Resistance and the Limits of Media Literacy in Countering Disinformation (in

Transitional Media Systems)

Shakuntala Banaji

Abstract: After outlining existing regulation and censorship in transitional media systems, this chapter considers the place of media literacy (variously defined) in public behaviours towards hateful disinformation. Early sections examine how arguments around media literacy, inoculation and resistance have failed persecuted populations in India where a vast network of far right ideologues and their supporters have gained power. Informed by studies of mediated hate, disinformation and regulation, later sections demonstrate that this takeover is influencing what it means to be a good citizen and who is and is not considered deserving of human recognition. An examination of the proliferation of systematic political disinformation, hate speech and violence, suggests that, far from being media illiterate or digitally ignorant, many hate and disinformation perpetrators are highly digitally skilled. To remain viable, the definition of media literacy needs to be radically rethought beyond the idea of 'not getting tricked'/'being able to perform certain skills'.

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<a>INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, regardless of location and putative media system, political disinformation and 'fake news' has taken hold and been manipulated for political gain. While this is widely traced to parties of the right and far right (Innes et al., 2021; Rone, 2022) with deeply illiberal and often violent consequences, disinformation has been produced and can be effective at swaying audiences across the political spectrum (Freelon & Lokot, 2020). Despite attempts to institute fact-checking and to alter algorithmic and AI-based automated detection systems to better take down misleading and hateful posts, most governments and tech billionaires have done very little to stem the tide, or to put in place lasting systems for preventing hate and disinformation (Banaji & Bhat, 2022). Scholars and lay petitioners are often met with the staple statement that any further efforts to safeguard vulnerable populations could threaten freedom of speech, and that citizens are either already savvy enough or need to be made more media literate. Ethical AI teams pointing out the dangers of algorithmic surveillance and the harm that biased profiling systems do to historically oppressed communities increasingly have found themselves ignored, disbanded or smeared, notwithstanding the relative lack of effectiveness of measures against the vast majority of right wing hate and disinformation.

The advent of the Covid-19 pandemic with its plethora of life-threatening misinformation and attendant deadly effects, briefly appeared to jolt some governments and tech policy makers out of their complacency. In 2020, content warnings and attempts to regulate and remove medically misleading content were sanctioned and implemented on Facebook, WhatsApp and Instagram. Twitter was the most thorough in blocking Covid denial accounts. Where previously tech corporations and media owners had assured regulators that

the public was, in the main, too experienced and well informed to fall for spurious, discriminatory content created by malicious actors, Covid-related sentiment analysis (Kalantari et al., 2021) makes it apparent that even at the risk to their own lives, members of the public across the globe and, particularly, in nations considered the most media literate, are inclined to trust elite purveyors of disinformation and to evince social, political and medical behaviours accordingly. The narrative about media literacy as a deterrent looks increasingly fragile as protestors show their resistance to vaccines and mask mandates by appearing to 'uncover' the lies of mainstream media.

Meanwhile propagandist, fabricated and misleading political advertising on Facebook and messaging on WhatsApp were implicated publicly in more than one success for the right and far right,[1] both in so-called 'established' liberal democracies and in countries asserted to be transitioning to democracy (Sharma, 2022; Milmo, 2021 discussing whistleblowers Sophie Zhang and Frances Haugen). Transitional media systems (Ognianova, 1997; Rantanen, 2007), which are my primary focus in this chapter, are those in countries which have been characterised as moving from one political-economic media dynamic (for instance, State funded, state-controlled, highly censored) to another (for instance, plural, partially privatised, purportedly democratic and globalised). After outlining existing regulatory and censorship circumstances in some of these countries, and briefly addressing debates on the best definitions and uses of media literacy – i.e. digital, critical, functional or allied to information literacy –in this chapter, I consider the past decade in India and the place of media literacy in public behaviours towards hateful disinformation, examining how arguments around media literacy, inoculation and resistance have failed India's persecuted populations of Muslims, Christians, Dalits, Adivasis, Sikhs and dissenting citizens as a vast network of far right ideologues and their supporters have taken over and have sought to control public perceptions. My observations, informed by studies of mediated hate, disinformation and

regulation, show that this takeover is influencing what it means to be a good citizen and who is and is not considered deserving of human rights protection and human recognition.

In final section, I examine examples of the proliferation of systematic political disinformation, hate speech and their accompanying violence. I demonstrate that actors circulating and perpetrating such hate speech and disinformation, far from being media illiterate or digitally ignorant in the usually accepted sense of these terms, are highly digitally skilled and understand the power of visual communication. Millions of media-savvy, digitally literate Indians who follow the ideology of Hindutva are using their knowledge and skills to manipulate media and political systems and to undermine democracy. The thrust of the argument will be that the definition of media literacy needs to be radically rethought beyond the idea of 'not getting tricked'/'being able to perform certain skills' and attached to forms of historical and human rights knowledge as well as ethics in order to bear even partially the burden currently placed on it. The conclusion considers whether there are combinations of strong, good-faith regulation and critical media literacy that might help to stem the tide of disinformation and hate.

<a>REGULATION, CENSORSHIP, INTERMEDIARY LIABILITY: A TROUBLING CONTINUUM IN 'NEO-AUTHORITARIEN' STATES**

The question of how and to what extent media systems should be transparently regulated is crucial. This holds for established and transitional media systems, both of which are subject to violent 'neo-authoritarianism' (Wodak, 2019) witnessed under leaders such as Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Modi, Orban, Trump and Putin, and aspired to by Marine Le Pen. On the one hand, the reasons for strong formal media regulation range from the wish to maintain freedom of speech, diversity and plurality by holding political and corporate actors to account, to an avowed need to protect historically targeted population groups (such as racial, ethnic, sexual and religious minorities or children) from the direct and indirect harms of

discriminatory speech, dehumanisation, and hate. On the other hand, the wish to control

public speech and to support media entities sympathising with conservative and authoritarian

political parties or systems or to make vast profits for shareholders are often hidden

motivations for regulatory decisions. In moves allied to 'savage deregulation' as discussed by

Traquina (1995) in regard to Portugal in the 1990s and by Kaymas in regard to Turkey since

the turn of the century, concerns around media monopolies and the protection of vulnerable

citizens have been shrugged off as moves are made towards ostensible self-regulation of the

media sphere (Becker, 2004; Kaymas, 2011; Parthasarathi, 2018). Press councils – or

equivalent bodies – and electronic media oversight bodies with ties to media companies have

been given the power to judge when their members have overstepped and to set the

parameters of mild forms of retributive action. The message is, therefore, that anything goes

as long as big players in the media industry stick together. Writing of Turkey, but effectively

outlining recent history in multiple other transitional media systems, Kaymas notes that the

Turkish media system 'has been transformed by the entry of big industrial and merchant

capital into the media scene and by the "savage deregulation" of broadcasting (…). With

regulatory responses to the problems of media concentration and cross ownership

contradictory and ineffective' (Kaymas, 2011, pp. 65-66). The ineffectiveness and

contradictory nature of regulatory and self-regulatory responses can be seen as interlinked and

deliberate. It is not in the interests of elite media and political players to hold media or

platform owners to account and regulatory 'standards' often apply differently to low budget,

dissident or progressive media, what we can call 'bad-faith' regulation.

Alongside sweeping deregulation and privatisation, monopolisation, co-option of

editors and regulators, and skewed competitive markets instituted in the 1990s, a vast new

infrastructure emerged in the early 2000s. This infrastructure comprises both formal (legal,

bureaucratic, political) and informal (IT cells, bots, paid news, vigilante mobs) elements. It

works to silence and sanction individuals and groups who use media and communications

technologies to question or dissent from majority (political, religious or racial) opinion. The policing and silencing of free expression enabled by this infrastructure is both different from and akin to the censorship and surveillance mechanisms that accompanied authoritarian party states from the middle of the 20th century onwards (Rajagopal, 2001; Reyaz, 2020). Policing and silencing apply most evidently in relation to matters considered by religious, political and ethnic majorities to pertain to their presiding groups' accounts of current events or to the version of history and national security that is positioned by those in power as paramount. With regard to media, in transitional systems, in particular, ideological censoriousness stretches from the moral policing of content to political censorship. Frequently the two are linked and achieved through the courts. Sometimes censorship and silencing are carried out through 'public' bodies such as media certification boards which pass judgments on radio, television, film, advertising and Over-the-Top online content. These same bodies demonstrate bias when they pay little or no attention to markedly disingenuous and misleading political advertising circulating on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram when it has been endorsed by ruling elites. Biased regulatory mechanisms and bodies enable takeovers favouring monopolistic markets dominated by the most powerful political and corporate groups. Corporate lobbyists and boards are positioned to ensure that non-compliant journalists and editors are not hired or lose their positions.

Informal, but highly effective, censorship of critical, dissident or politically challenging media content is also achieved through vigilante campaigns on and offline by hyper-nationalist networks with implicit support from highly placed members of government. Such campaigns target individual citizens who post comments online as well as media producers, actors and journalists who appear to criticise establishment/rightwing values or to draw attention to the failings of iconic political figures. When online threats, police visits and mob violence are not enough to intimidate those who try to support human rights, or to deconstruct and critique disinformation, law enforcement and the courts play a role through

police harassment and legal threats. This serves to harass media entities or individuals and constrain them from challenging government and ruling party narratives.

While India, Pakistan, Russia and Turkey, alongside a host of other transitional media systems, are particularly egregious practitioners of these practices, supposedly democratic media systems in the United Kingdom, the European Union and the United States are also known to use imprisonment and the threat of extradition as tools of intimidation. Indeed, charges of misinformation and endangering national security are often levelled against those whose mission is to decipher and draw attention to misinformation, as in the high-profile cases of Chelsea Manning, Edward Snowdon and Julian Assange. In Brazil and other South American nations, as in Indonesia, Israel, and the countries mentioned above, upstanding journalists and fact-checkers can find themselves imprisoned, assaulted or assassinated for their work (Mallick, 2022; United Nations, 2022).[2] Across the globe, powerful political forces use the twin rhetorics of freedom of expression and protecting national security as smokescreens for the denial of human and civil rights, the suppression of free speech and the contamination of the public sphere with an ever widening array of transmedia disinformation to keep themselves and their allies in power.

In their attempts to appear to be tackling online 'fake' news and disinformation, regimes such as the current governments of Singapore and India have threatened and implemented far-reaching laws on 'fake' news and intermediary liability, while, at the same time, accruing more power to censor those they disagree with (Balkin, 2018). While reassuring the regimes' supporters of the robustness of government intent to deal with 'fake' news and hold tech companies to account, these laws have been used to criminalise citizens who challenge the ruling parties on their role in censorship, disinformation and political violence. In effect, these laws and their use places the burden of censorship onto individuals and platforms. There is no doubt that tech companies that are guilty of shielding purveyors of disinformation and making the spread of misinformation easier could do more to mitigate the

worst dehumanising, discriminatory false information and disinformation on their platforms

and cross-platform apps (Banaji & Bhat, 2022). It is, however, also manifestly the case that

national laws facilitate the take-down of content that the companies know governments

consider to be threatening to the power of their regimes. Such content usually originates with

politically dissident groups and citizens and those who want to call out government-sponsored

and/or majoritarian disinformation.

In these contexts, the treatment of platform or intermediary liability is having a

'chilling effect' on freedom of expression. In India, for example:

> Under the Rules, limitation of intermediary liability has been made contingent to a
> privately administered takedown mechanism (…). [that] requires intermediaries to
> deliberate on the legality of the allegedly unlawful expressions and accordingly
> disable/remove such expressions in order to claim exemption from liability. As a
> result, intermediaries have donned the hat of a censor (…). Contrary to the objective
> of promoting free expression (…) the Rules seem to encourage privately administered
> injunctions to censor free expression without even the benefit of judicial review.'
> (Dara, 2020, p. 4)

Additionally, since the middle of 2021, the Indian government has instructed the

platform intermediaries to de-encrypt messages and it is now enjoining virtual private

network (VPN) providers to collect and pass on user data to the state.

Against this backdrop, it seems counter-intuitive to consider how audiences might be

integrated within the regulatory framework to reduce censorship by attending to media

literacy. Yet the turn to audience-based media literacy as a key facet of media governance

(Buckingham 2005, 2006; Potter, 2010) – in contrast to formal regulation – was accompanied

by moves towards ostensible media self-regulation in mature media systems. This approach is

now referenced frequently by platforms, the United Nations and international aid agencies

even in countries with transitional media systems (USAID, 2022; Universitas Gadjah Mada,

2020).[3] The policy and political rhetoric is that media literacy and, recently, 'digital literacy'

will be fruitful in helping audiences to 'resist' the lure of false advertising or misinformation

in privatised media spheres. Corporations and regulatory bodies argue that media literacy campaigns should be used to support viewing populations in resisting derogatory hate speech and 'fake' news, however ubiquitous, and in selecting sound information sources. Reliance on media literacy as a key protective regulatory tool has long been espoused in the Global North, and has become more visible in transitional media systems such as India.

Notwithstanding the emphasis on media literacy, even in Global North countries powerful and opaque connections between political parties, politicians, regulators and media owners persist, fostering a media environment conducive to derogatory hate speech and 'fake' news. This is evidenced, for example, in the case of *News International* and Rupert Murdoch, whose influence over politics and media regulatory mechanisms (McNight, 2010), was accompanied by the lack of a change in press-politics relations after the United Kingdom's Leveson Report (Barnett & Townsend, 2014).

Countries such as Russia, China and Singapore have retained strong centralised control of their media systems and the internet, barely cloaked by their encouragement of public private ventures and collaborations (Becker, 2004; Cummings & Kong, 2019). In some cases, control shows itself as open censorship of oppositional views and values on television news, rather than as more covert, but disturbing, censorship on public service media channels including the British Broadcasting Corporation, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation or Australian Broadcasting Corporation. In other instances, control plays out via a refusal of certification or self-censorship which are hard to evidence because they are subtle, but nevertheless ubiquitous (Fong, 2018).

The cases of Pakistan and India offer a more chequered picture of media governance with a greater apparent degree of decentralisation in terms of content production (Banaji, 2010; Parthasarathi & Srinivas, 2019). Yet there is evidence that the spectrum of views and values aired has narrowed since the early years of the 2000s (Siddiqui, 2017) and that the governments' interference extends beyond executive organs of media regulation to legal

challenges by rightwing thinktanks or individuals, harassment or blacklisting of critical journalists, and even the unleashing of fascist vigilante mobs. Those who deviate from the prescribed religious nationalist and/or neoliberal nationalist rhetorics in news or fiction media can find themselves targets of sustained political harassment. Publics with seemingly high functional media and digital literacy who are ideologically predisposed to resist what they believe to be a 'liberal hegemony' are mobilised via online social media channels to participate in the disciplining of 'deviant' (read: socialist, progressive, critical) media producers and citizens. There is an elision here between criticality and resistance. Thus, if all those who participate (in any action in the public sphere) are active citizens and all those who resist (anything or anyone) are showing their criticality, albeit in damaging ways, media literacy may well be contaminated by its association with prejudiced publics and the authoritarian ideologues who govern them.

<a>MEDIA LITERACY AND RESISTANCE TO MISINFORMATION: DEFINITIONAL CONFLICTS AND ABDICATIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

The difference between functional and critical media literacy for the attainment of democratic goals was discussed in the previous section. This section considers whether these can be integrated plausibly into more humane and just media governance regimes. In this context, it is important to review how different definitions of media and digital literacy gained in importance as a way of rationalising an audience-driven model of (de)regulation for media content. In his analysis of definitions of media literacy in the late 2000s, Potter (2010, pp. 676-678) explores the variations and nuances, arguing that scholars:

> exhibit a variety of positions concerning which skills are important and which sets of knowledge contribute to media literacy. The *most frequently mentioned skill is critical thinking* (…) although this term seems to be used as an umbrella idea for an unspecified conglomeration of mental processes by which people challenge media messages. (Potter, 2010, p. 680, emphasis added)

In her 2018 talk 'You Think You Want Media Literacy… Do You?', danah boyd

voices reservations about the 'critical' component of media literacy, and its implications for

democratic trust:

> I have a deep level of respect for the primary goal. As Renee Hobbs has written, media literacy is the "active inquiry and critical thinking about the messages we receive and create." (…) Media literacy is imagined to be empowering, enabling individuals to have agency and giving them the tools to help create a democratic society. But fundamentally, it is *a form of critical thinking that asks people to doubt what they see*. And that makes me nervous. (boyd, 2018, p. np., emphasis added)

It is important to reflect on the possibility of a distinctive form of critical media

literacy that is not aligned with right and far right intolerance. We might question whether the

phenomenon that boyd discusses meets the criterion for criticality or, instead, recalls pre-

programmed ideological scepticism towards content that contests a particular world view.

Nevertheless, she rightly points out that encouragement of doubt about the truthfulness and

trustworthiness of what one has witnessed via media (sometimes treated as synonymous with

criticality and inoculation) is the bedrock of some versions of media literacy. It is the base of

an iceberg upon which critical media literacy founders. This is particularly so when

ideologically motivated audiences deny the truthfulness of verified evidence, labelling it as

misinformation if it originates from sources they consider to be untrustworthy due to the

attribution of liberal or critical views (Polletta & Callahan, 2017).

Medeiros and Singh point out that when the concept of media literacy is misapplied:

> proposals to combat fake news focused on media literacy are "likely to fail" because they ignore how the core tenets of media literacy—such as evaluating the credibility of sources and the financial motivations at play, the general mandate to be sceptical of authority, and the elevation of expertise—do not necessarily lead to uniform conclusions about what information to trust. (2020, p. 289)

However, they consider the dangers of habitual scepticism on the part of media literate audiences as a small price to pay to avoid the draconian effects of top-down regulation of the online circulation of (mis)information, for instance, via intermediary liability laws which aim to hold platforms to account for the content they host. Presently,

> [i]n India, Internet intermediaries are given statutory conditional immunity from vicarious criminal liability. However, if the statutory conditions are violated, the veil of protection is lifted and the Internet intermediary becomes liable along with the actual offender (Ajoy, 2022).

And, in the light of the dangers of de-encryption for democracy and citizen rights protection, over-zealous moderation and the 'flaws (…) regarding (…) changes to intermediary liability rules', they observe that 'policymakers in India [should] eschew sweeping changes to the operation of the platform itself in favor of locally tailored information literacy campaigns' (Medeiros & Singh, 2020, pp. 294-295). Tailored local media literacy campaigns may be better placed than generic national ones to capture audience attention, drawing them into a spirit of enquiry and evaluation in news environments. However, Medeiros and Singh emphasise the missed opportunities in national or transnational campaigns that refer vaguely to 'rumour' and 'fake news', typically in urban settings which alienates rural and small town users, and a lack of urgency in addressing the consequences of disinformation. Such media literacy ad campaigns do not refer to specific incidents of lynching or mob violence or explain how particular groups are mobilised as perpetrators.

Given the context of subversion of democratic narratives in a massive, well-funded propaganda machine, including mainstream and social media in both transitional and established media systems (Banaji & Bhat, 2022; Benkler et al., 2018), it is difficult to share Medeiros and Singh's optimism about the promise of (media literate) citizen journalism to counter misinformation. At issue is not merely the failure of mainstream and community media to challenge unjust political frameworks systematically and to correct

misrepresentations that the right and far right push but also the co-option of media narratives and media governance by the far right. Ironically, in the context of ideological hate where particular social groups automatically become the 'problem' that dominant authoritarian civic and political actors seek to purge through discrimination and violence, confirmation by mainstream media is precisely what engenders further 'trust' in 'fake' posts or sock puppets and bot accounts tweeting out misinformation.

Voicing an important concern about media literacy rhetoric, Buckingham argues that 'there is a risk that the notion of "media literacy" favours a rationalistic model – a normative "adult" notion of the sophisticated, media-smart consumer that actually belies the complexity and diversity of children's engagements with media' (2005, p. 9). Highlighting the dissonance between expectation and reality for child audiences of media, Buckingham's observation can be extended to adults. The classic understandings of critical media literate audiences rarely pay attention to affective and emotional, ideological and partisan ways in which media of all kinds, including news, are sought out and engaged with. Yet, affective engagement with supremacist myths, racist and sexist stereotypes, and superstitious attitudes to wellbeing appears to be compatible with high levels of scepticism about media and discourse produced by perceived opponents or 'others' as well as high levels of skill in producing and circulating counter discourse (Banaji & Bhat, 2019). Conversely, as Deroo (2021, p. 58) points out, for critical media literacy to combat Islamophobia to be even partially effective, 'teachers should help students to interrogate how emotion and belief shape opinions, as facts, for some, are less influential when interacting and responding to media messages'.

Some studies have demonstrated the failures of existing media literacy measures to capture the less than robust ways in which people evaluate their own skills and competences:

> Prevailing expectations posit that literacy interventions help audiences to be "inoculated" against any harmful effects of misleading information. (…) In the current digital ecosystem where photographic proof is not sufficient to change the minds of

partisans, and fake stories lurk in every corner of the internet, equipping digital users with the skillset needed to discern facts from falsehoods is gaining relevance. The common assumption of this approach is that those with greater media literacy tend to consume false or dubious stories in a more critical manner, mitigating the influence of fake news on society. (Jones-Jang et al., 2021, p. 372)

Based on an analysis of extracted from extant scholarship in 2016 on representative adult samples of Facebook newsfeed users (n= 1299) in the United States concerning a range of media, information and news literacy values, Jones-Jang et al. explain that their study 'investigates such assumptions by assessing whether individuals with greater literacy (media, information, news, and digital literacies) are better at recognizing fake news, and which of these literacies are most relevant'(Jones-Jang et al., 2021, p. 383). They find that information literacy matters most while the competencies included in many media literacy scales seem at best trivial and at worst misleading in regard to the ability to parse out prejudices or disinformation. An inference that can be drawn from this research is the importance of the way in which people are expected to, but often do not, recognise their own biases and incompetence (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). This factor can play a debilitating role in the effective identification and rejection of misinformation. Indeed, many of those 'who claimed their experience and familiarity with news topics did not excel at fake news identification' (Jones-Jang et al., 2021, p. 383). Insofar as this phenomenon is well known, it is worth asking why it has not been used to refine the definitions of media literacy employed by regulators, corporations and governments.

One answer might lie in the ambivalence of many governments towards truly media literate publics. In the United Kingdom, for example, Wallis and Buckingham (2019) explain that the absence of a singular, robust definition of media literacy policy sphere allowed the concept to be stretched to accommodate extremely functional actions and strategies that are detached from the knowledge and criticality initially associated with the concept. Introduced to counter perceived risks associated with media representations of violence and violent

effects, once 'enshrined in statute', media literacy became an imperative intended to ensure that consumers are inoculated against media which do not need external regulation. After a decade during which the imperatives to 'keep children safe' and spread digital access across 'marginalised groups' were repeatedly promoted, conservative politicians, especially, shrank the notion of media literacy even further from its nesting in critical thinking until the concept was barely recognisable: 'Media literacy is still enshrined in law, but it has become a cultural policy that is effectively dead' (Wallis & Buckingham 2019, p. 201).

Globally, governments and corporations charged with encouraging and funding media literacy campaigns are constrained by their political economic and ideological motivations to be cautions in inspiring a public so informed, alert and critical that advertising is rejected and politicians and media experts are held to account for their failures. Yet, they are also motivated by their need to appear to take action against the circulation of violent and dehumanising disinformation that fosters genocide and undermines social and geopolitical stability. At the same time, non-aligned or independent media literacy advocates and teachers confront governments and corporations claiming to favour media literacy, social justice and tolerance, while they actively endorse high levels of digital skill, media literacy and scepticism about social democracy among powerful actors on the right and far right. These are the actors who create and purvey disinformation for their own political and economic gain. In the next section, I examine the lengths to which the co-opted media industry and technology literate far right users of platforms in India have gone to, to undermine rights, while using digital tools and media literacy as a cover for their take-over of the public sphere.

<a>FROM SECULAR NATIONALISM TO FASCIST POPULISM: MEDIA, TECHNOLOGY AND DEREGULATION IN INDIA

In the post-Nehru era of the 1960s and 70s, many people in India experienced a dearth of audiovisual media apart from that screened by public broadcasters. These media broadcast

news programmes, development-oriented documentaries and film and music entertainment programmes. Radio and television were restricted to urban audiences with access, but to limited topics and themes. Alongside some community media outlets (Pavarala & Malik, 2007), the press, while also largely urban, was not much better in terms of diverse representation of different social strata.

Purnima Mankekar (1999), Arvind Rajagopal (2001) and Ram Bhat (2020) detail how '[f]rom the late 1980s, the Congress Party, through the bureaucracy in the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, broke with previous secular broadcasting traditions and allowed the telecasting of Hindu epics on the national broadcaster' (2020, p. 91), thereby enabling a new form of Hindutva subjectivity to emerge. Functionaries of the then low-profile, but powerful, fascist World Hindu Forum (VHP) and Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) joined forces with politicians of the Party that came to power as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 1990s to produce and circulate low-cost cassettes and video tapes containing anti Muslim and anti-Christian disinformation, rewriting histories of India and projecting India as a Hindu nation. This was achieved via propaganda and calls for violence, including lynching and rape, against minority communities (Brosius, 2005; Banaji, 2018).

Packaged as political speech, 'freedom' songs and other popular cultural content, the Hindutva media supported the construction of an aspirational Hindu fascist identity which came to fruition with the election of a BJP government. Bhat's analysis of policy discourse demonstrates how 'the infrastructural politics and technological imaginaries of the BJP under Modi did not emerge from a vacuum. They were, rather, inherited from the previous two Congress regimes' "soft" neoliberal policies' (2020, p. 155). My own work on film and film viewing publics had also signalled the rise of these imaginaries (Banaji, 2006, 2007), which led to the nearly complete takeover of screen media by ultra-rightwing Hindu nationalist narratives after the ascendance of Narendra Modi's BJP to power in 2014. Highly

discriminatory fictional imaginaries of (specifically) Hindi and other vernacular film and television are relevant to the issue of media literacy and media regulation for three reasons.

First, films and series produced by misogynist, hyper-nationalist, xenophobic and Islamophobic producers have been beamed and streamed into the homes of television and film viewers in India and the diaspora for 30 years. Despite the presence of an active censor board, these cultural artefacts have been 'read' by some viewers as depictions of politics more real and immediate than factual broadcasts or newspapers (Banaji, 2006, 2007). Second, since the neoliberal deregulation of the electronic media sphere in India at the beginning of the 1990s, news programmes and rolling news coverage borrowed aesthetic and narrative elements from fiction media: high contrast colouring, scrolling text in giant flashing letters, screaming vocals and dramatic music as well as narrative arcs favouring quick ideological assumptions about terrorists (Muslim bad guys versus a protective state machinery), alarmingly blurring the boundaries between verifiable information and fiction. Third, in a spectacular transmedia takeover, many of the images and video clips from Hindutva propaganda videos and mainstream fiction film and television with its casteist, misogynist, anti-poor and anti-Muslim/anti-Christian imagery and rhetoric are now routinely used in the fake and deep-fake videos, GIFs and texts circulated across multiple social media channels (Banaji & Bhat, 2019; Mahapatra & Plageman, 2019; Saha et al., 2019; Garimella & Eckles, 2021).

Propagandist disinformation in India and among the diaspora is created and circulated by Indian citizens who are functionally information and digitally literate, and politically and ideologically aligned with the ruling Hindutva regime and the fascist RSS-VHP conclave. They utilise Twitter, Instagram, ShareChat, Telegram, TikTok and WhatsApp to forward their content. Many can manipulate images and make and upload GIFs or videos and vodcasts. A significant minority can programme, hack, and make deep fakes as testified to by the horrifying porn videos made of critical journalist, Rana Ayub, and the Sulli Deals and Bulli Deals websites on GitHub that pretend to 'auction' off prominent Muslim citizens in India

(Pandey, 2021).[4] Protecting the communications 'rights' of millions of Indians who circulate genocidal disinformation against minority communities and other forms of misinformation (for instance, medical and misogynist), are state actors and corporations such as Alphabet and Facebook. Facebook whistle-blowers Sophie Zhang and Frances Haugen and reports in the Wall Street Journal (Purnell & Horwitz, 2020)[5] in 2020 revealed Facebook's deliberate choice to keep high ranking Facebook staff in post who were supporting hate speech and disinformation: senior government and ruling party figures who advocated hate and violence against Muslims on Facebook and WhatsApp had been on the radar of some of Facebook's employees who had alerted senior employees' that this disinformation and incitement should be taken down. However, dangerous posts were not taken down. Frances Haugen and others have surmised that this was because the then head of Facebook India Ankhi Das was sympathetic to Islamophobic discourse (Pahwa, 2021).[6] The revelations did not prompt any changes of practice. One official was removed and the next head of Facebook India was chosen for their historic ties to the government and ruling party. This is consistent with a pattern followed by large tech companies across many Global South countries with transitional media systems, and latterly in Europe and the United States. Despite these partisan appointments, Meta faces lawsuits in India demanding the de-encryption of WhatsApp messages on government demand.

<a>CONCLUSION

Over 30 years – and especially during the recent past – vast numbers of Indians have lived their lives bathed in multiple formats of anti-Muslim, anti-democratic, and pro-Hindutva propaganda. Similarly, tailored propaganda against certain minorities also affects Chinese, Hungarian, Israeli, Myanmari, Russian, Pakistani and Sri Lankan citizens and those from many other countries. Some of the propaganda carried by mainstream media and online platforms stirs fear and disgust against ethnic, religious, caste and sexual minorities; other

content pedals 'fake' stories celebrating the invented economic prowess and heroism of majority communities and their leaders. This media environment was legitimised by racist and Islamophobic rhetoric and imagery broadcast and circulated from the United States, the European Union and Australia after 11 September 2001 (Beydoun, 2020).

In India, the result is repeated atrocities, discrimination, pogroms and lynching of Muslims, as well as atrocities and violence against Adivasis, Dalits, Christians, working class and lower caste Hindus living in North East and North West. The urban pogroms of 1992 (Bombay), 2002 (Gujarat) and 2020 (Delhi), have been interspersed with dozens of vicious bouts of ethnic cleansing. The police and judiciary have, in the main, propagated or legitimised virulent hate through laws and judgments *against* minority communities and assaults on or harassment of complainants from these communities (Open Doors, 2021).[7] Ironically, after the massacre of mainly Muslim populations in parts of Ahmedabad and surrounding areas when Modi was Chief Minister in 2002, a growing number of Hindu citizens evinced resistance to evidence of pogroms shown on English-language media channels as shown by the ethnographic work of Britta Ohm (2010). Journalists struggled to suppress their horror they witnessed mobs and burnt corpses. Hindu citizens reported that they believed they were being critical and media literate in pointing out that 'no Hindu would behave like that'; thus, they claimed, the footage was fake or that the media narratives were skewed to represent the Muslims side; in their view, it was Hindus who had been victimised (Ohm, 2010).

What then is the point of fostering a functionally media literate and ideologically majoritarian citizenry as a key element of media governance if the result can be cadres of internet users who can make and forward compelling WhatsApp messages, memes, GIFs, TikToks, Instagram and Facebook posts, administer groups or share Tweets that are harmful when these individuals succumb to a fascist world view or are in the pay of fascist parties? Even if we suppose that neutral and disinterested citizens attempt to find sources for

information that seems suspect or refuse to forward information before checking it – consistent with the core tenets of critical media literacy – the false information may be confirmed as truthful by co-opted or complicit judges, police, politicians and a mainstream media with leanings towards the right and far right. Thus, the capture of civic and political institutions by right and far right majoritarian parties in countries across the globe is one reason that media literacy and, in particular, functional media literacy that equates criticality with scepticism towards human rights and ethics, is not an answer to systematic or state-sanctioned genocidal disinformation, political manipulation and misinformation.

We must conclude, then, that all discussions of 'literacy' have value-laden connotations and that criticality is a site of conceptual struggle. A tendency in Global North media, political commentary and academia to silo off Global South nations as being particularly vulnerable to populist disinformation because of a lack of media literacy is itself a form of disinformation which disregards the widespread use – and acceptance – of disinformation and fake news globally. Only a strong commitment to media governance by international and regional bodies working with independent fact-checking organisations, local and national human rights groups, critical journalists and moderators, as well as with platform AI-based disinformation detection and policy teams can begin to keep abreast of the genres of dehumanising, risky and violent disinformation and hate speech that are being circulated through transmedia systems in both the Global North and South. Holding discriminatory, but politically protected producers of such content to account in the medium term, and taking down their social media posts after checking in the short term, would be an initial step towards the longer-term possibility of a media governance framework that at first challenges and then disables the conditions – such as bad-faith regulation, weak or ideologically co-opted media houses and paid news – that favour the wider circulation of disinformation and hate speech.

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Notes

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[1] See the accounts of whistle-blowers Sophie Zhang https://www.indiatimes.com/technology/news/facebook whistleblower-sophie-zhang-interview-553162.html and Frances Haugen

https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/oct/05/facebook-whistleblower-accuses-firm-of-serially-misleading-over-safety

[2] See https://www.thequint.com/news/webqoof/alt-news-and-mohammed-zubair-debunk-misinformation-and-track-hate; https://latamjournalismreview.org/articles/brazilian-fact-checking-agencies-are-targets-of-virtual-attacks-after-partnering-with-facebook-against-false-news/;

https://news.un.org/en/story/2022/06/1121252

[3] See, for instance, https://www.usaid.gov/central-asia-regional/press-releases/jun-9-2022-usaid-supports-international-media-literacy; https://www.ugm.ac.id/en/news/20237-ugm-and-whatsapp-launch-digitalliteracy-training-for-women

[4] https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-57764271

[5] https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-hate-speech-india-politics-muslim-hindu-modi-zuckerberg 11597423346

[6] https://slate.com/technology/2021/10/facebook-papers-india-modi-misinformation-rss-bjp.html

[7] https://media.opendoorsuk.org/document/pdf/Destructive%20Lies-Full%20version-DIGITAL-ODUK_2021.pdf