

**The Immediacy of Media Literacy**  
*Cultures of Critical News Consumption in Asia*

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## Introduction

In the midst of a global dialogue on “fake news” and press legitimacy, the case for media literacy is more compelling than ever. Throughout the diverse media environments in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Thailand, and India, cultures of protest are closely tied to a proficiency in media literacy among educated youth. There is a paradoxical relationship between a country’s press freedom and the youth’s ability to criticize media; a free press does not necessarily imply a high level of media literacy. In order for there to be interest in media literacy on both an individual level and an institutional level, there must be incentive for people to aspire towards media literacy. Often, the incentive is in the threat to a free press. In environments where media consumers feel their press growing biased, they have more incentive to aspire towards media literacy. Just as free press holds a nation accountable, media literate readers hold a biased or censored press accountable. The rise of internet news complicates traditions of news consumption by challenging press institutions and offering more sensational forms of media. However, if the costs of criticizing media are too high, many opt out of criticism altogether. Despite these differences in levels of media literacy among communities, identities, and nations, young people everywhere manage to find subversive means of navigating biased media.

At the core of media literacy is a sense of protest. While definitions vary, it is often described as the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a variety of forms. Renee Hobbs, a leading media literacy theorist, acknowledges differences in definitions of the term among various disciplines such as sociology, media studies, history, and education. She offers one definitive similarity between the many interpretations: critical questioning. While definitions differ, Hobbs (2006) argues that “the center pole of the media literacy umbrella” is the intention of cultivating a “pedagogy of inquiry” around media texts (p. 27). Just as the interpretations of

media literacy vary among disciplines, my research exemplifies the ways in which interpretations vary around the world. In defining media literacy through this lens of critical consumption, Hobbs brings consumer empowerment to the foreground. How empowered are readers of propagandistic dailies in China? How do lese-majeste censorship laws affect the knowledge of Thai readers? What resources do Singaporeans have to analyze nationalistic campaign posters? Effective media literacy programs require spaces for critical thinking. In countries where citizens face high-risk consequences for discussing anything which might be interpreted as criticism of the nation, it's easier to not talk about the problems at all — literally, the path of least resistance.

The proliferation of online news media lends itself to the proliferation of biased media or false information. The phrase “media literacy” is not as ubiquitous as that of “fake news,” but the ideas are inextricably tied in modern media discourse; identifying falsehoods in media is the cornerstone of media literacy. I use the term “fake news” sparingly, and only in reference to sensationalist, under-researched journalism or click-bait propaganda. To reduce the proliferation of this kind of false information, governments must improve educational media literacy programs to better equip youth with critical media evaluation skills. However, incentives for creating these programs differ greatly among political systems and national agendas.

One ethical conundrum of media literacy education is that it places the onus of truth-finding on the reader, rather than on the press institutions or the states which control them. In reality, however, these institutions will not improve overnight. For the time being, it is important to empower readers by offering future generations accessible media literacy programs in public schools. While these education programs admittedly work to alleviate symptoms of a much larger disease, they are the best option for the future of media consumption. Critical readership

requires media literacy, and widespread critical readership requires media literacy education programs.

### **China: Innovations in Silencing**

In mainland China, the decline of print newspaper subscriptions among young media consumers offers new and effective means for the government to simultaneously propagandize and censor the news via microblogging applications. Of the six Chinese young adults I interviewed, all of them dismissed the idea of print newspaper as a means of getting information. Sun Zhiyuan, a university student in Beijing, joked that “some even subscribed [to newspapers] just to sell as waste paper.” Despite this, Zhiyuan sees the transition to online news as a replacement to print: “I don't think the newspaper industry will die, because there will always be readers.” Today, most young Chinese news media consumers use the applications WeChat and Sina Weibo. Both comply with Chinese Communist Party (CCP) censorship laws, and both serve as platforms for the party to distribute their ideas via government-affiliated publications. WeChat, a messaging and profile-based social media platform, is often referred to as “Chinese Facebook” – the real Facebook is blocked by the firewall. Many Chinese also compare the microblogging app Sina Weibo to Twitter (also blocked), though there is comparatively less user-to-user interaction on Weibo's comment features than on Twitter's. Chinese national dailies which once thrived in print, including the CCP-aligned *Global Times* and *Guangming Daily*, now have verified accounts on these platforms which users can follow. While some of these articles appear in a typical newswriting style with quotes and transitions, many are filled with sensational GIFs and videos. There is a certain kind of selective optimism throughout mass media publications which attempt to reassure the population of their country's stability and

maintain the status quo. For example, the China Daily WeChat page features articles that read “Xi’s speech praised at home, abroad,” “Xi’s vision of shared future wins praise,” and a piece on how the Marriot hotel “listed Tibet along with Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao as countries.” Government policy limits the degree of user interaction on these platforms, thereby limiting conversations which could pose a threat to the party’s ideology. In March 2018, WeChat disabled the comment feature altogether for new accounts, in compliance with new government media policies.

The CCP tightens regulations consistently and creatively. In November 2016, during the U.S. presidential election season, Chinese media capitalized on the sensational relevance of “fake news” as a means to justify stricter online regulations to foreign media. *Global Times* published an article titled “Western Media’s Crusade Against Facebook,” describing the flaws of American media in its inability to control the proliferation of fake news online. The article reads:

“The Internet contains enormous energy, and the political risks that go along with it are unpredictable. China is on its way to strengthening Internet management, although how to manage it is another question. China is also right in demanding that US Internet companies, including Google and Facebook, abide by Chinese laws and be subject to supervision if they want to enter China market... Problems and conflicts caused by globalization and informationization have been unleashed in the Internet era, but the Western democratic system appears to be unable to address them.”

In 2017, Chinese news media employed a remolded meaning of the term “fake news,” in a *People’s Daily* tweet which reads “Foreign Media reports that police tortured a detained lawyer is FAKE NEWS, fabricated to tarnish China's image." As the official newspaper of the CCP, *People’s Daily* holds a great deal of leverage over Chinese readers. By discrediting foreign

media, the CCP reinforces its own legitimacy via a sensational, nationalistic social media presence.

The transition from print to online media allows party-affiliated publishers to not only circulate sensational, nationalistic news, but also censor conversation around these pieces. The CCP uses media to exercise soft power, meaning that the party establishes control through coercion and ideological attraction rather than through force (Edney 2012). Kingsley Edney asserts that China uses media innovation as “a way to boost the country’s soft power,” and thereby reinforce the strength of the party (p. 913). These innovative biases in mass media pose a threat to the future of Chinese media literacy. Despite these obstacles, critical young readers sometimes find comment section loopholes to share their individual opinions which might differ from the CCP’s. Zhiyuan described a more unregulated internet experience. Like many savvy young Chinese, he uses a VPN, which allows him to access foreign news sites and social media which are blocked by the firewall. According to Zhiyuan, though the WeChat and Weibo comment sections are frequently patrolled and censored for potentially anti-national content, there is a brief time frame following the posting of a news piece in which readers can comment freely before deletion. Zhiyuan said, “I think websites or newspapers are always saying the facts, they won’t comment. But in Weibo or the comment areas below, everyone can say something...yes I read the comments. Some people are really genius at the comment section.” Comment sections offer readers brief glimpses into a deeper discourse which the CCP tries to regulate. This sort of subversion, however, is difficult to maintain on an increasingly censored internet.

There is no room for state-sponsored critical media literacy education in China, as the nature of media literacy poses a risk to the government itself. Every university in China, public or

private, staffs one party member who oversees every major decision made by the school administration. Despite this institutional effort to preserve the party ideology, there is actually a history of media literacy within educational discourse. In the piece “Media Literacy Education in Mainland China: A Historical Overview,” several Chinese scholars approach the subject with the question of how Chinese might “deal with the changing world of media” (p. 382). The article frames media literacy in a much different light than Hobbs, frequently using the word “awareness” rather than “criticism” when discussing mass media. The programs discussed in this piece interpret media literacy education as media education, and resist the acknowledgement of critical consumption. The history of media literacy in China is not a history of protest, but rather a history of production and consumption. Seeing as the CCP dominates the majority of mainstream media in China, it is not in their best interest to support critical consumption education campaigns. If the mass public mobilizes against China’s propagandistic media, the CCP’s soft power strategy might not be enough to maintain the status quo. However, some critical young consumers have managed to find subversive loopholes through VPN internet access and comment sections. While this subtle form of protest might suggest hope for the state of Chinese media literacy, only one of the six Chinese young adults I spoke with expressed any interest in “keeping up with politics” via news media. None of them had heard the term “media literacy,” or 媒体素养 (Méitǐ sùyǎng). When asked which newspapers they read, four of the six said that they read niche publications about music, fashion, entertainment, etc., or that they use Sina Weibo. The other two respondents, including Zhiyuan, said that they read the daily news from WeChat. The CCP’s ongoing “soft power” strategies have proven largely effective in keeping the population complacent in order to maintain the status quo. The less resources people

have to criticize media, the more biased the media can grow; this cycle of media illiteracy is perpetuated among youth in China.

In Taiwan, however, media literacy education is compulsory. The Digital Minister of Taiwan, Audrey Tang, spoke with TIME about this new policy. She said, “I would say that we take freedom of speech much more seriously than most of the other Asian countries. Many other Asian countries see it as a utilitarian value that could be traded somehow, if some other value of higher utility, like national security, is at risk. But for many Taiwanese it’s a core value ... and I think we’re unique in that.” The dialogue around Taiwanese media literacy is geared towards self-protection, in avoiding what Tang calls “systematic computational propaganda based on rumors” and “psychological manipulation.” Taiwan is a pioneer in media literacy education, as it became the first Asian country to involve compulsory curriculum in public schools in 2017.

Trends in mainland media literacy displays a correlation between high levels of authoritarianism and the low levels of critical news consumption – for many young consumers in China, the costs of criticizing a biased media far outweigh the benefits.

### **Hong Kong: A Liminal Freedom**

Media literacy movements in Hong Kong are explicitly democratic, and therefore acts of protest against looming authoritarian leadership. After operating under British control for over a century, the “Chinese special administrative region” of democratic Hong Kong was handed over to China in 1997 under the principle of “one country, two systems.” The country is set to officially reunite with mainland China in 2047, and the state of Hong Kong’s free press balances precariously on either side of the transition. As CCP messages infiltrate Hong Kong media, the region’s democratic ideals are steadily compromised. In C.K. Cheung’s article “Education

Reform as an Agent of Change: The Development of Media Literacy in Hong Kong During the Last Decade,” she attributes the rise in media education curriculum to three major driving forces: the emphasis on civic education since Hong Kong’s return to China sovereignty, the introduction of information technology, and a recent review of curriculum. The ideological shock which resulted from Hong Kong’s return to the communist superpower drove educators to emphasize “civic education” in schools, in an act to cultivate “better participative democratic citizens (Cheung 2009). In this light, both media literacy education and civic education work symbiotically to preserve Hong Kong’s democratic values. After the handover, educational values shifted as curriculum writers saw it necessary to encourage students “to become critical of the messages which they are surrounded” (Cheung 2009). Hong Kong media literacy is tightly woven into the region’s democratic values.

In Benjamin Bland’s *Hong Kong Generation*, he examines the generation of Hong Kong youth who have technically lived under China’s control for their entire lives, yet feel more distant from Chinese culture than any older generation who grew up under British control:

“It is a common belief that identities are formed through exclusion, where a person can define oneself against the other. For many young people today, being a Hong Konger means not being a Mainlander. Surveys show that fewer and fewer young Hong Kongers see themselves as ‘Chinese’” (Bland 2017, p. 22).

This issue rose to a climax in 2014, when Hong Kong separatists held occupations for the Umbrella Movement. This movement was pro-independence and resulted in the punishment of many Hong Kongers, to varying degrees. Some were arrested and prosecuted while others were placed on a “no-entry” list to China. Among these on the “no-entry” list is Professor Shelby Chan, a faculty at Hang Seng Management College. She attended the 2014 protests, which she

described as an “intellectual Woodstock,” featuring artists, students, scholars and journalists alike. Many attendees protested media bias caused by the threatening Chinese legal system. Protesting a biased media is media literacy in itself; without critical readership, the media would continue to skew coverage without consequence.

A decades-long dilemma in Hong Kong media is the self-censoring spiral resulting from the CCP’s looming leadership. In 1998, soon after the handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China, Chin Chuan-Lee wrote about the “Press Self-Censorship and Political Transition in Hong Kong.” At the time of this article’s publication, there was “little theoretical or empirical literature to throw light on self-censorship,” whereas today, research on this topic ranges expansively. Lee considers self-censorship “difficult to document,” as the phenomenon is often “so structurally embedded that journalists may not even be aware they are censoring themselves” (p. 57). In this ambiguous environment, maintaining a critical sense of media literacy is close to impossible. How does a readership identify the absences within a press they know to be free? In the 2006 article “Newspaper Editorial Discourse and the Politics of Self-Censorship in Hong Kong,” scholars Francis Lee and Angel Lin describe trends in this self-censorship one decade after the transition of power. Lee and Lin argue that censorship can be found in the language, or the lack thereof. The censorship begins with language, then tends to move towards the elimination of coverage altogether. Today, in 2018, the crisis has only deepened. When I asked Bland about the self-censorship, he compared it to a “slowly deflating balloon” – once it begins, it will only get worse. When a publication censors one possibly sensitive topic, they walk themselves into a corner – if they do not write about the topic today, what incentive is there to do so tomorrow? Bland sees the roots of self-censorship as both top-down and bottom-up; in one instance, an editor might cut a story. In the next instance, a writer stops herself from covering a sensitive

topic which has potential to be cut. Bland also used the idea of self-censorship to explain Chinese social media like WeChat. Users know what kinds of posts will be taken down, and what kinds of users will be deleted, so they stop talking about those topics altogether. This idea reflects Lee's observations of the phenomenon in 1998; the preemptive silence is so conditioned that WeChat users "may not even be aware they are censoring themselves" (p. 57). In a sense, self-censorship is deeply psychological, and blatantly threatening to the fundamentals of media literacy.

Professor Shelby Chan described how the independence movement grows increasingly fatigued from fighting the leviathan that is China. Despite the pending challenges Hong Kong might soon face in sustaining a curriculum for media literacy education, the democracy movement could benefit greatly from cultivating these skills of critical consumption in young minds. While media literacy may not have the capacity to preserve Hong Kong's sovereignty forever, the skills of critical consumption can provide a subversive yet powerful means of protest.

### **Thailand: Maneuvering Taboo**

In a political environment which prosecutes Thais for sedition, during an era which blurs the lines of social media and mass media, efforts towards anti-censorship activism are some of the most potent displays of media literacy. The recent history of censorship in Thailand is complex. Thaksin Shinawatra's Thai Rak Thai party operated on a populist platform which worked to discredit the media, along with their criticism of him, in order to reassert his authority. From this perspective, it was the democratic forces which offered Thaksin a seat in office, which ultimately led to Thailand's free press being threatened. However, since the military who deposed him (and

later, his sister) came to power, there has been a slightly different resurgence in the threat of censorship. Now, Thailand maintains power of the monarchy through an emphasis on military and bureaucratic powers. While Thailand is categorized as a constitutional monarchy, the government is currently operated by a military dictatorship.

I spoke with a law student at Chiang Mai University (CMU) who requested to be referenced anonymously, as he could face criminal charges if a CMU professor saw his responses and interpreted them as anti-monarchical. When asked whether he thinks that Thai people are free to speak their minds, he responded with more questions: “Do you think it’s a democracy if you’re not allowed to say anything bad about your leader? Military soldiers govern the country; is this a democracy?” He chose to express these frustrations through a string of rhetorical questions, avoiding self-incrimination by walking around the subject of his criticism rather than stating his criticisms explicitly. His voice lowered when discussing the king or the military regime; “We need an election; we need a real democracy.” This moment illuminated the issue of self-censorship in a different light, particularly in regards to the lese-majeste laws; by guising criticism within nuance, the parameters of the criticism expands. He continued by saying that he recognizes the faults of Thai newspapers, as they can’t talk about everything — many subjects are off limits; “We have many issues that the reporters cannot talk about, but I want to be free.” Because of this censorship, he looks to international press to keep up to date with news. The Thai firewall is significantly lower than that of China, but anti-censorship websites are blocked systematically and effectively in Thailand. The Freedom Against Censorship website in Thailand, or FACT, is a grassroots organization which tells the stories of those who have been imprisoned for breaking lese-majeste laws, and advocates for their freedom. Consequentially, the Thai government censored the website. FACT also explores issues of censorship in other places

in the world, most frequently that of China. Their website features an article about a bookstore's censorship of *The Economist*, in which Chinese storekeepers tore out every article about "Hong Kong's Democrats" before placing them up for sale. This sort of international solidarity against internet censorship fosters a community of dissent against online regulation.

As exemplified in China, the more authoritarian a government, the more difficult it is for the public to be media literate; wide-scale media censorship builds a high barrier to entry. In news media, it is easier to see what is present rather than what is absent. While Thai censorship is certainly a systemic obstruction to democracy, the culture of constant protest and change brought by the two recent military coups of 2006 and 2014 offers room for a sort of persistent, critical conversation. Young people find a way to maintain freedom of expression and speech through face-to-face social networks, rather than those that are enforced by firewall. Aim Sinpeng's article "State Repression in Cyberspace: The Case of Thailand" explores the question of whether the internet facilitates "democratization or democratic entrenchment" in a country partially controlled by the monarchy. Sinpeng introduces the case of Chinranuch Premchaiporn, the webmaster of Prachatai (a respected independent news outlet), who was detained for failing to remove allegedly anti-monarchical comments. The article then explores the ways in which the internet's capacity to serve as a platform for free speech can be compromised through censorship and coercion by the state. Ultimately, Sinpeng concludes that the Thai state will continue to exert this repression of free speech so long as the benefits outweigh the cost for political elites.

When it comes to respect and reverence of authority, Thais do not have much mobility to question or criticize. In conversation with the same CMU law student, he expressed one of his greatest annoyances: the radio's twice-daily airing of the national anthem. He said it's annoying, and I asked him why — is it the sound itself, or the reason behind it? He said it's both: "The old

generation of people like to make the next generation respect, like, the unity of Thailand. I can say we [the younger generation] respect our country, but we don't need to play this every morning and every evening, when I have to stand like a rock. I don't want to do that." When it comes to the protection of the monarchy in Thailand, it is not just online censorship – it is state-mandated patriotic intervention via mass media. Soren Ivarsson and Lotte Isager's *Saying the Unsayable: Monarchy and Democracy in Thailand* collects essays which shed light on the ways in which some scholars have unfortunately prioritized respect over critical thinking, and thereby enabled King Bhumibol to avoid the criticism that other authoritarian leaders have faced in Asia. These essays look at previous scholarship about the monarchy from a strictly critical perspective, and gather that the institution has mistakenly been observed as somehow above politics, when in reality, the monarchy has long been deeply engrained in the political sphere, and could really be considered the main instigator of the 2006 coup. One essay examines the popular perspective that this system works because of its unique state as a "Thai-style democracy." This way of thinking has offered too much slack to the authoritarian tendencies of the oligarchy (be it the military, the bureaucracy, or the monarchy) and allowed the oppressive system to operate with little criticism. A "Thai-style democracy" parallels ideas offered by contemporary China as well, in that "Asian values" of community and hierarchy prevail over more individualistic rights of democratic freedom and free speech.

It is not so much that young Thai people are disinterested in protest, but they must operate in subtle ways to maintain a critical conversation. They do not avoid the conversation — they find safe places to hold it. These places are not found on the internet, due to constant content monitoring and censorship. The free press is at risk, but critical conversations manage to work their way around these bureaucratic barriers.

### **Singapore: Co-opting Media Literacy**

As a meritocratic system with strong interests in both advancing education and constructing a strong nationalistic education program, Singapore is at the crossroads between the costs and benefits of media literacy education. If the core value of media literacy is protest, it is not in their best interest to implement critical media literacy curriculum into their education system. In 1999, as a means of reinforcing a sense of Singapore nationality, the Ministry of Information and the Arts launched a National Education project called “The Singapore Story,” which both “endorses and is intended to endorse the *status quo*” (p. 20). This curriculum intends to build a strong sense of national belonging, as well as national respect. This story weaves into public education, as “its primary purpose is to ensure that young Singaporeans accept the narrative of the official nation-building project” (p. 35). From an early age, Singaporeans learn to embrace this constructed identity. In Wendy Bokhorst-Heng’s article “Newspapers in Singapore: A Mass Ceremony in the Imagining of the Nation,” she describes the ways in which the Singaporean press contributes heavily to the national identity of citizens. She sees this “ceremony” as constructed in a way which positions “the government [as] a dominant voice” (p. 560).

How, then, can Singapore encourage their youth to simultaneously digest this national narrative, and be critical of the stories they hear? The answer is through the education system’s co-optation of media literacy. In “The Construct of Media and Information Literacy in the Singapore Education System: Global Trends and Local Policies,” authors Lin, Mokhtar, and Wang identify “the aim of media literacy education” as intended to “strengthen the influence of high culture to fight against the increasing growth of popular culture in printing media at that time” (p. 8). This description of media literacy education differs significantly from the definition put forward earlier in the paper: “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in a

variety of forms” (Hobbs 2006). The growth of scholarly discourse around media literacy pressures the Singaporean education system to implement their own programs. Singapore is ranked highly in the Human Development Index for education – higher than any other Asian nation.

However, this loose interpretation of media literacy education as defined by Lin, Mokhtar, and Wang points to a larger implication of freedom in Singapore. In conversation with Deborah Emmanuel, a Singaporean poet and activist, she spoke to the ways in which the government weaves its nationalistic messages into the media. She uses poetry to express her frustrations with the Singapore’s corruption. In her spoken word poem “Sin City,” she points to class struggles within the city-state, saying “they say it’s safe in sin city, but only if you can afford safety.” Compared with China and Thailand, Singaporean society offers more freedom to speak out against the government, both in public and online. However, activism is by no means endorsed within the education system. Consequentially, critical media literacy education is not welcome in the current curriculum. While Singapore appears to be keeping up with this scholarly media education discourse, the future for media literacy curriculum which cultivates critical consumption and an effective “pedagogy of inquiry” is unhopeful (Hobbs 2006).

### **India: Making Space for Speech**

While Singaporean media literacy is limited by the strength of the state, the greatest threat to Indian media literacy is the emergence of religious fundamentalist groups which have gained political clout over the past twenty years. Media literacy discourse has recently brought many Indian scholars to theorize about means of improving the country’s media environment. K.J. Kumar (2007) advocates that media literacy could also mediate issues of moral policing in India,

such as when the government banned two TV channels for not complying to regulations. However, he says that this is not the worst of it; in fact, the bans are “nothing in comparison... with religious and political fundamentalist groups, who offer far greater threats to human rights and the freedom of the media.” He then questions whether media education would be enough to protect people from these threatening messages which often become physically violent, but emphasizes that media educators are central to the future of preserving democratic freedoms amidst extremism. At Ramjas College in Delhi, the campus literary society planned to hold a seminar event called “Cultures of Protest” in 2017, which was violently shut down by the ABVP, a student group affiliated with the right-wing Hindu nationalist organization RSS. Aakar Patel, the executive director of Amnesty International in India, wrote, “Universities are supposed to be safe spaces for debate and discussion. But the events at Ramjas College are a shameful reminder of how intimidation and threats continue to restrict free speech on university campuses.” This limitation of free speech functions like a violent form of censorship, in that it threatens the spaces which would otherwise allow for critical thinking.

Shatakshi Whorra, a Ramjas College student who was present at the attack, finds ways to expand her freedoms of speech via independent news platforms. She has written for the site “Feminism in India,” which aims to provide a space for “Intersectional Feminism – Desi Style.” The publication’s mission statement reads that “FII amplifies the voices of women and marginalized communities using tools of art, media, culture, technology and community.” Articles include stories of people across many different castes and cultural backgrounds. Shatakshi emphasized the importance of independent publications like these, as they offer a kind of substitute or supplementary space for free and safe discourse – a discourse which might otherwise be deemed “anti-national.”

Websites like Feminism in India certainly help make space for an open, critical dialogue, but for whom? Jesna Jayachandran describes the problems of the internet age in India as follows:

“Media pluralism, information abundance, global connectivity and interactivity co-exist with inherent contradictions. There are exclusions due to lack of access, basic literacy and structural constraints of caste, class and gender. Largely, the democratic benefits appear to be exercised by the privileged and middle classes.”

This relates to the ethical conflict introduced earlier in the paper, with regards to the onus being on the people rather than on the institutions. In this light, media literacy is only accessible to privileged members of society. Kumar sees the glaring problem in this, and writes, “The community, especially the minority and oppressed community, remains at the heart of any media education programme.” Inclusive media literacy programs should operate in all forms of school, public and private, and attempt to involve the experiences of as many young readers as possible. In “Marginalization of Media Literacy in Indian Public Sphere: A Contextual Analysis,” Nagaraj, Kundu, and Nayak (2014) tie the concept of media literacy directly to that of democracy. They write about the ways in which “media and information literacy can strengthen the public sphere in a multicultural and multilingual country like India” (Nagaraj et al., 2014). However, they do not see this as the reality; Indian media literacy education is largely under-researched and under-discussed. If this education was used effectively in India, the authors claim that it would promote “equality, social justice, democracy, freedom, human dignity and a more humane society” (Nagaraj et al., 2014).

Indian press institutions remain strong, but conversations of critical thinking and cultures of protest are often perceived by fundamentalist groups as anti-national – an often arbitrary label which empowers these groups to act with a sense of vigilante justice and shut down these critical

conversations with physical strength. In India, the most imminent threat to critical media literacy among youth lies in ideological extremism.

### **Japan: A Familiar System**

While also a parliamentary democracy, Japan's state of media literacy faces much different threats than India's. In Japan, "fake news" operates in a similar vein as it does in the United States. Throughout Japan's recent election season in October 2017, I found there to be a strong correlation between American and Japanese domestic politics and media. Among the similarities are partisan media bias, fake news epidemics, and general media illiteracy surrounding general elections. The real issue of media legitimacy lies in the "fake news" articles found online, as was the situation in the 2016 U.S. election. During the election season, Kyodo News reported on the emergence of the FactCheck Initiative Japan (FIJ), which provides fact-check analysis on major bouts of misinformation. For context, Kyodo News could be compared to the AP in terms of non-profit legitimacy and influence. This publication also reported that the FIJ began with the purpose of limiting the misinformation particularly surrounding the 2017 election coverage. FIJ's evaluations cover anything from blog articles, to mainstream media, to statements made by public officials, including Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. Like President Trump, Prime Minister Abe has been known to make attempts to diminish the reputability of journalism as a field, and thereby diminish the voices of his critics and opponents. In his article "Abe and Press Oppression: Guilty, Not Guilty, or Not Proven?" Michael Thomas Cucek evaluates Abe's anti-journalist rhetoric, and sees that this "could be construed as a vendetta against the media" (2016, p. 78). However, Cucek counters that the state of journalism is not threatened to the extent that

many anti-Abe liberals fear. Just as in the United States, traditional press institutions hold strong despite having a right-wing leadership which attempts to discredit them.

The sparse literature on media literacy in Japan frames youth to be entirely out of touch with the concept of media literacy. In his article “Media Literacy: An Unknown Concept in Japan,” Gordon Liversidge provides an anecdotal example of this supposed phenomenon by describing how a class full of his media students could not bring to the table a definition of “media literacy.” Liversidge examines media illiteracy as both a result and impetus of power corruption in Japan. While this may be true to an extent, the blame should not be placed entirely on the youth of Japan. One of the most outspoken anti-fake-news media outlets is BuzzFeed Japan, a publication which prioritizes its youthful demographics. Daisuke Furuta, chief editor of BuzzFeed Japan, one of the five media outlets involved in FIJ’s media literacy initiative, said, “It is media that have know-how to verify whether news items are inaccurate or intentionally false rumors. People around the world are working on the issue and we want such moves to spread further in Japan” (*Japan Times* 2017). BuzzFeed Japan used the U.S.’s Pizzagate debacle as an example of how fake news can blow up to extreme and dangerous proportions.

Moritso, a third year student at Ritsumeikan University, has mixed feelings about the government and biased media coverage. When I first asked him if he was interested in keeping up with politics, he said, “I’m not that interested in the government and how it goes.” We then began to discuss his political views in detail – he said that he plans to vote for Abe, and that “The economics are getting better and our job hunting environment is getting better” under Abe’s leadership. When asked about his trust in mainstream media, he said, “Usually I find news from the newspaper, but I’m not always sure they are true, because there are some ideas which is either the right side or the left side. So I’m not always that sure about the information. I always

check the internet or other company's newspapers as well to see if it is true." This conversation with Moritso counters the evidence provided by Liversidge, in which he argues that Japanese youth are media illiterate. While Moritso may not be familiar with the term "media literacy," he certainly makes efforts towards media literacy by checking news across sources to ensure accuracy of information. It is worth noting that the anti-fake-news movement in Japan is also largely anti-Abe, or at least critical of his speeches.

There is a relative dearth in literature on Japanese media literacy, compared to many other countries in this study. This scholarly dearth adds nuance to the correlation between free press and media literacy, as Japan has the highest level of press freedom in this six-country study, according to the Press Freedom Index (2018). This is perhaps due to the specificity of the term; the idea of "media literacy" can exist while unnamed in school curriculum, general media discourse, or conversations about fake news. In this way, the term "media literacy" limits the scope of the relating literature and discourse. For example, the FIJ website can be found in a search for anti-fake-news organizations, but not pro-media-literacy organizations. While it might not be explicitly studied in Japan, media literacy is a societal measure which spans across politics and education.

### **Conclusions:**

Across each of these six countries, young people manage to find ways to remain critical of media biases to some degree. While the decline of print newspapers has led to the rise in internet censorship, it has also led to the rise in internet activism. Young people can often manipulate existing regulations through nuance, as seen in comment sections and VPN downloads. While some media literacy education movements are explicitly democratic, others exist only to bring

“awareness” to new forms of media, as exemplified in scholarly work done in Singapore and China. I found my hypothesis to be incorrect; higher press freedom does *not* imply higher degrees of media literacy. In review, the data was so variant and nuanced that I chose to refer to the Press Freedom Index sparingly, as it frames these media environments sans nuance. The unfortunate irony of media literacy education is that its future lies in the hands of the state. The onus is on the institutions to arm the public with skills needed to evaluate the accuracy of the media they consume. While this is an unhopeful prospect for the people of China, Thailand, and Singapore, scholars of Indian media literacy education have optimistic visions of cross-cultural understanding as the basis of public school curriculum. As Renee Hobbs writes, “The diversity of perspectives and approaches of media literacy educators is indeed a source of strength and vitality, reflecting the widespread power, relevance, and appeal of the idea that critical analysis of media texts is an essential life skill in a media-saturated society” (2006).

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