In other words, they posit that instead of traveling around the country to 'soak in' the real Hinduism and understand its complexities, Western correspondents take their cues on the Hindu religion from the 'left-liberal' elites in Delhi who are supposedly 'anti-Hindu' in their outlook. In their view, such an attitude prevents them from accurately reporting on issues related to Hindu religious practices.

In addition, they argue that the international media's view of Hinduism is based on the colonial-era characterization of their religion as a "cult group of cow and idol worshipers."  While some of them attribute such a supposedly inaccurate depiction of Hindu practices to "racist" tendencies among international correspondents, others claim that the root cause of such reportage is their "envy" of India's growing economic and political clout in the world, clearly conflating being Hindu with Indianness. They complain that international correspondents view Hindu practices from a Western prism, which prevents them from accurately understanding the nuances of the Hindu religion.

Online right-wing supporters claim that social media offers them a "hope" in their efforts

to challenge and counter the so-called "Hinduphobia" in the Western media. Vidya, who

runs her own IT-startup in Bengaluru, and describes herself as a "hardcore supporter of

the BJP " recalls her usage of Twitter to galvanize support for an online petition to

investigate supposedly 'Hinduphobic' tweets posted by a staff member of the US-based

National Public Radio (NPR). Furkan Khan, a producer at *NPR,* had tweeted, "If Indians

give up Hinduism, they will also be solving most of their problems what with all the piss

drinking and dung worshipping" ("Delhi based employee," 2019). Articulating her

online activism against the *NPR* producer, Vidya contends:

> The *NPR* producer posted an offensive tweet that attributed India's problems to
> Hinduism. I don't follow her on Twitter, but someone on my timeline posted a screenshot
> of her tweet. How can a staff member of a reputed news organization tweet such hateful
> views and get away with it? So, I signed the online petition demanding an investigation
> on her tweets, and later, shared it on my timeline with my friends on Twitter and
> Facebook. I was relieved to find out that *NPR* eventually apologized, and that staff
> member was forced to quit. I really like social media because it gives people like us a
> chance to expose such hypocrites, and pseudo-liberals, and demolish their anti-Hindu
> narratives (Vidya, personal communication, November 26, 2019).

While the tweet was arguably offensive, instead of using this as an opportunity to

make constructive criticism of the journalistic practices, Hindu nationalists employed it

as evidence of mainstream media's anti-Hindu bias.

Additionally, online right-wing supporters argue that the mainstream press do not

cover 'important' topics related to the Hindu contributions to the field of science,

technology, art, and architecture. They make the claim that practices such as yoga,

Ayurveda[31] as well as other scientific, technological, astronomical and mathematical traditions with links to Hindu philosophy, do not find coverage in the mass media. Attributing "Hinduphobia" and a "colonial-mindset" prevalent within the media as the reason for the lack of coverage, Vishwas, a "hardcore supporter of Modi," states:

I never see a positive article on Hinduism and its contributions to science and medicine in our newspapers. Even when they mention yoga and Ayurveda, they do not acknowledge its connections to the Hindu religion. Our Hindu temples in South India are architectural and scientific marvels. But the press never publicizes them. They only sing praises of Islamic art and architecture like the Taj Mahal. It clearly shows the anti-Hindu bias in our media.



# Greater Journalistic Integrity in Reporting on Hinduism @ NPR

**9,525 have signed.** Let's get to 10,000!

Natasha Ram signed this petition

Liman Joshi signed this petition

abc XYZ Bengaluru, VA, India

I'm signing because... (optional)

☐ Display my name and comment on this petition

🔒 Sign this petition

Indu Viswanathan started this petition to National Public Radio

The recent debacle over NPR's New Delhi producer Furkan Khan's horrifically violent Hinduphobic tweet **reveals a much deeper issue in journalistic integrity from NPR**, in India and in the US. (If you recall, in her tweet, she stated, "If Indians give

*Figure 7: An online petition started by Hindu nationalists against NPR*

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[31] A holistic medicine system that has been practiced in parts of India for several years. It is a form of complimentary, alternative medicine.

To counter the mainstream media's supposed anti-Hindu bias, online right-wing supporters embrace a range of strategies. Prominent among them is their collection of large volumes of data, including screenshots of supposedly 'Hinduphobic' tweets posted by journalists. Headlines of 'anti-Hindu' articles and TV debates produced by the mainstream media are also gathered. For them, collages of these tweets and headlines serve as 'evidence' that journalists working for the established media are a bunch of 'Hindu-haters.' Besides, these screenshots and archives are used as rejoinders to mass media's narratives and to advance their broader claim that the content published by the English media cannot be trusted. Further, this material is tweeted back to journalists asking them for explanations for their alleged inconsistencies in the treatment of various faiths. These collages are widely shared and distributed through numerous pages and groups on social media and WhatsApp, which redistribute them within their own networks.

*Figure 8: A collage of senior journalist, Sagarika Ghose's tweets was widely shared by Hindu nationalists to illustrate her 'anti-Hindu' attitudes*

Overall, the denunciation of the press for 'ignoring' and 'overlooking' Hindu voices, is concurrent with the victimhood narrative adopted by the BJP and its affiliated Hindu nationalist organizations for several decades (Jaffrelot, 2008). Some scholars have argued such narratives could evoke the memory of a collective humiliation, in order to activate group solidarity (Kakar, 1996). In fact, researchers and political observers studying Hindu nationalism have provided an outline for this victimhood narrative, which is as follows:

> 'Hindus have no rights in their own land. They live like second-class citizens in their own country. They have been suffering violence and atrocities in the hands of Islamic invaders and Christian-Western colonizers for centuries. Others (Muslims and Christians) have ruthlessly destroyed the heritage of Hindus. Yet, secular, left-liberal political parties and the mainstream news media ignore their legitimate concerns and grievances and continue to appease the minorities. The

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government controls and manages our places of worship. Hindus, therefore, are not only the victims of the past atrocities but also of the current minority appeasement politics and anti-Hindu discourse--embraced by liberal political forces and India's established media' (McLane, 2010; Ghose, 2017).

It is the avowed mission of the supporters of the *Hindutva* ideology to take India to its glorious Hindu past---during which time, '*Akhanda Bharat*'[32] was purportedly the '*Jagadguru*' (teacher/knowledge provider for the entire world) (Chitkara, 2004). In their view, 'negative' reporting of Hindu beliefs, culture, philosophy, and rituals by the 'left-leaning' mainstream media, deliberately aims to thwart this mission, thereby denying Hinduism its rightful place in the history.

As illustrated by the responses from online supporters of the right, they see themselves and their fellow Hindus as the victims of 'exclusion' and 'mistreatment' imparted by the established media. This sense of victimhood forms the motivation behind their desire to correct the "biased narrative" and "imbalance" in the media discourse through the use of Twitter and other social platforms.

## 7.2. Media are partisan

Online right-wing supporters also argue that the 'anti-Hindu' media is naturally predisposed to oppose the BJP and its leadership. They allege that the media defend their ideological allies such as Congress Party and other 'secular' outfits while constantly vilifying the BJP and Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. The roots of the criticism that the media are not neutral lie in what the right-wing supporters perceived to be the established media's 'negative coverage' of the communal riots that took place in Gujarat when Narendra Modi was the Chief Minister of that state. In 2002, a total of 59 RSS volunteers

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[32] Akhanda Bharat is a Sanskrit/Hindi term for "Undivided India"

were incinerated in a train at Godhra in Gujarat by some Muslims, and their remains were taken in a procession in the state capital by Vishwa Hindu Parishad, a Hindu-nationalist group (Sinha, 2017). More than 1,000 people were killed in the subsequent violence, most of whom were Muslims. The English language press had severely criticized Modi for his inaction and complicity following which, he portrayed himself as the victim of an 'orchestrated media campaign' against him (Ohm, 2015; Maheshwari and Sparks, 2018).

Hindu nationalists opine that in the last two decades, Modi was "hounded" by the national and the international press, which acted like a "prosecutor" and "judge" at the same time and declared him responsible for the violence. They complain that the established media "left the semblance of neutrality" and indulged in "character assassination" of Modi by allegedly referring to him as a 'divisive,' 'communal,' 'fundamentalist,' 'anti-Muslim,' and a 'polarizing' figure (Kartik, personal communication, December 2, 2019).

They claim that journalists downplay similar incidents of communal violence when they take place in non-BJP ruled states. For online right-wing supporters, Modi is the "most vilified politician in independent India," and his resilience to the "media witch-hunt" is what endeared them to him. In their view, Modi remains a 'victim of biased and unfair' news coverage who has been subject to 'relentless media scrutiny.' In this regard, Sridhar, a Hyderabad-based tech-consultant proclaimed:

> I've seen the Hindu-Muslim riots in my city from my childhood. But the national media never questioned our Chief Minister like the way they targeted Modi. They portrayed him like he was a monster. Others would have succumbed to the pressure, and either quit or apologized. But Modi stood his ground. Despite being a victim of an unprecedented media trial, he showed his ideological conviction, and I began admiring him for that.

Furthermore, online Hindu nationalists allege that journalists from the established media do not pose hard-hitting and 'uncomfortable' questions to the leadership of the Congress Party despite several allegations of corruption against them. Congress party president Sonia Gandhi and her children, Priyanka, and Rahul Gandhi represent the third and fourth generations of the family that led the party since India's independence. They maintain that media personnel who have been "co-opted" into the Congress ecosystem, treat the Gandhis like "royalty" and create a "mystique and aura" around them by promoting the narratives of their family's "great service to the country" (Vidya, personal communication, November 26, 2019).

They also claim that during its six-decade rule, Congress 'treated the media well' by giving senior journalists--civilian awards, paid-memberships on government committees, nominations to the Rajyasabha (upper house of the Parliament), and access to elite clubs in New Delhi. The argument goes that due to such treatment, journalists feel obligated to return the favor to the Congress leadership by 'unfairly targeting' the Modi government. This, they say, is part of a 'standard practice' where a 'loyal coterie of journalists' never scrutinize the actions of the Nehru-Gandhi family but always censor and suppress individuals who oppose them. It is also alleged that since media houses financed by wealthy billionaires made political deals and received material favors from the previous Congress governments, they take a pro-Congress stance. Meanwhile, others attribute the so-called "sycophantic" behavior of the media towards Sonia Gandhi, to her "foreign-origin" and "white skin." Srinidhi, a tax consultant from Mangaluru, and a self-declared "Modi Bhakt," explains:

> Media treats Sonia Gandhi with a lot of reverence because she is a foreigner, has white skin, and is the daughter-in-law of Indira Gandhi. She can barely speak or

read Hindi. Her English has a heavy Italian accent. She hasn't even completed her college education. Despite all these facts, media fawn over her and never question her credentials. But they make fun of Modi's *desi* English accent. Even in scripted interviews, journalists do not ask Sonia any questions about corruption allegations against her. The media never took an objective look at her work as a member of the parliament. Similarly, her son, Rahul Gandhi, lost two national elections to Modi. Yet, the liberal media keep promoting him time and again. It doesn't happen anywhere else in the world. Can you imagine the U.S. media propping up Hillary Clinton as the next Democratic nominee after two consecutive defeats in the presidential elections?

Hindu nationalists claim that even after Modi's victories in the 2014 and 2019 general elections, the established media continue to 'target' him. They find it unfair that Modi is 'blamed' for every violent incident in the country even though it takes place in a non-BJP ruled state. Srinivas, an investment banker and an active member of the BJP's IT cell says:

> Modi is held responsible for religious violence in non-BJP ruled states, although law and order is under the control of the state government as per the Indian constitution. For example, when a Muslim man was killed in Uttar Pradesh over the consumption of beef, national and international media accused Modi of not doing enough to control the cow vigilantes. The state was then being ruled by the Samajwadi Party (party with secular-liberal ideology). Liberal media functions this way everywhere in the world. Even in the U.S., Trump is blamed for violence against African Americans even if those incidents occur in a state with a Democratic governor.

They express the view that such 'visceral hate' for Modi justifies his aversion to the media and unwillingness to engage with the journalists. They argue that since the established media have an "ideological bias" against Modi and the BJP, his press conferences or media interactions will be a "waste of his time." "He is anyway interacting directly with us through Twitter, Facebook, and 'Man Ki Baat.[33]' Why do we

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[33] Modi's fortnightly monologue on government-owned radio. The title directly translates to "Straight from the heart". This program was launched soon after Modi became the Prime Minister in 2014, which quickly began to drive stories in the print and electronic media.

need journalists to carry Modi's messages to us anymore?" asked Bhavik, who follows Modi on YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and occasionally tunes into his fortnightly radio monologue on the state broadcaster.

In addition to criticizing the mainstream press for being partisan, online Hindu nationalists maintain that there is no such thing as "non-ideological media" and that objectivity and neutrality were simply masks that mainstream news media use to hide their own ideological leanings. Indeed, the assumption that all media outlets are biased and engaged in the same type of ideological warfare provides a rationale for their engagement with the right-wing news media such as *Republic TV, Swarajya* and *OpIndia* in addition to the government-run television-broadcasters*, Doordarshan* and *All India Radio*. A number of them have claimed to have completely stopped watching or subscribing to TV channels and newspapers that are considered 'anti-BJP' and instead rely on right-wing outlets as well as social media to fulfill their information needs. In particular, they claim to watch 'subject matter experts' on YouTube who provide them 'in-depth' insights into current events. These 'experts' include pro-BJP individuals from academia, media, and think-tanks who post their analysis of current topics on their own YouTube channels. Several right-wing supporters argued that since the mainstream news media were not "neutral" or "objective" in their reportage, they have begun seeking out "alternatives." Siddharth, who describes himself as a "BJP supporter" explains:

> All media channels and newspapers are biased in their own way. There is no such thing as unbiased media or neutral journalism. All of them are expressing their points of view and putting forward their own narratives. So, I would rather watch something that shows BJP and Hindus in a positive light. I am glad that today, BJP supporters have our own media channels and websites that propagate the good work done by PM Modi. I have unsubscribed to newspapers and TV channels that work against the BJP and the Hindus.

In sum, as evidenced by their responses, online right-wing supporters argue that the mainstream media are hostile to the BJP and Narendra Modi and that they churn out news stories to serve the political purposes of the Congress Party and its liberal allies.

## 7.3. Media are Entitled Elite

Online right-wing supporters characterize established media as 'entitled' and 'elitist' and perceive journalists working for the English language press as being 'disconnected' from the 'ordinary people.' They allege that the elite media has an inherent bias against politicians with "dark complexion" and "poor English," which, according to them, explains their antipathy towards many BJP leaders, including Narendra Modi. Further, they believe that the representatives of the RSS and its affiliate organizations are supposedly perceived as "rustic" and "*ghaati*"[34] because of their "humble origins." In their view, English media is full of "fake socialists" and "elite hypocrites" who claim to speak for the 'subalterns' but, in reality, are "suppressing the voices" of individuals from underprivileged backgrounds. Ravi, an online right-wing supporter, articulates this criticism:

> Most *Sangh Parivar* and BJP folks come from rural and poor backgrounds. They are not fluent in English or have expensive clothes to wear. For these English educated, urban-raised, elite journalists, they come across as uneducated and uncultured people who are orthodox, regressive, and backward. Several BJP spokespersons have openly said that the English TV channels do not take their soundbites because they don't have the right accent or look good on camera. Elite journalists give long lectures on racism and casteism, but don't practice what they preach.

Further, in support of their argument of the media being elite, they contend that most news anchors working for the English channels are well-connected and are related

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[34] Ghaati is a derogatory term which implies an ignorant or an uncultured person

to top bureaucrats, politicians, literati, diplomats, senior editors, and sports celebrities. The argument goes that since they come from privileged backgrounds and are products of nepotism themselves, they are biased in favor of politicians from the Congress party whose top leaders supposedly belong to the same 'class.' In fact, during the 2014 and 2019 election campaigns, Narendra Modi had positioned himself as the 'outsider' and the 'champion of the poor and the middle-class' while casting his opponent Rahul Gandhi as the embodiment of the elite establishment (Talukdar, 2019). In an interview, Modi even claimed that his public image was not crafted by the "Khan market gang," [35] consisting of an elite group of journalists, lawyers, bureaucrats, and activists based in New Delhi. Such anti-elite rhetoric resonates with the online Hindu nationalists who believe that a minority of powerful elites, including media figures, have long controlled the avenues of discourse in the country.

Furthermore, online right-wing supporters averred that it is this 'elitist nature' of the English media that makes them "despise " BJP's social media supporters who 'dare' to challenge them. They suggest that journalists' reluctance to engage in an 'online debate' with them was not due to their lack of interest or time but because of their 'arrogance' and 'unwillingness' to be held accountable by 'laypersons.' Vijay, a "BJP supporter," elaborates further:

> Brown-skinned English-speaking elite replaced the British colonial masters when India got independence. Many Delhi-based journalists and top editors working for English language media are related to these elites. These journalists come from powerful and wealthy families and are educated in Ivy League universities. Because of their privileged background, they think they are superior to the rest of us. They write op-eds and articles sitting in Delhi, which do not reflect the ground

[35] Khan market is a posh shopping locality in New Delhi. This is close to the residences of India's top bureaucrats and politicians. It has become an idiom that may loosely be equated with the Beltway Washington consensus.

reality of life in *Bharat*[36]. When we try to give them feedback or engage in an online discussion with them, they do not like it. Journalists think they are too privileged and important to be questioned or challenged. If we persist, they call us a troll.

Interestingly, most online right-wing supporters claimed that journalists from Hindi and the vernacular press were more receptive to their thoughts and ideas. In their view, reporters working for the regional media typically come from small towns and rural areas where they complete their education with Hindi or other regional languages as the medium of instruction. Given the "cultural proximity" of these 'Indic' languages to the religious rhetoric embedded in the Hindu nationalist discourse, they say, these reporters tend to be less hostile to the BJP. Besides, Hindu nationalists like Amish, perceive these reporters to be more sensitive to the sentiments and beliefs of Hindus when reporting on religion-related topics:

> Most senior journalists and editors working for the English media, with the exception of *Republic TV*, are elitist and Western in their outlook. They have a superiority complex simply because they speak in British and American accented English, discuss international cinema, and frequently travel abroad. Their minds are still colonized. Hindi and regional news channels are somewhat sympathetic to the Hindu-cause. This could be because reporters working for the vernacular press typically come from the same backgrounds as the BJP and *Sangh Parivar* leaders. Since they would not have received English medium education, they are more rooted in our Indian culture and values. They understand the nuances of our Hindu festivals, traditions, customs, and rituals because they are not looking at them from a Western prism.

Another common belief expressed by online Hindu nationalists is that the established media dislike Narendra Modi because he stopped their "gravy-train" of entitlements such as subsidized housing, tours and visits abroad, and invitations to state-

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[36] Bharat is the Hindi/Sanskrit name for India. It has come to denote rural India where the simple, common folk live. While "India" is understood to belong to the rich and the powerful, Bharat belongs to the hungry and oppressed masses who have limited access to education, health care and sanitation. As historian Devdutt Patnaik (2014) writes, "For India, Bharat is the land of Hindu fundamentalists. For Bharat, India is the land of elites and pseudo-secularists."

sponsored diplomatic events in addition to unfettered access to the government offices, officials, and ministers. They argue that such 'entitlement' provided an opportunity for 'elite' reporters to work with 'backdoor operators' and 'power brokers' to influence government decisions in favor of corporate and vested interests. Many of them cite the 'Radia tapes' scandal[37] as an example to make the broader claim that the 'elite' media, in the past, had used their access to power not to gather information from the government sources but to advance their self-interests. Such media, they argue, dislike Modi because he is an "honest" and "down-to-earth" individual who has apparently put an end to their 'entitlement.' Vidya, a BJP supporter, asserts that most "Modi-critics" among journalists oppose him because he "dispossessed" and "disempowered" them by "busting" their sense of entitlement:

> I learned from videos released by former journalists that media personnel enjoyed free foreign trips when the Congress party was in power. They apparently got to stay in luxurious hotels and resorts and enjoy liquor, food, and chauffeur-driven cars when they were on government-sponsored trips to other countries. This kind of entitlement culture prevailed for six decades. Governments run by non-BJP parties also allocated apartments to reporters at subsidized rates. Why should journalists get to enjoy all these at the taxpayer's expense? Can we expect such journalists to give us unbiased and objective news? They will obviously publish favorable stories to the political class that takes good care of them. Modi doesn't, and that's why they hate him.

These responses clearly show that the Hindu nationalist critique of the media is based not only on religious and political grounds but also on the 'class' divisions enmeshed in the Indian society. Such positioning of the media as part of the entrenched elite also appears to be aimed at advancing the 'anti-media' sentiment, particularly

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[37] In November 2010, transcripts and audio files of damaging phone conversations between several prominent Indian journalists and Nira Radia, a lobbyist for India's top corporate firms were published by English weekly *Open Magazine.* In this scandal, journalists could be heard on tape offering lobbyists' clients advice on how to place stories in media outlets. Journalists came across as acting as intermediaries between corporate interests and the ruling Congress party.

among the neo-middle class (Jaffrelot, 2013) that constitutes recent beneficiaries of India's economic growth. Given that this neo-middle class has long stayed outside the 'old elite,' such rhetoric is likely to have a wide appeal. That said, it is also notable that a vast majority of the online right-wing supporters belong to the upper castes, including Brahmin and Kshatriya communities (Mohan, 2015), that had historically held most power within the social hierarchy of the Hindu society.

## 7.4. Media are Corrupt

In a related criticism, online right-wing supporters maintain that the mainstream news media in India are involved in corruption. This criticism takes many forms. While some of them refer to journalists as "paid media" who take bribes to write favorable stories, others contend that news media set aside their ethics and professionalism in return for favors from politicians including securing government advertisements, nomination to the upper house of the Parliament (Rajyasabha), financial bailouts, and speedy administrative approvals for other business interests of the media owners.  Right-wing supporters maintain that such 'compromise' of ethics and values is evident in the news produced by the established media where "agendas" are pushed, and "narratives" favoring their "paymasters" are constantly promoted (Sandeep, personal communication, November 21, 2019). This type of criticism was also articulated by Narendra Modi during the election campaign, where he chastised a well-known TV news anchor for securing one of India's highest civilian awards (known as 'Padma awards') from the Congress government. In the video interview that was widely circulated by online right-wing supporters, Modi is seen as saying: "If you abuse Modi, you will get a Rajya Sabha (upper house in the Indian Parliament) seat or a Padmasri or a Padma Bhushan award"

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(Ninan, 2013). Expressing identical criticisms, online right-wing supporters averred that

the news media "tweak facts," "withhold information," "target political opponents of

their clients," and "overlook omissions" by the government, in lieu of monetary benefits.

Vishal, an online Hindu nationalist, explains:

> These days, newspapers read like government pamphlets or PR handouts of
> corporate companies. Media in my state of Telangana thrive on advertisements
> from the local TRS-party run government. So, they sing praises of the Chief
> Minister and his son. There is very little public affairs reporting or discussion on
> civic issues and corruption in the local government. If media owners were honest
> and took no favors from the government, why would they be afraid of posing
> tough questions to politicians? Our media is corrupt and dependent on the crumbs
> thrown at them by the political class. So, they have lost the moral and ethical
> stature to hold our public representatives accountable.

Additionally, right-wing supporters claim to highlight the 'lavish' lifestyle being

led by elite journalists, which serve as circumstantial evidence of their "corruption."

Photographs and videos of journalists' residences, their vacations abroad, and details of

expensive colleges in which their children study-- are sourced from social media, google

search, as well as right-wing media sources. This anecdotal 'evidence' is then used to

make the argument that journalists receive money by 'planting' stories in lieu of favors

received in cash or kind, and therefore, they are able to afford such a luxurious lifestyle.

Online Hindu nationalists also put forward the theory that such 'corruption' and

'financial transactions' are behind the "false propaganda" being spread by the established

media against the BJP and Hindus. Several Hindu nationalists have admitted to

confronting journalists on Twitter about their sources of income and what they believe to

be the disproportionate assets owned by them. For example, when government agencies

investigated alleged tax evasions by the founders of *NDTV*, Hindu nationalists tweeted

with #NDTVfraud to discredit the news channel. Ashwin, a 'BJP fan' was one such

tweeter who elaborates further:

> Some senior editors and journalists started off as camera persons. Today, they live in palatial buildings in posh neighborhoods of Delhi and Noida. For example, how does Rajdeep Sardesai, a TV news anchor, live in one of the most expensive areas in Delhi? How do they make so much money? In addition to ideological reasons, monetary benefits from other political parties are also responsible for the media's opposition to the BJP. Since journalists do not get any benefits or favors from BJP leaders, they have no reason to publicize the good work done by the Modi government.

To further the accusation that the established media are corrupt, online Hindu

nationalists also claim to cite a 2010 report from the Press Council of India, which gave a

detailed account of the prevalence of paid news in the press during the 2009 elections in

different states.



*Figure 9: BJP leader, Subramanian Swamy's tweet alleging money laundering and tax evasion by the Times of India group*

In addition to making the charge that the media receive payments for favorable

coverage, right-wing supporters also argue that most journalists are 'morally corrupt'

individuals. The crux of this criticism is that journalists "rehabilitate" media figures of

the 'left-liberal' orientation despite them being accused of serious offenses, including

molestation, financial scandals, and plagiarism. When such journalists are invited to

talks, events, and panel discussions, right-wing supporters not only organize online

petitions to disinvite them but also use it as an example to underscore the "hypocrisy" of

the media.  It is argued that 'leftist' journalists who make "lofty" statements in their

opinion-pieces on topics such as equality, justice, and the rule of law, disregard the same

in their own professional conduct. In other words, Hindu nationalists maintain that while

the mainstream news media were quick to condemn others, they did not speak out against

their "own." Articulating this criticism, Srinidhi proclaimed:

> So many left-liberal journalists accused in the #metoo have been slowly
> rehabilitated by media houses. Some of them who resigned from their posts
> continue to be invited to literary festivals, book launches, conferences, and
> seminars. Journalists like Barkha Dutt and Vir Sanghvi, who were audiotaped
> making deals with the government on behalf of corporate brokers, are still in the
> media field. In any other country, such corrupt people would never anchor
> television shows or write opinion pieces again. But our leftist ecosystem
> overlooks all these ethical shortcomings just because they are fellow liberals.

While the discourse of professional journalism aims to present its members as

ethical individuals working in the public interest, by positioning them as corrupt and

immoral figures, online Hindu nationalists aim to attack the professional integrity of

both--individual journalists as well as established media organizations.

## 7.5. Media are 'Unpatriotic'

Online right-wing supporters also attack the mainstream press for publishing

stories and air views that, according to them, 'hurt' India's global image, and therefore

"work" against the country's national interests. In their view, the established media

highlight 'negative' aspects of India including poverty, attacks on minorities, sexual

assaults on women, corruption, air pollution, caste divisions, sectarian violence, and

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diminishing freedom of expression---which are 'deliberately' exaggerated to make the country look 'bad.' They also argue that the Western press takes cues from India's "leftist" media and picks up the "exception" stories to make "sweeping generalizations" to malign the entire country. Moreover, online Hindu nationalists claim that the international media intentionally avoid consulting 'real experts' on India and instead rely on 'leftist propagandists' who supposedly indulge in "extreme virtue signaling" when writing about the country. Online right-wing supporters like Ravi contend that hiring reporters who express such "extreme" opinions in their pieces, makes business sense for the media houses. In this regard, he says:

> Media seems to think readers don't get excited about facts and nuanced reporting anymore. To get more traction and web traffic, publications appear to rely on columnists who present sharp and polarizing opinions that are based on innuendo and exaggerations. So, they take an isolated incident in one corner of India and present it as if that is the norm in the country. Doing so also suits their anti-Modi narrative. Enraged readers on both sides of the political aisle click on the article, which is precisely what the media want. In the process, India's global image is taking a severe beating. The world thinks we are the rape-capital and a dirty, poor, unlivable country. Aren't there any positive stories to write about India? We barely see any of them in the *New York Times* or the *Guardian* because they don't want to publish such reports.

In addition, online Hindu nationalists argue that the "left-liberal" press advances an anti-India narrative, particularly in the news coverage related to India's relationship with Pakistan. Television debates and opinion pieces by English language media are intensely scrutinized for their supposed 'anti-national' tone. Questions raised by journalists regarding the Indian army's claims about destroying 'terrorist camps' in Pakistan are criticized for 'doubting' and 'undermining' the credibility of the armed forces. Criticism of the Indian police action vis-a-vis civilians in Kashmir is also used to make the broader claim that the mainstream press in India works for the 'enemy' nation.

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Critical news reporting on human rights violations and the internet shut down in Kashmir are also perceived as providing anti-India propaganda material to the 'enemy nation'-Pakistan.

Online right-wing criticism of the press thus ranges from accusations of the press being on the payrolls of the Pakistani intelligence agency to media figures being berated for lacking even rudimentary understanding of matters such as defense strategy and geopolitics In this regard, Bhavik, who regularly watches television debates "even on leftist channels," makes the following observation:

> During the Indo-Pak conflict, our leftist television media invited panelists from Pakistan for debates. They asked Pakistani panelists if India's military action was justified. What is the point of such a discussion? Our news anchors goad panelists to speak against India and PM Modi just so they can make it more sensational and get better television ratings. Journalists are short-sighted and have no sense of how their work affects the country's geopolitical interests. I don't think the media in any other country is as blatantly anti-national as ours.

Further, they accuse that the established media downplay terrorism in Kashmir by referring to terrorists as 'militants,' 'activists,' or 'suspected terrorists.' Right-wing supporters believe that such usage is not simply a matter of semantics but a "conscious effort" by the left-leaning media to make "radical Islamic extremism" look like a mere armed resistance against the oppression of the state. They contend that such "sympathetic" coverage is aimed at normalizing terrorism and making "Jihadi extremism" appear like a "legitimate struggle" for a Kashmiri identity. Similarly, mainstream media coverage of left-wing student activism in the universities is criticized for "providing a megaphone to secessionist forces" or the '*tukde tukde gang.*'[38]

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[38]  A pejorative catchphrase used by BJP and its supporters to refer to left-wing student activists who they accuse of promoting secessionism and sedition.

Additionally, the coverage of terrorist attacks and hostage situations by 24-hour news channels have come under sharp criticism from the online right-wing supporters. According to them, the live coverage including details of security deployment, availability of ammunition, presence of civilians as well as government's action plan--all help terrorists successfully carry out the operations.



***Figure 10: A cartoon shared by online Hindu nationalists on social media, which accuses NDTV of aiding the enemy through its 'irresponsible' coverage.***

The live broadcast of 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks, as well as a subsequent strike on the Indian air force base in Pathankot by Pakistan-based terrorist outfits, are frequently cited by right-wing supporters to claim that television news channels prioritize their ratings over national security. To diffuse this message among social media users, they

design cartoons, memes, and infographics that are widely distributed through online

networks. While some of them characterize such coverage as "unprofessional" and

"irresponsible conduct," a vast majority of the right-wing supporters look at it as part of a

larger 'conspiracy' by anti-Indian media to help terrorists "achieve their goals." Those

who express the latter, demand legal action and arrest of such journalists for "treachery."

Vijay who shares this belief proclaims:

> News channels like *NDTV* have aided terrorists by revealing sensitive information during ongoing-terrorist attacks. I've read reports about the Indian army complaining to the government about irresponsible coverage of the Kargil war by *NDTV* reporter, Barkha Dutt, where she disclosed army positions live on air. Her live broadcast during the 26/11 Mumbai terror attacks have endangered the security operations. The information she disclosed was used by terrorists and their collaborators to kill more innocent civilians and high-ranking police officers. Our television journalists are highly unprofessional and play an anti-national role in the time of national crisis. Legal action must be initiated against such journalists.

Notably, in 2016, Modi-government attempted to stop the broadcasts of *NDTV* to

'punish' the channel for "breaching national security laws" during its coverage of

terrorist attacks on the Indian air force base. Following severe protests from media groups

and journalist associations, the proposed ban was put on hold (Roy, 2016).

Clearly, online Hindu nationalists define 'patriotism' narrowly where one is

patriotic only if she is a righteous defender of the government and the Indian armed

forces. By this definition, questioning the government's claims without accepting them

on the face value or highlighting human rights concerns of the civilians in a disputed

territory are viewed as acting against the nation. Incidentally, such characterization of the

media personnel is parallel to their own accusation of the mainstream press branding

them as "regressive" and "backward" for expressing conservative views. This narrow

definition of patriotism has given rise to several online right-wing vigilante groups that

identify and target civilians for allegedly 'mocking' the Indian army. Such groups are involved in reporting civilians to their employers and educational institutions with the demand that "action" be taken on them for their 'anti-national' posts on social media (Chari et al., 2019).

**Table 3: Critique of the mainstream news media by online Hindu nationalists**

| Themes | Dominant Criticisms |
| --- | --- |
| Media as Anti-Hindu | Media withhold complete details when reporting crimes committed by Muslims <br><br> Media censor Hindu voices and provide space to 'activists' who ridicule Hindu philosophy and culture <br><br> The international press has a colonial-era view of Hinduism. |
| Media are partisan | Established media have a 'visceral hate' for the BJP and Narendra Modi <br><br> Journalists do not ask hard-hitting questions to the Congress Party leadership <br><br> Media are not objective or neutral in their reportage |
| Media are Entitled Elite | The English language media is elitist and disconnected from the ordinary people <br><br> Journalists have an inherent bias against BJP leaders because they do not belong to the same 'class.' <br><br> Most top journalists are products of nepotism |
| Media are Corrupt | Journalists take bribes to write favorable stories <br><br> News reporters set aside their ethics in return for a favor from politicians <br><br> Media 'plant' stories in lieu of favors received in cash or kind |

| | |
|---|---|
| Media are 'Unpatriotic' | Media raise questions on the professional integrity of the Indian armed forces |
| | Journalists downplay terrorism in Kashmir by referring to terrorists as 'militants.' |
| | Television news channels prioritize their ratings over India's national security |

## 7.6. Social media as 'Remedy'

While articulating their criticism of the established media, online right-wing supporters were united in their view that the effective use' of social media has enabled them to challenge mainstream media discourses seen as anti-Hindu, anti-BJP, and anti-India. Many among this group expressed a view that social media played a crucial role in BJP's two consecutive victories and helped shape public opinion 'despite the negative publicity' given by the mainstream press. Indeed, a number of them confidently asserted that social media communication had diminished professional media's ability to "set the narrative" and provided them an opportunity to present their 'point of view' without any constraints and gatekeepers. Some of them even claimed that they have 'fact-checked' established media versions about government programs in BJP-ruled states and presented the 'true' story via social media. Srinivas, an active member of the BJP's IT cell who had taken a similar 'initiative' to ''fact-check' a story, contends:

> I've read a story in a local newspaper regarding government officials demanding a fee from citizens to avail of Modi's new healthcare scheme. That story also went viral on social media. I knew that no fee was associated with the scheme, and it was fake news. So, the next day, I went to the government office myself and interviewed the officials. I video recorded their statement clarifying that no fee was being collected to qualify for the scheme. I shared the video on my timeline and also sent it to the BJP's IT cell. They distributed it to everyone and posted it on their official page. Cell phones, social media, and the Internet have made it

possible for us to debunk such hoaxes and fake news. I'm doing my bit to contribute to the selfless efforts of Modi to put India back on the right path.

Online Hindu nationalists argued that when the BJP was in power between 1999 and 2004, the internet penetration was low and social media had barely any presence in India---for them to be able to counter negative articles published by the traditional media. According to them, the ability to gather and distribute 'eye-witness accounts' that contradict mainstream media articles, has helped them 'demolish' the 'anti-BJP propaganda' spread by the press. Such efforts to provide an 'alternative point of view' have apparently made it possible for Modi to overcome the mainstream news media's attempts to spread a 'negative perception' of his government. Providing insights into such efforts, Raghav said:

> In the pre-social media era, the mainstream press managed to set the narrative, and alternative views were not allowed to enter the public domain. Mr. Vajpayee's[39] government faced vicious attacks by the left-liberal press, and there was no way for us to counter them. Now, we have inexpensive mobile phones, through which we record videos and share them on social media. Often, when the media produces a negative story on Modi or BJP, one of our *karyakartas*[40] visit the venue, interview people, and fact-check the details provided by the news media. This way, people get to know the real story behind the media story. Now, it is very hard for them (media) to lie and get away with it. For example, when a journalist accused BJP supporters of physically assaulting him in New York, we shared videos taken by eyewitnesses, which completely contradicted his claims. Our videos clearly showed that he was the one who provoked and initiated the fight. Without social media, we would not have been able to bring out such facts.

In addition to gathering evidence to counter the mainstream press, online Hindu nationalists claimed to have used social media to wield pressure on BJP leaders, ministers and top bureaucrats to withdraw advertisements to TV news channels and newspapers

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[39] Atal Bihari Vajpayee was the first BJP Prime Minister who was in office between 1999 and 2004. However, he did not have a full majority in the Parliament. He ran a BJP-led coalition government.

[40] Party workers/cadre

that are considered 'anti-BJP' and 'anti-Modi.' Right-wing supporters have also admitted to tweeting to top BJP leaders to avoid giving interviews to news organizations, which they think peddle "lies" about BJP and Modi. Sridhar, an online right-winger, recalls tweeting with a hashtag "#ShameOnArunjaitley' (Shame on Arun Jaitley) that criticized senior BJP leader and former cabinet minister, Arun Jaitley, for giving an interview to *NDTV*, a 24-hour English news channel, widely regarded by the right-wing to be an 'anti-BJP' outlet. Sridhar is convinced that such pressure tactics can act as a "reality check" for both BJP leaders as well as the media:

> Some of us work very hard on social media to dismantle the fake narratives spread by these leftist media groups. What is the point of that work if BJP leaders embrace and encourage the same media? Why should we waste our time? Senior BJP leaders like Nitin Gadkari continue to give interviews to news channels like NDTV, which spread lies about the party all the time. So, we tweet to such leaders and tag Narendra Modi in the tweet to express our anger and displeasure. Sometimes, leaders do cancel their interviews or avoid engaging with such media the next time. We should not be obligated to show courtesies to journalists and media groups that are biased against us.

In fact, *NDTV* was repeatedly mentioned by online Hindu nationalists for being "openly anti-BJP" and showing the Modi-government in "poor light." Some of them have claimed to have tweeted with Twitter hashtags such as #ShameonNDTV and #BoycottNDTV to draw wider attention to the channel's supposed anti-BJP bias and impart pressure on the government to avoid engaging with this news channel. As if echoing the sentiments expressed by its digital supporters, Sambit Patra, a BJP spokesperson, at a public rally had once referred to *NDTV* as "anti-India, anti-Hindu and anti-BJP outlet" ("BJP's Sambit Patra," 2017).

Additionally, Hindu nationalists claimed to have countered mainstream news media's so-called "Hinduphobic content," by completely boycotting them, and by

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subscribing to right-wing outlets such as *Swarajya, OpIndia, Indiafacts,* and *Indic academy,* which provide a "Hindu perspective" on events and incidents.  They contend that some of these sites, particularly, *Indiafacts* and *Indic academy*, offer insights and commentary on topics ranging from--government 'takeover' of the Hindu temples to Indian contribution to the astronomy. According to them, these 'important' topics are 'completely avoided' by the established media. Some of them write articles to these sites and also provide monetary support in the form of monthly and annual subscriptions Offering an insight into the unique counterstrategies adopted by Hindu nationalists in their efforts to challenge the press, Sandeep, a BJP supporter, said:

> We want to target the leftist media, where it hurts them the most. They make money if we visit their news sites or click on their articles. We realized that the more we are outraged, the more money they make. So, we came up with a new strategy. One of us shares the screenshot of the articles published in the mainstream media via Twitter. This way, everyone can access their articles without making them rich. This also helps us retain the report even if the media take it down from their websites following a controversy.

Thus, online Hindu nationalists take up highly organized efforts to counteract the professional media through boycotts and reducing their website traffic through screenshots in addition to levying pressure on the BJP leadership to avoid engaging with the mainstream press.

As evidenced through the aforementioned responses, online right-wing supporters of the BJP express deep distrust of the mainstream news media. Accusing the press of being anti-Hindu, anti-India, corrupt, entitled, elitist, and biased against the BJP, they take up various strategies to challenge the credibility and legitimacy of the traditional news media.

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# Chapter 8: Discussion and Conclusion

The articulation of anti-media sentiments by Hindu nationalist forces – a constitutive element of populism – through partisan media platforms such as *Swarajya, OpIndia,* and *Republic TV,* has indeed emerged as an important development of the Indian media landscape. Significantly, the emergence of these alternative media outlets and their expression of media criticisms coincide with the unprecedented rise of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in Indian politics. These two developments in the political and media arena have considerable implications for the future of journalism, public discourse, and democracy in India.

As evidenced by the findings of this dissertation, it is clear that India's right-wing forces, aided by access to technology and power, seek to discredit professional journalism by employing several overlapping critiques. These attacks on the mainstream media are generally articulated through discursive strategies aimed at contesting the claims to fairness, accuracy, and neutrality, that constitute the cornerstones of professional journalism's occupational identity and legitimacy (McQuail, 1992; Deuze, 2005). These strategies are significant because they involve a discursive act of 'positioning' (Van Langenhove and Harré,1999) through which right-wing forces locate themselves as 'victims' and professional journalists as individuals who disregard the normative ideals of their profession in order to serve the interests of the 'conspiring elite.' Besides, positioning entails, "assignment of roles to speakers through the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person's actions comprehensible and relatively determinate as social acts" (p. 20). The findings of this dissertation demonstrate that the

discursive act of positioning was indeed employed by right-wing alternative news outlets in India where professional journalists are assigned the roles of 'anti-nationals' or 'political propagandists' by referring to their critical reportage of the BJP as evidence for the same. This deliberate self-positioning (1999:27) of themselves as the 'victims' of 'biased' reporting is articulated in order to achieve their goal of perpetuating the idea of "liberal media bias" and de-legitimizing professional journalism.

Similarly, strategies such as "highlighting mainstream media mistakes" used by *OpIndia* and *Swarajya* as well as positioning of the journalists as "corrupt" by online Hindu nationalists seek to engender skepticism and mistrust in the professional practices of mainstream news sources.

Through instant interpretations, accusations of staging and fabrication, and expressing their suspicions of hidden agenda, these right-wing alternative outlets engage in their efforts to characterize and position mainstream journalism and its practitioners as inherently biased, unethical, and disconnected from the concerns and beliefs of ordinary Indians. In doing so, they attempt to challenge the hegemonic power of the mainstream media by popularizing the idea that the established journalism has fundamentally failed in its role as a trustworthy and professional news provider. In other words, the right-wing alternative media engage in what Stiernstedt (2014) calls "interest-based" criticism driven by "particular concerns of specific groups," that seek to undermine the credibility of established news organizations within society.

Likewise, by "naming and shaming journalists," as well as "publicizing critiques of journalism by prominent individuals," right-wing outlets seek to alter public perceptions of reporters as ethical and acting in the public interest, thereby affecting their

ability to position themselves as independent professionals who have the right to "create legitimate discursive knowledge for others" (Carlson, 2017, p. 182). Meanwhile, by portraying the mainstream media as "biased against India and Hindus," as well as "partisan and elite oriented," right-wing alternative media and online Hindu nationalists intend to dispute the latter's self-presentation as neutral actors who serve a crucial societal function by "enabling public discourse," that is oriented on "facts, selected by professional actors, and published following professional rules" (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861). Such attempts have important consequences for the mainstream news media because they are directed at attacking the journalistic authority, which scholars like Carlson (2017) have described as the "right to be listened to, indicating how a certain kind of knowledge is assigned legitimacy" (p.7). Notably, as witnessed from the examples provided in the findings of this study, right-wing news outlets reject in their own media, the standards of fairness, accuracy, and neutrality that they claim to expect from the so-called 'liberal media.' In other words, these partisan news outlets criticize the mainstream press of not being 'objective' while being 'subjective' in their own treatment of news stories produced on their portals and television network. Clearly, *Swarajya, OpIndia,* and *Republic TV* view and position themselves not as providers of 'unbiased' news but as 'remedies' to the perceived imbalance in the media discourse.

Some evidence suggests that similar efforts to delegitimize the media and undermine the credibility of professional journalism have yielded political dividends for right-wing forces elsewhere. For instance, in the United States, conservative forces have long shared a belief that political change could be driven not just from ideas but from the "proper expression and diffusion of those ideas through ideological media sources"

(Hemmer, 2016: x). Driven by this belief, since the late 1940s, right-wing activists in the United States developed their radio programs, magazines, and publishing houses, which acted as their own "instruments of public scrutiny" and those that "direct and instruct popular opinion" (Blumenthal, 2008:4). These partisan outlets advanced the idea of 'liberal media bias' and primed a generation of conservatives to reject 'non-conservative media,' which has arguably contributed to the present state of right-wing vitriol towards the established media (Ladd, 2012; Smith, 2010; Lane, 2019; Major, 2020). Unsurprisingly, conservative trust in the American media has been eroding over time. A recent Gallup poll data shows that only 15 percent of Republicans trust the mainstream media, while 69 percent of Democrats say they have trust and confidence in the press (Brenan, 2019).

Media criticisms articulated by the right-wing alternative sites, television network, and online Hindu nationalists indicate that similar efforts are underway in India as well, where the critical mainstream press is being discredited through the charge of 'liberal media bias.' Indeed, this development closely mirrors global trends in which an increasing number of right-wing outlets not only engage in media critique that raise questions on the trustworthiness of the established media but to also provide what they perceive to be credible alternatives to mainstream news (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a).

A closer look at the dominant criticisms of the professional journalism expressed by right-wing alternative outlets in Western democracies offers useful insights into the similarities between their critique of the press and those articulated by Hindu nationalists in India. For instance, Holt (2015) through a qualitative content analysis of media-critical articles published in the Swedish right-wing media, identified five recurring themes:

erroneous reporting, criticism of ownership and political influence, naming and shaming, discursive contestations and alternative phraseology as well as an additional theme of dealing with the promotion of other right-wing alternative media outlets. Many of these themes align closely with the media criticisms articulated by Hindu nationalists, as mentioned in the findings of this dissertation. Similarly, Fawzi (2019) points out that right-leaning populist media in Europe accuse professional journalists of being part of the 'establishment' and 'neglecting' the people's interests. Partisan news outlets in the West also advance the claim that journalists are controlled by the 'liberal' political class and that the media and politics "actively conspire" (p. 43). Put differently, right-wing forces share a belief that politics and media are not independent of each other and that journalists do not maintain the professional distance needed to fulfill their role as the watchdog of democracy (Hanitzsch, 2007). Similar claims are made by right-wing alternative outlets in India, which position the press as being part of the corrupt elite as represented by the Congress party. As mentioned in the findings of this study, Hindu nationalists share a belief that the professional journalists are a "corrupt and entitled elite" who care more about their self-interests rather than about how common people are doing.

Likewise, right-wing alternative media in the European countries disagree with the portrayal of their in-group by established media and blame journalists for intentionally "misinforming" their audience on the negative impact of immigration (Haller and Holt, 2018; Fawzi, 2019). Further, they accuse the press of withholding information on the ethnic background of perpetrators of crimes and suppressing the truth in the name of political correctness (Engesser et al., 2017; Moffitt, 2017; Krämer, 2018).

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Identically, the right-wing in India charge the press as being biased against the interests of the majority Hindu community. *Swarajya, OpIndia*, *Republic TV,* and online right-wing supporters portray the established media as "pro-minority" and accuse them of disregarding the suffering of Hindus. Furthermore, Western right-wing media's accusations of the mainstream press of maintaining "double standards when judging established elites compared to representatives of populist movements and parties" (Krämer, 2018: 13), and being "biased, partisan, and deceitful" (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a: 1228)---are also reflected in the Hindu nationalist criticism of the press.

Similarly, the demographic of the online right-wing supporters is also similar to those in the West. Online Hindu nationalists like their Western counterparts are a male-dominated group who share content that advances the ideas of technological progress, military might, and physical strength in addition to promoting the "manly" and "strong" leader, Modi. These hyper-masculine Hindutva images and ideas are rooted in the notion of "hegemonic masculinity" that is characterized by attributes of "decisiveness, muscular strength, aggression and a willingness to engage in a battle" as opposed to femininity that is defined by traits such as "weakness, non-violence, compassion, and willingness to compromise" (Banerjee, 2006: 64). The repertoire of online right-wing supporters includes the sharing of images of manhood, the warrior monk, and the celebration of physical and spiritual strength. Such a hypermasculine worldview stands in opposition to the perceived image of women journalists as "liberal," "western," "modern," and by inference unvirtuous. Therefore, women journalists are often at the receiving end of the online attacks from right-wing supporters. Indeed, armed masculinity is embedded within the political doctrine of Hindu nationalism, which includes the "valorization of a

Hindutva male ideal that serves to challenge the hegemonic masculinity of the West as well as to demonize the masculinity of the Muslim other" (Subramanian, 2019). Such patriarchal and masculine outlook is identical to the discursive constructions of White Nordic masculinities found in right-wing populist media in the West (Norocel et al., 2018).

And, the similarities are not just confined to the nature of media criticisms but also extend to their presentation styles. For example, *Republic TV*'s framing of its media critique in an "us versus them," "patriots versus anti-nationals" and "established media versus independent media" format, closely mimics the framing that has been long embraced by *Fox news* in the U.S. Besides, right-wing news anchor, Arnab Goswami's opinionated and ideologically charged attacks on the integrity and patriotism of the professional media resemble identical attacks on the "liberal media" by *Fox news* anchors Tucker Carlson, Bill O'Reilly and Sean Hannity who have charged professional journalists of "working with terrorists," "spreading disinformation," and holding "anti-American motives" (Brock, 2005: 344). Arguably, the Indian right-wing critique of the traditional news media parallels those expressed by the likes of *Breitbart* and *Fox News* in the U.S., *Compact* magazine in Germany, *Nyhter Idag* in Sweden, and *Document.no* in Norway.

While there are many similarities, there are also a few differences in the expressions of media distrust. For example, the critique of the media being "anti-India" and "pro-Muslim" are arguably the most salient attacks on the established media. It is most forcefully and consistently articulated by right-wing websites, television network as

well as online Hindu nationalists to discredit the professional media. While similar

sentiments may be perpetuated by right-leaning news outlets in the West, in India, the

critique of the media as working against the country's national interests is aimed at

capitalizing on the deep-rooted religious fault lines between Hindus and Muslims in the

country.  In addition, the positioning of the press as being "anti-India" should be

understood in the context of the country's historical rivalry with its neighbor, Pakistan

(Paul, 2005). Moreover, the conflict over the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir, coupled

with BJP's Hindutva-driven political agenda, has turned 'religious nationalism' into a

salient feature of the Indian politics and public discourse (Manchanda, 2002). In addition

to these factors, the 'victimhood' narrative embraced by the BJP and its *Sangh Parivar*

allies has historically positioned Hindus as the victims of "Muslim appeasement politics"

espoused by secular political parties like the Congress and the so-called 'anti-Hindu'

discourse furthered by the established media. Therefore, while in the Western

democracies, particularly in Europe, right-wing media criticism of the press as favoring

outgroups is attributed to relatively recent developments such as globalization, migration

and neoliberal economic reforms, the Hindu nationalist critique of the press is an

outcome of established media's resistance to *Sangh Parivar*'s long-standing definition of

the Muslims as the 'outsiders,' and as those who 'belong to Pakistan.' In that sense, the

charge of the press being "pro-Muslim" and "anti-India" is not a 'side issue' but is central

to the discourse of religious politics in India.

Similarly, the critique of the press as being 'elite' takes a unique form in India.

While in the West, this right-wing criticism is confined to the argument that the elite

media are detached from the people, and serve the interests of the ruling class, in India,

this critique also encompasses complex socio-economic and cultural factors related to language, class, urban-rural divide, and well-entrenched caste hierarchies. For example, online right-wing supporters in India accuse the elite English language media of being biased against the BJP leaders because of their 'rural' backgrounds and 'poor English language skills.' Fluency in English has long been associated with an elevated socio-economic status in India because of the country's colonial past. Those who knew the language were hired by the British colonial government as administrators, thereby creating a national perception that English is a prerequisite for a better standard of living. The critique of the English language press being dominated by the postcolonial urban-dwelling 'elite' stems from these deep-seated class-based divisions in Indian society.

Overall, the rise of *OpIndia, Swarajya, Republic TV,* and similar right-wing alternative media outlets signals the growth of a partisan media sector in India. As evidenced from the findings in this dissertation, often, these partisan news outlets, along with online right-wing supporters demonstrate ideological solidarity by supporting one another and often collaborate in their efforts to discredit mainstream journalism (Bhat and Chadha, 2020). Arguably, these news outlets along with online Hindu nationalists are important building blocks of the effort to establish a right-wing media ecosystem in the country along the lines of a well-networked conservative media ecosystem in the U.S (Meagher, 2012; Benkler et al., 2017). This emerging media ecosystem claims to speak to those who feel alienated from the mainstream news media and perceive right-wing and right-leaning sites as offering a necessary corrective to legacy media narratives, especially those offered by the English-language press.

Indeed, to many supporters of the Indian right, these outlets articulate the legitimate concerns of a so-called "silent majority," –which according to them – are not adequately or fairly reflected within the mainstream press discourse. Put differently, the emergence of right-wing media represents an attempt to constitute a parallel discursive arena or a counter-sphere (Major, 2012) where Hindu nationalist activists are not only able to express their core ideas, but can also define their own identity, articulate perceived misrepresentations, and present oppositional discourses challenging what they deem to be a biased mainstream media narrative. In doing so, they engage in discursive practices such as rebutting and rearticulating, which arguably create what Magilchrist and Böhmig (2012) have termed "rips" and "tiny fissures" within the "hegemonic formation" represented by professional news media.

And although such activities have typically been identified with subaltern groups, who have developed discursive arenas in response to the politics of stratified societies whose deliberative practices have the tendency to exclude marginalized groups (Fraser, 1990), these tactics, as witnessed through the findings, have increasingly been appropriated by right-wing groups who are not remotely subordinate, but nonetheless view themselves as such. Mark Major (2012) makes this observation with regard to the conservative movement in the United States, and I similarly make the case that while there is no evidence to suggest that Hindu nationalists are subject to social, cultural, economic, and political marginalization in a Hindu-majority India, they nevertheless perceive themselves as excluded from the mainstream news media discourse. These burgeoning right-wing news sites offer them an alternative to the mainstream public sphere that serve to articulate their criticism against the mainstream news media.

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As such, scholars who study populist criticism of the press also downplay the claims of right-wing voices being 'marginalized' and 'censored' by the legacy media. They contend that the mass media, in fact, provide "favorable opportunity structures for populist actors" and cover their issues comprehensively (Fawzi, 2019: 39), thereby providing them with political legitimacy. They argue that notwithstanding the extensive coverage, right-wing populist actors deliberately articulate expressions of media distrust to yield pressure on the established media to provide them with more 'favorable' coverage and to neutralize any future criticism against their movement (Moffitt, 2016). In fact, Holt and Haller (2017) in their research on the "liar press" accusation levied against the mainstream news media by German right-wing populists, found that populist forces both endorsed media articles that advanced their agenda, as well as positioned journalists as part of the well-entrenched elite and corrupt establishment. Hemmer (2016) calls this approach "elite populism," which allows populists to play the victim and speak as representatives of the "people" against the elite (of which media is part of), despite getting all the free media coverage and access to sources of social and political power. In the current context, Hindu nationalists associated with the BJP enjoy a complete majority in both houses of the Indian parliament and hold power in the majority of the Indian states. In addition to their hegemonic position in Indian politics, BJP leaders receive extensive media coverage. Data related to primetime coverage in national news channels have shown that Narendra Modi and other BJP leaders receive 'wall-to-wall' coverage and exponentially more media attention than their political rivals, which has been instrumental in his 2019 reelection as the Prime Minister (Rao, 2018). According to the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC), during the 2019 election campaign, PM

Modi and BJP president, Amit Shah, received 722 hours and 124 hours or TV airtime

compared to Congress leaders, Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi Vadra who were

shown for 252 and 84 hours respectively ("Narendra Modi got 722," 2019).  In fact,

several senior journalists in India have consistently lamented the uncritical praise and

"fantastic press" received by PM Modi. For instance, former editor and political

commentator, Vinod Mehta, wrote:

> Ever since, and months before, he moved to his present residence in Delhi, I have wondered how the myth of media hostility towards the 'most vilified politician in independent India' gained so much currency since it is manifestly untrue. You have only to pick up a newspaper or listen to current affairs television, and you are drowned in gushing prose eulogizing every aspect of the PM — from his wardrobe to his frugal diet to his skill in presenting India's case to foreign audiences across the globe…..The US visit is a copybook example. In that week, the capital appeared bereft of journalists: they were all traveling at enormous personal expense to cover the trip. Hyper compliments regarding Modi's alleged charisma and vision were forced out of American commentators, who appeared bemused by the collective overkill. The number of times I heard anchors use the word 'brilliant' must be a world record (Mehta, 2014).

Despite their dominant position in the Indian politics and garnering substantial

news coverage, Modi and his Hindu nationalist supporters position themselves as the

'victims' of a 'well-orchestrated negative media campaign'(Ghose, 2017), thereby

embracing what Hemmer (2016) has referred to as "elite populism." This approach also

points to what Ohm (2015) calls a "double strategy" where on the one hand, right-wing

populist forces capitalize on the media coverage generated by "self-scandalization,"

"dramatization," and "controversial statements," and on the other hand, encourage people

to trust their own capacity to recognize their "truth" and reject counter-interpretations

offered the 'elite' groups. While the former helps them in the diffusion and

mainstreaming of their ideas, the latter provides them immunity from journalistic

investigations. This double strategy is adopted because right-wing populist actors like

Hindu nationalists cannot completely do away with the mainstream press. Indeed, their success depends on their 'performative style,' which is enacted on the media-stage, thereby making mass media- an indispensable tool for their political project (Wodak, 2015). Moreover, right-wing populists cannot rely only on partisan outlets to spread their messages because of their relatively 'limited reach.'

To understand this 'double strategy' of right-wing populists, it is important to take a look at empirical studies on the effects of partisan news on the audience. Existing research demonstrates that increased availability of partisan news via expanding media choice "may not translate into mass effects beyond those highly interested in politics" (Davis and Dunaway, 2016: 292). Findings also suggest that citizens with 'extreme views' are more likely to show polarization after exposure to media messages compared to citizens with less extreme views (Gvirsman, 2014; Van Aelst, 2017). In other words, exposure to partisan media may enhance polarization, but mostly only for certain groups of people. Besides, numerous studies have shown that despite the increase in partisan news outlets, mass media continue to remain an important source of information with regards to politics and current affairs (Mitchell, 2018). Also, in India, people continue to have higher levels of trust in the mainstream news media compared to the Western democracies, where public trust in the established media has been witnessing a steady decline (Sharma, 2019; Thukral, 2018). These findings indicate that right-wing populist actors, particularly in India, have to continue to engage with the mainstream news actors in order to expand the reach of their messages to the audience beyond their core support base. Through the charge of media bias, right-wing populist actors attempt to put

journalists on the defensive and compel them to provide them with maximum visibility (Moffitt, 2016).

## 8.1. Implications of Anti-Media Populism

Arguably, media criticism articulated by right-wing alternative news outlets, as well as the BJP leadership, aimed at delegitimizing the mainstream press, is likely to have a major impact on the functioning of the professional journalists in India. Firstly, the delegitimization of the established media is achieved by endorsing and promoting alternative channels of communication. Since *OpIndia, Swarajya, Republic,* and other similar sites are followed on social media by Prime Minister Modi, his cabinet colleagues, as well as online Hindu nationalists, they are able to play a significant role in mainstreaming right-wing populist ideas, especially as they relate to the mainstream press. Research has demonstrated that politicians' media criticisms can enhance the public perceptions of news bias (Smith, 2010) and decrease their trust in the media (Ladd, 2012). The characterization of professional journalists as "news traders" and "presstitutes" by Modi and other BJP leaders (Prasad, 2019) coupled with the validation of right-wing alternative news sources is likely to normalize and popularize the 'anti-media' sentiments. Indeed, media observers have pointed out that right-wing alternative news outlets – frequently working in tandem along with BJP politicians and online right-wing supporters – play an increasingly visible and critical role in attacking the credibility of Indian news organizations and effectively multi-casting and redistributing anti-media populist sentiments to audiences on a range of online platforms (Sardesai, 2018). Media scholars contend that such tactical attacks on the mainstream press using alternative news platforms and social networking sites allows right-wing populist actors unfiltered

dissemination of their messages, which in the longer term has the potential to "wean parts of the audience from the traditional media once they become familiar with the anti-media populism and different framing of issues on populist media platforms" (Krämer 2017: 1294).

Secondly, the mainstream press is de-legitimized through coercive measures, including threats to their personal safety and livelihood. Indeed, anti-media sentiments as those expressed by right-wing news outlets and online Hindu nationalists could prepare the ground for violence against journalists. Many news reporters in India already report being subject to threats such as-- doxxing (disclosing private information and documents) social shaming, rape, sexist insults, job loss, criminal defamation suits, and intimidation through death threats--all aimed at media personnel known to express anti-government and anti-BJP views (Anand, 2017). This kind of intimidation and concern for personal safety has led to self-censorship of "unprecedented levels" among journalists in India ("RSF issues warning," 2018). The prevalence of anti-media populist sentiments is likely to justify and rationalize such harassment and harsh treatment of journalists. For instance, when Gauri Lankesh, a well-known journalist and a fierce critic of the Modi government, was murdered allegedly by members of the hardline Hindu nationalist groups, celebratory tweets were posted from the Twitter accounts followed by Narendra Modi (Gettleman, 2017; Pandey, 2017). A BJP lawmaker even issued a public statement that Ms. Lankesh would have been alive if she had not criticized the *Sangh Parivar* ("Gauri Lankesh was killed," 2017).

In addition to threats to personal safety, fear of losing their jobs has impeded news media from publishing critical reports against the government. In the last decade, Indian mediascape has witnessed an increased concentration of ownership and investments in news media by the country's top business firms (Chadha, 2017). For example, Reliance Industries, one of India's most prominent corporate firms with business interests in oil, retail, and telecom, has invested in Network 18 group, which owns about 20 television channels in 15 Indian languages (Guha-Thakurta, 2012). To journalists working for this network, being critical of the government would mean inviting a backlash, which could put Reliance's other business interests at risk. Several journalists critical of Narendra Modi have allegedly been fired from their jobs by their corporate managements as soon as he became the Prime Minister in 2014, while others have "internalized" self-regulation to avoid similar consequences (Maheshwari and Sparks, 2018; Goyel et al., 2020). This is problematic because it affects the diversity of viewpoints represented in public debates, prevents journalists from conducting honest discussions on current events and public affairs topics, and leads to a more "narrow ideological debate" in the media (Schudson, 2003; Thompson, 1995; Benson, 2004; Van Aelst, 2017).

Thirdly, the de-legitimacy of professional journalism is achieved by imposing economic pressure on media organizations. Many mainstream news outlets depend on government-sponsored advertisements for their revenue. The Modi administration spent 5,726 crore Indian rupees (about USD 800 million) between 2014 and 2019 on government publicity. A bulk of this spending goes to the mainstream news publications and television channels. More than 400 round the clock news channels and 90,000

newspapers in over 20 languages compete with one another to secure these ads (Maheshwari and Sparks, 2018). Moreover, in the last few years, Indian news media has been witnessing a steady decline in the advertisement revenue from non-government sources due to the Modi-administration's economic policies such as demonetization of the country's currency notes and the new Goods and Services Tax (GST), that has stunted the overall growth of the economy (Kant, 2019). This trend of declining ad revenue is only expected to exacerbate due to the impact of Covid-19 on the Indian economy ("The economics of news media," 2019).

These factors have enhanced the media's dependency on government advertisements for its revenue. In a crowded media market, these advertisements are very crucial for the sustenance of the media, particularly- smaller news outlets. This financial dependency puts news organizations under constant pressure and makes them economically unstable. Besides, this renders them vulnerable to takeovers by industrial groups and corporate interests close to the government.

Many times, news media are forced to 'compromise' and voluntarily takedown 'unfavorable' articles from their websites to avoid being 'punished' in the form of cuts in the advertisements (Pulla, 2020). Media's self-regulation and disappearance of critical reports and articles from news websites had become so common that an observer remarked, "Since May 2014, when this government came to power, the 404 error page on media websites is showing up rather more frequently than before" (Ninan, 2019b).

Moreover, right-wing media outlets and online Hindu nationalists who are critical of the established media, put pressure on the BJP government to cut off ads to the news organizations they think are 'biased,' 'anti-Hindu' and 'anti-India,' and instead 'reward'

partisan outlets that favor the *Hindutva* ideology. In 2019, the Modi government stopped advertisements to three major English dailies known to be critical of the government-*The Telegraph, Times of India,* and *The Hindu* without providing a valid reason for doing so (Ghoshal, 2019). Similarly, in March 2019, the government refused to advertise in three leading newspapers in Kashmir in response to the 'anti-India' tone in their coverage of current events (Muralidharan, 2019).

News organizations that have the wherewithal to withstand economic pressures and refuse to succumb to the subversive tactics are faced with legal harassment in the form of government investigations on alleged tax evasions and money laundering ("Income tax dept's notice," 2020). Independent news outlets that do not rely on government and corporate advertisements and raise funding through philanthropic donations and reader contributions are subject to criminal-libel suits by government agencies and BJP leaders to mount pressure (Krishnan, 2018).

Additionally, tactics embraced by online right-wing supporters such as a mass boycott of mainstream sources of news, pressurizing government officials and cabinet ministers to avoid engaging with the press, and demanding withdrawal of credentials, puts intense pressure on the journalists, resulting in media's conformity. Owing to this pressure, several bureaucrats have refused to interact with reporters and have restricted their access to their offices—thereby, making it difficult for the media to gather information from government sources (Vij, 2014). The Modi administration has used "access" to bureaucrats and ministers as a way to exert its control on the press (Chaturvedi, 2017). Several journalists report that access had been denied to them if they published a 'negative' story against the government. In order to deliver stories and

maintain access, news reporters go "overboard to keep BJP leaders happy" (Yadav, 2020).

Furthermore, many major media houses conduct advertiser-sponsored events each year to generate revenue and deepen connections with their advertisers. Attendance of the Prime Minister and his cabinet colleagues to such media organized "conclaves," "summits," and "conferences" is crucial to attracting corporate sponsors. Their attendance is sought after not only because it generates sound bites for the media but also because of the advertisement revenue that the event generates (Bal, 2017). Online Hindu nationalists wield immense pressure on the BJP leadership to boycott events held by news outlets deemed adversarial to the Modi government and the *Hindutva* ideology (Ninan, 2019b). In fact, in March 2017, Modi withdrew his participation from a "Global business summit' held by the *Times of India* group citing security reasons. Subsequently, it was reported that the participation was withdrawn in response to a few negative articles published in the *Times of India* (Bal, 2017). These tactics force the mainstream press to toe the government line and avoid publishing stories that are critical of the administration. Moreover, efforts by Hindu nationalists to undermine the media through a mass boycott of mainstream news sources, including unsubscribing news channels and canceling newspaper subscriptions, could erode readership and viewership for the established media, leading to economic instability. As a result, the mainstream press turns increasingly dependent on the government ads for its survival.

Such well-networked and highly-organized attacks on journalists, and a toxic mix of political and economic pressures on media organizations have created what Gans (1980: 249) had termed as a "chilling effect" on news reporters where they feel

threatened to articulate their criticism of the government for fear of consequences. This atmosphere of fear impacts not only the profession of journalism but also the public's right to information. More importantly, such structural pressures prevent the mainstream press from performing the democratic tasks of the media, i.e., to "inform, scrutinize, debate, and represent" (Curran, 2005: 120), and hold the government accountable. Ideally, this requires journalists to "report criticisms of the government, reveal information of the conditions in which people live, and locate their problems" (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001: 55). However, the Modi administration's intolerance towards critical media coupled with charges of bias levied by right-wing alternative outlets has led to the diminution of news media's independence.

About a decade ago, scholars such as Rao (2008) who study journalistic practices and media content in India contended that despite being at the mercy of market forces, news media in the country gave "voice to the voiceless" and sought "accountability" from government actors. She went on to argue that Indian journalists who have a rich history of "scrutinizing politicians and the political arena" continue to "voice the concern of the people while holding themselves and others accountable" (p. 204). The establishment of right-wing channels of communication, and de-legitimization of journalists through anti-media populism, have radically altered the mediascape in India, with scholars and media observers lamenting that rising hyper-nationalism and an 'enfeebled journalistic community' have dealt a "blow to objective reportage" (Basu, 2018).

Besides, the commercial success of some of these right-wing news outlets has had a profound influence on other news organizations, particularly among the television news channels. High ratings for *Republic TV*'s content has led other channels to adopt its editorial template with similar debate styles and ideological positions, which include the expression of anti-media sentiments in their talk shows (Bhushan, 2019b). The striking resemblance between the pro-right-wing stance taken by the news channels has prompted media observers to claim that the television news outlets in India have started to look like "mirror images of each other with similar headlines, reports, and opinion articles" (Bajpai, 2019). For instance, *Times Now,* a 24-hour English news channel, espouses editorial lines identical to those appearing on *Republic TV*. Mimicking Arnab Goswami's jingoistic and brash style of journalism, *Times Now* anchors denounce panelists who disagree with them and criticize "Lutyens media" for being 'anti-India' and 'anti-Hindu.' This trend has influenced Hindi news channels as well, where television anchors openly describe themselves as "proud nationalists," and claim to support "any force" that puts "India first" (Yadav, 2020)—clearly collapsing the distinction between journalism and propaganda. Indeed, a recent analysis of debates on India's 24-hour English and Hindi news channels has concluded that the television networks, "adhere to the militant patriotic, nationalistic line of reporting and consciously obscure the disagreement through minority voices" (Pandit and Chattopadhyay, 2017: 172). The enthusiasm demonstrated by the news media to defend the government and question the opposition has earned them a moniker of --'Godi Media'[41], which implies that increasingly, the press have departed

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[41] 'Godi' translates to 'lap'. Godi media is used to refer to pro-Modi media. Critics contend that many news organizations have started to behave like 'lap dogs' of Modi. Such news outlets are referred to as Godi media.

from their role as watchdogs of democracy and have started to behave like the 'lapdogs' of the Modi government (Chaturvedi, 2018).

As a result of the shift in editorial stance, driven mostly by commercial factors, India is witnessing an expansion of right-leaning news outlets, leading to an unprecedented polarization of the media space (Devi, 2019). Besides, in a fragmented and highly competitive media market, loud and opinionated studio discussions on topics such as nationalism, anti-elitism, corruption in the media, and accusations of being "pro-Pakistan" - are favored due to the "potential for conflict and its entertaining value" (Van Aelst, 2017: 12). This is also perceived as a way to survive in the 'media business,' which inadvertently leads to the creation of what Berry and Sobeiraj (2013) have called the "outrage industry." Such expansion of the right-wing media space also means -- amplification and extensive distribution of anti-media sentiments among wide sections of the society.

Moreover, with right-wing news outlets such as *OpIndia, Swarajya,* and *Republic TV* starting to produce content in Hindi and other vernacular languages, this trend is arguably likely to gain further ground, enhancing their ability to not only potentially draw audiences away from traditional media outlets but also shape perceptions about mainstream journalists and journalism even in rural areas. In fact, *Republic TV* has already announced that it aims to launch news channels in regional languages and reach 200 million TV viewers by 2021 (Bhattacharyya, 2019). This is also potentially significant because currently, English language news viewership and readership is only around 4 million and 31 million, respectively. This is minuscule compared to about 120 million viewers and 186 million readers of Hindi news ("The Economic Times trumps,"

2019). Besides, Hindi is spoken predominantly in several north Indian states, also known as the "Hindi-belt," which are politically crucial for parties that seek to win the parliamentary elections. The foray of right-wing portals and television networks into the Hindi media space could lead to a wider distribution and faster diffusion of anti-media messages to a large number of audiences outside the English-speaking urban areas.

Further, right-wing news outlets, particularly portals such as *OpIndia* and *Swarajya,* have begun producing YouTube videos, which include a critique of mainstream media (see, for example, https://www.youtube.com/c/Opindia_com/videos). Through formats such as vlogging, live-streamed debates, and short explainer videos, these sites have been making concerted efforts to appeal to young and internet-savvy audiences. In doing so, they are aiming to both-- persuade media consumers to reject traditional sources of news as well as establish their own credibility by employing the norms of participatory culture. In other words, using the affordances of YouTube, right-wing news outlets are attempting to build trust with their audiences by emphasizing on their individuality, relatability and authenticity to those audiences as opposed to the "presumed formality, inauthenticity and distance of legacy news media" (Lewis, 2020: 213). With 265 million monthly active users, India constitutes the largest and fastest-growing market for YouTube (Laghate, 2019). By capitalizing on the wide reach of the video streaming platform, right-wing news outlets seek to disseminate their criticism of the mainstream press to an increasing number of users.

Indeed, digital social media has played a crucial role in what Govil and Baishya (2018:68) have called the "virality of right-wing ideological resentment" in India. Hindu nationalists have successfully marshaled the affordances of technology to forward their

agenda, garner public support to their core ideas, and attack their opponents. Criticism of the mainstream press, "debunking" stories published in traditional media, archiving 'evidence' against journalists, and presentation of counter-arguments--are at the core of the voluntary 'digital work' performed by online right-wing supporters (Udupa, 2015; 2016; 2018). This is also potentially significant in light of the recent scholarly evidence that the process of self-socialization on the internet could also lead right-wing supporters and trolls to avoid using commercial media altogether. Explaining this process, Kemmers et al. (2015) claim that persons who have a feeling of social crisis come in contact with information that blames the current political conditions, minorities, and media for the crisis. Scholars posit that in this process, people "consolidate the new worldview, reinterpreting previous experiences in its light and draw practical consequences like avoiding any use of mainstream media" (Krämer, 2017). The information vacuum left by traditional sources of news is typically filled by hyper-partisan news outlets.

At the forefront of using digital media technologies, BJP and the *Sangh Parivar* have established a vast network of digital volunteers who work to draw the Internet-savvy generation towards the *Hindutva* ideology. To do so, they effectively use online and cellular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Snapchat, and Tiktok. There are also reports that the BJP and its affiliate organizations use the services of private tech firms to run their WhatsApp groups and produce content for viral transmission on mobile applications (Sathe, 2019). According to an estimate, BJP operates anywhere between 20,000 to 50,000 WhatsApp groups in each state (Rawat, 2018).

Many researchers have argued that these groups serve as "conduits of hoaxes and jokes" in addition to "fake news, forged documents, crypto-histories, conspiracy theories, cartoons and morphed photos and videos" of political opponents as well as the media figures (Sinha, 2017: 4173). Posts such as UNESCO naming Modi "as the best prime minister in the world," and India's national anthem being ranked as the "best in the world," circulate freely and rather quickly on these platforms and groups ("UNESCO declares," 2016). WhatsApp, with 400 million active monthly users in the country, has been documented as a leading factor in the "propagation of fake news, responsible for lynchings, political propaganda and sectarian clashes" (Gupta and Taneja, 2018). Their widespread use, low-cost communication, and the impunity offered by end-to-end encryption make platforms like WhatsApp conducive for the spread of right-wing political messages. In fact, a study conducted by Banaji et al., (2019) has found that disinformation and misinformation related to ethno-religious and nationalistic themes such as 'anti-Pakistan,' 'anti-Muslim,' 'anti-Hindu,' 'anti-Congress,' and 'pro-BJP' are widely distributed on India's WhatsApp groups. Further, the analysis found that WhatsApp messages work "in tandem with ideas, tropes, messages, and stereotypes, which circulate more widely in the public domain" (p. 3). And, the projected increase in the number of internet users in India from currently estimated 574 million to about 639 million by the end of December 2020 (Jha, 2020), is only likely to enhance the role of WhatsApp and other mobile applications in the dissemination of such nationalist discourse including its expression of anti-media sentiments across the country.

The circulation of mainstream media critique through highly organized and well-networked right-wing information apparatus coupled with low media literacy in India--could adversely impact public perception of journalists and the mainstream news media. Information literacy and media education are not a formal part of India's education system (Jayachandran, 2018). In a country with high rates of illiteracy, government agencies have long channeled their resources only on improving basic education, with no scope for media literacy in these efforts (Bhattacharjee, 2019). Consequently, there are no structured news literacy modules taught either in the high school or college-level education- leaving large swaths of the population receptive and vulnerable to the anti-media propaganda perpetuated by right-wing news outlets and Hindu nationalist forces.

Overall, the emergence of right-wing alternative news outlets has major ramifications for the political information environment and the processes of knowledge dissemination and acquisition in India. Although the availability of partisan news sources may be construed as an outcome of 'high choice media environment'- where opportunities for increased interactivity and civil society participation have become available, the efforts of the Hindu nationalists in India appear to be in the opposite direction. Driven by anti-media populism, the Modi administration has exerted tight control on the flow of government-related information, restricted access to the media personnel, cut off revenue sources as a countermeasure to negative reports, and de-legitimized the press through media criticism as mentioned in the findings of this dissertation. As a result, India, which happens to be one of the largest media markets in the world, is actually witnessing a shrinking of its media diversity (Ninan, 2019). Put differently, the sheer number of media organizations and outlets conceals the fact that the

government exerted control and other factors mentioned above, has led to an increasing homogenization of the communication landscape in the country.

Besides, the clamp down on the mainstream media through coercive measures must be seen in the light of established media's indispensability for populist communication. Despite the rise of right-wing alternative sites, and social media and Internet-enabled technologies, the mainstream press still constitutes the chief source of political information for most people (Van Aelst, 2017). The de-legitimization of the press through media criticism and economic pressures must be viewed as the adoption of "double strategy" by Hindu nationalist groups and right-wing news outlets to—subdue the mainstream media into accommodating *Hindutva* as well as to discredit and undermine professional journalism with the hope that the audience will eventually seek out right-wing sources of news.

Further, the rise of partisan news outlets is likely to have a significant impact on the public and the political discourse in India in the long term. Research suggests that the greater supply of partisan media is likely to lead to a more fragmented audience because the supply "creates a greater demand for media tailored to people's political beliefs" (Van Aelst, 2017: 12). Scholars believe that more partisan news outlets could, therefore, lead to a further polarization of political views, 'filter bubbles' (Pariser, 2011), or a 'balkanization' of the public sphere (Sunstein, 2007). In that sense, the rise of right-wing alternative news outlets while providing a discursive space for the articulation of Hindu nationalist views also creates opportunity structures for selective exposure based on the political attitudes and beliefs of their readers and viewers. Such polarization is likely to prime citizens' underlying predispositions and make them more extreme and divided

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(Levendusky, 2013). In a diverse and multicultural country like India, with a long history of communal and sectarian violence, polarization could lead to more social and religious divisions (Price, 2020). Besides, with over 30 political parties represented in the Parliament, polarization may erode the possibility of arriving at a political consensus, thereby making it difficult to have any meaningful deliberations on contentious issues.

## 8.2. Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have explored media criticisms articulated by burgeoning right-wing alternative news media in India. Through a thematic analysis of 545 media-related articles published on right-wing portals, *Swarajya.com* and *OpIndia.com*, an ethnographic qualitative content analysis of media-related debates aired on the right-wing television network, *Republic TV,* and in-depth interviews with 24 Hindu nationalists active on Twitter, this dissertation examined the discursive strategies employed by right-wing actors in India to discredit and undermine professional journalism.  In this section, I summarize key findings and offer conclusions and recommendations. Insights into the dominant criticisms articulated against them and their professional work by Hindu nationalists will offer journalists an opportunity to develop counterstrategies and narratives. The findings of this study will also provide scholars of comparative studies, a comprehensive look at the anti-media populist sentiment prevailing in a non-Western democracy like India. In doing so, the study unpacks the distinct social, technological, historical, economic, and political factors aiding the right-wing actors in their efforts to de-legitimize the professional media. Finally, to scholars interested in understanding the relationship between the right-wing populist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and India's established media, this study argues that a 'double strategy' is at play---where on the one

hand the mainstream media is discredited through criticisms articulated by right-wing alternative news outlets while on the other hand, the professional media is coerced through various pressure tactics into providing favorable coverage. I also address the limitations of this work and make suggestions for future research.

### 8.2.1 Overview of Findings and Conclusion

This exploration of anti-media populist sentiments articulated by the emerging right-wing alternative media in India highlighted several salient points. First, with regards to the dominant themes of criticism, right-wing news outlets accuse the mainstream press of suppressing the voices and opinions of the Hindu majority while favoring minorities and working against India's interests by tarnishing the country's global image. Further, they charge the traditional media of controlling public opinion by withholding crucial information, censoring right-wing views, and spreading 'false narratives.' Additionally, they advance the claim that the professional media act as the mouthpieces of the establishment as represented by the Congress party while opposing the BJP. Hindu nationalists also share a belief that the news media do not offer balanced, diverse, and impartial coverage. Further, right-wing actors characterize news reporters as individuals who are 'corrupt,' 'unethical,' and working to advance their self-interests. Broadly, these expressions of media distrust are articulated and disseminated with an intent to attack the professional integrity of journalists and to position themselves as the challengers to the hegemonic power of the established media. These criticisms parallel those expressed by right-wing alternative sites in the Western democracies such as Sweden, Germany, Norway, and the U.S. Likewise, there are similarities between the presentation styles and the editorial tone adopted by the right-wing television network, *Republic TV* in India as

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well as the *Fox news* in the U.S.  These alternative news outlets offer Hindu nationalists a parallel discursive space to express their core ideas, define their own identity, articulate perceived misrepresentations, and present oppositional discourses challenging what they deem to be a biased mainstream media narrative.

That said, the right-wing positioning of themselves as the 'victims' of a 'biased' media narrative stands in sharp contrast to the extensive media coverage received by the Hindu nationalist movement and the BJP leaders, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Consequently, these right-wing criticisms lack factual arguments and must be viewed as driven by their motive to de-legitimize the mainstream press. Besides, a steady decline in ad revenue and reliance on government advertisements for their survival, render the established news outlets vulnerable to take over by the corporate firms close to the government. Such financial reliance on the government for advertisement revenue allows the Modi administration to have control over the editorial content produced by the news media. Moreover, the BJP government has tried to undermine the established news media by denying access to the government offices and refusing to give interviews to news outlets publishing 'negative' stories on the administration. In addition, to harass independent news organizations, criminal charges have been filed against them under the pretext of tax evasion and money laundering. Therefore, I argue that in India, the "double strategy" is at play- where on the one hand, mainstream news media is being discredited with the help of emerging right-wing news outlets, and on the other hand, the professional journalists are being coerced into providing favorable news coverage to the Hindu nationalist movement and the Modi administration. High readership, greater credibility, and wider reach of the mainstream press make them indispensable for the

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right-wing populist communication. Therefore, this "double strategy" is adopted, which capitalizes on the established media's reach and credibility among the general audiences while continuing to discredit professional journalism with the aim to gradually attract readers and viewers from the mainstream sources towards right-wing news outlets.

These organized efforts by the right-wing actors have created a worrisome environment for professional journalists who resort to self-censorship instead of risking their personal safety and losing their livelihood. The anti-media populist sentiments expressed mostly online often lead to online hate speech directed against journalists and their news organizations. As a result, despite being one of the largest media markets in the world, content produced by various news outlets is increasingly becoming homogenous and bereft of diverse views. Such homogenization of the mainstream news media content and pro-government stance undermines the media's watchdog role in the Indian democracy.

### 8.2.2. Recommendations

The articulation of anti-media sentiments and the shrinking diversity of views in the mainstream press have highlighted the need for media literacy education at both high school and college levels. News and information literacy programs are not part of the education system in India. As a result, anti-media propaganda is easily spread alongside fake news, hoaxes, falsehoods, and disinformation through WhatsApp and other mobile applications. Independent media organizations, civil society groups, non-profits, and media educators, including university professors, must collaborate and expend their energy, expertise, and resources to offer media literacy programs and courses to high school and college students across the country.

Further, the mainstream news media needs to pay attention to its own ethical shortcomings and sensationalism in its reportage. Right-wing alternative news outlets take advantage of these shortcomings to discredit the established media. Continuous efforts must be made by the professional media and associations of journalists and journalism educators to review and critique media performance in a constructive manner.

Finally, independent media activists must explore counterstrategies to overcome the organized efforts of Hindu nationalists to discredit mainstream journalism. Some of these strategies are already being implemented, albeit on a small scale. One such effort includes the pursuit of alternative ways of funding the media projects. Currently, excessive reliance on corporate firms and government agencies for advertisement revenue has diminished the media's ability to hold the government and the economic elite accountable. Acquiescence to the government propaganda and the business interests further erodes the media's credibility as a professional and an independent institution. Recently, a new trend of philanthropy funded independent media has started emerging in the Indian media space (see, for example, https://thewire.in/). While these niche outlets are currently catering to the information needs of readers from English-speaking urban areas, future projects must explore the launch of similar outlets in Hindi and other vernacular languages. Such funding not only enables independent journalists to dodge co-option and self-censorship but also enrich the media space with a diversity of views. The other counterstrategy that is currently being employed by independent media activists is the establishment of fact-checking sites. In the last five years, several such sites have been set up (for example, https://www.altnews.in/), which verify the claims made on social media, particularly by online Hindu nationalists. Such efforts have made it possible

to disprove the accusations of bias and corruption made against professional media. While these strategies are yielding positive results, they need to be scaled up in order to match the huge volume of content produced by right-wing alternative media against the mainstream press.

### 8.2.3. Further Research

The findings presented in this dissertation will hopefully be useful for public debate as well as future research work on the emerging right-wing media space in India. Additional research must consider alternative media inspired by diverse political ideologies that view themselves as correctives to the mainstream discourse of news. Moreover, currently, there are a number of right-wing news websites in India. Studies of similarities and differences between them will provide valuable insights into the spectrum of right-leaning information sources made available for the audiences in the country. Besides, an analysis of the interactions, acknowledgments, exchanges, and collaborations between various right-leaning news outlets is the need of the hour. It not only provides an understanding of the inner workings of the right-wing news sector in India but also reveals if indeed a well-networked right-wing media ecosystem has emerged in the country.

Further, given the intense debates on the right-wing alternative media and their relation to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), there is a need to analyze the effects of the content produced by such media outlets on the general audience in varied contexts. The absence of such research can lead to an inaccurate estimation of the effects of the right-wing news outlets on public attitudes towards partisan content.

An important aspect that needs to be studied is the financial aspects involved in the workings of alternative right-wing media. Currently, very little is known about their business models, including their sources of funding, the total number of subscribers, and advertising revenue generated through various means, including YouTube videos. Moreover, such research provides crucial insights into the ideological and political motivations of individuals providing their financial support to these partisan outlets.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1: Sample of Questions from the Semi-structured Interviews

1. Which newspapers do you read, and why?

2. Which 24-hour television news channels do you watch?

3. Is there a reason you choose those newspapers and television network over the others?

4. What are your views on India's mainstream news media?

5. Do you think the established media are fair in their coverage of BJP and Hindus? Can you please explain?

6. Have you tried interacting with professional journalists on Twitter? If so, what were the tweets about, and how did those interactions go?

7. In your own words, can you please describe an ideal journalist?

8. How do you perceive the right-wing news sites like *Swarajya* and *OpIndia?* How often do you read them?

9. Where do you get most of your news from?

10. What kind of news do you read and share?

11. Who are your favorite journalists? And why?

12. What are your criticisms (if any) of the media? Can you elaborate?

13. Are there any professional journalists you dislike? If so, why? Can you please elaborate?

14. What do you think of Arnab Goswami's style of journalism?

15. What solutions do you propose to correct that perceived 'liberal bias' in the mainstream press? (Question only applicable if the participant articulates the criticism of the press)

16. What motivates you to use social media? How many tweets do you post each day?

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