

Shashidhar Nanjundaiah, **News Aesthetics and Myth: The Making of Media Illiteracy in India**, London, UK: Routledge, 2024, 246 pp., \$170.00 (hardcover).

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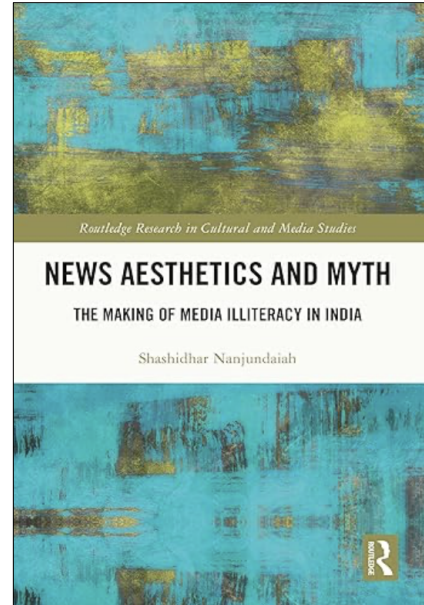
In **News Aesthetics and Myth: The Making of Media Illiteracy in India**, Shashidhar Nanjundaiah, a founding dean and professor in the School of Digital Media and Communication at Mahindra University, provides a deep, detailed argument interrogating linkages among trust, modernity, post-colonial challenges, news aesthetics and narratives, media literacy, and illiteracy.

Nanjundaiah explains that because all media present constructions highlighting, featuring, and emphasizing some elements while omitting or obscuring others, narration is a nonneutral process influenced by history, culture, and societal contexts. For instance, he asserts, when applying familiar aesthetic logics media professionals and prosumers (who have some literacy skills in reading, writing, and creating messages) may be making some communities, activities, and ideas visible and others invisible (doing the work of *visibilization* and *invisibilization*). He warns that this creates problems for contemporary life, because:

Illiteracy is seen as a static absence of literacy . . . : What is not available, we cannot understand. Thus, this illiteracy is the incomprehensible counterpart of invisibility, of silence. Without visibility and articulation, the path for an authoritarian vision and voice is uninterrupted, crystal-clear, decisive. (p. 128)

A core premise of the chapter “Trust, Promise, and Duty” is that digital media fosters doubt regarding a range of topics, and the deterioration of rationality arises from contrasts between impartial, impersonal, journalistic reports, and (some) packaged, “official” versions of events and their reasons. When social media and AI are added to the news and information stream, informed and uninformed opinions are further intermingled. As is described, in contemporary India the algorithms of construction and distribution decisions are increasingly manipulated by nationalistic agendas, and monitoring, professional editorial reviews are absent. Thus, even new media messages are found to reflect aesthetic routines linking messages to preformed narratives.

Regarding the influence of this experience on media illiteracy, Nanjundaiah reasons that competing messages create skepticism, foster the public’s erosion of trust, and contribute to faulty and/or incomplete personal and collective meaning-making. “Rather than acting as thinking individuals, the media prosumer adopts strategies that are derived from a user’s manual—playing a seemingly



transformative role in a controlled laboratory that seeks to maintain the status quo" (p. 71). Because the potential for societal change relies on the carriers of trust, and the observable state-media relations hold the capacity to build up powerful versions of reality (toward which people respond, plan, and act), people are presented with the public acceptance of authority. Furthermore, he explains, as India is at a distinct "narrative moment" wherein there is uncertainty about the future, few(er) media prosumers question assumptions regarding understanding information, misinformation, and disinformation.

Nanjundaiah interrogates the interplay between mediated and prosumer interpretations, by regarding the aesthetic form and the way it interacts with practices of meaning-making and certainty. He explains that news media convert incidents to spectacles, which are integrated within larger narratives, which are then understood within social/cultural myths. To do this, there are four features of aesthetics: display—showing the visible; embellishment of "beauty" and "truth"—reliant on media practices for gathering information; *invisibilization*—being told only what we like to hear, through narration of (an alternative) reality; and the rendering of reality—merging versions of understanding through the form and frame of news as a mode; connecting the presentation of news to art and life through an understanding of the maintenance of the mythological. In the liminal existence of everyday life, mediated narratives thus obscure the layers of the visible and invisible, are manufactured through the implementation of the aesthetics of the news form, and carry consequences for prosumers.

In his analyses, Nanjundaiah shows how the media of India encourage particular political tendencies, while creating stories about imagined communities. When, for instance, messages from Prime Minister Narendra Modi suggest prosperity and strength (and obscure inconvenient facts about poverty and political conflicts), the narratives uphold hegemonic notions of achieved, national, post-colonial modernity. Furthermore, overly positive narratives about Western-style high-rises built by local labor, urban artistic centers, and/or the renaming of (formerly British) landmarks and regions in India also strengthen a particular, incomplete, presentation of the nation. In addition to this, in post-2014 India, politicians have highly influenced several of the media channels, and the Indian mixed-model of government media support (with news independence) has wavered, while popular "news," with English-speaking reporters and U.S.-styled presentations, has supported an increasingly international version of shallow, gimmicky, attention-grabbing marketing schemes (impersonating and displacing trustworthy kinds of journalism).

Into this milieu, fused local and Western juxtapositions of mediated core narratives of globalization and localism in India serve problematic goals. Examples of postreflexive communication, critiqued by Nanjundaiah, support politicized thinking—blending and blurring distinctions between myth and actual history. Media literacy education that instructs people to identify individual instances of untruths does not fully address this wider problem, because when responding to what is offered and ignorant of what has been omitted by the news media and interpersonal information sources, people tend to perpetuate perspectives that align with enduring myths. Thus, the illiteracy of concern for Nanjundaiah resides in unawareness (or lack of responsiveness to the understanding) that narrative and myth function beyond objective rationality and in the domain of trust.

As a compelling example, India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi is described as being shown in news accounts in carefully crafted ways, with emphasis given to his public identities as a statesman, an authority figure domestically and on the world stage, and a visually spiritual "modernized" Hindu leader. Scrutinized excerpts of media coverage of Modi's dramatic speeches and campaign events highlight ways he employs stories to tie his identity to salient national myths about his biography, his understanding of "Mother India" and the promises he makes. Terms, phrases, and pictures are particularly composed to gain and hold attention, and to suggest his connections to international leaders (the "friends" he hugs), the positive elements of his position on the global stage, and his rise to fame and power. In these official media examples of narratives and myths, Nanjundaiah finds Modi depicted strategically, employing the polysemic concept of *vikas* (the improvement of existence) to suggest that his status and success is tied to that of India.

In the chapter "Case Study: The Spectacle of India's Potemkin Village," Nanjundaiah applies aesthetic and mythic criticism to evaluate media coverage of Trump's 2020 visit to India, including: staged areas for motorcades; performative displays of national unity at stadium rallies; and synthetic versions of native songs and dances. Analysis of the reporting aptly makes the point that what is shown and responded to may diminish truthful understandings. By identifying ways the media extended preferred conclusions, and used language, colors, and references to strategically selected elements of the nation's "remembered history" (while hiding Muslim leaders and communities), Nanjundaiah concludes the media amplified Hindu leadership. To Western and domestic media consumers, India is shown and discussed as exotic, traditional, striving to be modern in rural areas, and technological/technical and modern in hyperurban megacities.

In summary, Nanjundaiah has written a significant book, dense with philosophical references supporting a perspective regarding trust formation and maintenance. In linking mediated communication to the creation of narratives and myth, he offers a new argument about media illiteracy. While insightful case studies succeed in illustrating the ideas, the book would be better with more. (Perhaps readers may think of ways to additionally apply and test the concepts with their own examples?)

This nuanced, ten-chapter book, which revisits arguments from the author's dissertation, applies a poststructuralist approach to examine and ideologically critique contemporary political assumptions and the aesthetics of the creation, dissemination, and interpretation of media offerings. *News Aesthetics and Myth: The Making of Media Illiteracy in India* makes the argument that media literacy education has the potential to go beyond a training in decoding, leading to skepticism, and instead can be a tool of demystification promoting the investigation of the ways narrated events create sutured myths.

As Nanjundaiah compellingly states:

media literacy has the potential to address the tectonic changes in the way truths are defined, told, and consumed; it deserves an inclusive explanation that comes from a perch with the affordances and capabilities of both Western and non-Western political and cultural practices. (p. 12)

*News Aesthetics and Myth: The Making of Media Illiteracy in India* specifically fills this scholarly and practical gap, providing arguments and explanations based on examples from India, while making a valuable contribution to a field often addressed by American and European scholars.

Nanjundaiah has written about Modi's India in particular, but many of his ideas can be used to suggest investigations and critiques of the uses of practiced aesthetics, especially in other post-colonial nations and countries with increasing nationalism and/or authoritarian media control. His analysis of systems of control that diminish the ability of citizens to be informed and his invitation for culturally aware, collectivistic, community-affirming media literacy responses provide suggested solutions with global applications.