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The broken mirror: Making sense of Indian politics on Twitter, an Inter-medium perspective

Digital Workshop, 30 August – 31 August 2021

by

the Centre de Sciences Humaines (CSH) and the Indraprastha Institute of Information Technology Delhi (IIIT-D)

Abstracts

The digital turn in political campaigning and communication in developing societies has made ethnographic, text and network analyses of social media a requirement for any comprehensive study of political behaviour and institutions.

Within a span of five years, the use of social network services (SNS) and social media has more than tripled in India (CSDS 2019), while “experts” in online strategizing have become indispensable to any political venture. As a result, nearly half of the scholarship on phenomena such as hate speech on SNS have studied users’ engagement on Twitter, sparking debates about the representativeness of the findings presented (Matamoros-Fernández 2021). This panel has the aim to interrogate the role of the platform in conducting politics in contemporary India while questioning, simultaneously, the potential weakness in generalisations and comparative biases emerging out of such analyses.

Papers will engage with the need to address shortcomings in social representativeness of the Twitter user base (Keskinen 2018) as well as their impact on the type of dominant political narratives and interactions at work on the platform. Contributions will also aim at introspecting on the spatial, social, and gendered variability of online practices on Twitter (Vaghela, Mothilal and Pal 2020), advancing our understandings of political attitudes and discourses across platform types and locating their practical deployment on the ground, before, during and after political campaigning. In addition, we aim to contribute to the developing social theory of Twitter in Indian politics, and re-orient the way the platform is used by social science researchers as a lens into the digitization of life in the Global South (Quet and Al Dahdah 2020) and more specifically in the context of ‘millennial India’ (Udupa, Venkatraman & Khan 2019). We are particularly interested in contributions seeking to establish digital archives to advance scholarship on political practices at the interface of online and offline social worlds.

Keywords: India, Political Science, Media Studies, Twitter, Text Analysis, Digital Culture, South Asian History / Studies

Monday, August 30, 2021

Authors: Dibyendu Mishra (MSR), Ronojoy Sen (NUS), Joyojeet Pal (MSR, U. Michigan Ann Arbor)

Title: Political engagement and dissent on Twitter by sportspersons in India and the US

Abstract:

Influencers who are celebrities in the offline world, often amass a large following on social media. Their outsize online influence and its network effects gives them the ability to engage followers on a large number of topics, within and outside their expertise. Alongside serving as a broadcast medium which helps in generating traditional media coverage, these platforms help extend their parasocial relationships and brands. In this study we curate a sample of tweets from the 200 most followed sportspersons in India and the United States respectively since 2019, map their connections with politicians, and analyze their engagements with key topics online. Our analyses show significant differences between the issue engagements by US and Indian sportspersons – we find that in the US, there is much evidence of sportspersons presenting positions of dissent against the acts and positions of national government, whereas in India, most sportspersons either align with government or engage minimally in dissent. We describe these issues in detail, highlighting specific cases that underline these differences. We propose that the ownership and control of sporting activities impact what sportspersons are willing to say online, and by extension, how their influence is exercised on issues of public interest.

Authors: Megha Mishra (OII), Pu Yan (OII), Ralph Schroeder (OII)

Title: TikTok politics: Tit for tat on the India-China cyberspace frontier

Abstract:

TikTok has enjoyed wide popularity in the Global South. But in the summer of 2020, a tit for tat altercation erupted over the use of the app in India against the backdrop of a border dispute between India and China. India banned TikTok, along with other Chinese mobile applications. This ban raised larger ongoing issues around user privacy, cybersecurity threats, and content regulation on social media platforms and telecommunications equipment around the world. In this paper we explore these issues and the wider debates in the media and among policy-makers. We undertook ten in depth interviews with ten employees of technology companies, policy-makers, journalists and academics in India, The interviewees broadly agreed that the ban constituted geopolitical signaling to the Chinese government in light of the border conflict. We also focus on the public discourses before and after the TikTok ban on social media. To do this we applied computational linguistic analysis on 6388 Twitter posts about the ban by Indian users. The discourses on Twitter show intense

nationalistic rhetoric: Indian Twitter users were vocal in urging the government to ban TikTok. We also identified three main categories of TikTok ban discourses on Twitter: concerns for TikTok's influence on Indian society; debates about the cultural aspects of different social media platforms, especially between TikTok and YouTube; and appeals for grassroots nationalistic actions boycotting TikTok and urging the government to ban Chinese apps. The Modi government used the mobile app ban to serve its goal of promoting 'spectator sport' militarism to boost its legitimacy during the border skirmishes. It did not ban infrastructure (hardware) or investment since it depends on China for these. Indian apps were able to reap the benefits as users flocked to them. We conclude that the TikTok ban is indicative of wider geopolitical conflicts over social media to come.

Authors: Marine Al Dahdah (CNRS, CEMS), Mehdi Arfaoui (EHESS, CEMS) and Marie Chartier (IRIS).

Title: MeTooIndia: narratives, networks and impacts of an indianised global feminist movement

Abstract:

#MeToo has been studied as an international social movement that has crossed national and cultural barriers. Relying on social media, female victims reported their experience of sexual abuse and consequent trauma to the public with this specific # on Twitter, massively from 2017 till today (Starkey et al., 2019). This movement has offered a model for women rights activism and opened the way to new narratives.

Still, social media networks have been proved to be biased demographically toward those who hold the most power. In the Indian context, where only 1% of the population is using Twitter, individuals who have access to this platform tend to be men from privileged classes, castes, and locations (Guha, 2021). This article examines the feminist hashtag #MeTooIndia and its adoption by different social groups in relationship with the specificities of the Indian context. How does this # articulate with or differ from other feminist hashtags? How does it responds to public misunderstanding, disbelief, or complacency surrounding violence against women in India? What kind of impact did it have on Indian feminist organizations? or on specific spheres that were highly pinpointed like political parties, cultural industries or higher education settings?

This research uses a mixed method approach. The main material of our analysis relies on a quantitative and qualitative content and network analysis of the 354.496 #MeTooIndia tweets posted and shared on Twitter between 2018 and 2021. We also conducted a quantitative and qualitative media framing analysis of news coverage about #MeTooIndia between 2018 and 2021. At last, we conducted interviews on the MeToo movement in India with researchers and activists. The paper discusses the origins of the MeToo movement in India and the way it approaches gendered oppressions as well as individualized and collective experiences of sexual abuse. We later explore the impact of the hashtag-led movement in three different spheres: the political, the cultural and the higher education arenas.

Authors: Paarmita Jhalani (IIIT-D), Karishma Sinha (IIIT-D) , Aasim Khan (IIIT-D) and Payel Mukherjee (IIIT-D)

Title: Breaking or mending the public sphere? Twitter and the digital politics of Shaheen Bagh and BLM protestors within Indian and the American democratic politics

Abstract: The use of Twitter by politicians and protest movements has become a remarkable feature of 'digital politics' in India as much as in the economically advanced Western world. But does the media serve a similar role in the democratic context in the two regions, or is it likely to further damage the public sphere at home? This paper contrasts and compares the case of #ShaheenBagh movement in India with the #BLM in the US, and explores the extent to which the use of Twitter reflected the contrasting roles of Twitter in the digital politics of protest movements in each country. More specifically, we focus on three interrelated components of Twitter's role in digital politics; firstly, the way protestors engaged with the incumbent party in power on Twitter. Secondly, their engagement with sympathetic opposition groups and intellectuals and finally, the way mainstream media journalists and celebrities engaged with them. Using inductive computational analysis to conduct social network analysis of Twitter interactions between these key groups we categorise digital politics as both reflective as well as constitutive of the deep fractures that have emerged in the public sphere. This contrasts with the American scenario where Twitter has become a platform for more progressive digital politics esp in giving new voices from the Left a means to engage grassroots campaigns like BLM which did not take place in India to the same extent.

Author: Jayana Jain (LMU Munich, ONLINEPOL)

Title: Long-Distance Hindu Nationalism and Modi Mania: Twitter Networks of Indian Diaspora Supporters for CAA in Germany

Abstract:

In recent diaspora and migration studies, there is a consensus that the digital space is the migrant self's intimate practice and an ongoing social process where different forms of cultures emerge and are mediated. Broadly, my paper examines how political cultures are shaped through interactions with and on Twitter, an online platform mediating transnational modalities of belonging in migrant citizens' social life. By conducting a digital ethnographic study, it investigates the Indian diasporic youth's social media affordances on selected Twitter accounts within the context of the ongoing citizenship discourse under the Modi-led BJP governance in India. My paper begins by contextualising how the pro- and anti-

CAA protests staged by Indian diasporic professionals and students in Germany reinforce or resist the populist right-wing Hindutva ideologies of the BJP where Twitter serves as both a digital infrastructure of convergence and a strategy to facilitate political formations of affect. As my study acknowledges the role of the world wide web in intricately weaving the glocal networks of support and dissent, it scrutinizes how the performance of migrant digital identities relate to the power relations embedded within the material, affective and algorithmic configurations of online media as politically charged spaces. In doing so, my paper hopes to address two key questions: How was the Anti-CAA movement shaped through the digital infrastructure of Twitter and attained further momentum simultaneously with the ground protests in India and abroad?

Tuesday, August 31, 2021

Authors: Shehla Rashid (JNU, MSR), Arshia Arya (MSR), Joyojeet Pal (MSR, U. Michigan Ann Arbor)

Title (tentative): Big businesses and political engagement – a comparative study of India and the US

Abstract:

Big businesses have evolved from being passive targets of activism and social campaigns to being active proponents of values that they consider key to their organisational ethos (Chatterji and Toffel, 2019; Flauger and Stratmann, 2017; Nilsson, 2018; Nobel, 2016). Brown, Manegold and Marquardt (2020) contend that the rise in CEO activism and corporate activism in general can be attributed to the fact that politics is becoming more divisive and that companies are therefore not shying away from socio-political issues that lack social consensus. While there are various studies in the US that study and establish these trends, no systematic study of such trends in India has been carried out, except for press reportage on isolated events. We studied the Twitter accounts of businesses on the Fortune 500 lists for India and the US in 2020, and their CEOs (or other top bosses). We carried out a comparative analysis of topical engagement on both sides. Specifically, we examine engagement on issues of rights by comparing the number of times business accounts tweeted on United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) related material, as well as the number of times they engage on human rights. We then conduct an in-depth examination of one issue – immigrant rights, by comparing the engagement on both sides with recent laws that have been in the news – the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) in the United States, and the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) in India. Our analyses show that the business accounts on both sides do tweet about political issues of various kinds, and that the two sets have similar patterns of engaging with issues like gender, inclusion, accessibility, diversity, sustainability, and transparency. Many of these are what may be referred to as ‘settled topics’, since they are UN SDG-mandated topics or those mentioned in the Indian Companies Act, 2013. Where we find differences is with engagement on rights, specifically on immigration and naturalisation policies in the two countries. We find that while US businesses are willing to take oppositional positions to the government on immigration, Indian companies are less likely to take that position. Our findings hint at the hierarchies of issues in which private corporations are willing to publicly state their positions, and the underlying tensions between state and private actors on issues of national consequence.

Author: Kathryn Kalady Osowski (UPenn)

Title: “Where have all the good women gone?": MGTOW, Modi’s BJP, and the male haven of Indian Twitter

Abstract:

In 2018, two BJP parliamentarians campaigned for a purush aayog or “men’s commission” and an amendment to Section 498A, the controversial domestic abuse law which they claimed had been increasingly weaponized by wives to harass their husbands and in-laws. With hashtags like #purushaayog and #savemen, men’s rights activists on Twitter celebrated the MPs for finally addressing India’s so-called “gender bias” against men.

The Indian Twitterscape disproportionately fosters and proliferates reactionary movements like Hindu nationalism and misogynistic MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way). Necessitating privileges like access to a smartphone and digital savvy, Twitter mostly attracts Indian users who are young, middle-class urbanites and, therefore, statistically predisposed to backing the BJP. Men dominate the platform, constituting nearly 70% of Indian users. 7 of the 10 most engaged with Indian profiles are BJP politicians. Twitter's engagement-driven algorithm and character limits reward punchy sensationalism over careful discourse. Given these characteristics, it is unsurprising that Indian Twitter not only adeptly packages together misogyny and BJP rhetoric but that the movements capitalize on the platform to reach out to a sympathetic, disenfranchised male audience.

Although the independent rises of MGTOW and the BJP on Twitter have been investigated, their mutualistic relationship online and the ways it manifests offline has not been sufficiently explored. To map MGTOW and the BJP's convergence over the past decade, I will scrub hashtags like #purushaayog using Netlytic software and chart the linkages between the groups' rhetoric over time using programming language R. This nodal projection will visualize their complete Twitter feedback loop, enabling me to pinpoint where new rhetoric materialized and—in cross-referencing news sources—how that rhetoric moved online to offline or vice versa. This adaptable methodology will enable other researchers to consolidate, visualize, and analyze similar political linkages, ultimately extending netography to more South Asian contexts.

Authors: Jean-Thomas Martelli (CSH), Vihang Jumle (Hertie School in Berlin),

Title: Legitimacy-making for the twitterati, populist-playing for the aam-aadmi: An inter-medium analysis of Modi's addresses (2010-2021)

Abstract:

Studies examining the spatial variability of the populist discourse rely on the—often tacit—assumption that cultural practices and platform usages are at best second-order parameters. Through concentrating on the case of Indian political communication on Twitter, we show that populist communication is not tailored to a particular medium of communication, but rather to the particular audience it can reach via it. More specifically, we describe how Prime Minister Narendra Modi uses wide-reaching media such as radio to unfold a populist narrative based on institutional disintermediation, simple language, counselling and the staging of an intimate conversation with the masses. Oppositely, Modi uses more elitist and cosmopolitan social media such as Twitter India to undo his populist credentials, and

introduce himself as a respectable democratic leader favoring multilateral collaborations, banal nationalism and Gandhian peace-building. The comparisons of his political rhetoric across seven address formats indicates that Modi is populist *tactically* rather than *ideologically*, which contradicts the tenets of the current dominant populist paradigm developed by Cas Mudde. In the final section of the article, we venture into comparing Modi and Trump Tweets. We suggest that due to the popularity of Twitter in the US, it was strategically useful for the US political leader to act populist on the platform, while it doesn't for Modi. This tends to indicate that not enough attention is given to inter-medium studies, as the latter do not assume that a social media platform such as Twitter has an homogenous political significance across countries.

Authors: Jean-Thomas Martelli (CSH), Vihang Jumle (Hertie School in Berlin), Vedant Jumle (Ashoka U.)

Title: Junk nationalism: Communal patriotism as entertainment news, a speech-to-text analysis of Indian TV show 'The Debate'

Abstract:

The windfall of national electoral successes of the Bharatiya Janata Party have sparked a haunting question: are we witnessing the beginning of an Hindu nationalist hegemony? This presentation suggests that the routinization of majoritarian and ethnic democracy in India is facilitated by the mass diffusion of feel-good entertainment artifacts supplanting previously austere ideological idioms. We present work in progress, mainly the analysis of the text-to-speech renditions of *The Debate*, the vociferous and communal TV show of prime time journalist anchor Arnab Goswami. At this stage, we perform three types of textual comparisons: between the content of broadcastings and its audience's engagement on the video sharing platform YouTube; between the show and a similar newscasting, 'ET Now'; and between our transcripts and pre-evaluated synthetic text. Through these overlapping approaches, we aim at identifying a particular form of televisual entertainment which we term 'junk nationalism'. We test whether the flaunting of patriotic stances is associated on the one hand with high-engagement anti-minority statements, and on the other with the caricatural spectacle of inarticulate excess, pertaining to the high-pitch theatrics of the buffoonery, the farce and the Manichean public trial. We conclude by complementing the quantitative analysis with qualitative insights on Arnab's publicly available social media conversations, in which he reflects on the continuum between patriotism, entertainment and the increase in viewership.

3:20-3:30 Concluding remarks and way forward