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The Hindutva Media Eco System

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In November 2020, Kapil Mishra, a functionary of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who earned notoriety for inflammatory remarks that triggered a series of violent affrays in Delhi earlier that year, sent out a form through his handle on the social media site Twitter. It was a call for volunteers for an association he proposed setting up, which he chose to name the “Hindu Ecosystem”. Its aim was the promotion of a wide range of causes held dear by the faith, or at least by the party that has appropriated it for narrow sectarian motives. Within two days, he claimed to have 16,000 signed-up volunteers.¹

Among those who signed up were two journalists from a website that specialises in common-sense critique of the media. In January 2020, the two published the results from two months of observing the “Hindu ecosystem”. The purpose of the “ecosystem”, they concluded was “spamming Twitter”, using a simple mode of operation.² “Every week”, the investigation revealed, the ecosystem volunteers “pick up a theme and do an intensive campaign around it, ready with mass propaganda and a bunch of fake news ... to push the Hindutva ideology”.

Links are often shared which the volunteer would have to merely click through, for a message to be posted on Twitter. Calls to boycott certain kinds of cultural activity – from works of literature to TV shows and films – were rife. When the agitation against the three supposed “farm reform bills” was at its peak, attracting the

¹ Ipsita Chakravarty, “Why the New Hindu Ecosystem ... Sounds So Menacing”, Scroll, November 18, 2020; extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/5sptxwa>.

² “Spam” is defined in the online Merriam-Webster dictionary as “unsolicited usually commercial messages (such as emails, text messages, or Internet postings) sent to a large number of recipients or posted in a large number of places”. But the term also has acquired a political definition, as with capturing certain territories in the public discourse with a single-minded message that seeks a particular end.

attention of international pop star Rihanna, a morphed image of the artiste was shared, depicting her in a *hijab*.

Among other common themes often pushed through the “ecosystem” were the glories of the *Sanatana Dharma*, the greatness of Indian temple architecture and the atrocities against the faith perpetrated by Muslim invaders. Also favoured were demographic themes, highlighting the supposed multiplication of the Muslim population that threatened to bring Hindus into a minority in the only land they could claim as their own. The sum of what the investigative journalists found was quite simply put: “Kapil Mishra is leading a network of over 20,000 people who are working in an organised fashion to create and spread communal hatred”.³

Soon after the story broke on what the Hindu ecosystem was up to, a trend emerged on Twitter demanding action against Kapil Mishra for promoting communal hate. This “trend”, a measure that Twitter puts out to reflect the frequency of messaging on a certain theme, was soon overwhelmed by another. In the battle between the Twitter “hashtags”, which reflect the frequency with which a particular theme is featured on the social media site, “I Stand With Kapil Mishra” had soon overwhelmed the call for action against him.

In May 2021, the BJP drumbeater and primetime TV warrior, Sambit Patra, tweeted out a document that purported to show how the Congress was engaged in a campaign to make the Narendra Modi government look weak and incompetent in its response to the second wave of the lethal coronavirus pandemic. The Congress protested, saying that the image of the so-called “toolkit” it was accused of putting out was a compound of disparate pictures from various points in time. Twitter responded to the Congress complaint, which had been officially registered as a police case, by marking Patra’s tweet as “manipulated media”.⁴

Within days, the Delhi Police, acting ostensibly on the Congress complaint, had raided – not the premises of the offender – but the offices of Twitter.⁵ Under the law in force with conventional media, the reporter, editor and publisher are all held equally liable for bogus content. But in the age of the social media, where each

³ Shambhavi Thakur and Meghanad S, “Hate factory: Inside Kapil Mishra’s ‘Hindu Ecosystem’”, The News Laundry, 15 Feb 2021, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/5n76t8vd>.

⁴ See “Twitter flags Sambit Patra’s tweet on Congress toolkit as manipulated media”, The Hindu, May 21, 2021, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/3w6z7j4c>.

⁵ “Police in India raid Twitter offices in probe of tweets with ‘manipulated media’ label”, The Verge, May 24, 2021, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/ujxj99sj>.

platform witnesses traffic in literally millions of messages, these distinctions are vital, and not yet sorted out in most legal systems. The Delhi Police though, cared little for these nuances. They were embarked upon a policy of transforming what was a clear forgery into an item of truth.

These are two incidents from an infinitely large and growing catalogue of abuses of the power the social media. Between them, they throw light on strategies used by the BJP to ensure its untrammelled dominance over the world of information flows. There are two options in use: either overwhelm through force of numbers, or silence through the law of force. India, as the social scientist Thomas Blom Hansen has observed, is increasingly governed by the law of force, rather than the force of law.⁶ When party operatives working round the clock are unable to flood the zone with messages that serve a partisan end, the coercive apparatus of the state can be pressed into the service of transforming falsehood into truth.

Events such as this are strongly resonant of the themes that the philosopher Hannah Arendt took up in a brief but profound essay written in 1967. Titled “Truth and Politics”, the essay records a conversation in the 1920s between Georges Clemenceau, prime minister of France during World War I, and a friendly visitor from Germany, then going through the transformational changes of the Weimar Republic (when the trauma of Nazism was still very distant). What, Clemenceau is asked, would future historians say about the reasons for World War I? Who would be held responsible for triggering that conflagration that for just over two decades remained humanity’s most brutal war against itself?

Clemenceau was not clear on the matter, though his political instincts as a war-time national leader should have led him to absolute clarity. The larger question was one of future historians’ assessment, which he could not answer. Yet he knew for certain, that no future historian would risk his credibility by arguing that “Belgium invaded Germany”.⁷

Arendt recognises the point, since it is a recorded fact that “on the night of August 4, 1914, German troops crossed the frontier of

⁶ Thomas Blom Hansen, “Democracy Against the Law, Reflections on India’s Illiberal Democracy”, in Angana P. Chatterji, et al (editors), *Majoritarian State, How Hindu Nationalism is Changing India*, Delhi, 2019, pp 19-40.

⁷ Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics”, *The New Yorker*, February 17, 1967, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/32fwd9ba>.

Belgium”. It would, she argues, “require no less than a power monopoly over the entire civilized world”, to alter that well-recorded fact”. But is such a power monopoly “inconceivable”? “It is not difficult”, she concludes, “to imagine what the fate of factual truth would be if power interests, national or social, had the last say in these matters”.⁸

A well-worn narrative holds that through the early years of industrial society, as class conflict sharpened, the press remained an arena of partisan contestation. But with the maturity of industrial society and the triumph of liberal democratic values, press freedom became a strongly enshrined value of constitutional governance. This coincided with the industrialisation of the press and the professionalisation of journalism. As James Curran and Jean Seton put the story in their thorough and widely read account of the evolution of the British press: “The press allegedly became free partly as a consequence of a heroic battle against the state ... the economic emancipation of the press from political control... The growth of newspaper profits, largely from advertising is said to have rescued the press from economic dependence on the state”.⁹

There were several ideologues and prophets of the new age of liberal democracy, but a consideration of two among them would be sufficient: Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, separated by roughly three-quarters of a century during which bourgeois democracy grew from a state of incipience to its full-blown state. Kant was perhaps the greatest of the thinkers of the time known as the European “enlightenment”, a state of escape as he put it, from the tutelage of older authorities. The enlightened state was when every individual would begin acting with a sound and well-formed judgment of the principles of “universal legislation”, when he would willingly submit to the laws he would develop and take responsibility for.

Kant was a contemporary of Adam Smith, who theorised that a competitive market, with all its conflicts and potential for abuse, would be the best guarantee of human progress. Indeed, Kant’s thinking on the contest of political ideas and the evolution of a perfect civic constitution, could be regarded as an initial draft of the notion of the “marketplace of ideas”. If allowed to function with few fetters, the marketplace of ideas, where reasonable persons

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power Without Responsibility, The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, London, 1985, p 7.

interact, share their ideas and compete in a spirit of open inquiry, would ensure that the best rise to the surface and the spurious sink to the bottom. That was the best guarantee that the system of governance would be the best suited to the spirit of enlightenment.¹⁰

Writing in more settled and equable conditions of the mid-19th century, at least as far as the European continent was concerned – though he showed little attention to the ongoing conquest of Africa -- John Stuart Mill was absolute in his commitment to free speech. He did not exert himself quite so much in the cause of press freedom, perhaps because like all liberal thinkers of his time, Mill assumed that with laws that met libertarian standards, all voices would be heard. The power to restrain the expression of any point of view, he held inherently illegitimate, no matter if the voice being silenced was hopelessly isolated and demonstrably in error.

The possibility of the majority being in error could not be ruled out, and even if indisputably in the right, the grasp over truth could only be sharpened in a collision with error. To prevent itself from lapsing into the “deep slumber of a decided opinion”, society needed always to encourage those who would question established beliefs and express contrarian opinions. “In sober truth”, he concluded, “the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind”.

The “public” could be variously constructed: in the US, it was the whole white population and in Britain, “chiefly the middle class”. Irrespective of these distinctions, the “public” was always a “mass”, or in other words, “a collective mediocrity”. The singular novelty Mill observed in his time was that the mass did not take its opinion from the authorities held in awe in earlier times -- the church and the state -- or from the ostensible leaders of society. Rather, “their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers”.¹¹

Was the industrial press in the age of the supposed professionalisation of journalism, and the discovery of objective truth, a new form of tutelage, closely akin to earlier forms such as

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, “A Critique of Practical Reason” (1788) in Allen W. Wood (editor), *Basic Writings of Immanuel Kant*, 2001, p 238.

¹¹ John Stuart Mill, “On Liberty”, in *Six Great Humanistic Essays of John Stuart Mill*, 1969, pp 154, 179, 190.

the church and the state? Many years before Mill, as a young journalist seeking radical social change, Karl Marx confronted the reality of press censorship in the Rhineland province of Prussia. He had before him a number of propositions on how far press freedom would be consistent with the broader objects of the social order emerging from feudalism. Marx observed that there was no other sphere in which the “specific estate spirit” – the interests of the various orders of society -- was “more clearly, decisively and fully expressed than in the debates on the press”. This was especially so in the various rationales advanced for opposing press freedom. Freedom of the press, understood in its broadest sense as every individual’s right of self-expression, was a general freedom. But every public figure showed his social class (or estate) interest, in the position he took on the issue, despite florid pretences of speaking for the generality of citizens. These were estates speaking through their individual representatives, expressing the collective intent to deny all others the freedom they claimed as an exclusive right.

As he embarked on a lifelong mission of radical political transformation, free speech was among the first of the rights Marx focused on. On view then were a range of political postures, several verging on the absurd. He dealt with postures that were little short of absurd. Among the speeches Marx heard while watching the proceedings of the provincial assembly of Rhineland, was one by the representative of a princely estate, which held that “the fetters with which the press is shackled, prove that it is not destined for free activity”. The absurdity here was evident as was its inspiration in Germanic romanticism, which saw the law and the state as the point of arrival, a state of perfection that was the very apotheosis of human endeavour. Marx’s ironic refutation, which became the basis for a much wider reflection in later years on the denial of basic liberties under capitalism, was that freedom is the natural state of man and no law could be written to negate that. “No man combats freedom”, he wrote: “at most he combats the freedom of others”.¹²

Many of these themes surfaced afresh during what is called the “progressive era” in the United States. In *The Brass Check*, a novel he was compelled to publish himself in 1919, Upton Sinclair the radical journalist, novelist, and political campaigner, offered a powerful critique of how the press was, behind the façade of “free

¹² Karl Marx, “Debates on Freedom of the Press”, from Marx and Engels, *Collected Works, Volume I*, Moscow, 1975; extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/mry2azm7>.

and objective”, propagating the views of a narrow strata of privilege and wealth. Though now tending to slip into oblivion, Sinclair is still remembered for his work exposing the ruthlessly exploitative assembly line manufactories that had begun to dominate U.S. industry at the time. His critique of the press though, has sunk into oblivion, for reasons not far to seek. As Robert McChesney points out, the media today enjoys the privilege of pursuing its profit motives with little oversight. It also gets to determine the tone of the public conversation. And among its greatest achievements has been to shut out any kind of public conversation about itself.¹³

The radical critique of the media did not by any means end with Upton Sinclair. It may have been suppressed by the advertisement driven and supposedly objective media of the time, but the years since have witnessed sporadic efforts at revival. Notable among these have been Ben Bagdikian with his landmark 1983 work, *The Media Monopoly*, before Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman took it to a new high with their 1988 work, *Manufacturing Consent*. Both have gone through multiple later editions, but a neglected classic along the way is Vance Packard’s *The Hidden Persuaders*, published in 1957 and received with much opprobrium, since it was seen to deeply undermine of what was seen to be media freedom at the time.¹⁴

The media publishes two kinds of content: news and editorial are one, and advertising is the other. The difference between the two is that there is an inherent claim to “truth” only in one. News and editorial content is meant to influence the reader or audience in terms of its opinion about any matter of contemporary relevance. These could have a bearing on his or her actions as civic beings living within a social state. Advertising has the narrower object of influencing the audience’s purchasing behaviour. It does not necessarily advance a truth claim. Indeed, in advertising, truth can often be dispensed with in the quest for an attractive appearance that could induce a buying decision.

Advertising is one of the most loosely monitored areas of global business. It also has enormous clout, since the news media recognises its power to determine its fortunes. Vance Packard’s work in 1957 detailed the influence that the advertising industry

¹³ Robert McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media*, 2008, chapter 3, “Upton Sinclair and the Contradictions of Capitalist Journalism”.

¹⁴ Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders*, 1953, Amazon Kindle edition, 2007.

exerted on everyday life, through its various manifestations. The advertising industry pushed back, typically with broadsides like this: “Paranoids like Vance Packard, author of *The Hidden Persuaders*, have made fortunes peddling the fiction that advertising is some arcane force that causes you to act against your will. It is hogwash”. On a contrary note, in his foreword to a golden jubilee reissue of Packard’s book, Mark Crispin Miller noted: “The history of America since the Civil War is, in large part, a history of conquest by commercial advertising... the history of an ever-rising flood of corporate propaganda – and also of our various responses to it, as *We the People* have obscurely struggled to reverse it, or resist it, or to live our lives in spite of it, or have simply let it carry us away”.¹⁵

The marketplace of ideas in other words, could soon become the playground of the highest bidder, who could effectively decide what gets heard and what gets buried. If advertising is a licence to misinform, how far does the news media live up to its mandate to be a source of authentic information? The news media thrives on the virtue of transparency, but feels no obligation to subject itself to that virtue. Yet, partly because it is of such importance to the corporate sector and the advertising industry some estimates of the sources through which the news media derives its revenue are available (table 1).

The newspaper industry prior to the pandemic disruption of 2020, was used a situation in which it earned well over two-thirds of its revenue from advertising, where it faced no obligation of truthfulness. The television media presents a slightly different picture, though only superficially (Table 2). The important qualification that needs introduction here, is that the revenue listed against the “distribution” function does not belong to the content producers. It goes, rather, to the cable operator or the DTH service. The content producer has to compete for a share of the advertising money that is spent on TV, and with the proliferation of channels in recent times, there is no reliable estimate of where the ad money is going. Indeed, fixing the TV viewership ratings has become the main game in town with the proliferation of channels, an enterprise that obsequious channels have been particularly successful at.¹⁶ A

¹⁵ Mark Crispin Miller, “Introduction”, to *Ibid.*

¹⁶ A chargesheet against the chief editor and principal promoter of Republic TV, among the most aggressive channels in pursuing the regime’s agenda, was filed in June 2021 by the Mumbai city police. The case has languished since power was captured by the BJP and a faction of the Shiv Sena

similar crisis of credibility also besets the newspaper readership surveys, following bitter recriminations among the major publishing houses every time the results are published.¹⁷

The skew in favour of advertising in news media revenues is so pronounced that in an unguarded moment, the Vice-Chairman of India's largest media company, Bennett Coleman and Co Ltd., asserted that his business was advertising rather than news.¹⁸ A hasty retraction followed after his remark drew much adverse public attention, but the inconvenient truth had been blurted out in that unguarded moment, bringing great clarity to the relative priorities of the news industry.

An inquiry is also called for into the agenda setting power of commerce. Advertising is the main driver of media profitability, and purchasing power is the single metric that matters to the advertiser. The media industry is challenged today by a shift in advertiser priorities. Print is seen to be less effective in terms of delivering value for ad money invested, though TV continues to retain its promise. The expanding new frontier is digital media and even if TV manages to recover its share, there may not be enough going around for the clamouring mass of channels in existence claiming to be in the business of news.

Since the global financial meltdown of 2008, corporate advertising budgets have been under pressure and the competition among media outlets for the slowly growing pool of advertising money has been frenetic. Anxieties among the high purchasing power strata grew at the same time over a possible loss of privilege from the pursuit of a rights-based policy idiom. A strongman able to revive jaded nationalistic tropes and sway crowds with a message of rage and resentment, promised distraction from a reasoned discourse.

in June 2022. See "TRP Scam: Arnab Goswami named in Mumbai Police Chargesheet", *Indian Express*, June 22, 2021, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/yc86pz8f>.

¹⁷ The National Readership Survey formed by a consortium of publishers, advertising agencies and market research firms, was the industry standard for much of the 1990s, until a rival grouping set up the Indian Readership Survey. The two often produced contrary results, creating a public spectacle of incessant squabbling between rival newspaper groups. In 2008, the NRS, beset by severe problems of credibility, suspended its operations. The IRS continued though with indifferent results ever since. Since 2020, it has not resumed operations. See Sukumar Muralidharan, *Freedom, Civility, Commerce: Contemporary Media and the Public*, 2018, pp 345-7. Also, see "Indian Readership Survey Suspended", published by the marketing and advertising website WARC February 21, 2014, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/2p9p7a6u>.

¹⁸ Ken Auletta, "Citizens Jain", *The New Yorker*, October 1, 2012, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/2tn2pyfz>.

Print and TV news then began to adopt various strategic manoeuvres to staunch the haemorrhage of advertising to digital platforms. An active promotion of hashtags that cater to the mood of the moment among the affluent strata, began to be one way of driving audience and potentially ad traffic. That these commercial strategems also constituted an inducement for the older media to emulate the “echo chamber” effects of the new, was a matter of deep worry for seasoned journalists and observers of the media. But clearly, the profit compulsion overwhelmed all else.

Table1: Newspaper revenues by advertising and circulation (in rupees crore): figures for 2021 and 2023 are forecasts. Source: FICCFrames Annual Report on the Media and Entertainment Industry.

	2019	2020	2021E	2023E
Advertising	20,580	12,170	15,210	16,290
Circulation	8,990	6,820	8,490	9,480
Total	29570	18990	23700	25770

Table 2: Television advertising and distribution revenue (in rupees crore)

	2019	2020	2021E	2023E
Advertising	32,000	25,100	30,400	34,500
Distribution	46,800	43,400	45,600	50,200
Total	78,700	68,500	76,000	84,700

Table 3: Total Adex in Indian Economy, 2011 to 2020, by traditional and digital sectors

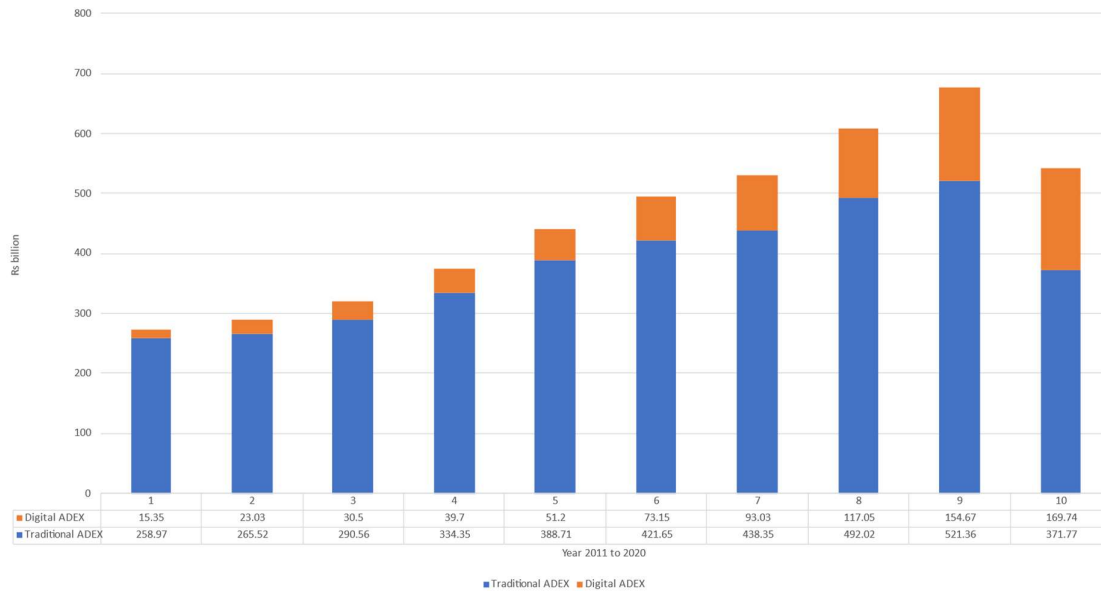


Table 3 presents the long-term trend in advertising expenditure in the Indian economy. Clearly, there has been a shift from advertising expenditure in “traditional” media sectors such as print, television and radio, to the digital format over the years. The shift was gradual to begin with, but may have accelerated with the pandemic, compounding an already acute crisis of profitability for the media industry. With pressures building on the bottomline, the media industry has had to cut back on news gathering expenses. And in an effort at earning at least a few decimal fractions of the advertising money migrating to the digital format, it has begun increasingly to follow the trends that are suggested by the “hashtag” ecosystem.

In a 2018 book, the veteran journalist and media observer Pamela Philipose described how the BJP succeeded in India’s “most

mediatised election” in 2014, in capturing the public space through a coordinated effort across all media platforms.¹⁹ In 2018 again, an undercover journalistic investigation by the website Cobrapost, unravelled in vivid and disturbing detail, how some of India’s biggest media corporations were eager to take up the advocacy of a political agenda for assured financial rewards. Launched in 2017, Cobrapost’s “Operation 136” took its title from the global rank India was awarded on the annual press freedom index compiled by Paris-based Reporters Sans Frontieres (RSF).

If that was a deeply mortifying moment, more bad news followed. In April 2018, RSF downgraded India another two places, on grounds that merit some attention. The hyper-nationalistic cohorts closely gathered into Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s orbit, the RSF argued, had assumed the authority to determine the forms of media practice that could be tolerated, and those that must be ruthlessly put down. Often enough, unquestioning faith in the political leadership was the touchstone. “Hindu nationalists”, the RSF said, had been “trying to purge all manifestations of ‘anti-national’ thought from the national debate”. These officially encouraged exercises in thought-control ensured that “self-censorship (was) growing in the mainstream media and journalists (were) increasingly the targets of online smear campaigns by the most radical nationalists, who vilify them and even threaten physical reprisals”.

Operation 136 laid bare how the media industry was an eager participant in its own enslavement to the new hyper-nationalism, which came bundled with commercial incentives for anybody who signed up for it. Responding to the blandishments of an undercover operative from Cobrapost, top media executives expressed their eagerness to push the political agenda commonly referred to as Hindutva, since it could amply pay its way. It mattered not that the agenda was deeply destructive of basic civility, indeed a threat to the security and the basic constitutional rights of minorities and other vulnerable social groups. All that mattered was the commercial imperative.

Media executives who engaged the Cobrapost provocateur rather than showing him the door, ended up revealing the most inglorious tricks of their trade. Most of them found nothing amiss in the proposal to begin an advertising campaign that would in its first

¹⁹ *Media’s Shifting Terrain: Five Years that Transformed the Way India Communicates*, 2018.

stage, exploit mass sentiments of piety by deploying words and images from the legends of Krishna, a figure from the Hindu pantheon who unlike Ram or Ganapati, had been sparingly used in political mobilisation.

From these first invocations of Krishna and his battlefield sermon of duty and commitment, the Bhagavad Gita, the campaign would escalate to a second stage, where its tools would be the mockery of Prime Minister Modi's political rivals. The third stage would seek active polarisation, to excite a sense of animus towards the "anti-national" social groups and promote Prime Minister Modi's sole claims to represent an India on the pathway to fulfilling its burgeoning ambitions.²⁰

On May 22, 2019 as the million plus electronic voting machines that register the popular will in India were being clustered for the count after a gruelling campaign and 38 day long schedule of polling, *Columbia Journalism Review* posted an article rich with cross references, titled "Results expected in India's 'WhatsApp election'". Exit polls indicated a surprisingly comfortable win for incumbent prime minister Narendra Modi, described in turn, as a "divisive Hindu nationalist". Though a number of issues were at stake in the election, including matters of life and livelihood, what had been most riveting was "the rampant proliferation of disinformation and hate speech online". "Traditional media" with its significant presence in the public sphere could not evade responsibility, but the more serious aggravation by far, had been caused by social media platform Facebook and its wholly owned messaging app WhatsApp.²¹

A few days later, long-time media observer Sevanti Ninan provided a thorough and rather depressing account of the "delegitimisation of the media as an institution" over the first five-year term of the Modi government. Among the principal causes was the "cooption" of the media by the "ruling establishment". The media has rolled over and played dead, rather than risk offending a powerful regime that emerged in the general election of 2014, headed by the first

²⁰ The Cobrapost story is narrated in Sukumar Muralidharan, *Freedom, Civility, Commerce*, pp 431-40.

²¹ Jon Allsop, "Results Expected in India's WhatsApp Election", *Columbia Journalism Review*, May 22, 2019, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/3ptw5u8n>.

prime minister to command an absolute parliamentary majority since 1984.²²

As Ninan points out, Modi was categorical from very early in his first term in office, that he had no use for the traditional media. His approach, which has been executed by a large cohort of eager acolytes, has been to create a media system that compels older outlets into the abject quest of emulation, in the hope of gaining some traction with the audiences that matter. This perhaps explains why large sections of the mainstream media see no way out of the crisis of profitability they are facing, than mimicking the loud, obstreperous and intolerant tone that the regime seeks to foster through the social media.

Three days after his 2019 triumph, even more decisive than forecast by the exit polls, Modi addressed the senior leadership and newly elected members of parliament of his party and its coalition partners. Alongside the call to duty and service, the main themes of his 75 minute speech in Hindi, Modi issued several explicit warnings about the media. The signals were clear: the Prime Minister would not in his second term retreat from the contentious relationship he had maintained with the media through the first.

Modi's unique political success and his impact on the social and communal fabric, cannot be understood without reference to the use he and his core constituencies have made of the internet and the new media. There is a strategic sensibility underlying this approach, a shrewd reading of how the structural transformations of the internet age have exposed fault-lines in traditional media which could be exploited for political advantage. The Ericsson Mobility Report (EMR) issued every six months, provides data on the volumes of transactions taking place over the mobile phone network in the world's principal markets. Data transactions over the internet have, unsurprisingly, multiplied several times since 2015 when India's biggest industrial conglomerate Reliance – with political clout unmatched in business history -- entered the market with a subsidiary operation, Jio, that offered virtually free data plans. As with the growing Reliance presence in a number of sectors, its entry into telecom was facilitated enormously by

²² Sevanti Ninan, "How India's Media Landscape Changed Over Five Years", The India Forum, June 6, 2019; extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/sb8y6ssx>.

indulgent policy, which treats the corporation as virtually an extension of the government.²³

EMR clubs India along with Nepal and Bhutan as a market, but the numbers could safely be assumed to pertain mostly to India. In the last quarter of 2018, the average data traffic over each smart-phone in India was estimated to 9.8 gigabytes (GB) per month. This was sharply up over the earlier year's figure of 6 GB per month. Going back to 2015, the data traffic on each smart-phone was a mere 1.5 GB per month. Factoring in the rapid growth in smart-phone numbers, the total data traffic over the mobile network had increased from 0.3 Exabytes per month in 2015 (each Exabyte is a billion Gigabytes) to 4.6 in 2018.

A 2019 survey by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism found that most news in India was consumed in the video format.²⁴ An ethnographic survey of fake news in India, released in November 2018 by the BBC, spoke of memes and images as fast growing idioms for the exchange of news and the formation of collective solidarities. This study, which involved voluntary access to the cellphone messaging services of a number of active social media participants, revealed that "nationalism" was a major driver of fake news. Among participants in the survey, "facts were less important to some than the emotional desire to bolster national identity". The personal was political in the realm of the social media. In empowering users to vent their anxieties in the confident belief that these would gain resonance with others similarly inclined, social media had empowered citizens in a perverse fashion. And analysis "suggested that right-wing networks (were) much more organised than on the left, pushing nationalistic fake stories further".²⁵

The right-wing has understood that reality to create a corrosive populism that actively pursues the disenfranchisement of those at the margins. Media practitioners committed to values of liberalism are yet to discover an antidote for this growing malaise. The growing recourse to coercive means, where once the right-wing had absolute mastery over the media ecosystem, may suggest a

²³ Daniel Block, "Data Plans: How government decisions are helping Reliance Jio monopolise the telecom sector", *The Caravan*, February 1, 2019, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/52saxsnj>.

²⁴ *India Digital News Report*, RISJ, University of Oxford, 2019; extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/57ns6e4t>.

²⁵ "Nationalism a driving force behind fake news in India, research shows", BBC News, November 12, 2018, extracted November 2022 at: <https://tinyurl.com/37x4b7hs>.

certain vulnerability, an awareness that the campaign of misinformation and myth is fetching diminishing returns. There are opportunities to reverse the tide before the political damage becomes irreversible.