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Source: *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, No. 8 (FEBRUARY 20, 2016), pp. 52-60

Published by: Economic and Political Weekly

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44004416>

Accessed: 29-08-2023 04:18 +00:00

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# Twitter and the Rebranding of Narendra Modi

JOYOJEET PAL, PRIYANK CHANDRA, V G VINOD VYDISWARAN

Through a qualitative study of the historical patterns of retweeting and favouriting of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's messages, followbacks to other Twitter accounts, and evolving themes of messages pre- and post-election, this essay examines trends in his political discourse that have corresponded to four distinct periods. Thoughtful construction of messages on Twitter has helped Modi build a powerful online brand, allowing him to transcend a problematic past and emerge as a techno-savvy global leader who speaks directly to his electorate.

During a visit to China in May 2015, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi tweeted a photo of himself with Chinese Premier, Li Keqiang. The image quickly went viral, with the *Wall Street Journal* calling it the "most powerful selfie in history" (Sugden 2015). By this point, Modi had more than 12.4 million followers on Twitter, making him the second-most followed elected politician there. The same week, Modi declined a one-year anniversary press conference amid news reports that "the extremely social media savvy premiere does not feel the necessity for another 'connect' through the media when he is already in direct touch with the people" (Sharma 2015).

Narendra Modi does indeed have phenomenal direct reach via social media. Besides the Twitter page, Modi's team runs a YouTube channel, a Facebook page with more than 28 million "likes," and other social media accounts including LinkedIn, Pinterest, Instagram and Tumblr. Modi, a lifelong grass-roots organiser tied to social conservatives of the Indian political right, has been an unlikely character to emerge on top of the social media charts in India, a domain traditionally populated by movie stars and young urbanites.

On 16 May 2014, the day his party won the general election, Modi sent out the most retweeted message from India in the history of Twitter. His victory tweet was emblematic of the style of political communication that his Twitter handle "@narendramodi" has come to exemplify. In the place of banal thanks for the popular mandate, he congratulated India's people for the wisdom of their choice.

"India has Won," he tweeted.

## 1 Background

Narendra Modi was the prime ministerial candidate representing the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a right-wing Hindu nationalist party, leading into the 2014 Indian general elections. The BJP is a political wing of a parent social organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which espouses the ideology of Hindutva, based on a Hindu ideal of social and economic living. The RSS has a complicated history in India, having been banned at times by the Indian government for its ideological positions, most prominently for its alleged role in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi. Part of the RSS social mandate was an official separation of its social activities from political involvement. Modi was a *pracharak*, or full-time fieldworker of the RSS, for much of his adult life. He was the first career RSS *pracharak* to become head of government in an Indian state when he became chief minister of Gujarat in 2001.

Authors would like to acknowledge Shraddha Jain and Verushka Patel for their research work. Additionally, the authors acknowledge the anonymous reviewer's suggestions for the paper.

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A major event in Modi's political career was the 2002 Gujarat Hindu–Muslim riots, for which he was indicted by the Supreme Court, and for which some of his close associates were convicted and imprisoned. Although he was not convicted, his infamous public statement of the riots as “resulting from the natural and justified anger of people” left his image scarred on the international stage (Narula 2002).

Leaders in several European nations had a tacit boycott prohibiting high-ranking officials from contact with Modi, and the United States (US) banned him from entering the country. In the meantime, Modi grew in strength with several electoral victories. His appearances at political speeches were marked by militant symbols, including swords (<http://im.rediff.com/news/2009/sep/10modi.jpg>), and fiery, antagonistic oratory (Patel 2002).

Following the riots, the major thrust of Modi's political discourse was the development of Gujarat. Modi was projected as an industry-friendly, economically aggressive politician who would bring fiscal discipline and rectitude to the state, building on his history as a lifelong volunteer who lived on little and managed a disciplined corps of political foot soldiers. Gujarat was ranked high for economic freedom among Indian states by the Fraser Institute (Debroy et al 2011). Modi's “Gujarat Model” boasted free enterprise, targeted public expenditure, and avoided riots since 2002, with Modi himself getting the moniker of *Vikaas Purush* (Development Man). The claims of economic growth were questioned on inequitable spread (Shah 2013) as well as on actual improvement on Gujarat's traditionally high growth rates (Ghatak and Roy 2014: 13).

Modi's relationship with the news media, particularly the elite English language media, remained complicated and often driven by the history of his involvement in the Gujarat riots. A botched interview with television journalist Karan Thapar was much publicised as a noticeably frazzled Modi left midway through after being asked about his thoughts on being perceived as a murderer (Jaffrelot 2015).

During the latter half of his tenure as chief minister, a series of images appeared with Modi seated in serene settings with white ducks, an Apple laptop, an Obama biography and a financial newspaper, looking relaxed in his running gear (<http://im.rediff.com/news/2013/sep/13narendra2.jpg>). This was the portrayal of a modern man of peace, an international economic thinker, a man departed from the traditional dress of the political Indian class, and indeed the RSS, and a modern man adept at using the latest technology.

An association with technology has been useful in Indian politics in the last two decades. A number of Indian politicians have used such an association to build images as tech-savvy, modern, non-traditional politicians (Mudliar and Pal 2013). Unlike most major leaders in the RSS or BJP, Modi had an internet presence for well over a decade and he had a strong network of supporters among the affluent expatriate Gujaratis, including a solid network within the US of people in the tech industry. Alongside his credibility with the social conservative right, for his past as an RSS pracharak, he represented a vision for globalisation, much unlike earlier conservatives who were

associated with indigenous production movements, like the Swadeshi Jagran Manch.

## 2 Related Work

This paper contributes to three strands of work: first, social media and electoral politics; second, social media and political communication; and third, image politics in India. Our work builds on theories of political self-representation, what Erving Goffman (1959) described as the “theatre of everyday life.” Twitter is part of a larger theatrical of political narrative that reinvents the political actor and what he represents through a relatively manageable media outlet that at once allows for one-way pronouncements alongside the spectre of interactive conversation. In this context, technology in and of itself is a political artefact, and Twitter is at once a means of communication and an outlet of political brand signalling for the man who speaks through it (Lilleker and Koc-Michalska 2013).

The 2008 US presidential election remains a key case of a grass-roots social media movement, where the Obama campaign used social media to build a following and galvanise it into action (Cogburn and Espinoza-Vasquez 2011). Barack Obama's momentum in social media was maintained beyond the election, similar to what we see with Modi, making it a good pre- and post-election case. Libby Hemphill et al (2013), investigating the US Congress's use of social media, found that officials frequently use Twitter to advertise their political positions, but rarely to request political action or to recognise the work of others. Politicians' caginess about public interactions that get out of control is not new. For instance, in the Scottish elections of 2010, social media were primarily used for one-way communication rather than dialogue (Baxter and Marcella 2012). Modi offers a case to expand social media studies because his tweets do occasionally recognise others; however, the centrality of the leader and his voice remain absolute. Modi's avoidance of discursive interactivity resonates with Jahna Otterbacher et al's (2013) findings across multiple political systems, that despite Twitter's affordances of interactivity and conversation, officials use language to avoid engagement.

Research in the United Kingdom (UK) shows that politicians' awkward tweeting has a “dad-on-the-dance-floor” quality (Jackson and Lilleker 2011). Modi's tweeting is a relevant extension, given his own origins with a social movement of typically older Hindu conservatives, and yet his campaign was specifically crafted so that he did not come across as inept online. Sanne Kruikemeier (2014), in studying the Dutch national elections of 2010, found that candidates who used Twitter during the course of the campaign received more votes than those who did not, and furthermore that interactivity had a positive impact. In research on the broader realm of online presence and its consequences on voter behaviour, Rachel K Gibson and Ian McAllister (2006) in a study of Australian elections found that campaign websites positively influence voter choice.

However, other studies contradict some of these findings, claiming that online campaigns primarily galvanise supporters who are already engaged (Park and Perry 2008). The

variance in these findings underlines the challenges of working in this space in this time of rapidly changing means of access to media. This variance also iterates that every study is a snapshot in the timeline of the level of social media adoption in a society. This is likely true in India, where social media access has gone from a few million to tens of millions since Modi's move online. Our goal is not to make a claim on whether Modi won the election because of social media. The issue is moot. Our goal is to understand how Twitter fits within Modi's negotiation of a broader environment outside of his traditional base.

Modi's use of Twitter aligns with Gregory A Huber and Kevin Arceneaux's (2007) view of leadership campaigns as a persuasive informative tool, rather than one people actually learn from. Twitter in this case emerges as a signalling mechanism for younger urban Indians, who like young urbanites elsewhere show higher political apathy than their rural counterparts. This ties with literature on the role of social media in potentially reversing political apathy among young citizens in democracies (Delli Carpini 2000). Our research further explores social media's role in appealing to expatriate Indians and the broader international community.

Our work contributes to studies of Modi himself, and of the relationship between the Hindu right wing political movement and technology. Modi's past is deeply tied to the reasons social media are relevant today. Referencing a meeting with Modi in the 1990s, when he was still a small-time RSS pracharak, Ashis Nandy (2002) referred to Narendra Modi as a "textbook case of a fascist and a prospective killer." For much of the last two decades, work on the Hindutva movement broadly, and Modi specifically, has focused on radical discourse, organisation, and discipline (Jose 2012). In this regard, the actions of Modi's followers on Twitter bear similarities to such traditional grassroots political work. However, there is little research on the ways that radical discourses have been constructed and communities have been organised online.

Finally, our work speaks to the literature on technology and media in the global South. Studies of the effects of social media have focused on communications around landmark events, for example pro-democracy protests (Lotan et al 2011), the aftermath of disasters (Smith 2010), and transparency in fragile elections (Ahmed and Skoric 2015; Smyth and Best 2013). The common thread has been the hope for technology as a means of decentralisation of information and circumvention of institutions. Little work has considered, however, the role of technology in reframing of "business as usual" politics in the global South.

### 3 Methodology

We used qualitative methods to examine two sets of data related to the public signalling of Modi's online presence on Twitter. The data do not explain "why" Modi gained a following (Twitter users who "follow" another account), but rather they shed light on how Modi's online image was constructed and evolved. We chose a hand-coded qualitative approach for (i) classifying the accounts followed by the @narendramodi handle, and (ii) thematically classifying individual tweets.

Our goal was to conduct a deep analysis of political communication, rather than a broad study of sentiment that would be better served by an automated classification.

The first set of data relates to @narendramodi's following behaviour online, leading up to the election. We kept track of all the Twitter handles followed by @narendramodi and used these data to understand approaches to public signalling in terms of who he followed up until his election, and why that matters.

Second, we downloaded all the tweets by the handle @narendramodi between 1 February 2009 and 18 February 2015 using the Twitter API and Topsy.com, a website that archives tweets. To obtain Modi's older tweets, we scraped the website Topsy.com for the tweets, and then scraped the number of retweets and favourites from the Twitter page of each individual tweet. In total, 6,649 tweets are represented in this sample. The study spans 1 February 2009, the date of the first tweet, to 18 February 2015, exactly nine months post-election. We followed tweets for nine months after the election to provide a set of tweets that stabilises after the initial spike in activity immediately post-election. Each data item includes the text of the tweet, the date and time, the platform on which it was composed, and the number of times the message was retweeted and forwarded.<sup>1</sup> Two lines of analysis were performed. First, we calculated the median<sup>2</sup> of retweets and favourites for tweets in each month to examine the growth of the online presence. Second, we qualitatively coded a subset of these tweets to understand how the themes of discussion changed over the years.

### 3.1 'Following' Analysis

We mined the 1,043 accounts that were publicly known as being followed by the handle @narendramodi as of 15 May 2014.<sup>3</sup> The three authors, all familiar with Indian politics, independently classified the accounts using their public profile text as a primary source of information. We followed up with web

**Table 1: Categorisation of Accounts Followed by @narendramodi till May 2014**

Account Types	Number	Median of Followers	Median of Tweets
Organisations			
Domestic	24	9,231	990
International	8	6,45,585	5,887
Media			
Indian news media	91	18,898	20,460
International media	25	21,96,087	24,800
Celebrities			
Indian celebrities	32	7,96,856	3,108
Global celebrities	3	88,34,952	1,022
Politicians			
BJP politicians	152	2,725	647
Non-BJP Indian politicians	4	45,132	3,119
International politicians	8	3,87,976	2,176
BJP-affiliated			
Informal pro-BJP accounts	71	4,048	1,346
Karyakartas	125	1,322	4,765
Official BJP party accounts	50	5,960	1,432
Others			
Laypersons	428	1,968	15,281
Others	22	4,034	4,521
Total	1,043	3,083	6,139

searches on each identifiable name to check for membership in the BJP or the RSS.

We created 14 categories of accounts (Table 1, p 54). For each mined account, we tracked the number of followers, listed tweets as of 15 May 2014, and classified them in the categories specified. Two authors coded all 1,043 accounts (till May 2014, the date of the elections) into 14 categories. Cohen's kappa coefficient was 0.899, with the coders agreeing on the categorisation for 961 (92.1%) accounts, making inter-rater agreement high. A third author arbitrated and assigned the remaining 82 accounts.

### 3.2 Thematic Analysis

We first examined the popularity of @narendramodi's tweets through their monthly median number of retweets and favourites. Second, we analysed tweets over four time periods, which were selected as key junctures in Narendra Modi's political career. These have been represented as blocks in Table 2. Out of our sample of 6,649 tweets, 2,114 tweets fell within the parameters of the four blocks. The first block we picked was slightly larger than the rest, to round off at a meaningful point, when Narendra Modi began his Sabhavana fast in Godhra, a call for communal harmony by the leader, thus signalling an open move towards pan-Indian leadership.

Past analyses of coded political tweets have shown that a single classification scheme may be inadequate to capture the range of purposes a tweet is intended to serve at a given point (Hemphill et al 2013). We consequently used a three-tiered coding system: the first was a typology classification, followed

**Table 2: Categorisation of Tweets According to Time Period** (n=2,114)

Block	Tweet Time Period	Time Period Significance	No of Tweets
1	1 February 2009 to 21 January 2012	Early tweets	625
2	3 August 2012 to 30 January 2013	Tweets leading into 2012 Gujarat elections	500
3	13 April 2014 to 17 May 2014	Tweets leading into 2014 general elections	501
4	15 December 2014 to 18 February 2015	Most recent tweets	488

**Table 3: Inter-coder Agreement on Categorized Tweets**

Category	Themes Included in Tweet Text	No of Tweets	Cohen's Kappa Coefficient
Achievement	Programmatic/political feats of the party or Modi himself	78	0.75
Address	References to public addresses	107	0.72
Appeal	Public appeal to support a programme or group, including policy	67	0.73
Condolence	Condolences on a tragedy	50	0.87
Congratulation	Congratulations on achievements	57	0.93
Endorsement	Support for another individual or programme	94	0.56
Generic	General messages that were casual musings	312	0.64
Gratitude	Thanks to group or individual for event or programme	59	0.80
Greetings	Individual or group greetings, including for religious festivals	133	0.90
Confrontation	Direct or implied reference to rivals	130	0.64
Tribute	Tribute to a group, or individual achiever, often national figure	92	0.80
Update	Update on state of affairs or policy	373	0.60

by up to three thematic codes, and one geographical code. We reframed the classification structure to suit the Indian context, in particular to deal with the nuanced greeting messages that are consistent across Modi's later political communications.

Each tweet was analysed individually, even when a single message spanned multiple tweets. We created a classification scheme with 12 categories under which each tweet was classified (Table 3). Fifteen categories were created after analysis of the first 50 tweets; for each category, example tweets were created for reference in the coding scheme. After the first 500 tweets were coded, three categories were collapsed into others by agreement of all coders based on significant overlap. Each tweet was classified under a single category. The two largest categories were "generic" and "updates," though if all greeting categories were flattened (condolences, congratulations, etc) then "greetings" would be the largest.

The Cohen's kappa coefficient on agreement between the two coders for categorising the entire set was 0.69 (Table 3). There was more agreement on categories such as congratulations, greetings, and condolences, and less on updates and generic, which were also the two largest categories of tweets.

The team also conducted a thematic analysis based on the subjects in each tweet. We created a list of 183 themes, which evolved as the project continued. Each coder used up to three themes per tweet, and there was no reconciliation between the two coders. All 2,114 tweets were coded, with a grand total of 5,993 coded instances. Of all themes, we highlight nine in this paper, selected post-analysis based on their significance as recurrent concepts, as follows:

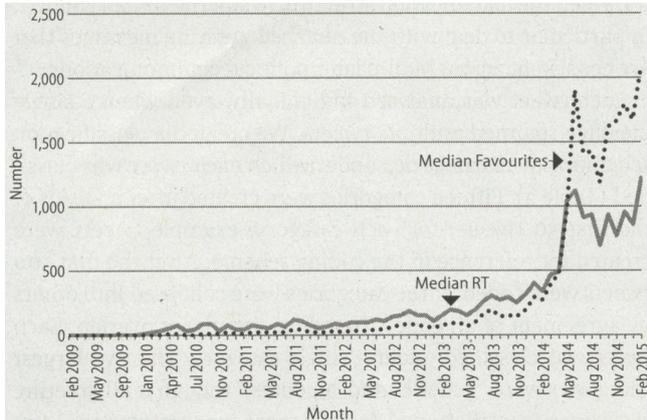
- (i) BJP: Any direct reference to the BJP party.
- (ii) Hindutva: Hindutva references and Hindu greetings, practices or references to Hindu festivals and gods.
- (iii) Elections: References to electoral issues.
- (iv) Youth: References to youth issues.
- (v) Development: References to economic development, industrial growth, and rural development.
- (vi) Congress: References to political rival Congress Party.
- (vii) Education: References to education issues.
- (viii) Sports: References to sports issues.
- (ix) Policy: Specific discussions on policy issues.

### 4 Findings

To start our analysis, we looked at the retweets and favourites of messages from @narendramodi to help frame the genesis of growth in the Twitter network.

The number of tweets from @narendramodi fluctuates quite significantly between February 2009 and January 2012; there would be periods of several days with no tweets. After 2012, tweeting became fairly consistent. We found consistent growth of retweeting and favouriting between 2009 and 2015, although there were some spurts (Figure 1, p 56). We see that retweeting was consistently higher than favouriting until February 2014, but the gap was reduced as Modi's online following increased. At the point of Modi's election, favouriting overtook retweeting, and it has continued at a higher level, as is typical of most celebrity accounts.

**Figure 1: Median of Retweets (RTs) and Favourites (Favs) of Messages from @narendramodi between 2009 and 2015**



The retweet score of each tweet in the month is considered a single item. All items in a month are lined up in ascending order of the number of retweets, and the middle value is the median for that month, likewise for favouriting.  
Source: Twitter API.

This offers evidence of community action to propagate Modi's message, both in the early days of his tweeting and through two elections thereafter. Post the 2014 elections, the impetus for activist retweeting was reduced, and by this point his following exceeded 6 million (half of what it reached within another year).

#### 4.1 'Following' Behaviours

Table 1 includes the coded list of all accounts known to be followed by @narendramodi. The largest category of accounts is that of laypersons ( $n=428$ ; 41.0%), followed by BJP politicians ( $n=152$ ; 14.6%), BJP *karyakartas* or workers ( $n=125$ ; 12.0%), and Indian news organisations and reporters ( $n=91$ ; 8.7%). The median number of tweets and followers for those accounts gives us a sense of their potential reach, international news media and global celebrities being the most influential. We look in greater detail at accounts followed by @narendramodi that belong to Indian and global celebrities and laypersons because these are relevant from a political signalling perspective.

#### 4.2 Celebrity Following

A key early celebrity endorsement came from Hindi film star Ajay Devgn in August 2012 when he hosted a Google+ hangout session with then Chief Minister Modi in preparation for the 2012 Gujarat assembly elections. The event was rebroadcast on a YouTube channel created for Modi. Although film stars had done similar sessions on YouTube, this was the first by an Indian politician. The choice of technology and moderator were clever—Google was trying to popularise the multi-participant video chat, and Devgn had just released one of the biggest box office successes in the Hindi film industry and had more than 1 million followers on Twitter. The hashtag #ModiHangout became the first viral event on Modi's social media presence.

After the Devgn hangout, Modi followed a number of celebrity accounts, irrespective of whether they offered followbacks. This was curated to suggest affiliation. Early followings by Modi included Hindi film actors with solid social media followings including Ajay Devgn, Raveena Tandon, Preity Zinta

and Amitabh Bachchan. Modi followed a number of celebrities in the South, where the BJP is traditionally weaker, including A R Rahman, an Academy Award winner musician, and Lakshmi Manchu, an actress from a prominent Southern political family. He followed male stars with known fan bases including Rajinikanth and Vijay in Tamil Nadu, and Nagarjuna and Pawan Kalyan in Andhra Pradesh. Such followings were typically accompanied by photographs, which were heavily retweeted.

Modi's followings included a nod to industry. He followed Eric Schmidt and Bill Gates, both widely iconic tech figures in India, and also Pranav Mistry, the young Indian student at Massachusetts Institute of Technology known for his work on interfaces. Modi followed two spiritual leaders—Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev, both of whom endorsed Modi and had networks of followers online.

#### 4.3 Non-celebrity Following

We focus on two categories of non-celebrities. These include 125 *karyakartas* (volunteer foot soldiers of the party or its parent RSS), and 428 laypersons with no verifiable affiliation to the party. Layperson followers formed informal pro-Modi groups in the run-up to the elections around hashtags like #NDArocks, using names such as "Saffron Senioritas."

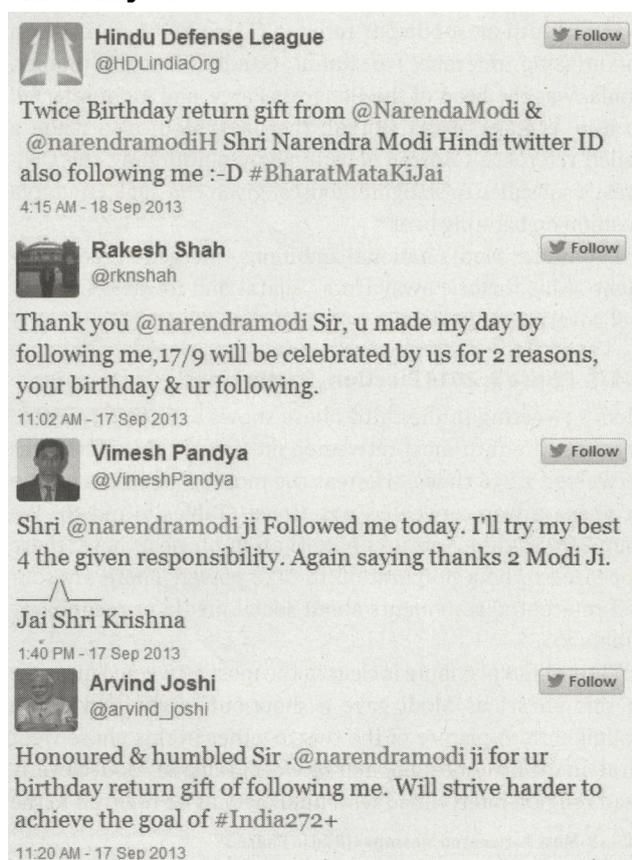
We examined accounts of several Indian politicians standing for the 2014 elections, including others from the BJP. Their Twitter accounts served primarily as a one-way information broadcast, with very limited use of following except reciprocally to public figures and news media. Modi, in contrast, is the only leader who extensively offered followbacks to *karyakartas*. This implies reciprocity to his followers, and thus, by extension, a seat at the table. On 17 September 2013, his 63rd birthday, Modi followed a number of *karyakartas* and layperson followers. Many announced their thankfulness on being followed by changing their profiles on Twitter and adding phrases such as "I am being followed by Modi" or "Modi follows me" in their profiles. We also found common use of Modi's image alongside catchphrases from the campaign such as "India First." This tap on the shoulder by the leader served as a call to action (Figure 2, p 57).

Although the political themes of Modi's tweets in the run-up to the elections had moved away from Hindutva, the layperson profiles emphasised the philosophy of the economic and political right. We mined the text from the profiles of all 428 layperson accounts. The four most common adjectives used in self-descriptions were "proud," "nationalist," "Hindu" and "patriotic." "Engineer" and "professional" were the two most common terms of occupation, followed by "lawyer" and "entrepreneur."

#### 4.4 Tweet Themes

Some tweeting themes evolved significantly over the four study periods, whereas others appeared fairly consistently. Table 4 (p 57) shows the raw instances of the nine selected themes, all of which had at least 75 instances in the entire data set. We picked items based on their frequency and to highlight some of the major trends in each of the phases.

**Figure 2: Public Profiles of Twitter Accounts That Mention Modi Following Them**



Source: Screenshot taken by authors on 1 May 2014.

Two categories with low coefficients of variance—youth and development—were consistently tweeted themes in all phases. Political themes such as elections, as well as issues relating to Modi's own party, the BJP, and the rival Congress Party appear relatively more selectively. Elections are strong in phases 2 and 3, and in the run-up to the general election, rallies, addresses, and political confrontations are very strong. These drop off in phase 4. His home state of Gujarat, a major theme in the first two phases, declines later. The Hinduism theme, represented significantly during the first and second phases, drops off leading up to the elections (Table 4).

**Table 4: Instances of Coded Themes through Four Stages Alongside Coefficients of Variance (CV)** (theme instances n=5,993)

Theme	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	CV
BJP	23	20	65	21	0.587
Hinduism/tradition	69	140	12	49	0.690
Elections	8	56	223	0	1.253
Youth	49	44	25	50	0.240
Development	70	33	63	57	0.250
Congress	52	33	88	2	0.712
Education	65	13	1	16	1.030
Sports	20	23	0	32	0.624
Policy	38	19	15	53	0.489

The word count confirms the people-centric rhetoric in Modi's tweets (Table 5). We also see a few regional anomalies: Gujarat is understandably a major theme in the first two phases when

Modi was a regional politician, but the battleground of the state of Bihar appears only in the run-up to the general election, and then disappears post-election. A look at the popular tweets on @narendramodi through the four stages gives us a deeper qualitative understanding of how the themes converted to viral messages.

**Table 5: Selected Word Count with Coefficient of Variance (CV)**

Word	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	CV
Development	27	50	32	25	0.263
People*	54	109	126	52	0.344
Thank*	17	28	39	13	0.374
BJP	13	30	24	10	0.377
Congress/UPA	23	62	73	2	0.643
Address*	5	51	48	7	0.702
Gujarat	153	245	32	12	0.765
Rally*	3	13	137	9	1.233
Vivekananda	18	161	0	9	1.258
Bihar	2	0	28	0	1.415

\* Variants of the word included (for example, thanks, thankful).

#### 4.4.1 Phase 1: Early Tweets, Development and Hindutva

Although many of his early tweets were sent by a third person on his behalf, he quickly switched to first-person in this phase. During this phase, Modi already had a fairly active traditional website, [www.narendramodi.in](http://www.narendramodi.in). This website and a Facebook feed were integrated into his tweets, and the single largest recurrent term in his tweets was a hyperlink to the website (Table 6).

Modi's campaign consistently appropriated hashtags that have a development branding and make a nationalistic appeal, such as #IndiaDevelops (Table 6). A more direct attack at the Congress Party is seen with #2facedCongress used in confrontation with specific references to the politicians A Raja and Sheila Dixit.

**Table 6: Ten Most Retweeted Messages (RTs) in Phase 1**

Tweet Rank	Tweet Text	Retweets	Date/Time
1	Today #Anna gave call for 'Right to Reject'. #Gujarat govt passed bill for this cause twice in 2008 and 2009. Sadly governor rejected it.	775	8/28/11 4:54 am
2	Another example of congress' disgusting double standards. For them, Anna is corrupt while A Raja and Sheila Dixit are non-corrupt! #2facedCong	690	8/15/11 11:29 am
3	God is great!	449	9/12/11 3:19 am
4	Russian court dismisses plea to ban <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> . Satyameva Jayate! Jai Shree Krishna!	433	12/28/11 7:15 am
5	It is the time for the entire nation to get together and have a firm resolve to fight terror #mumbaiblasts	410	7/13/11 1:05 pm
6	Vote for Bringing Back Indian Black Money Deposited in Swiss Bank. Participate in the Nationwide Poll Campaign at <a href="http://www.narendramodi.in/polls">www.narendramodi.in/polls</a>	391	4/11/09 3:02 am
7	Their sacrifice before 80 years made India free. Let us pay our tribute to #Shaheed #BhagatSingh, #Rajguru and #Sukhdev	368	3/23/11 2:51 am
8	Wishing a very Happy Birthday to Atal Bihari Vajpayeeji, one of India's most inspiring leaders of all times!	336	12/24/11 10:53 pm
9	The day when Krishna and Sudama met epitomises a true #FriendshipDay. Lets celebrate and learn from their deep, pure and timeless friendship.	334	8/7/11 2:06 am
10	#Gujarat is proud to host the biggest facility of #Ford outside America worth \$1bn which will provide a total of 36,000 jobs #IndiaDevelops	329	7/28/11 7:10 am

Two clear Hindu-themed tweets were among popular retweets (Table 6). He appropriated the Western concept of “Friendship Day” and applied it to the Hindu mythological relationship between Krishna and Sudama. Although Modi’s following crossed 1 million during this phase, he was still largely seen as a regional politician. His reference to the Russian court’s decision against the ban on the Gita championed the cause of Hindu rights. His use of “Jai Shree Krishna,” a common Hindu Gujarati greeting, was aimed at his regional following. However, references to national icons Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, and Rajguru, and to tax-evasion and earnings in Swiss banks were nods at more mainstream national issues (Table 6).

At this stage there was a high volume of discussion on education and youth-related issues in social media. However, these themes do not figure prominently among the most retweeted messages.

**4.4.2 Phase 2: Late Gujarat, Preparing for National Leadership**

The most popular tweets from the second phase moved away from Gujarat towards national issues and confrontation with the Congress Party (Table 7). At this point, six of the top 10 retweets were attacks on the Congress Party, and all of them bore a sarcastic tone. A number of personal attacks included a veiled reference to the foreign origin of Sonia Gandhi and the naming of schemes after the Gandhi family.

As in phase 1, birthday greetings for the former prime minister, the old guard of the party, were popular and retweeted. Modi also invoked national figures Bhagat Singh (also phase 1)

**Table 7: Most Retweeted Messages (RTs) in Phase 2**

Tweet Rank	Tweet Text	Retweets	Date/Time
1	Pakistan Govt renames Shadman Chowk in Lahore as Bhagat Singh Chowk. I congratulate them for this tribute to the martyr nm4.in/QEtmA6	972	10/01/2012 7:49
2	UPA gives subsidy to slaughter houses but rations LPG cylinders & hikes diesel price. Is this Disha of Congress? nm4.in/QYkyH9	866	09/14/2012 10:42
3	Mr. Rahul Gandhi talks of respect for Vidhan Sabha but his own attendance in Lok Sabha between May 2011–May 2012 was 24 out of 85 sittings!	858	12/11/2012 5:59
4	Entire UPA Govt. wakes up to rescue son in law of one family but when there is terror attack only a spokesperson speaks nm4.in/SS0zJl	709	10/13/2012 9:18
5	Money doesn’t grow on trees’ Am surprised at this explanation. What bigger trees Congress needs than Coal scam & 2G? nm4.in/Q4MqHK	705	09/22/2012 5:27
6	No need of looking behind, FORWARD! We want infinite energy, infinite courage, infinite patience... bit.ly/xYiTIB #vivekananda150	701	12/19/2012 20:59
7	Heartfelt birthday wishes to Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee ji, a colossal figure in Indian Politics who has inspired millions.	649	12/24/2012 23:07
8	Full of life, Balasaheb Thackeray was an epitome of courage and valour. I am grieved to hear about his demise. May his soul rest in peace.	613	11/17/2012 7:23
9	Assam and FDI issues prove PM ji has redefined our democracy as ‘Govt of foreigners, by foreigners and for foreigners’ nm4.in/NG3l3e	593	09/21/2012 3:30
10	Rahul Baba’s hypocrisy on full show. Says only 1 voice is heard in Guj. I ask—what about the 5,000 schemes named after his family?	590	12/14/2012 11:54

and Swami Vivekananda, after whom he named his youth initiative, marking 150 years of the leader’s birth.

In the 10th-most-popular retweet (Table 7), Modi made an infantilising reference to Rahul Gandhi. Rahul’s mother, Sonia, was the head of the Congress Party, and Modi referred to him as Rahul Baba (Rahul, the boy). Modi also made a veiled reference to a religious topic by questioning the Congress’s subsidies to slaughterhouses, given the BJP’s Hindutva position on banning beef.

In phase 2, Modi’s national ambitions emerged in the movement of his rhetoric away from Gujarat and towards the central government in Delhi.

**4.4.3 Phase 3: 2014 Election, Battle Lines**

Modi’s tweeting in the third phase shows a marked increase in reach; the 10th-most-retweeted message in this phase was retweeted 2,256 times, whereas the most retweeted message in phase 2 was retweeted 972 times (Tables 7 and 8). We found fewer direct attacks here than in phase 2; here, there appeared to be a preparation to take power. There are four self-referential statements about social media or technology (Table 8).

The politics of tribute is clear in the most retweeted message in this phase, as Modi gave a shout-out to the movie star Rajinikanth. A picture of the two together in this phase went viral. In the fifth-most-popular retweet (Table 8), Modi cleverly used religion intertwined with filial piety as he referred to the

**Table 8: Most Retweeted Messages (RTs) in Phase 3\***

Tweet Rank	Tweet Text	Retweets	Date/Time
1	#NowFollowing @superstarrajini. Delighted to see the Superstar on Twitter. A warm welcome http://t.co/ewcPnySggb	3768	05/05/2014 14:58
2	Selfie is in! Share yours using #SelfieWithModi & see what happens https://t.co/2s2BZ7GvuC http://t.co/oDrCZztzo0	3735	04/30/2014 4:48
3	Voted! Here is my selfie http://t.co/7OnhFijOAC	3457	04/30/2014 4:45
4	Petty statements by those claiming to be BJP’s well wishers are deviating the campaign from the issues of development & good governance.	3331	04/22/2014 3:57
5	My profound apologies to Ganga Maa for not being able to perform Aarti today. Wish these people know that a mother’s love is above politics.	2933	05/08/2014 2:55
6	I disapprove any such irresponsible statement & appeal to those making them to kindly refrain from doing so.	2830	04/22/2014 3:58
7	Due to communal politics of Abdullah family, Kashmiri Pandits were removed from their homes only due to their religion. Is this secularism?	2692	04/28/2014 7:46
8	Due to social media, lies & false promises of several leaders could not go beyond the podiums of their rallies! More power to social media.	2643	05/12/2014 12:54
9	The way Rahul Baba is making statements with a dash of comedy in them, I think the TV show of Kapil Sharma may soon have to shut shop.	2545	04/27/2014 12:27
10	8 months, 5,800+ rallies, Charchas, programmes, 3 lakh+ KMs... an extensive, innovative & satisfying journey. My blog http://t.co/6MLdibQpNB	2256	05/10/2014 15:11

\* Not including victory and congratulation tweets following 15 May. These have been excluded from the qualitative analysis since they give a skewed flavour of content of posts from this phase.

River Ganges as his mother. Modi also periodically posted images of himself with his mother on Facebook and Twitter, some of which have been among the most widely propagated messages on the network.

The hashtag #SelfieWithModi is an example of interaction and reciprocity, analogous to the followbacks on his birthday in 2013 in that it got people talking about the leader as one of their own. Anyone could take a selfie showing the vote verification black mark on the finger and could then themselves be part of a hashtag thread they shared with their leader.

#### 4.4.4 Phase 4: Yes, Prime Minister

The post-election phase in Narendra Modi's tweeting is distinct in its relative lack of political tweets. The cricket world cup took place during this phase, thus five of the top 10 retweets were cricket-related (Table 9). The tweets picked up on popular culture references, such as calling the national team skipper M S Dhoni "Captain Cool"—a popular way of referring to him on social media. Retweet 9 shows a sophistication in cricket language as Modi referred to specifics about team batsman Suresh Raina's style of play. That the most retweeted messages involve cricket is testament to the place of cricket in Indian cyberspace, and potentially to Modi's recognition of such.

**Table 9: Most Retweeted Messages (RTs) in Phase 4**

Tweet Rank	Tweet Text	Retweets	Date/Time
1	Congrats Team India. Well played. We are all very proud of you.	20,795	02/15/2015 11:37
2	Spoke to @ArvindKejriwal & congratulated him on the win. Assured him Centre's complete support in the development of Delhi.	14,853	02/10/2015 4:51
3	In the wake of dastardly attack in Pakistan, I appeal to schools across India to observe 2 mins of silence tomorrow as a mark of solidarity.	8,325	12/16/2014 17:20
4	As the 2015 Cricket World Cup begins, my best wishes to the Indian Cricket Team. खेले दिल से, वर्ल्ड कप लाओ फिर से!	7,994	02/12/2015 12:31
5	Have seen the news about a Temple being built in my name. I was appalled. This is shocking & against India's great traditions.	7,401	02/12/2015 3:17
6	My best wishes to captain cool @msdhoni. Play hard, lead well & make India proud. Knowing you, I am sure you will.	7,298	02/12/2015 12:31
7	RT @WhiteHouse: Thank you @NarendraModi for a memorable visit, and to the Indian people for their warm welcome. #India -bo	7,206	01/27/2015 8:29
8	Who is not a fan of Sir Jadeja? We all look forward to seeing your all round performances take India to victory! @imjadeja	6,414	02/12/2015 12:39
9	Suresh Raina has always been agile on the field & hard-hitting with the bat. Hit them out of the park, including the bouncers :) @ImRaina	5,901	02/12/2015 12:36
10	It is a senseless act of unspeakable brutality that has claimed lives of the most innocent of human beings—young children in their school.	5,729	12/16/2014 10:37

By this point Modi was using Twitter widely for greetings and generic messages, much in the style of a benign ruler as opposed to the issue-based political tweets that marked earlier phases. Modi had more than 10 million followers by the start of phase 4, and his every message was being retweeted and favoured at least 1,000 times. An example of Modi's rhetoric

to gracious paternalistic figures comes in his widely retweeted shout-out to Arvind Kejriwal, his new political rival, congratulating him for his electoral victory in Delhi, which Modi himself had campaigned ferociously against.

The second major difference in his tweeting in phase 4 is his focus on policy issues (Table 4), which as a single theme was prominent in this phase than it was in the previous phases. But, this does not emerge strongly when one considers the most retweeted messages, which were themed around sports, for instance. This is itself an important point on the nature of what is popular on Twitter, and indeed of Modi's recognition of the same.

## 5 Conclusions

Modi came with a message that already appealed to a constituent population. This analysis does not question the appeal, but instead looks at the strategies that both consolidated the existing base and formed a palatable signal for new followers. Although we use "Modi" for convenience throughout this paper to describe activity on @narendramodi, we cannot be certain of the individual origin of any message. Modi's campaign hired ad agency Ogilvy and Mather and was run by the convenors of the BJP national information technology (IT) cell at the party's headquarters. Reported associates included Illinois Institute of Technology's PhD Arvind Gupta, Chanakya Institute professor Radhakrishnan Pillai, Columbia University graduate and tech entrepreneur Rajesh Jain, and a number of volunteers from investment banking, consulting, technology and management. Gupta, head of Modi's IT cell, highlighted the campaign's drive to go after 155 urban constituencies as central to its online strategy (Mahurkar and Pradhan 2014). From the early days of sporadic tweeting and clumsy use of hashtags, we see a gradual but measured evolution to a point where every message on Twitter now feels like a crafted quote.

Our analysis shows evidence of consistent activity in pre-election retweeting by Modi's followers. The corresponding "following" activity on @narendramodi shows the ways in which reciprocity is signalled, and how that in turn emerges as a call to action. Finally, the thematic analysis offers insight into how Modi's social media message changed through various phases in his political evolution.

The reduction of direct media contact from Modi emphasises his growing assurance that social media are a self-sufficient form of media outreach; traditional news media no longer play a role. Without an established media tradition of press addresses by the head of government, the media's lack of direct access to Modi is not unprecedented. Nonetheless, social media offer Modi the ability to appear consistently in contact with the people. As we find with the active retweeting of his early tweets, followed by the overtaking by favouriting post-election, a concerted early campaign with a core set of followers helps build a solid media reach that both rivals and serves as a feeder to mainstream media. Unlike many of the political campaigns that started off awkwardly on Twitter, Modi avoided coming across as an old-world political leader unaccustomed to technology, and emerged as a tech-savvy leader for India through strategic, well-crafted tweeting. The campaign consistently tweeted on topics of youth and

development throughout the four phases studied, alongside the use of technological artefacts, such as selfies, in crafting an appeal to a young demographic.

The strategic use of “following” public and non-public persons and organisations as a means of political signalling is an area of limited academic research that Modi’s campaign highlights. Finally, the reframing of Modi’s image provides an insightful look into the potential discourse of development and technology in an aspirational nation state, and ways in which artefacts like Twitter and Facebook symbolise a new modernity.

A few years ago, Narendra Modi may well have been able to win a popular election in India, but it is questionable whether he would have been a viable face for a multicultural, growing nation state that stands among global powers. In just a few years, he has evolved from a sectarian strongman unwelcome in several nations, to a selfie-clicking leader with a finger on the latest technology as well as the pulse of his constituents.

The re-imagining of Modi through social media is all the more important because of his near-total lack of contact, as Prime Minister, with traditional news media. Outside of prepared

speeches at major events, what we see of Modi on social media is almost all we see of him. And yet, Modi comes across as the most interactive Prime Minister the country has ever had.

Modi’s Twitter campaign exemplifies the power of social media in shaping the citizenry’s imagination of its political leader. Our goal is not to examine how or why his online following has grown, but to understand what picture it paints of him and how this picture was created through a combination of explicit messaging in the form of carefully crafted tweets, alongside implicit messaging in the form of followbacks.

The case of Modi requires a radical rethinking of the potential for centralised, one-way messaging from the political apparatus in societies where leader–public discourse mediated by a free news media is not the norm. The popular discourse of social media has proposed that social media are a means of empowering the general population, particularly in the global South. The case of @narendramodi is not as much one of institutional capture as it is of the creation of a compelling alternate discourse. It is the best proof we have that Twitter can craft great leaders.

## NOTES

- 1 All retweet counts are from July 2015. If the number of times a message got retweeted has changed since then (they typically do by a very small fraction), that will not be reflected in the data.
- 2 Median was used as a measure to account for the potential bias in using mean, which would be inflated in the months with one or a few highly viral messages.
- 3 This approach means that some accounts that were followed in the past but were unfollowed since cannot be captured in this number.

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