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Max Planck Institute for the Study of
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser
und multiethnischer Gesellschaften

MMG Working Paper 14-10 • ISSN 2192-2357

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Online Archiving as Claims to History:
New Media and Religious Politics in India



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MMG Working Paper 14-10

Max-Planck-Institut zur Erforschung multireligiöser und multiethnischer Gesellschaften,
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity
Göttingen

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ISSN 2192-2357 (MMG Working Papers Print)

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Abstract

This paper explores the case of right-wing Hindu nationalist volunteers in India, to turn a critical eye on a digital practice that has become prominent on social media in India in recent times – the assembling of facts, figures and treatises as an ideological exercise by the net-savvy ‘non-experts’. Building on ethnographic fieldwork among social media users in urban India, I argue that the practice of online archiving constitutes a distinct politics of history-making, pertinent especially for the varied ways in which online users participate in religious politics. Online archiving for religious politics offers a sobering, and even troubling, picture of the digital commons, and unsettles some of the universalist claims underlying much celebrated user-generated content.

Keywords: Social media, online religious politics, India, Hindu nationalism, online archiving.

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In 2013, soon after India's Apex Court upheld the constitutional provision to criminalize homosexual intercourse, a well-known English language journalist with a massive Twitter following flashed a tweet: '3 regimes with severe anti-gay laws. Apartheid South Africa. Stalin's Russia. Nazi Germany. World is laughing at India thanks to crackpot judge'. As quickly as the tweet had gathered some attention, an alert online group of right-wing Hindu nationalists seized it to launch an offensive against the seemingly left-leaning lady journalist. Working briskly to substantiate this as a case of contempt of court, the online workers for Hindu nationalism assembled legal precedents, case studies and Court pronouncements, and posted its 'findings' on 'Indiafacts.com', a website with an avowed mission to 'act as a watchdog by closely monitoring anti-India and anti-Hindu propaganda, distortion and slander'.¹ Citing legal texts to clarify what constitutes contempt of court, the website declared that the journalist's tweet could be liable for charges under the nation's principal law to protect the sanctity of the judiciary. The journalist reacted quickly and tweeted an apology, mindful of the mounting cases of contempt of court in which even the mightiest politicians find it hard to wriggle out. Showcasing the apology tweet as a victory to their online vigilantism, the website proudly declared that the apology was a direct result of its exposé and posted the story under a separate section of the website, 'IndiaFacts Impact'.

The challenge thrown at the journalist by the volunteers of IndiaFacts and the trap of confession they laid for her through a quick assortment of legal cases and excerpts represents one of the numerous online activities of the self-declared 'Internet Hindus', who constitute a new group of right-wing Hindu nationalist activists in India. Aside from targeting journalists who are critical of Hindu nationalism or seen as insufficiently respectful of Hindu traditions owing to their professed liberal secularism, these 'Internet Hindus' are active in gathering texts, commentaries and arguments which portray the fecund repertoire of Hinduism as the civilizational essence of India, and shove them aggressively into online media through Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and hundreds of websites. With unending enthusiasm, they trace, store, categorize, and retrieve online webs of information and debates about Hindu kingdoms, Hindu deities, Hindu mythologies, Hindu-Muslim riots as well as Christian and Islamic theologies.

How do these practices of 'Internet Hindus' signal new forms of political agency emerging along social media? How do these practices reflect and reshape the frac-

1 <http://www.indiafacts.co.in/about-indiafacts/#sthash.EvguiZmo.dpbs>
(accessed on 5 February 2014)

tured politics of religious difference in India which witnesses, among other things, episodes of interreligious conflicts on different scales on a regular basis? What features of global network architecture and national media cultures underlie these practices? What do they say about the purported secular mediations of new media, and the euphoric pronouncements on new media's potential to transcend social divides with their peer-to-peer communication architecture?

This paper explores these questions by turning a critical eye on a distinct practice that has become prominent on social media in India in recent times – the assembling of facts, figures and treatises as an ideological exercise by the net-savvy 'non-experts'. I call this practice 'online archiving'. Based on ethnographic fieldwork among social media users and religious-political authorities in Mumbai and Bangalore in 2013, as well as content analysis of online texts, I argue that online archiving constitutes a distinct politics of history-making among a growing number of online Hindu nationalist volunteers such as the moderators of *Indiafacts.com* and a much smaller number of pro-Islamic activists.

In advancing the argument on archiving-as-history-making, I turn attention away from archives as mere 'institutions of memory' (Hartley, 2012, p. 157) writ in a technicist approach, towards archiving as an active political 'practice' (Couldry, 2008) to reconfigure contentious memory-making as claims to power. Here, memories concern the claimed histories of an undivided 'Hindu nation' and history-making refers to the active and ever improvising practices of assembling data to weave and revive a particular narrative of the nation – efforts which are no longer confined to the formal corridors of knowledge creation or bound by the disciplinary definitions of history in the academia.

Online-archiving-as-history-making shares the features of conventional archiving – systematic storing, categorizing and retrieving information (Povineli, 2011) – and in turn constituting and legitimating certain forms of knowledge, which is a key social consequence of media from the earliest forms of writing (Goody, 1976) to the advent of print in fifteenth century Europe (Eisenstein, 1983). However, it is distinct from the earlier forms because of the exponential growth of digital media and innovations in storage devices in the last two decades. The innovations and expansion of storage capacities are shaped in part by informational economy's massive appetite for data as a source and medium for capital accumulation (Harvey, 2010) and peer driven technological advances which have altered the scale, architecture and experience of archiving by adding speed and multiplicity. While much critical literature on archiving in the Foucauldian tradition focuses on state-power nexus in which archiving rep-

resents a form of state governmentality, or ‘reverse archiving’ among the subalterns which disrupts the legitimating effects of state authorship precisely by replicating state archiving practices (Appadurai, 2002; Bandopadhyaya, 2011), online archiving among Hindu nationalist volunteers draws attention to forms of belonging and contestations beyond the formal realm of state knowledge, foremost of religious-political communities. The multiple claims on the author-function then constitute a deep politics of history, which are not limited to static storage and classification, but a dynamic and continuous online work through which grids of data, textual narratives and visual images on religious communities and theologies are pushed into the public domain to wrestle for legitimacy. The border-crossings between authorized and non-authorized speakers in archiving (Brown and Davis-Brown, 1998) disrupt organizational controls over data and their order, and even their aesthetics,² whether of the state, religious institutions, mainstream media or expert historians.

The challenge to the authorial legitimacy of traditional religious sources through online practices is widely studied in the context of Christianity, revealing vernacular forms distinct from institutional Christianity which have created ‘a dispersed vernacular authority that enforces a self-sealing ideology’ (Howard, 2011: 3). This is in relation to technology’s active mediation of religious experiences as ‘voluntaristic’ and self-driven. Howard shows that a certain section of Christian believers in the US formed user groups and moderated blogs and forums, in ways that ritualized online activities of rendering Biblical prophecy through ‘End Times’ interpretation created a ‘social entity [which was] made authoritative by everyday believers’ repeated choices to connect’ (7). Similarly, Heidi Campbell (2010) has shown that ‘virtual ecclesia’ is created when virtual communities imagine themselves as an online congregation. Although what emerges from continuous contacts resemble affinity spaces which relate to established authorities in various ways (including those available for systematic channeling) and not always non-institutional vernacular authority as Howard argues, the important insight of dispersed agencies forming self-sealing ideology through non-institutional (and yet-to-be institutionalized) online practices become relevant for other religious-political contexts as well. These scholars explore in detail conversations and dialogues about religious experiences and theological interpretations, including the intensely fought contestations over evolutionary his-

2 Citing Martin Heidegger, Brown and Davis-Brown note that archives assumed aesthetic and architectural features to ‘acquire the appearance of invulnerability, veiled in mystery, containing the value above all earthly values: the pure capacity to produce values’ (1998: 20).

tory versus creationism in the US. There is however scant theoretical attention on storing, categorizing and retrieving information which are crucial for the constitution of dispersed agencies in the religious-political sphere and their claims to history.

Turning attention towards this important practice, the paper develops the concept of archiving as an important online practice for religious nationalism. Archiving, as used here, is distinct from ‘archives’ since it refers not to any ‘end product’ with a certain completion of form, content and coding, but a practice that imagines and aims towards it, incorporating its varied features as well as infusing variations and exigencies in the course. More important, it is a dynamic endeavor – filled with ready ripostes and commentaries rallied against opposing narratives – than an exercise confined to designing and maintaining web portals for information display, or in other words, mere curation of ‘data’. It is also an emic category since archiving is a popular term among social media users in India, who draw reference to or use various Internet archiving platforms as part of their regular online activities.

Using the case of Hindu nationalist volunteers in India as a lens into online media’s creative work at archiving as history-making,³ I show how these new contenders to archiving power engage the media ‘to make and command what took place here or there, in this or that place, and thus what has an authoritative place in the contemporary organization of social life’ (Povineli, 2011, pp. 150–152). While this is not to argue that the Internet is used only for the purposes of Hindu nationalism or Islamic radicalism – however construed – and even more so since Hinduism and Islam are expressed and experienced in splendidly different forms of popular religiosities on contemporary media, the growing salience of ethno-religious debates among the Internet enabled urban youth prompts a deeper inquiry into their practices as well as the Internet itself as a medium which is at times hastily theorized as a secularizing machine. Although an important body of recent literature has examined the deep

3 I do not make the claim that online archiving practices, as defined, are exclusive to the Internet Hindus. Without doubt, this is a shared online practice inspired by the very architecture of network resources. Online practices of historicizing one’s own community are also seen among the Dalits, the lowest in the status ranking of caste hierarchies in India, as Rohit Chopra (2006) argues in an important study of the narrative symmetries between Dalit and Hindu nationalist discourses on new media. The case of Internet Hindus reveals the intersection of this practice with historically constituted field of religious difference, pointing to a broader point that the Internet are not expanding aside from the historically shaped social world, but very much in relation to it. I draw on the concept of ‘proto-agency’ in the subsequent sections to highlight the Internet’s intersection with the historically shaped religious difference.

inroads of Hindu religion into the online media (Campbell, 2010; Helland, 2007; Scheifinger, 2009), there is yet scant research on how ethno-religious politics increasingly find the Internet as an arena to gain credence and audience in South Asia.

The paper begins with a discussion on Hindu nationalist efforts to define a history for Hinduism, and the expansion of the Internet and online Hindu nationalist workers in this fissured landscape of religious-political history-making and their practice of archiving. Arguing that this practice is shaped by the culture of 'Hindu national realism' mediated by television in India (Rajagopal 2007), the paper discusses history-making among 'Internet Hindus' through two frames of 'evidence building' and 'truth effects', to demonstrate, in the conclusions, that online archiving for religious politics offers a sobering, and even troubling, picture of the digital commons and user-generated content.

History for Hinduism

Rewriting historical narratives about Hinduism and reclaiming Hinduism as a political concept have been a central preoccupation for Hindutva (Hindu nationalist) ideologues since the earliest years of its inception in colonial India (Hansen 2001; Jeffreot, 1996; van der Veer, 1994). Shaped in part by the colonial state techniques of divisive politics and hardened further by the politics of religious difference in postcolonial India, these efforts have centered on essentializing Hinduism to produce a homogenized Hindu nation. The political agenda of rendering a history to Hinduism embodies the profound paradox of Hindu nationalist strategy. Here, the stigmatization of Semitic religions is accompanied by its emulation (Jeffreot, 1996, p. 346). Thus, as with Christianity and other Semitic religions, belief is not only articulated in theological terms, but endowed with a faith in its history. Aside from ascribing a single authoritative text for Hinduism (the *Bhagavadgeeta*), Hindutva proponents have endeavored to provide it with central religious institutions, publicizing a panoply of historical figures and political symbols cast in the idioms of popular Hindu texts and imageries. In a context where people follow a range of Hindu practices which invoke piety, spirituality, humanism and collective rituals at the same time, these strategies have always wrestled with diverse forms of public religiosity and religion's uneven nexus with formal politics. Yet, Hindu nationalists have remained consistent in their vision to assign a single history to Hinduism which is defined in large part by

a strongly shared assumption that the intellectual sphere and the professedly liberal-secular Nehruvian Indian state have conspired to silence the injustice meted out to the Hindus by Muslims and Christians, as rulers, missionaries or scholars.

Such efforts to yoke the sacred with the modernist tropes of evidenced heritage have assumed a new scale and force today, as history has erupted into an even more embattled field. No longer confined to the disagreements between warring camps of the Western educated academic elite – which is a common occurrence in the debates between those seen as left-liberal historians and those who accuse vilification of Hinduism as an orientalist trap and secular liberalism as disregard for the sacred, it is now a field of intense contestations among ‘non-experts’ and the ‘common public’.

Several recent instances bear evidence for Hindu nationalists’ claims on ‘history’, and the emotional charge of history that underlies their efforts. In 2007, a controversy broke out over ‘Ram Sethu’ – a bridge between India and Sri Lanka which was declared as an artifact of nature (a thirty mile limestone shoals) by the Archeological Survey of India but contested by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, Hindu nationalist organization, which claimed that the structure was built by Hindu deity Rama with his aides from the monkey army (*vānara sena*) to reach (Sri) Lanka and rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana. Protests against the alleged political move to rip Ramayana off its sacred aura signified a battle not only against the clinical view of scientific discourse but the disparate claims on the historicity of Ramayana. Similarly, when Delhi University introduced A.K. Ramanujan’s essay ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’ in 2011, a text which captured in fine literary prose the plural traditions of Ramayana in various regional and folk narratives, Hindutva activists attacked the campus, tearing away the essay, and declaring that Ramayana embodied a single narrative, and a single history. Attacks on the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune in Western India to protest against ‘unflattering’ accounts of Shivaji Maharaj, an important icon for Hindu nationalism in India, were yet another in the line (in 2004). These and many more incidents of framing plural invocations of history as illegitimate and unfaithful of the motherland (*janmabhūmi*) signify a continued battle over ‘Hindu history’.

If in India these attacks reflect a confluence of factors, including pragmatic political moves of diverse groups and underemployed youth seeking the excitement of media coverage, the claims to Hindu history are stronger among a large section of the Hindu diaspora in North America, Europe and Australia, as they negotiate cultural belonging and geographical distance. The task of endowing Hinduism with history, which is now transnational in scope, has rested on the premise that Hinduism

ought to transform into a more masculine faith with a unified symbolic and political center, resting on the territorial logic of the aspired Hindu state and the perceived threat of the Muslim ‘outsiders’. Such an impulse to rewrite history is sharpened by the disjuncture with the past inflicted by colonial experience (Thapar, 2004), even as the Hindutva agenda gained valence at various periods during India’s postcolonial decades, especially after the national Emergency when secularism of the Nehru-Indira Gandhi era came under sharp crisis, releasing a panoply of religious symbols and their allusions to history into political sphere proper.

Drawing attention to the mass mediated nature of Hindutva politics of history, Arvind Rajagopal (2007) argues that the impulse to claim a singular history is shaped in part by the culture of realism in media production in postcolonial India, reflected in documentary films and parallel cinema cast in the motif of modernization or empowerment which flourished alongside mainstream fiction cinema in the 1980s. Describing how cinematic realism was used by Hindutva ideologues to create agit-prop cinema, he shows that this led to the use of cinema as a way to blend historical fact with Hindutva mythology and create a kind of theological realism. The widely watched epic serial of Ramayana on Doordarshan created a ‘mythic idea of history... whose precise status as fact or fiction was not relevant’ (2007: 211). Rajagopal argues that the comfort of not having to clarify the status of the narrative as either fact or fiction transitioned into a phase of reality television when liberalizing media brought Hindutva’s ‘mythic world of marauding Muslims and helpless Hindus’ into a new form of realism backed with assertions of factual data (211). What has new media done in this fissured landscape of crafting hegemonic histories and their shifting epistemological bases? What indeed is the location of new media in this wider politics of Hindutva history?

‘Hindu culture 2.0’⁴

With 80 million active Internet users on personal computers (24 per cent penetration), 39 million Internet users on mobile phones (12 per cent penetration) and 57 million

4 This was the description of online Hindu nationalism in a commentary by T.M. Krishna, classical Indian musician. ‘The Twinned Self’, *The Hindu*, 9 November 2014. http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/columns/t_m_krishna/why-is-the-idea-of-indian-culture-always-connected-with-religious-identity/article6577807.ece , accessed November 17, 2014

on social media (17 per cent penetration), urban India constitutes a growing community of online media users.⁵ Although Internet penetration is eight percent of the overall Indian population, the number of Internet users, at 100 million in 2013, was next only to the USA and China. Optimistic industry surveys anticipate this number to reach 300 million in 2014. The growth of the Internet is part of a broader story of private media expansion in India since the 1990s, when the media and communications sector boomed alongside expanding consumer markets and global capital flows following the rapid, yet uneven, liberalization of the Indian economy. With some surveys estimating 346 million Internet enabled mobile phone connections already in India,⁶ new media in a deregulated context is rapidly making inroads into the public domains of India and the private lives of millions of Indians. Although access to the Internet is still confined to the educated middle classes in urban areas, the expansion of smart phones has added a new momentum to the spread of online networks, including the rural areas which now have close to 292 million mobile phone subscribers.

Despite significant variation in the political ideologies advanced on new media, the growing social media support for Narendra Modi, the controversial right-wing leader from BJP (Hindu nationalist party) who is now India's prime minister, testifies to the deep penetration of Hindu majoritarian ideologies. With close to 8 million followers on Twitter (in 2014), Modi has the largest Twitter following for any political leader in India. Similarly, new Facebook pages and websites appear at regular intervals, sporting new titles and striking visuals, with an aim to establish a Hindu State in India (egs: www.eshakha.com; www.hindunet.org; www.hinduunity.org; Hindu Voice). These sites have multiplied alongside extreme Islamic voices, evident in the routine exchange of abusive comments between Hindutva proponents and Islamic volunteers on Twitter and Facebook. While the impact of these online media voices cannot be overstated, their salience owes partly to commercial mass media in English as well as regional languages looking for discussions within social media as a privileged form of reader-generated content, both as an effort to turn 'interactive' and appeal to the relatively affluent Internet users as the core readership base for their advertisement-led revenue model.

5 The figures are based on a survey conducted by the Indian Market Research Bureau (IMRB) in 2013.

6 Rajini Vaidyanatan, 'Is 2012 the Year for India's Internet?' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-16354076> (accessed on 21 February 2014).

If in the 1990s, cyber Hindutva was largely confined to the Indian diaspora in North America and driven by organized networks of Vishwa Hindu Parishad, it has spread in India in the last two decades, with many cyber channels available at reasonable rates on affordable gadgets. Although a large number of Hindutva online channels are still operated by organized networks of the Rashtreeya Swayam Sevak Sangha (Therwath, 2012), and the BJP with its publicly disclosed budget for social media propaganda, a new group of 'Internet Hindus' have emerged, who do not always display formal affiliation with any organization.

'Internet Hindus' imagine themselves as heroic warriors fighting the ideological battle on their own terms, and upon their own will. To them, online platforms promise an arena where energies can cohere without any top-down mentoring or monitoring, where the youth can find a voice, a means to link these voices on a completely 'autonomous' platform, free of political might and manipulation. Aside from their online support to major Hindu nationalist leaders, 'Internet Hindus' often assume pseudo names or shared IDs ('Internet Hindu', 'The Proud Nationalist', 'The Saffron Knight', 'Ex-Muslim') and remain active on Twitter, Youtube, Facebook, and Whatsapp as well as a range of web portals, with an aim to engage in Hindutva politics as a discursive practice. Internet Hindutva is often presented as urban modernity, raising issues of secular corruption and clean governance alongside criticizing what is seen as the hypocrisy of secularism in Indian politics which disregards the rich corpus of spiritual-political concepts embedded in Sanatana Dharma – ancient Hindu wisdom.

This discursive marking of Hindu nationalism signals new connections between media and right-wing Hindu nationalism in a deregulated context. The media sector was among the first to feel the impact of liberalization in India, when a large section of the commercial English media articulated a news discourse to legitimate pro-privatization politics (Parameswaran, 2004), in the very midst of the expanding regional language media rendering visibility to multiple publics and deflecting the hegemonic discourse of liberalizing 'New India' in multifarious ways (Udupa, 2012). Media's overlaps with Hindu nationalism in a multilingual media field is captured in the well-known thesis of 'split public' by Arvind Rajagopal (2001) which proposes that the English media's secular-liberal news ethos stood distinct from vernacular media's repertoire of news creation which was more amenable for the cultural referents of Hindu nationalism. However, the pro-market ideologies of the English media were also the key point of mobilization among the upper and middle class activists of Hindu nationalism.

The overlaps between pro-market ideologies and Hindu nationalism (Rajagopal, 2001) are replicated in the new media, partly since ‘Internet Hindus’ are English educated, upper or intermediary caste, urban, young, and affluent – a class which has privileged most from liberalization. However, the sense that English media have systematically vilified the cause of Hindu nationalism has driven this youth – the very constituency of ‘monetizable readership’ for the liberalization friendly commercial news media – to embrace social media as an unconstrained and ‘unbiased’ medium for expression. Deepening the elite politics of Hindutva in India, which has historically reflected the middle class and upper class claims to social-political power (van der Veer, 1994), this new generation of tech-savvy Hindutva volunteers draw their symbolic salience in part from the celebratory discourse of the high-tech class as the torchbearers of India’s ascendance as an emerging global power (Upadhyaya, 2009). The symbolic salience of technophilic elite accords privilege even though there are a large number of traders and non-high-tech professionals among ‘Internet Hindus’. Moreover, the renewed idea of ‘Hindu India’ draws inspiration from media narratives about ‘New India’, in that the aspiration to make India a global power combines with an avowed mission to take India to its glorious Hindu past – a trope that is central to Hindutva mobilization in India (Hansen, 2001).

Although by no means uncontested in their claims, as evident in the diverse arguments on religious identities and secular liberalism fiercely advanced on online media, the salience of self-propelled and self-organized online media practices among ‘Internet Hindus’ signal that the economic shifts shaping the urban and tech-savvy ‘new middle class’ have intersected with Hindu nationalism in a deeply co-constitutive way, and mediated by features inherent in network architecture. An important practice in this line, this paper suggests, is online archiving aimed at challenging public discourses seen as anti-Hindu and anti-India through the trope of history.

‘Internet Hindus’ and the fascination for history

Varun Shah⁷, an avid tweeter in Mumbai, who had taken a lead in organizing tweeters for Hindu right-wing politics, was among the active ‘Internet Hindus’ who regularly engaged media commentaries on secular India with the ‘data’ derived from online searches. Heading a small social media marketing company in Mumbai, Varun, in

7 Name is changed to protect anonymity.

his mid-20s, prided his knowledge of new media technologies, while remaining alert to news narratives on television and print media. Rarely did he exit the field of Twitter feed during the day time, as he assiduously followed the tweets of key journalists of English media and those that had braved them to ‘admit’ to the errors. When I met him during one of the Tweeters’ Meets for online Hindu nationalist activists, I noticed the stylish black suit he sported, with a laptop and a projector screen, and a small group of much younger college boys following him as if to take instructions about technical arrangements for the event from this experienced techie. After the event, I cornered Varun for a conversation, to which he responded like a public figure taking questions from a probing journalist, excited about this moment of importance. Yet, his hesitation revealed his discomfort with the prospect of coming out of the cloak of anonymity bequeathed by online media. As my questions became insistent, he seemed determined to showcase the swelling energy among net-savvy youth like him who would challenge ‘pseudo-secularism’ with ‘right facts’. He asserted confidently:

People may bring up any topic on twitter. We have the organization to challenge it. We will defeat it. We have beaten the claims of the Left and CRT [Congi Reptile Tweepie – an accusatory acronym for the Indian National Congress Party]. We have the database of actual facts. Right wing is always right. When you talk about Gujarat riots [in 2002] and Modi, we immediately show that the worst riots happened in 1969 when Congress was in power.⁸

During my fieldwork in Mumbai and Bangalore, the confidence of ‘mastering’ social media was evident not only among social media marketing agents such as Varun, but other young professionals employed in advertising, small-scale retail, computer software industry and finance, as well as college students who volunteered to add voice to the Hindu cause online.⁹ These self-declared ‘Internet Hindus’ amass volumes of

8 The violent riots in 2002 between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian state of Gujarat, have been widely studied as a case of complicit ruling party (BJP) targeting minority Muslims.

9 In his column in *Pioneer* (English newspaper), prominent Hindu nationalist commentator Kanchan Gupta cited an ‘ongoing online survey’ to describe the profile of ‘Internet Hindus’. This survey was open ‘to all Hindus who use the Internet’. The response, Gupta writes, was ‘overwhelming’, although giving no exact number of respondents or the name of the agency that conducted the survey. Of the total number of respondents, ‘88.9 per cent... identified themselves as ‘Internet Hindus’, indicating they attach no shame to the term though their critics would want them to feel ashamed. Of the respondents, four per cent are aged 20 years and below; 55 per cent are aged 30 and below; 31 per cent are 40

data and build online repositories of information on ancient Hindu kingdoms, popular translations of Vedic scripts, pre-independence politics and communal tensions in the postcolonial decades, with a ready corpus of data on riots, clashes and state action extracted from google searches and databases, and stored on free online platforms such as *Scribd* and some drawn from the paid services. Through online platforms, ‘Internet Hindus’ relay and reinforce the central tenets of Hindutva history with a missionary zeal, presenting them as indubitable sets of data. They propose that Aryans did not invade Bharata (Indian subcontinent) but they originated in this land. They share texts about Muslim attacks on Hindu temples and Christian proselytization, as well as eulogizing accounts of the masculine valor of Hinduism exemplified by such luminary historical figures as Swami Vivekananda and Veer Savarkar. One of the key challenges is against what is widely named as ‘Nehruvian consensus’ and how its version of secularism purged the ideals of Hindu culture in favor of ‘minority appeasement’. Thus, statements of Nehru and his contemporaries are regularly dug out, to present them with commentaries and satirical slants. Key to this exercise is the enterprise of narrativizing records and figures in the modern template of building evidence rather than myth. ‘With the coming of the internet and economic liberalization’, wrote a columnist for *Indiafacts.com*, ‘people...[are]...getting access to sources backed by solid evidence, an opulence they were denied before. This has led to a collapse of the Nehruvian idea of India. So what you are seeing now...is renovation of history, not an intolerant phase’.¹⁰ On the digital parking spots, ‘Internet Hindus’ also keep records of online debates they had engaged in, all the while excited with their new-found status as authors.

and below; and, only 10 per cent are aged above 40. In brief, 90 per cent of them are young Indians...43 per cent are graduates (most of them from top-notch engineering, science and medical colleges); 46 per cent are post-graduates (a large number of them have MBA degrees from the best B-schools); and, 11 per cent have PhDs. It is understandable that none of them is unemployed. Those without jobs are still studying (17.3 per cent) and can be found in labs and classrooms of the best universities here and abroad. Of the 82.7 per cent who are employed, 3.1 per cent earn up to Rs 2 lakh a year; 18.4 per cent earn up to Rs 6 lakh a year; 34.7 per cent earn up to Rs 12 lakh a year; and 26.5 per cent earn more than Rs 24 lakh a year. Nearly 60 per cent of them frequently travel abroad on work and holiday. Some 11 per cent have travelled abroad at least once.’ <http://kanchangupta.blogspot.de/2010/03/dont-block-internet-hindus.html>, accessed 17 November, 2014. Blog posted on 14 March, 2010.

10 Chakraborty, Poulasta. ‘Why T M Krishna must stick only to music’, *Indiafacts.co.in*, 13 November 2014. <https://www.indiafacts.co.in/tm-krishna-must-stick-music/#.VGn4cE10yid>, accessed 17 November 2014.

Manish Patel in Mumbai proudly showed me the lists of content he had stored through peer-to-peer data sharing, which had an elaborate grid of material on Hindu kingdoms and riot statistics in India. He said to me that the bank of data he has access to cannot be matched by any ‘half-trained’ journalist in the country. Although not a formal member of any Hindu nationalist organization, Manish now prides a large following on Twitter after he chanced upon and got excited about the ‘material’ on Hindu India which was ‘out there on the net’. Archiving for Hindu nationalism thus constitutes a field of diffused agencies in which a Hindu consciousness is as much an outcome of online practices as it is a force which shapes them.¹¹ Here, religious politics through archiving represents a particular form of online mediation where ‘interaction [between online users] is substantial with forms of its own, and an active process in which the form of the mediation alters the things mediated’ (Williams, 1976, p. 205). Evidently, what binds these geographically dispersed online Hindutva actors in their endeavor for archiving is the motivation to cleanse the ‘dirty world of pseudosecularism’ and its ‘needless appeasement’ of religious minorities, first and foremost by rendering a ‘correct history’. Indiafacts.com, a site which prides of offering ‘authentic news’ to online activists of Hindu nationalism is a striking case for a more organized effort of this type.

Defining itself as a not-for-profit Trust, IndiaFacts.com – when accessed in February 2014 – declared that it is as antidote to ‘spurious brand of secularism’. With the technical clarity of bullet-point rendition and backed with the force of zestful confrontation with ‘spurious secularism’, the portal lists its objectives to:

- Act as a watchdog by closely monitoring anti-India and anti-Hindu propaganda, distortion and slander.
- Counter these distortions with factual and well-researched rebuttals.
- Take legal action against the purveyors of such falsehoods in extreme cases.
- Monitor the media, academia, intelligentsia and the public space in general, and carry out fact checks.

¹¹ This is not to say that Hindu nationalism as a political project was always centralized. Although the movement was articulated through a variety of agents and associations – inviting the description of *‘parivar’* (family) than a single bounded organization, the current moment of Internet Hindutva represents a far more dispersed field of agencies since many net savvy youth hardly ever participate in the daily rituals of organizational bonding at the *‘shakhas’*, local organizational units where the RSS recruits new people and sustains allegiance among those who enter the fold.

- Challenge and discredit the existing narrative, which is chiefly based on Marxist constructs.
- Build a comprehensive repository of various aspects of Hinduism.¹²

Decrying that ‘the irrational hatred against India and Hinduism’ has extended into ‘the expression of Indian and Hindu ideals, history, philosophy, culture, Gods, icons, personalities, sages, and symbols’, the website seeks to remedy the ‘imbalance’ in the public discourse. The key strategy of the website is to engage in ‘fact checking’ and compiling scholarly debates on premodern and modern histories of India. The various sections of the website bespeak their avowed agenda to correct the present with an accurate account of the past. Content is organized under distinct sections labeled as ‘Fact Meter’, ‘Distortion Watch’, ‘History Quarry’, ‘False Liberals’ and ‘Hinduism Q&A’, and the homepage flashes articles that are set in the tone of furious muck-racking, especially confrontations with public figures – litterateurs, journalists, historians, politicians and filmmakers – who utter or imply allegedly anti-Hindu narrative. Thus, under the section ‘Distortion Watch’, ‘Internet Hindus’ serving the website bring to scrutiny facts and arguments presented by public figures in what they categorize as the fields of media, politics, academia, and intelligentsia. The proud exposé of a popular journalist’s twitter slip on the judiciary with an underlying conservative Hindutva opposition to homosexuality is one of the several confrontational archiving practices of the website. Fact checking and online challenge are backed by other standard practices such as archiving articles on ancient Hindu wisdom on statecraft, Indian mercantilism, and Hindu epics, as well as reports on the darker face of the Indian National Congress Party, the Left-wing Parties, the Vatican and the geopolitics of the US. The narrative and memories of undivided Hindu nation ransacked by Muslim invaders and the unending spirit of Hindus to reclaim global power revives and regurgitates the Hindu nationalist story of a besieged nation ready to avenge humiliation, yet positive and confident about its place in the world (Hansen, 2001). At its interactional best, the website invites the readers to contribute to the task of undoing the imbalance, by displaying an enticing caption on the top-right, ‘Got a Distortion or Slander Story? Tell Us’.

To showcase its confident posturing in the public domain, the website flashes a tag to follow its web name – ‘Indiafacts.com, the final word’. The finality of its version of history has a tangible and direct adversary: the national English language media.

¹² <http://www.indiafacts.co.in/about-indiafacts/#sthash.Y1O3Z9CK.dpbs> (accessed on 17 February 2014).

Among online Hindutva activists, the relentless efforts to challenge the English news media stems from a sense of deep frustration at having spurned by English journalists and English educated intellectuals, and their ‘arrogant modernity’ that frames Hindutva as regressive politics with no place in the repertoire of secular news. For ‘Internet Hindus’, English journalists’ reluctance to accept Hinduism as a ‘way of life’ in India and their callous disinterest in the rich Hindu tradition reveal their anxieties to be seen as sufficiently modern – a sign of feeble minds enslaved by western influence. Although the English media’s modernity is itself reflective of their privileged class position in India and their supposed areligious position is mired by many contradictions, the seemingly ‘vernacular’ voice of Hindutva is now more English friendly, and more creative in creating truth effects around histories churned from the net.

‘Screenshot mafia’: Creating truth effects

Archiving practices among ‘Internet Hindus’ are essentially an epistemological exercise, where truth claims of particular sections of mainstream media, caustically described as ‘sickular (and not secular) media’ or euphemized as ‘western media’ are put to question by drawing parallel archives of peer-to-peer media. Aside from reviving and reconstructing historical memories of glorious Hindu kingdoms and injustice against the Hindus, these archives then also serve as informational devices to challenge the truth regimes of organized English media and contest their moral authority, ironically mimicking the very structures of mass media’s claims to truth and popularity. The paradox of embodying the very precepts of the alleged adversary runs deeply in the Hindutva ideology, as pointed out earlier. As a distinct politics of knowledge, these practices install a semiotic practice of ‘evidence-as-riposte’, gathered grounds up by the labor of online users than any large organization feeding the cadre with ready material for use and reuse. Many ‘Internet Hindus’ in Mumbai and Bangalore proudly recounted their efforts to post ‘rejoinders’ to mainstream media narratives on their online portals, which can no longer be ‘put to the dustbin’ by the organized media. A prominent online Hindu nationalist commentator framed this as a war against media ‘elites’:

First, the Net is beyond the control of those who control newspapers and news channels. While the print and audiovisual media have for long excluded contrarian opinion and denied space to those who disagree with absurd notions of ‘secularism’ or question the quality of reportage, the Net has provided space to the ‘other’ voice..... The elite who dominate newspapers and news channels are seen by ‘Internet Hindus’ as part of India’s past, not future. As one ‘Internet Hindu’ writes in his blog, “A large number of ex-elite can’t stomach fact that children of bankruptcy are better travelled, better read and dominate the Internet!”¹³

Often, these online workers challenge media reports by posting the screenshots of the exact lines posted by the journalist, and throwing them back at her/him to demand explanation for factual errors or logical inconsistency. A young lady journalist in Mumbai who was bullied by ‘Internet Hindus’ for her less-than-glorious report of a public rally by Narendra Modi in Mumbai, squarely described these practices as ‘screenshot mafia’. Screenshots are often bundled with long arguments on Hindu traditions, with ingenious theological interpretations of Hinduism as well as Islam.

Such ‘cleaning up’ of mainstream media narratives occurred, for instance, when cyber activists of Hindutva sought to salvage the Vedic hymn *Puruṣasūkta* when a prominent English journalist dubbed this ancient text as anti-woman and anti-lower caste. ‘Internet Hindus’ were quick to challenge her with counter points, alleging that the different organs of the Cosmic Being (*Puruṣa*) represented different *varṇa* (divisions in society) which had an equally valuable place as organs in a body.¹⁴ It is with a greater force of virulence that similar reinterpretations are thrust into the online media, echoing Christian conservative and Zionist trends elsewhere in the world to dub Quran as a ‘terrorist manual’. Accusing the Quran as a terrorist guide, an Internet Hindu in Mumbai added confidently, ‘I can prove it with documentary evidence’. Another self-proclaimed online Hindu nationalist warrior elaborated this further:

Whenever someone writes something about Quran and *Āyāts*, I immediately go and see my Quran. It is a religious matter, it is a sensitive issue so you cannot just do and get away with it. So you prove, yes it is there in Quran. Internet is helping a lot. Go to [...].

13 <http://kanchangupta.blogspot.de/2010/03/dont-block-internet-hindus.html>, accessed November 17, 2014. Blog posted on 14 March, 2010.

14 In the *Puruṣasūkta*, the Brahmanas (upper caste in the current lexicon) emerged from the face of the Cosmic Being, the *Rajanya* (kshatriyas, the warrior castes) from the arms, the *Vaiśya* (merchant caste) from the thighs and the *Śudra* (the labor caste) came from the legs. The translation of different organs of the *Puruṣa* as castes and class denoting status and power is highly disputed, while several commentaries point to the deep implications of the hymn for a hierarchical social order.

com and see for yourself, you will understand everything – what Bible says about women, democracy, women rights etc. For Quran, there are millions of sites. Just type Quran 9/5, everything comes up...simple *ek hi command hai*...[just one command] Quran 9 oblique 5. So they cannot hide. This is the benefit of social media.

The new-found confidence around online materials as evidence signals an important shift underway: here, access to texts and hyperlinks very quickly morphs into an assured sense of authentic knowledge, especially when they are seen as arriving ‘outside’ of mainstream English media in India through ‘global’ channels.

Yet, this evidencing need not always base itself on the seemingly rational grounds of truth but they are, in a curious twist of neutrality, either ‘bad’ or ‘good facts’. Prashant, a young graduate of business administration working for an investment bank, claimed:

The most popular leader on Facebook or on social media is Narendra Modi. The amount of truth about what his role was in 2002 is very much there [on social media]...the *good facts* are there on social media rather than any news channel or mainstream media carrying it.

Prashant spends his time searching for a job in Mumbai city, but never fails to be part of the ‘Patriotic People’s Conferences’ – the offline events organized regularly to amass right-wing tweeters in major cities across India. Prashant had not only tweeted to publicize one such gathering in Mumbai where I met him, but he had also volunteered to shoulder some of the organizational responsibilities for the event, as he continued to relay ‘good facts’ about Modi. For a leader facing the accusation of committing a pogrom against religious minorities in Gujarat and now cleared by the Apex Court of all charges and ascending the high seat of India’s prime minister, the maneuvers of tweeters and Facebook users around bad and good ‘facts’ form a firm base of support. In a manner of adjudicating the charges with all the ‘facts’ available on the online media, Prashant stated, with firm conviction:

So let’s put together what facts are there of his role specifically in 2002 riots. They [the Indian state and media] haven’t found any truth. But most people who are driving it want to do it for the sake of TRPs [television ratings]. They hype it up so that there is some story about it and then there is a definite agenda. So ninety percent of us know every fact about what happened post 2002 only because social media.

Prashant’s confidence around the veracity of social media plays to social media industry’s loud claims about peer-to-peer communication of having overpowered organized media in winning the trust of people, or more precisely, in creating truth effects.

In a run-down office in Goregaon, a Mumbai suburb, we met Manikandan, a self-declared Internet Hindu. Publishing a small Hindu nationalist magazine in Mumbai, this ‘non-mainstream journalist’, as he defined himself, used the blogs and micro-blogging sites to increase the visibility for his magazine. His single room office in a housing colony had a festive look on the day we met him, as the local branch of the Shiva Sena (right-wing regional political party) had organized a free meal under a pandal (temporary tent). His office was filled with papers, files, books and magazines, with a large image of Bharat Mata (‘Mother India’) holding a saffron flag and standing next to a lion, hung on the wall. The wallpaper of Manikandan’s computer had Rama and Sita – Hindu Gods and icons of Hindu nationalism, and he had employed one other senior man to help him run the magazine as well as the website. Although most of his commentaries were relayed through the magazine, his recent embrace of new media brought him not only a larger number of ‘followers’ but also a vibrant interactive ground to contest oppositional claims. During our discussion, he stated confidently:

They [English journalists] are really frightened of the social media. Because whatever they say, they cannot go scot free. They will get rejoinders.

Rejoinders, in Manikandan’s idiom, were akin to verbal slingshot – they can fling, strike and fix the debauched, in the online war of confronting histories. These practices represent digital ‘remediation’ (Bolter and Grusin 2000) of Hindutva practices as the older forms of agitation over history-making enter the continuous, synchronous webs of information display and ripostes which feed into state-driven text book revisions and event-driven forms of traditional contestation (street protests), as an ideological storehouse and an undercurrent.

The politics of history fuelled by the online practices of archiving, trolling and swarming with rejoinders is by no means limited to Hindu nationalists. A section of the Internet savvy Muslim youth engage in creatively assembling theological arguments and historical narratives about Islam and Hinduism, causing unease among the established religious authorities, especially the local Mullahs and the Maulanas, about their growing vulnerability to online agency. Describing at length the various Hindu deities and mythological characters, Irfan Khan in Mumbai, averred that the Hindu deity Rama had committed crime by fighting against Ravana, the demon-king, through unethical means to rescue his wife Sita. No Hindu deity, he asserted, is taintless. Keeping online records of Islamic texts and video sermons of the Imams, Irfan Khan and his friends regularly meet in the neighborhoods to discuss the various the-

ological elucidations of Islam available online, inserting their favorite quotes or their own interpretations on Facebook group pages. Although Islamic voices – diverse as they are – are not uncommon on the net, the number of the Muslim youth active on the Internet is small, reflecting their lower number overall as well as their relatively poor levels of education and limited access to the net within the highly skewed demographics of India.¹⁵ But a degree of commonality in the online practices of religious politics points to what might lie within the online media that prompts and produces them, as they interface the historically inflected tensions between (and co-existence of) Hindus and Muslims in a postcolonial society. I suggest, in the conclusions, that the infrastructure of digital story-telling is crucial for archiving-as-history-making, even as online religious politics fuelled by this practice brings to question the widely prevalent arguments on self-made media in current literature.

Conclusions

In an important body of new media literature on digital story-telling (Lambert 2006; Lundby 2008) scholars recognize the digital infrastructure of narrativizing selves through small-scale, bottom-up online agency which also allows these stories to be shared with others afterwards. Crucial in this conception of digital story-telling is the argument that storytelling ‘is not something invented by the individual, but renegotiated in a cultural process’ shared by others (Erstad and Werstsch 2008: 25). The case of ‘Internet Hindus’ and the Islamic youth suggests that it is this very story-telling infrastructure that enables and gets transformed by religious politics – where the ‘digital story circle’ and its features of collaboration, informality and template

15 Recent media sting operations have drawn attention to organized forms of manipulation in the online domain, especially for discussions on political and religious issues considered sensitive or important. See <http://www.cobrapost.com/index.php/news-detail?nid=4025&cid=23> for a sting operation (‘Operation Blue Star’) by an alternative media group which exposed several social media companies promising online tools to flood social networking sites with messages that can tarnish the image of political opponents or fuel religious riots. Hence, it is not always clear if the hate messages are sent out by members of the same religious community, especially the Muslims, or whether these messages are part of organized and paid cycles of biased content. Although any clear quantitative data is hard to come by, my ethnographic fieldwork in India points to a large number of Internet Hindus and a much smaller number of Muslim youth who are enthusiastic about participating in online discussions on religious politics.

narratives ‘multiply the authors, distribute their energy across a wide field of participants (including some non-human agents)’ (Friedlander, 2008, p. 177). While these infrastructures of agency underlie the practices of ‘Internet Hindus’ and suggest new forms of political agency, they illustrate that the autobiographical obsession in the participation culture (Jenkins, 2006) is not limited to personal stories, but it is also about religious-political communities of which they see themselves as devout members. The avenues of scaling up narratives through online technologies are evident, for instance, by small-scale websites and individual players like Varun and Manikandan multiplying their circles of online ‘followers’ by using and interlinking Twitter, web portals and online data banks through hyper-links, tags and retweets. Much in the same vein, these players were drawn into the template of telling stories and posting ‘status’, which deeply shaped how they relayed the histories of Hindu nation. The continued resilience of Hindutva ideology and their newfound home in the Internet, and religious discussions among the self-declared Islamic supporters, point to the disturbing salience of identity narratives, which are, in the words of Ola Erstad and James Wertsch, a ‘schematic narrative which is resistant to change’ (2008, 30).

In the Indian context, online Hindutva narratives aiming for truth effects draw attention to what Arvind Rajagopal (2007) recognizes as Hindu national realism, which is shaped by its historical opposition to secular realism representing, among other things, specific class privileges in postcolonial India. Hindu national realism blends mythology with historical facts, to create an epistemological rupture in the objectivity driven discourse of secularism. The case of Internet Hindus however suggests that the efficacy of online practices lies in its mimesis of mainstream news media’s realism and objectivity claims. Equally, distinct from Rajagopal’s analysis, this paper has shown that Hindu nationalist politics of history should take account of the agentic moments shaped in part by features inherent in the new media architecture and the broader mediated ecology of ‘reality’ television which prompt us to expand our lens beyond the formal political sphere and national media cultures. Internet Hindu nationalism also prompts a relook at the split public thesis positing a divide between English media’s objectivity norm and regional language media’s cultural repertoire of ‘decency’ and ‘honesty’. That new media upsets this conceptual divide is illustrated by the confidence around the English tag ‘right-wingers’ which is a novelty, as Hindutva politics of the various vernaculars increasingly makes its way into an English-dominated new media, for a new generation of urban middle class social media users for whom hybrid forms of English-Hindi and various regional languages are a rule than an exception. The crisis of secularism cannot then be coded

neatly in linguistic categories, since contestations emerge within the English speaking classes, and across the varied blurred lines of linguistic practices which have emerged with new media.

Important as they are, these network features do not create unchecked agency which begins and ends with digital capacities. As several critical studies on new media propose, political discourses and material arrangements prefigure media action, just as media practices deeply alter these broader structures. Nick Couldry and colleagues theorize this as ‘proto-agency’ which refers to heterogeneous preconditions for digital engagement, which include ‘new forms of agency (understood as such), digital awareness and broader infrastructural changes’ (Clark et al., 2014, p. 2). ‘Internet Hindus’, as this paper demonstrates, benefit from some of these favorable preconditions, owing to their privileged social position, the symbolic salience of net-savviness and a new-found sense of political agency on social media.

Shaped by network features and proto-agentic conditions, archiving-as-history-making has deepened a sphere of practice which is distinct from Hinduism’s online presence in contexts where users have come together to create ‘safe, supportive, and religiously tolerant environments’ (Helland, 2007) through disembodied, yet profoundly sacred, ritual practices (Scheifinger, 2009) and community building through cultural recognition. If online media’s ritual-cultural mediations are pertinent especially for the diaspora, Internet Hindu nationalism articulates the new-found confidence of a domestic class of net-enabled youth, which is strongly linked with global networks of diasporic Hindu nationalist supporters. Archiving as a discursive practice is central to these ‘Internet Hindus’ as opposed to ritual mediations in a traditional sense, since it is an endeavour to produce evidence in the modernist template, yoking the sacred with an overt political agenda.

The case of religious politics of social media through modes of archiving and truth-making qualifies some of the celebratory discourses around digital commons and ‘proam’ as ‘consumer co-created content where expertise is distributed beyond traditional professionalism’ (Hartley, 2012, p. 156). One important critique of these celebratory discourses has come from political economy which has drawn attention to forms of ‘digital enclosure’ shaped by market forces underlying uneven distribution of digital flows (Lessig, 2002) and even higher barriers to public recognition (Couldry, 2008). However, the case of religious politics of online media reveals that limits to shared commonness and its political possibilities could also emerge within the realm of ‘bottom-up practice’ and user-generated content as self-made media. The practices of ‘Internet Hindus’ redirect our attention to new media’s historical-

social determinants, and prompt us to pause over euphoric statements about new media's potential to transcend social divides, adding a sobering note on constant online work which substantiates assumptions of difference and animosity between communities imagined in religious terms and theologies. These digital registers of reterritorialization qualify generalized claims on universal global networks purportedly characterized by an ideologically irreducible chaos (Hartley, 2012) or the optimistic assumptions of digital empowerment as organized commoning against entrenched authorities (Papacharissi 2002).

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