Anti-media populism: Expressions of media distrust by right-wing media in India

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ABSTRACT

Criticism of mainstream media as being “biased” has emerged as a defining characteristic of right-wing discourse all over the world. Such expressions are coupled with the establishment of right-wing news outlets that seek to undermine professional journalism. But while scholars have examined the operation of such outlets in the context of Western democracies, anti-media populism in the Global South has received little scholarly attention. Through a thematic analysis of articles published on OpIndia.com—a right-wing news site in India, this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature and identify the discursive strategies employed by the right-wing media to discredit the mainstream press in India.

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Introduction

Criticism of mainstream news media organizations has emerged as a defining characteristic of contemporary populist movements, notably those on the right (Holt, 2018; Moffitt, 2016). Indeed, the notion that journalists are biased and that professional news organizations conceal or distort information that does not fit their “politically correct” agenda (Haller & Holt, 2019) has become an article of faith among right-wing politicians across the world. In the United States, for instance, President Trump has accused journalists of being purveyors of “fake news” (Grynbaum, 2017). Similarly, in Germany, Frauke Petry, leader of the right-wing populist AfD party, has referred to the country’s establishment media as “Lügenpresse,” or lying press, while in Brazil, President Jair Bolsonaro has dismissed investigative reporting as “fake news” invented by a corrupt establishment (Boadle & Slattery, 2018).

Underpinning such expressions of anti-media sentiments is a pervasive attempt by right-wing political forces to define mainstream news media as part of a liberal establishment that collaborates with ruling elites (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) while being “unwilling to, represent ordinary people and their needs” (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2175). And, while the expression of such views within right-wing circles is not new, the internet has facilitated the unprecedented emergence and expansion of media outlets that enable right-wing groups to critique mainstream news sources all over the world, including in numerous non-Western countries. However, despite this development, the emergence and impact
of right-wing news outlets within the Global South remains an understudied phenomenon.

This study aims to address this gap in the literature by analyzing the attacks on mainstream media mounted by India’s leading right-wing online news portal OpIndia.com. Founded in 2014, OpIndia.com describes itself as a platform for “alternate discourse and right-liberal ideas,” and is the most-visited right-wing news portal in India, receiving 4.63 million unique views in May 2019 compared to the next most-visited right-wing site Swarajya.com, which had 3.22 million unique visitors during the same period. Moreover, unlike other right-wing sites that focus on media issues only sporadically, OpIndia.com offers a sustained critique of mainstream media through its Media and Fact Check sections. Finally, OpIndia.com enjoys considerable support within the ranks of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, many of whose top leaders not only support the outlet on social media platforms but also mention and disseminate news stories produced by it ("PM Narendra Modi mentions," 2019). Motivated by these defining characteristics, this paper undertakes a thematic analysis of the site’s articles that criticize the mainstream press. It identifies and unpacks the discursive strategies adopted by OpIndia.com to discredit mainstream news media sources and argues that the attacks by this right-wing outlet are aimed at eroding the credibility of professional journalism in India and offering an oppositional perspective to mainstream media discourse that it perceives to be biased against the right.

**Literature Review**

Mudde (2004, p. 562) defines populism as a “thin ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and holds that politics should represent the general will of the people.” Indeed, populists not only accuse so-called “elites,” of depriving the “people” of their rights but actively present themselves as the only ones capable of restoring popular sovereignty through the elimination of intermediaries (Engesser et al., 2017). Among the political and cultural elites frequently targeted by populists are mainstream journalists who are often portrayed as part of the power structure against the “collective will” (Haller & Holt, 2019, p. 3). But, although a critique of corporate media is manifest in both left-wing and right-wing populist discourses (Waisbord, 2018), in the current context it is right-wing populists who have explicitly positioned themselves against mainstream media through the articulation of discourses that undermine the latter’s claims to legitimacy.

Within such discourse, legacy journalists are frequently portrayed as supporters of the political “establishment,” (Greven, 2016) who are “not fair or objective in their reports about society” (Tsafati, 2003, p. 67). Mainstream journalists are also accused of being “biased, partisan and deceitful” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a, p. 1228) and of using “double standards when judging established elites compared to representatives of populist movements and parties” (Krämer, 2018, p. 139). The rise of partisan online platforms that allow populists to express anti-media sentiments as well as “wean parts of the audience from traditional media” (Krämer, 2017, p. 1303), has moreover enabled the amplification of this discourse. Scholars such as Atton (2015) suggest that such platforms – particularly those provided by right-wing media – not only provide perspectives that diverge from those visible in the mainstream press but simultaneously suggest that these positions
represent the views of the “people,” rather than corrupt professional elites such as journalists (Hameleers, 2018).

**Anti-Media Populism in India**

In the case of India, current expressions of anti-media populism emanate primarily from supporters of Hindu nationalist organizations such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) and the Rashtrtiya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) as well as the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Indeed, the BJP traces its roots to the Bharatiya Jan Sangh, the political arm of the RSS, many of whose members played a key role in the formation of the BJP in 1980. While there is no formal relationship between the Hindu nationalist organizations and the BJP, they are deeply linked through a “majoritarian conception of national belonging” (Basu, 2017, p. 5), reflected in the Hindutva or Hinduness movement that militates against the “history of postcolonial secularism which had been at the foundation of conceptualizations of an independent Indian nation-state” (Basu, 2017, pp. ix–x). Broadly, these organizations identify the authentic “people” of India as “Hindus,” whom they view as being deprived of their “rights,” due to policies designed by the country’s Westernized “elites,” who seek to “appease” minorities such as Muslims for political gains (Chopra, 2019). Meanwhile, the ruling BJP government also seeks to emphasize economic policies aimed at creating a distinctive populism in which

> the “people,” encompassing the poor, the newly urbanized neo-middle classes and middle-class Hindus … are cast against a secular, “anti-national” liberal “elite” who are seen as corrupt because they monopolize power, resources and prevent “development” while pandering to non-Hindu minority groups. (Chacko, 2018, p. 543)

Journalists – particularly those employed by English-speaking outlets and viewed as opposed to this mix of majoritarian identity politics and neo-liberal economics – have frequently been targeted as part of this so-called liberal elite. These attacks have mainly come from members of the urban, tech-savvy middle classes (Udupa, 2015) who arguably comprise the readership of sites such as OpIndia.com. Indeed, the BJP, its affinity organizations, and their supporters have long had a contentious relationship with many mainstream English language outlets. Tensions with this sector of the news media initially emerged in the early 1990s, as a result of what the Hindu right perceived to be the English language press’s negative media coverage of the Ram Janmabhumi movement² (Rajagopal, 2001). The conflict, however, became especially pronounced when the BJP government of the state of Gujarat, led by Narendra Modi, was criticized for its failure to control sectarian riots involving Hindus and Muslims in 2002. In fact, some segments of the national press suggested that members of the BJP government had actually been complicit in organizing the violence that resulted in the deaths of nearly a thousand people, mostly Muslims (Ram, 2012). Not surprisingly, media coverage, particularly by television news channels which carried the riots “live,” drew considerable flak from BJP and its supporters who accused mainstream outlets of unfairly “demonizing Hindu organizations and their supporters” (“Hindu Vivek Kendra,” 2002). Right-wing activists were particularly enraged by editorials that called on Modi to apologize for his government’s actions during the riots. Arguing that non-BJP leaders were never asked to apologize in similar situations, this demand they suggested, reflected the anti-BJP/anti-Hindu stance of mainstream media outlets.
When Modi was cleared of involvement in the riots by India’s Supreme Court in 2012, his supporters’ perceptions that the mainstream media were biased against Modi in particular and the Hindu majority in general, were further strengthened. Meanwhile, Modi himself took the position that he was the “victim” of an orchestrated media (Sardesai, 2018) campaign and sought to entirely circumvent the mainstream press by largely avoiding press conferences and interviews, even after becoming prime minister in 2014.

But while Modi has avoided the mainstream press, his supporters have emerged as a major locus of opposition to professional journalism, operating individually on social media platforms (Mohan, 2015; Udupa, 2015) and institutionally through the platforms provided by right-wing sites (Chadha & Bhat, 2019) whose content typically combines “emotive Hindutva issues and developmental concerns,” as well as support for the BJP government (Khan, 2015). While several such sites exist, as previously explained, OpIndia.com is especially notable both in terms of the unique visitors that it receives as well as its explicit focus on media critique, which is why we chose to focus on it.

To gain insight into the nature of the anti-media populist sentiment as manifest in the content of OpIndia.com we conducted a thematic analysis of media-related articles published on the site. All articles that appeared on OpIndia.com which referenced mainstream news media between January 1, 2018, and December 31, 2018, were initially selected for analysis. We chose this time period because it comprised the year before the general election of 2019, a period during which mainstream media coverage was likely to be the object of considerable attention. The site published 284 articles on India’s mainstream news media during the aforementioned period. This dataset was then refined through further reading. Articles that mentioned mainstream media but did not involve media critiques were removed from the dataset. This produced a final dataset of 260 articles that formed the basis of our thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis can be defined as “a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found within a data set” (Nowell et al., 2017). We chose this method because – as Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest – it is “flexible” in that it is not “theoretically bounded,” and can be applied to a range of research questions while simultaneously enabling the researcher to produce “a rich and detailed, yet complex account of data” (p. 5). Our thematic data analysis was conducted through an inductive approach, which Patton (1990, p. 453) defines as a method where themes identified are strongly linked to the data themselves. That is to say, inductive analysis involves discovering patterns, themes, and categories in data that are not limited by established or pre-existing definitions and aims to “highlight the most salient constellations of meanings present in the data set” (Joffe, 2012, p. 209).

We began by undertaking a close reading of the articles to familiarize themselves with the data. This was followed by a process of open coding in which the researchers worked together to identify preliminary patterns within the data. This was an iterative process in which we returned to the data repeatedly and resolved points of disagreement through simultaneous readings and discussions. Subsequently, we grouped these preliminary elements into themes which, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), “represent some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Eventually, five broad themes emerged in the data illustrating the nature of anti-media sentiments articulated on OpIndia.com. These themes include highlighting errors in mainstream media
coverage, attacking individual journalists, publicizing media criticism by prominent individuals, and representing mainstream media as pro-elite as well as anti-Hindu. In the following section, we discuss these themes in greater detail.

**Findings**

**Highlighting “Media Mistakes”**

A dominant theme among the articles published by *OpIndia.com* was to highlight any misquoted statements, incorrect headlines, or errors that appeared in mainstream news outlets. While it is outside the purview of this paper to determine whether these mistakes were the result of sloppy practice or something more sinister, they were nevertheless amplified and presented as exemplars of “fake news” by the site and arguably perceived to be so by its readers, many of whom played a key role in bringing these “mistakes” to light. In this regard, *OpIndia.com*’s response would seem to be similar to that of right-wing media outlets in European countries which “epistemologically” position themselves as “exposers of mainstream media’s “fake news” (Holt, 2015, p. 53).

Thus, for example, on November 20, 2018, the site 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 right-wing activists who “discovered” this error in the headline, the *OpIndia.com* 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.com* 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.com* sought to represent the mistake as an intentional attempt to deceive the public. As the site put it:

>This 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).

In a similar vein, international news outlets were also called out by *OpIndia.com* for reporting “errors.” In one such case, the portal attacked the BBC for inaccurately identifying *TheBetterIndia.com* – a website that highlights positive news about India – as a purveyor of fake news in a report that it produced on the issue. And while the BBC accepted the “error,” and issued an apology to the founder of the website, *OpIndia.com* made the case that such mistakes not only revealed the “shoddy” work of the BBC but showed the latter to be trafficking in “fake news” (Sharma, 2018b). In fact, the very acknowledgement and correction of errors by mainstream news organizations was used by
OpIndia.com to make the case that mainstream news media could not be trusted to disseminate accurate information.

Such attacks – which mirror global efforts by right-wing anti-media populists to “call out” legacy media “mistakes” – are aimed at challenging mainstream journalism’s claims to “being an authority” (Carlson, 2017, p. 7) that have been traditionally predicated on adherence to professional values such as accuracy and facticity.

“Naming” and “Shaming” Journalists

Another significant theme that emerged in our data were attacks on journalists and media owners associated with the mainstream press – particularly those deemed to be opposed to the ruling BJP or affiliated organizations. Such personal attacks – which are similar to those mounted on reporters by right-wing outlets in the United States – resulted in numerous OpIndia.com pieces where journalists were criticized for their alleged involvement in sexual harassment cases (“Tejpal, MJ Akbar and Gautam Adhikari Continue,” 2018; “The Wire Puts a Journalist Accused,” 2018), plagiarism (“Book by Indian Express,” 2018) or financial scandals (“NDTV’s Prannoy Roy and Radhika Roy,” 2018). For example, when Vinod Dua – a well-known journalist working for the news website The Wire – was accused of sexual harassment by a female filmmaker, OpIndia.com published a series of articles criticizing both Dua and his employer. For instance, an article published on October 17, 2018, stated:

It was on 14th October 2018 that allegations of sexual harassment surfaced against journalist Vinod Dua, who now routinely misleads his readers and viewers through the leftist propaganda website, The Wire. The allegations were of sexually menacing behavior, classic workplace harassment and stalking. (Sharma, 2018a)

And even after Dua left the organization, OpIndia.com continued to underscore the “hypocrisy” of the mainstream media, which it claimed was quick to condemn others in similar situations but did not speak out against their own. As an article published on December 7, 2018, put it:

The Wire and its coterie had pretended to be the harbingers of women’s rights. However, it is intriguing how the Left’s double standards leave no cause untouched. The collective silence of the entire ecosystem on the shenanigans of The Wire and its journalists only goes to prove that the left will rehabilitate its own no matter what the price is (“As Vinod Dua Finds,” 2018).

Similarly, when some media owners were charged with tax evasion (Bhattacharjee, 2018a; “NDTV in Soup,” 2018), OpIndia.com ran a series of articles highlighting their alleged financial improprieties. The portal also criticized mainstream news organizations for what it perceived to be their failure to criticize the accused. Writing about tax raids at the residence of Raghav Bahl, the founder of the news website The Quint, the OpIndia.com contended:

The media does not want to be subjected to the same standards it sets for others and cries victim every time someone among them is accused of misconduct or investigated regarding some matter. They do not even want law enforcement authorities to investigate them. It reeks of elitism, arrogance, and hypocrisy. (Bhattacharjee, 2018a)

Another line of attack on mainstream journalists involved attacks on their work accusing them variously of “malicious editing” (“After Getting Caught,” 2018), “unethical behavior”
("Journalist' Saba Naqvi," 2018), and producing stories based on "fake data and biased rhetoric" (Bhattacharjee, 2018b). Furthermore, using the free online labor of supporters, OpIndia.com also engaged in extensive surveillance of journalists’ social media postings for any inconsistencies or contradictions. These formed the basis for critique in which any shifts or changes in position were highlighted and publicized as evidence of dishonesty, typically through a side-by-side display of tweets.

While the discourse of professional journalism seeks to present its members as ethical figures who act in the public interest, by highlighting alleged or real misconduct on the part of journalists, OpIndia.com thus attempts to create a parallel and oppositional narrative aimed at attacking the professional integrity of individual journalists.

Media as Partisan and Elite-Oriented

In addition to attacks on individual journalists, OpIndia.com’s critique of mainstream media also included a number of articles that sought to position the latter as partisan and supportive of the established “elites,” once again reprising a familiar line of right-wing media critique that views professional journalism as an “uncritical platform for those in power” (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019b, p. 902). The general thrust of these articles was that mainstream news coverage was unfair to the BJP while favoring the opposition Congress party which until recently dominated India’s political landscape and is regarded as representing the so-called “establishment,” by the BJP and its supporters. For example, referencing media responses to the testimony of a middleman who mentioned Congress leaders Sonia and Rahul Gandhi in the context of the Augusta Westland defense deal in which Congress leaders were believed to have received bribes, OpIndia.com accused journalists of ignoring the story. As the website put it in a story on December 29, 2018:

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) has mentioned to the court that the alleged middleman Christian Michel in his testimony has spoken about one “Mrs. Gandhi” and “Italian lady’s son R”. However, the media and Congress loyalists have taken no time to confound the enormity of this reference… Journalists are conspicuously silent on gross corruption… ("As Christian Michel Names Mrs. Gandhi,” 2018).

Meanwhile, OpIndia.com asserted that mainstream news media were not only quick to attack the ruling BJP government over the recent Rafale aircraft deal case, but that they persisted in doing so even after the Indian Supreme Court ruled that it would not sanction a probe into the case. Suggesting that the media employed “double standards” while judging representatives of their party compared to established elites such as the Congress – which Krämer (2018) identifies as a popular right-wing discursive strategy – the website argued:

All the claims and allegations made by the opposition and other critics in the Rafale deal with regard to decision making, pricing and specifications have been thoroughly denied and explained by Government, however, the claims had never stopped and even blatant lies and fake information have been repeatedly peddled regarding the Rafale deal ("Concerns for Congress", 2018).

In another example, following news reports linking the Congress party to the controversial data analytics firm Cambridge Analytica, OpIndia.com published an article suggesting that mainstream journalists were unwilling to investigate the issue further due to their pro-Congress sympathies. As the piece which appeared on March 30, 2018, stated:
Sections of media are keenly interested in ensuring that the Congress’ alleged involvement with Cambridge Analytica is not considered seriously by the public (Nithesh, 2018).

Similarly, numerous other articles suggested that mainstream journalists sought to actively support the Congress and its leadership. For instance, in a piece dated December 23, 2018, OpIndia.com highlighted what it perceived to be an effort by well-known journalist Barkha Dutt to compare the “accessibility” of former PM, Manmohan Singh, to that of the current PM, Narendra Modi, suggesting that her attempts to project Singh in a more positive light vis-à-vis Modi were motivated by pique at being excluded from the access to powerful circles that she had enjoyed due to her pro-Congress orientation. As the article put it:

In her attempt to glorify Manmohan Singh, Barkha Dutt may also have liberally interpreted the “openness” of the UPA government as it had allowed the likes of Barkha Dutt and others to play a larger role in deciding the selection of cabinet ministers during the UPA government, as opposed to the present government who has ignored and shown the door to several journalists-lobbyists of the Congress era (“While Issuing Clean Chit,” 2018).

In fact, OpIndia.com articles frequently referred to mainstream journalists as “Congress-friendly media” and “Congress-loyal journalists” – thereby aiming to position the mainstream press as being part of the corrupt establishment elite as represented by the Congress party.

In keeping with the theme of representing mainstream media outlets as supportive of the opposition Congress party, multiple OpIndia.com articles also criticized the latter’s framing of issues, contending that the press not only failed to credit the Modi government for what they termed its “good governance” and “corruption-free” administration (“India on Global Corruption,” 2018) but also failed to acknowledge the social welfare and economic development projects that it had undertaken. In one such article published on November 22, 2018, OpIndia.com attacked a news outlet which had highlighted the slow expansion of rural broadband connectivity in India under Modi’s BharatNet initiative, implying that its coverage was unfair because it focused on the Modi government without recognizing the limited expansion of internet connectivity into villages under the previous government (Singh, 2018).

In yet another piece, published on October 22, 2018, OpIndia took another outlet to task for questioning the criteria for inclusion/exclusion in a public health insurance scheme launched by the Modi government, claiming that the coverage had failed to note that “thousands had benefitted” from the program and that moreover the exclusions were based on long-standing census classifications (“Newslaundry Presents Half-Truths,” 2018). In fact, OpIndia.com published several such articles questioning what they perceived to be the mainstream media’s negative coverage of initiatives launched by the Modi government (Banerjee, 2018; “Bogibeel Bridge,” 2018) and suggested that such coverage was rooted in the pro-Congress/anti-BJP stance of most mainstream outlets.

Chakravartty and Roy (2015) point out that such efforts are aimed at putting the established media, particularly the English language media, on the defensive while positioning Modi and his government as the “victim” of an elite “news media conspiracy” (p. 316), arguably with the goal of neutralizing criticism and ensuring more favorable coverage in the future.

Publicizing Criticism of Mainstream Media by Prominent Individuals

Another key theme revealed in our thematic analysis was OpIndia.com’s emphasis on publicizing criticism of the news media by celebrities as well as prominent individuals such as
Air Marshal Savur’s revelation on Twitter is shocking, to say the least. It is hard to imagine a journalist holding the power to threaten an air commodore to let her enter a sensitive area with impunity ("Barkha Dutt Threatened," 2018).

Moreover, the article also used this example – which was disputed by the journalist in question – to make the broader assertion that her behavior exemplified what OpIndia.com deemed to be “the glaring media insensitivity and irresponsibility,” as well as their willingness to “compromise national security” (“Barkha Dutt Threatened,” 2018).

In another instance, on July 6, 2018, OpIndia.com ran a story detailing how the Minister for Information and Broadcasting “called out” the television channel NDTV for both running an incorrect image and, upon being criticized, changing it without acknowledgment of its error. Furthermore, OpIndia.com sought to suggest that the channel had only apologized due to the Minister’s critique (“Minister Rajyavardhan Rathore Slams,” 2018). In a similar vein, when former Foreign Minister Sushma Swaraj corrected information tweeted by television journalist, Nidhi Razdan in 2018, OpIndia.com published an article claiming that the journalist had been “pulled up” by the minister for spreading “misinformation” (“Nidhi Razdan Gets Pulled Up,” 2018). In fact, even though the entire incident appeared to be something of a misunderstanding in which the Minister responded to one of two tweets sent in succession by Razdan – who later apologized for the fact that her first tweet was “seen in isolation” – OpIndia.com nevertheless highlighted the Minister’s initial response while downplaying the fact that Razdan had clarified the situation and that the Minister had even thanked her for doing so.

Among other such stories run by OpIndia.com that involved criticism of the mainstream media by notable individuals was a piece in which the chief justice of India admonished a news outlet for publishing confidential materials related to a corruption case involving a high-ranking official (“Here is Why Furious Ranjan Gogoi CJI,” 2018) as well another in which judges from the Delhi High Court issued notices to various media outlets for disclosing the name of a minor who had been raped and murdered (“Delhi HC Issues Notices,” 2018). In sum, OpIndia.com thus provided a platform for the dissemination and amplification of media criticism by influential figures and used this critique to buttress and legitimize its own anti-media rhetoric.

**Media Biased Against India and Hindus**

A final theme that emerged in our analysis of OpIndia.com’s media critique was the site’s attempt to define the mainstream press as being biased against national as well as majority Hindu interests. In articulating this notion, OpIndia.com hewed closely to notions of perceived “liberal” media bias that have long been an article of faith among members of conservative and other right-wing groups in countries such as the United States (Hemmer,
Indeed, the site carried several articles which argued that the “left-liberal” press “peddled” an anti-India narrative, particularly in coverage related to India’s relationship with Pakistan. For instance, in a case where Indian journalist Rajdeep Sardesai thanked the Prime Minister of Pakistan for releasing an Indian citizen who had been held in Pakistan on charges of espionage, OpIndia.com ran a story on December 18, 2018, where it stated that the release had been due to the efforts of the Pakistani judiciary as well as the efforts of the Indian government rather than the government of Pakistan. The story implied that not only was Sardesai’s gratitude misplaced but that it revealed his pro-Pakistan sympathies. As the article put it:

It is rather appalling that the sermonizer-in-chief, Rajdeep Sardesai was seen hailing the Pakistan Government for their efforts (which actually does not exist), towards the homecoming of Hamid Ansari (Mohta, 2018).

In another instance where some Indian journalists were invited to visit Pakistan in order to cover the dedication of an infrastructure project located on the Indo-Pak border, OpIndia.com published a series of articles questioning the criteria for the selection of those journalists and expressed concern at what it perceived to be the exclusion of certain outlets. The story also questioned the patriotism of journalists who were invited. In this regard, an OpIndia.com article commented:

Several questions are now being raised about the list of “approved” journalists and the zeal with which they have been participating in peddling the “aman ki asha” (hope for peace) line of argument while in Pakistan. How were these journalists “selected”? Were the ones who are more likely to be sympathetic towards Pakistan’s line of argument chosen? … While Pakistan regularly sends gun-wielding terrorists to India with the sole aim of bleeding India with a thousand cuts, the jubilation displayed by these journalists do make citizens uncomfortable … (“Corridor of Love”, 2018).

In addition to underscoring what it characterized as the mainstream media’s “anti-India” stance, OpIndia.com also sought to frequently emphasize what it perceived to be its “anti-Hindu” orientation, publishing numerous articles suggesting that the news media tended to favor minorities. For example, in a stance reminiscent of right-wing outlets in the U.S. which frequently decry “liberal” attempts to declare a “War on Christmas” (Cassino, 2016), OpIndia.com published an article claiming that mainstream news outlets displayed negative attitudes towards Hindu festivals while celebrating those belonging to what it called “Abrahamic” faiths (“Celebrations on Christmas,” 2018; “If Ramzan Was,” 2018). Comparing television network, Times Now’s coverage of the Hindu festival of Diwali with Christmas, OpIndia.com said:

Before Diwali, Times Now urged followers to exercise restraint to achieve their weight loss goals. With Christmas around the corner, however, Times Now has no such words of caution for their followers and even urge them to taste the “perfect plum cake recipe” (“Celebrations on Christmas,” 2018).

Similarly, when a 24-hour television news channel, CNN News18 invited its viewers to send pictures and videos of people who violated the ban on the use of fireworks during Diwali, OpIndia.com contended:

It has become par for the course in recent times. Every Hindu festival is mired in negativity. From Holi to Makar Sankranti to Dussehra, efforts are made to raise environmental concerns
on these particular days while ignoring them for the rest of the year … the activists and the mainstream media and the state machinery need to step back right now and contemplate on the true motivations of their actions and stop hiding behind noble intentions. ("Mainstream Media is Evil," 2018).

In a more serious vein, OpIndia.com also contended that professional journalists tended to be biased against the interests of the Hindu community. For instance, seeking to counter a story by television news channel India Today about low-caste Hindus being unable to enter a famous temple, OpIndia.com asserted that not only was the story untrue, calling it “fake news,” but suggested that it was anti-Hindu since it aimed to “create a wedge” between the upper and lower castes ("Fact Check: Are Dalits Not," 2018). The site also devoted considerable effort to producing articles claiming that mainstream media unfairly highlighted crimes involving minorities as instances of hate crimes. In a story that ran on September 26, 2018, OpIndia.com accused the mainstream media of “turning” the death of an 8-year old Muslim boy into a “lynching,” stating:

The unfortunate incident was a result of a playground scuffle between children. The liberals have long trivialised words like “hate crime” and “lynching” to suit their own agenda and narrative of communal hatred. However, using a bunch of children to further their agenda is a new low that the leftists have managed to achieve ("Liberals Turn Death," 2018).

OpIndia.com sought to reinforce this point by running several articles that challenged mainstream media accounts documenting hate crimes against Muslims. Claiming that the data used in these stories was “shockingly biased,” OpIndia.com said the cases included had been “cherry-picked to build the narrative of Hindus attacking Muslims” ("Barkha Dutt Uses Fake," 2018). Meanwhile, other articles on the portal sought to highlight instances in which they believed Hindus had been victimized by Muslims, claiming that these received little attention from mainstream media outlets – which OpIndia.com asserted – were quick to sympathize with minorities but disregarded the suffering of Hindus. In fact, OpIndia.com even contended that mainstream news outlets not only minimized crimes committed by Muslims but unfairly implicated Hindus in these crimes. As a story dated June 10, 2018 put it:

Some left-leaning media had earlier carefully omitted and retracted stories related to alleged crimes committed by the members of minority community, while deliberately bringing Hindu religion even to those crimes committed by the Muslims ("Did Times of India Deliberately," 2018).

This positioning of journalists as pro-minority and anti-majority by the right-wing portal OpIndia.com tracks closely with findings from several European cases. For instance, Føgerschou and Ihlebæk (2019a), in their examination of articles related to the mainstream press published in Norwegian right-wing media, found that populists claimed that professional journalism favored immigrants while, according to Krämer (2018), right-wing anti-media populists in Germany view the media as “downplaying acts committed by migrants and minorities.” Indeed, the claim that mainstream media reportage is biased against non-elite majorities is frequently reiterated within right-wing discourse where it is typically deployed to undercut mainstream journalism’s claims to values such as neutrality and balance.
Discussion and Conclusion

The expression of anti-media sentiments by right-wing forces – a constitutive element of populism – through partisan ideological platforms such as OpIndia.com has thus emerged as a significant feature of the Indian media landscape. And though we did not analyze content from other (less popular) right-wing sites in this study, prior research indicates that they too seek to discredit professional journalism employing critiques similar to those adopted by OpIndia.com (see, e.g., Chadha & Bhat, 2019). These attacks on the mainstream media are generally articulated through a discursive repertoire aimed at undermining the claims to accuracy, neutrality, and ethics that underpin professional journalism’s occupational identity and legitimacy. For example, the strategy of “highlighting mainstream media mistakes” is used by right-wing outlets such as OpIndia.com to engender skepticism and mistrust in the professional practices of mainstream news sources (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a, p. 1223). In other words, they engage in what Stiernstedt (2014) calls “interest-based” criticism that seeks to challenge the credibility of established news organizations within society. Similarly, by “naming and shaming journalists,” as well as “publicizing critiques of journalism by prominent individuals,” right-wing outlets seek to challenge public perceptions of journalists as ethical and acting in the public interest, thereby affecting their ability to position themselves as actors who have the right to “create legitimate discursive knowledge for others” (Carlson, 2017, p. 182).

Meanwhile, by characterizing the mainstream media as “biased against India and Hindus,” as well as “partisan and elite oriented,” outlets such as OpIndia.com seek to challenge the latter’s self-presentation as neutral actors who serve a crucial societal function by “enabling public discourse,” that is based on “facts, selected by professional actors, and published following professional rules” (Holt et al., 2019, p. 861). Hemmer (2016) calls this approach “elite populism,” whereby populists speak as representatives of the “people” against the elite, of which the media are held to be a part.

Overall, the rise of OpIndia.com and similar right-wing sites signals the growth of a right-wing populist media sector in India. This media speaks to those who feel alienated from the mainstream news media and perceive right-wing and right-leaning sites as offering a necessary corrective to mainstream media narratives, especially those offered by the English-language press. Indeed, to many supporters of the Indian right, sites such as OpIndia.com articulate the legitimate concerns of a so-called “silent majorit,” – which in their view – are not adequately or fairly reflected within the mainstream press discourse. Put differently, the emergence of right-wing sites represents an attempt to constitute a parallel discursive arena where right-wing and right-leaning individuals can develop oppositional counter-narratives to what they deem to be biased mainstream media perspectives.

This development closely mirrors global trends in which right-wing outlets not only engage in media critique that seeks to negatively characterize the so-called mainstream media as unprofessional but to also provide what they perceive to be credible alternatives to mainstream news (Figenschou & Ihlebæk, 2019a). In doing so, they engage in discursive practices that arguably create what Magilchrist and Böhmg (2012) have termed “rips” within the “hegemonic formation” represented by professional news outlets.

Moreover, since OpIndia.com and other similar sites are followed/endorsed on social media by Prime Minister Modi, his cabinet colleagues, as well as activists associated
with the Hindu right, they are able to play a significant role in normalizing right-wing populist ideas, especially as they relate to the mainstream press. Indeed, media observers have pointed out that outlets such as OpIndia.com – frequently working in tandem along with BJP politicians, supporters, and activists on social media – play an increasingly visible and critical role in attacking the credibility of Indian news organizations and effectively multi-casting and redistributing anti-media sentiments to audiences on a range of online platforms (Sardesai, 2018). And with the projected increase in the number of internet users in India especially in rural areas, combined with the rapid expansion of right-wing media such as OpIndia.com into so-called vernacular languages, this trend is arguably likely to gain further ground, enhancing the ability of the latter to not only potentially draw audiences away from traditional media outlets but also shape perceptions about mainstream journalists and journalism in the Indian context.

Notes

1. For example, conservatives in the United States have argued that that mainstream media are characterized by a so-called liberal bias since the 1940s (Major, 2012), while the term lugenpresse was used by the Nazi regime to discredit opponents (Noack, 2016).
2. The Ram Janmabhumi movement, led by the Hindu right, was aimed at rebuilding a temple at the birthplace of the Hindu deity Lord Rama by demolishing a 16th-century mosque believed to be standing on the temple’s original site.

References


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