REPORTAGE | TALKING POINTS | IDEAS

MODI MATINEE SHOW
INSIDE INDIA'S CELEB TWITTER

Since 2014, India's most-followed celebrities frequently engage with Modi, but hardly ever disapprove or disagree

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MINT SHORT STORY

WHO

Since being elected PM, Modi has arguably been one of the most celebrity-savvy political figures India has ever known. The pattern of using celebrities as endorsers for government initiatives has since been kept up.

WHY

In 2014, Modi had the kind of public endorsement from the social elite that perhaps no other candidate has ever had. Perhaps, equally important, has been Modi's continued engagement with celebrities post-elections.

HOW

To understand celebrity polarization along the political spectrum, a curated list of 483 of India's most followed public figures/celebrities was used to identify where they fall on the political map.

PM Narendra Modi takes part in a selfie with Bollywood actors during a recent interaction in New Delhi.

@NARANDIHAR

Prime Minister Modi is a master of the celebrity outreach game. One of the things Narendra Modi got less credit for in his 2014 election campaign was the astuteness with which he engaged celebrities—prominent personalities in entertainment, business, sports, and spirituality. Before 2013, few celebrities would speak up for Narendra Modi; but in the run-up to the election, a large number of major public figures had been tweeted to by him, innocuously photographed together with him, or openly endorsed him.

Modi was not only the central figure in the media as far as the 2014 election was concerned, but he had the kind of apparent public endorsement from the social elite that perhaps no other opposition candidate has ever had in the history of Indian elections. Perhaps, equally important, was Modi's continued engagement with celebrities post-elections. Modi memorialized interactions with celebrities through selfies; tweeted to them during birthdays; and also formalized celebrity engagement with the state by using them in his widely publicized social media campaigns for initiatives ranging from Swaech Bharat to Beti Bachao. By offering an ostensibly apolitical embrace to public figures, Modi capitalized on their fan following, while the celebrities got to pat themselves on the backs for their social contributions—with a broom in one hand and cellphone camera in another.

As a result, celebrity Twitter has slowly but surely turned into a potent vehicle to reach a mass audience. In the run-up to a contentious 2019 election season, celebrities are once again gearing up for a busy few months—either openly putting their weight behind candidates or playing a game of innuendo by restricting their endorsements to chance selfies.

But what animates the consequential bubble that contains India's celeb Twitter? What hashtags do they amplify? Which political voices or personalities do they channel on to a broader audience? And are there distinct political camps within celebdom? How does a selfie with Modi spread on Twitter?

Since tweets are after all public, at least some of those questions can be answered.

TWITTER TRENDS

A Big Data analysis of India's celebrity Twitterverse (consisting of 483 prominent figures from the world of arts, sports, entertainment, business, and religion) throws up some interesting patterns.

Firstly, they are clearly influential and have a broad reach. Within the sample, a subset of 40-odd personalities who frequently engage in borderline political discourse have over 8 million followers, on average, and each of their tweets get retweeted at least 350 times. Bollywood stars like Akshay Kumar or Amitabh Bachchan, on average, don't get retweeted as much as celebrities with relatively smaller followings—like actors Kamal Haasan and Rajinikanth, who is, by median average, the most retweeted Indian celebrity (*see Chart 1*). Thus, the inexplicable aura and mystique of Rajinikanth holds good in the Twitter realm too.

Several factors impact retweet rates—including the number of followers, the relevance of the message subject to the celebrity, and the style and content of the messages. Thus, actors Swara Bhaskar and Prakash Raj get relatively high retweet rates when weighted to their following due to the political nature of their messaging.

To understand celebrity polarization along the political spectrum, a curated list of commonly used hashtags by over 1,000 Indian politicians was used to identify where celebs fall on the political map based on the hashtags they use. The hashtags repeatedly used by Narendra Modi and Rahul Gandhi, in particular, gives some broad pointers.

On the left top of *Chart 2* is Khushbu Sundar, who is high on the graph because of the frequency at which she tweets hashtags that Rahul tends to use, and towards the far left for the number of such hashtags she uses. Likewise, on the extreme right are those celebrities who proportionately use more hashtags that Modi tends to use. We see that both Baba Ramdev and Sri Sri Ravi Shankar are in this corner, but also cricketers Suresh Raina and Sachin Tendulkar. Secondly, we also observe that southern celebrities are less likely to use pro-Modi hashtags. The exception, in this case, is Malayalam actor Mohanlal who has tweeted pro-Modi several times. Kannada actor Prakash Raj, who also appears on the right because of his use of Modi's hashtags, is actually misleading since he uses Modi's hashtags sarcastically and is fairly openly anti-BJP. Finally, a number of celebrities who tweet on the left side of the graph may not explicitly support Rahul Gandhi (Vishal Dadlani and Javed Jaffrey, for instance, are both AAP-aligned) but their hashtag use seems to put them ideologically closer to the Gandhi side.

An alternative way of understanding alignments is to examine networks. We plotted all the celebrities based on who they followed from various political parties and who followed them back. For the sake of simplicity, we divided the politicians in our sample into NDA and non-NDA. Baba Ramdev, for instance, both follows and is followed by a relatively high number of BJP politicians (*see Chart 4*). The most interesting insight, however, is the clustering around the centre and the premium on neutrality—even when there are strong suggestions of their political alignment, as with Madhuri Dixit and Javed Jaffrey (lending quantitative validity to the widely held perception that Indian celebrities play it safe). The other curious facet is that there are more politicians in the top half of the figure than the bottom, suggesting that these celebrities have the ear of NDA politicians. The exception here is Vivek Oberoi, who while actively following a number of NDA leaning politicians is not proportionately followed by NDA politicians (Oberoi is set to portray Modi in an upcoming biopic).

HASHTAG WARS

One good way to understand how implicit issue-specific support can be given is by examining hashtags that have political undertones. While there are some hashtags that explicitly suggest support to a particular political party, the majority of hashtags allow the user the ability to deny actual endorsement of an individual politician.

> That celebrities steer clear of appearing partisan is evident from the fact that they prefer campaigns which are not controversial

Broadly, relatively less political issues get more celebrity endorsement than hashtags that are more political. Thus, hashtags about hygiene and fitness do better on average than more political hashtags such as those related to the Statue of Unity or the national budget.

A gamified campaign technique to engage celebrities has been the use of chain snowballs, as used in the ALS challenge. Modi used this to great effect with the Swaech Bharat campaign.

The fact that celebrities steer clear of appearing partisan is evident from the fact that they prefer campaigns that are not controversial—the FitnessChallenge has the most attached celebrities, for instance (*see Chart 3*). Second, hashtags that have an affective emotional appeal tend to do better than those that politicians are seeking to promote.

MODI VS RAHUL

By this point in the 2014 campaign, the celebrity endorsements had already started coming in for Modi. Rahul Gandhi, on the other hand, has a much more significant branding problem.

Since being elected prime minister, Modi has arguably been one of the most celebrity-savvy political figures India has ever known. The pattern of using celebrities as endorsers for initiatives has since been kept up, but he has also had much-publicized casual engagements with celebrities, including the most recent meeting with Bollywood stars in Delhi. The gamified style of #SwacchBharat and #SelfieWithModi has been central to the way brand Modi has made it cool to support him.

As a result, while there are celebrity detractors of Modi, the numbers are minuscule compared to those that have supported him publicly, and the tone of tweets against him is far more gentle.

The real action with celebrities is indeed happening through allusive conversations that take place with hashtags. The most commonly used hashtags were aimed at the BJP rather than at Modi himself. Two cases include the Kathua rape case and the Sterlite riot case. In the Kathua case, Bollywood stars came together under what was presumably a relatively safe topic of coalescence, that the rape and murder of a child was unacceptable. But no conversation can be apolitical long enough, and the networks of people who supported Kathua, and those who took it as symbolic of attack on the establishment pushed the celebrities to one or another corner. Consequently, cases of gender violence emerge as one of the strongest points of anti-BJP social media activity by celebrities. However, there wasn't the same normative safety of collective outrage with social media posts around the Kathua case as there was with the Nirbhaya case from a few years ago. A number of celebrity tweets received pushback from people on social media, as with Sonam Kapoor Ahuja, who was trolled significantly for her tweets against the rapists—a reminder that even the temporary appearance of being anti-government comes with a price.

CONCLUSION

Brand Modi has been practically impregnable following the 2014 election. Few if any celebrities would openly tweet against Modi. The data suggests that most celebrity voices which disagree with the BJP government come from the safe geographies of the South or West Bengal. To the extent that celebrities matter for votes, few Bollywood stars seem likely to play a hand, particularly one that is anti-BJP. Cricket, the other religion, seems firmly in favour of Modi. For celebrities, keeping away from an explicit affiliation is a judicious means of preserving their own brand and fan base. Politicians' engagement with celebrities must be viewed from within the frame of a media engagement strategy that relies on removing mediators and reaching out to the public directly. Politicians can now avoid engagement with professional journalists and address only those questions that they wish to discuss, and do so with the endorsement of a social elite. By engaging with celebrities on social issues or items that are outside of solely political matters, politicians can present the spectre of being actively engaged with matters of national relevance, and indeed furthering the conversation by engaging key public figures in it. The real threat is to the quality of democratic discourse with a silent, or actively collusive social elite.

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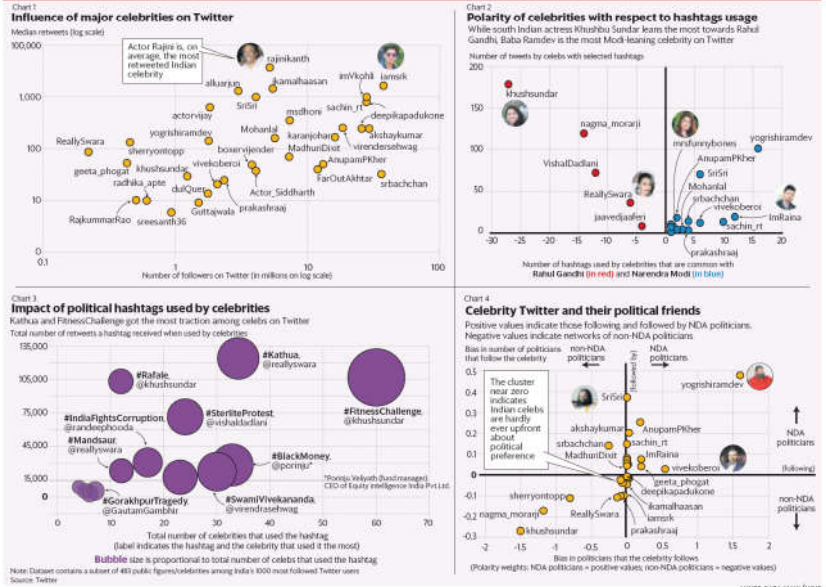
WHAT GOES ON INSIDE INDIA'S CELEBRITY TWITTER



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