

Banalities Turned Viral: Narendra Modi and the Political Tweet

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Abstract

Narendra Modi's social media presence is among the most extensive for any politician in the world, including on Twitter where he currently stands second in following only to Barack Obama. With a mix of "feel good" messages, shout-outs to other celebrities, and well-timed ritualized responses, as well as a careful strategy of "followbacks" for a small selection of his most active followers, Modi has been able to grow his following dramatically especially since 2013. Twitter helps Modi directly reach a significant constituency of listeners, and use it as a channel to talk to the main stream media. In addition, the very appearance of his using social media effectively is in itself valuable in reshaping his public image as a technology-savvy leader, aligned with the aspirations of a new Indian modernity.

Keywords

Narendra Modi, Twitter, social media, politics, India, BJP, campaign, followback, new media, Facebook, NaMo, RSS

The most "retweeted" and "favorited" message in India's social media history came on May 15, 2014, when the handle @narendramodi tweeted "India has Won." The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) had come to power in elections with the biggest mandate in three decades, and Narendra Modi would be the next prime minister. The carefully phrased victory tweet congratulated the social media supporters who had for months been his online foot soldiers. By this point, Modi was the third most followed politician online (Raguhunathan 2014). By the end of the calendar year, Modi had crossed

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Figure 1. Cover image of Modi's Facebook page receiving blessings from his mother in September 2014.

nine million followers on Twitter, more than quadrupling his reach from the start of the year.

Modi's Twitter campaign has been one of the most successful by a public figure. The campaign was coordinated and sustained through various social media outlets and was integrated into Modi's larger election outreach campaign. This included a website (www.narendramodi.in), a Facebook page, a Pinterest board, a YouTube channel, and profiles on Google+, LinkedIn, Tumblr, and Instagram. Each of these has continued to be updated regularly with news, statements, and images of Modi. His campaign also featured a mobile app called India272+ to pass messages and organize volunteers.

Modi's online image is carefully crafted. His social media outlets feature photographs that fit within a larger brand image that at once straddles two spaces—a man who represents values and tradition and a man who represents globalized modernity. Social media allow control over the initial dissemination of the news and imagery, and the use of various outlets simultaneously has helped build this image. Modi's Facebook page (Figure 1) shows him with his mother, his Pinterest profile has images of development initiatives, and his Twitter page features selfies that have gone viral. During the elections, online products featuring Modi included laptop bags, MacBook skins, and even an Android-based smartphone. Images of Modi in pensive poses with his laptop preceded selfies he took on a slick large-screen mobile device.

Soon after the elections, *Open Magazine* did a cover story on Modi titled "Triumph of the Will" (Figure 2). The story went viral on social media as an endorsement of the man. In a decade, Modi had gone from being a man whose primary media impression stood on memories of the 2002 Gujarat riots, and the man television commentator



Figure 2. The Open Magazine's Cover post-elections referencing Leni Riefenstahl's Nazi propaganda documentary.

Karan Thapar called out for a murderer, to being the political face of modernity. And the two were not incompatible.

The post-riots face of Modi is a far cry from what the Twitter handle @narendramodi crafted as an image. Through Twitter, he directly addressed his audience through a range of oft-banal but mostly positive messages. His tweets offered a lens into the campaign of image management that has recast him as a development hero, reaching new audiences with an image of a polity that represents industrial acumen, technology, and a keen pulse on the global aspirations of the young nation.

Although "banality" is a complex term used in a range of ways in media discourse (Morris 1988), the term here refers to a more literal sense of spoken platitudes. Specifically, as related to the use of political tweets, my use of banalities builds on

Jackson and Lilleker's (2011) classification of political tweets as tools for self-promotion and ingratiation rather than for sensitive topics and confrontation. The idea of banalities as political communication also builds on Marwick and boyd's (2011) conception of imagined audiences, where social media presence is enacted through a series of often polysemic messages that signify a multiplicity of public images at once. The banal tweet is thus explicitly defined by its apparent innocuous nature—delivered as a feel-good missive, ritualized response, or casual musing, but weighed by its underlying meaning as part of a larger message of impression management.

Retweet Central

When Modi's Facebook account was opened, it was done on his behalf, with a single posting encouraging supporters to join "NaMo League" to promote the views of the Gujarat chief minister. This remained the only message for all of 2011. The next message in 2012 came in first-person voice, ostensibly by the man himself, encouraging people to sign up for his updates. This was a different approach from U.S. President Barack Obama's page, for instance, which was openly managed by an organization on his behalf. Modi gave the appearance of having composed the messages himself.

Another important element of the campaign was a Google Hangout session with Bollywood actor Ajay Devgan on August 31, 2012. The event, a casual Q/A session between the actor and the politician, preceded the 2012 Gujarat Assembly elections and was broadcast on YouTube. It was rare at that time for a major politician to appear on a live interactive chat in a discursive interview. The endorsement by the film star paid off. In the months following the Google+ chat, Modi's online following increased significantly. On the auspicious ninth day of the Hindu festival of Navratri (nine nights), October 23, 2012, a major event in his home state of Gujarat, @narendramodi crossed one million followers. Until this point, the goal of his online presence was ostensibly to lead him into the 2012 Gujarat Assembly elections as a man who stood for development in his state. However, Modi's Twitter followers had surpassed all but one Indian politician, Shashi Tharoor from the Congress party, who had his own Twitter following due to his previous reputation as an author and international diplomat.

The transition in Modi's online presence started in 2013. Early in the year, the focus of his tweeting was Gujarat; then in about the second week of June, Modi sent a series of messages referring to "seeking the blessings" of then-BJP parliamentary leader LK Advani and to party president Rajnath Singh. Behind the tweets was a period of internal party discussion on who would lead the 2014 national election campaign. The speculation ended when Modi was elevated to chairman of the 2014 election campaign, which all but confirmed him as the candidate for prime minister.

This marked a new, national phase in Modi's social media discourse. By July 2013, he had mentioned multiple states besides Gujarat—Uttarakhand, Goa, Punjab, Orissa, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu. He had tweeted about meeting both former president A. P. J. Abdul Kalam and current president Pranab Mukherjee, and had mentioned national icons Guru Harkishan, Swami Vivekananda, and Chandrashekhar

Table 1. @Narendramodi's Favoriting and Retweeting since 2013.

Time period	Mean daily tweets	Mean retweets	Mean favorites	Most retweeted message (date)	Most retweeted message
05/27/13–12/31/13	4.9	193.4	345.4	07/22/13	Height of Intolerance! http://t.co/j7q2J6DMKO #AditiRestaurant
01/01/14–05/15/14	10.4	502.9	585.2	04/13/14	With Rajinikanth ji http://t.co/ErTqvfr8Lx
05/16/14–09/11/14	4.5	1,585.9	2,210.2	05/15/14	India has won!

Azad. Twitter accounts in various Indian languages were set up to translate his tweets, and news emerged on the tech entrepreneurs who joined his social media campaign (Thoppil 2013). On July 4, 2013, he overtook Shashi Tharoor as the country's most followed politician on Twitter.

Modi's birthday, September 17, 2013, was a key social media event for the campaign. On that day, his handle, @narendramodi, "followed" a number of Twitter accounts handpicked from volunteer *Karyakartas* ("foot soldiers") online or individuals with significant Twitter followings. This strategy of offering followbacks was not new; the Obama campaign used these, somewhat indiscriminately, following back 650,000 Twitter users. In contrast, Modi's handle followed 1,000 accounts, a mix of celebrities, institutions, and individual tweeters.

For the individual tweeters, the act of following by Modi was seen as a call to action. Overnight hundreds of people changed their Twitter profile text to mention Narendra Modi or posted that they were being followed by the man himself, and many replaced their profile pictures with one of Modi. Immediately thereafter, Modi tweeted messages encouraging the registration of young voters, and as public outreach, he copied his message to the handles of the most followed Twitter accounts in India—including those of film stars Shah Rukh Khan, Priyanka Chopra, Salman Khan, Amitabh Bachchan and Akshay Kumar; cricketer Sachin Tendulkar; and spiritual leader Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. On December 18, 2013, he surpassed three million followers (Mirani 2013).

The Populist

Table 1 is a snapshot of the growth of Modi since his prime ministerial campaign. It also gives a sense of how Modi has had a pulse on what resonates in the medium. The three most popular tweets appeal to the audience that was most relevant at the time.

His July 2013 post (in Table 1) capitalized on an incident in which Congress party workers shut down a restaurant whose owner had a tongue-in-cheek joke about the ruling party "eating money" printed with each bill for customers. The tweet went viral.

There was an outpouring of support for the restaurant owner, who overnight became a minor celebrity, especially among young people, for taking on the political institution. By wording his tweet in terms of tolerance, Modi did not just stand up for the little guy who spoke up against his political rivals. He endorsed free speech.

In April 2014, Modi had his most retweeted message prior to the election when he tweeted a photograph of himself with South Indian film star Rajinikanth. With a less significant following in the South than in the North and West of the country, the tweet with Rajinikanth suggested an endorsement from southern India. Likewise, Modi tweeted photos of himself with Telugu film star Pawan Kalyan and Tamil film star Vijay, a photo of himself flying kites with Hindi star Salman Khan, and an entire event with some of the top stars in the film fraternity in Andhra Pradesh. All these were banal on the surface. There were no explicit endorsements or statements of policy, but all these tweets were heavily retweeted by the respective artists' fans. Between the second half of 2013 and the first half of 2014 in the run up to the election, the typical retweet count of Modi's messages more than doubled.

The followbacks played an important role in the online construction of Modi's image. Modi's followbacks and style of directly addressing people were intended as a move away from a *Mai Baap*-form of ivory tower politics of which he accused the leadership of his rival United Progressive Alliance (UPA). Modi used social media as a constant means of public address, unlike the Congress' Rahul Gandhi, who had no presence on social media. Modi's followback strategy was unique even within the BJP. Although other leaders like Rajnath Singh, Sushma Swaraj, and Arun Jaitley all had fairly large social media presences, most did no followbacks or else had limited follows to prominent figures. Modi's use of Twitter was both a call to action and an important means of reiterating that he remained a *Karyakarta* who listened to those who followed him.

When a layperson was followed-back by Modi, there was invariably an immediate reaction by the individual. Reactions ranged from a tweet announcing the event to changing the profile picture to Modi. Although no public data exist on how the individuals were selected, most of those who were followed-back had a significant following of their own, identified themselves as supporters of Modi or BJP, and had posted a message related to the party. A sampling of four of the public profiles of the Twitter accounts followed by Modi highlights the centrality of announcing one's status as being "tapped back" by the leader. All four profiles showed many key terms associated with the discourse of the Right. These included the use of *Bharat* instead of "India," the use of the "India First" slogan, and an analogy to the Tea Party referring to American right-wing politics. The profiles also highlighted affiliated political and oppositional perspectives. There were shout-outs to Hindu spiritual leaders Sri Sri Ravi Shankar and Baba Ramdev (@narendramodi referenced both during the campaign). The other political party to use social media effectively in the run up to the Delhi elections, the Aam Aadmi Party, was derogatorily called AAPTARDS (as in "retards"). One profile used the Hindu incantation *Ahimsa parmo dharm, Hinsa Tathaiva cha* (loosely translated, "Non-violence is the ultimate dharma. So, too, is violence in service of Dharma"), underlining ways in which the banalities of the tweets

were part of a complex web of stakeholders and political persuasions that formed the ecology of his online campaign.

A Winner's Voice

When Barack Obama sent out his victory tweet in 2012 of a picture of himself hugging Michelle Obama with the line "Four More Years," Twitter reported it was the most retweeted message ever at the time. In contrast, Modi's victory tweet on May 15 did not mention himself or the BJP. Instead, he congratulated India for choosing him. Indeed, Modi's online footprint is a fraction of Obama's, whose victory tweet had more than ten times as many retweets as Modi's. But one difference was critical.

A comparison of 3,200 retweets from the two accounts from May 2013 to May 2014 showed that the typical tweet from @barackobama had a median of 582 retweets per message and got tagged a "favorite" about 607 times. Each tweet from @narendramodi got roughly 1,735 retweets and was "favorited" roughly 1,107 times. This, despite the fact that during the study period, Modi had only twice tweeted messages that had more than 10,000 retweets, whereas Obama had 40 tweets in the same period that reached the same figure. In other words, although Modi had less than a seventh of the followers, Obama has far less ability to turn messages gigantically viral. Modi was significantly more able to get a consistent social media buzz about what he had to say. Although some of this could be attributed to a post-election euphoria effect, this nonetheless pointed to an effective means of direct popular outreach created by the party.

Indeed the core act of following did not necessarily mean readership or activity in a strict sense. A random sampling of 10,000 of Modi's 6.29 million followers in September 2014 using Simply Measured Twitter software showed his following is largely composed of individuals with a small number of followers themselves. From this random subset, 46.2 percent of his followers were Twitter accounts with no followers, and 88.9 percent had five or fewer. About 60.2 percent of the accounts had never tweeted, and an additional 19 percent had only once sent out a tweet. Only 5.6 percent of all followers had sent out more than 10 tweets since creating Twitter accounts. In other words, this sample estimated that Modi had a central group of 350,000 active followers who regularly read or occasionally retweeted his words. From the total sample of 10,000 studied, only 55 were individuals with more than 100 followers and 300 tweets (excluding all identifiable corporate accounts). While this number may look small, it suggests that the inner circle of highly active followers with significant reach was closer to 34,000 users in September 2014 at the time he had about 6.29 million supporters.

The social media campaign also contributed to the visual brand re-imagining of Modi. Prior to the election, a series of Modi photographs circulated on social media showing him with an Apple laptop, using a DSLR camera, reading an Obama biography, wearing a jogging tracksuit, and wearing a cowboy hat. Such images were part of a larger branding exercise that has continued since his second term as chief minister of Gujarat (see also Kaur [IN PRESS]). His brand consultants included prominent figures in advertising and heads of top agencies in India, including Piyush Pandey of

Ogilvy and Mather, Prasoon Joshi of McCann, and Sam Balsara of Madison World (Pande 2014). Such images contributed to the media persona differentiated at once from the Khadi-wearing, Nehruvian politician, but also from the khakhi-shorts-wearing, RSS volunteer.

The Twitter campaign extended these images. Most of Modi's tweets, particularly post-election, have been banal, feel-good messages, shout-outs to major events and popular figures, and nods to partnerships and affiliations. He has tweeted praise to India's youth, national culture, and traditions, while giving gentle nods to nationalist figures including Vivekananda, Veer Savarkar, and Chhatrapati Shivaji, and also the Dalit/lower-caste leader Babasaheb Ambedkar. There were tweets in the summer of 2014 about both the Indian cricket victory in England and about the World Cup soccer final in Brazil. He made public tweets to world leaders including Vladimir Putin, Stephen Harper, Obama, Shinzo Abe, and David Cameron, and he did a series of live tweets and pictures from meetings with leaders from neighboring Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and China. He started a hashtag called #SelfieWithModi in which he took a picture of himself on his mobile with the election mark on his finger and tweeted it, triggering a viral set of images of people posting their own similar images.

Modi tweeted occasionally in management jargon, referring to demographic dividends, information superhighways, and smart governance. He typically referred to Sonia Gandhi as "madam" and Rahul Gandhi as "shahzada" (prince) or "Rahul Baba," and although he attacked the Congress Party on several issues, his references to the Gandhis themselves were cloaked in witticisms and ridicule. Through mockery, he underlined a prowess with language, wit, and, most importantly, no inclination on his part to take his opponent seriously. He took a jab at Rahul Gandhi's campaign in the state of Rajasthan using a reference to the movie *Dhoom 3* (2014) that was running in theaters at the time.

Conclusion

On September 7, 2014, Modi wished Japanese tennis contender Kei Nishikori success in the U.S. Open final. His message was both a nod to Japanese national pride and a wink at a class of Indians watching the U.S. Open back home. The gentle tenor of his twitter banalities on global events, carefully crafted and global public thank-you notes, and consistent reinforcement of national development themes suggest no shadow of a man who was once-rejected by the international community and was banned from entering the United States for gross violations of religious freedom. The young demographic of Twitter users in India are from a generation that has grown up with little memory with the riots of 2002—the enduring memory of Modi for them will be the political maverick who talks directly to the people, whether through Twitter or via his popular radio and YouTube missives called *MannkiBaat* (translated, "Words from the Soul").

For a party long branded as appealing to constituents of traditional Hindutva values, the use of technology in the party's reimagination has been particularly salient (see also Mohan [IN PRESS]). Modi has used a protechnological discourse to reframe

his political image. As he said in an address to the Shri Ram College of Commerce in 2007, Indians in the past were snake charmers, but the Indian youth in the future will be (computer) mouse charmers (NDTV 2013). The capture of social media allowed Modi to cater to aspirations for a modernity that mirrored blueprints from the global North. The BJP no longer stood only for older Hindu men in saffron. Instead, here was a man who could take a selfie with one hand and use the other for a trident when needed. For the first time in its history, the BJP leader emerged as more central to the public discourse than the ideology he stands for. Modi's credentials as a foot soldier allowed him to become the unquestionable centerpiece of the campaign within the party. Perhaps it was those credentials as well that lent credence to a growing popular discourse of a strongman with a gentle touch. The Modi social media case is as much a story about the way technology is iconized in India as it is a story of a man who learned to master it.

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