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E-Seminar 52
Abusive Exchange in Social Media: the Politics of Online Gaali Cultures in India

By
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Discussant
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Nell Haynes (nell.haynes@gmail.com)   **July 8th 2015**

Hello everyone,

I'm so delighted to be able to participate in this discussion with my comments. I'm also looking forward to a lively discussion. Please find my comments below.

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Nell Haynes, Ph.D.
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This paper, "*Gaali *Culture in India: The Politics of Abusive Exchange on Social Media" by Sahana Udupa explores the use of insult and abuse on Indian Twitter, often in contexts of religious and political difference. She uses a framework of performance and verbal art to explore this phenomenon as experienced by social media users in Mumbai and Bangalore in 2013 and 2014. The paper specifically looks at abuse as a form of and response to political participation among urban youth, asking what consequences these practices may produce. Udupa suggests that while the use of abusive language may open up new lines of political participation, they also

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reinstantiate silencing mechanisms of women through masculinist discourses of shame.

My comments focus on three different topics arising from Udupa's paper and relevant to broader discussions of social media. First, Udupa's paper addresses an analytical question taking her subject, not as some monolithic entity known as Twitter, but as a specific, contextually nuanced Indian Twitter, thereby supporting the notion that the importance of social media lies in the ways they are used by individuals in particular situations, rather than how they may prescribe certain types of usage. Second, Udupa suggests the lens of performance to look at social media usage, a valuable way of thinking through user motivations, while keeping in mind the fact that audience interpretation is essential to any understanding of social media expression. Finally, Udupa's paper addresses a question of who speaks in what contexts/publics, and who is *allowed* to speak. This gives the paper more weight in terms of its application to more general anthropological discussions bridging themes of media with social justice and contestations of power. So, in asking what constitutes social media abuse, and what is its meaning, Udupa expertly interweaves a number of different important themes and debates of contemporary anthropology, making for a lively and fascinating paper.

Udupa begins with an implicit acknowledgement that a study of social media must be centered on content, and not a platform as a whole, taking into account place and context. She provides important information about the nature of Twitter in India and how users generally use the platform, thus providing a background for discussing the particular phenomena of abuse. Further, pointing out that "social media for political debates still constitutes a middle class urban phenomenon with an overrepresentation of privileged class groups" (p. 6) focuses our attention to a specific subset of the population. This specificity contributes to understanding social media use, and issues of voice and silencing which I address later, within relations of power.

While Udupa concedes that the 140 character limit of Twitter may contribute to the rapid and hostile nature of abusive exchanges, ethnographies of Twitter from other contexts remind us this outcome is anything but inevitable. Udupa employs Nick Couldry's (2010) term protoagency (p. 10) to acknowledge the important context of verbal art in politics in India, and this framing might be equally useful in thinking about the choice of Twitter within a Polymedia context, as the space in which abuse takes place. This is indeed a complicated question, not only of what media might provide space for feedback, but also where politics and news are frequently discussed. Thus, we return not just to the technical parameters and affordances of the platform but the ways that individuals use it that are important background to this phenomenon.

Abuse is central to this question of social media usage because it reminds us that new media are perhaps never an entirely positive or negative phenomenon. Udupa expertly contextualizes these abuses within Indian verbal art, particularly in politics, as well as within religious and gender regimes that are important to their understanding. In doing so, she places abuse as an important topic of concern in thinking through the ways that local "culture" remains central to social media use even while so many cautionary accounts suggest that social media represents a globally homogenizing force. Udupa rightly eschews the legal definition of abuse to concentrate on users' own definitions of malicious intent that has an effect on their social media participation (p. 6).

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Following Irvine (1993), she sees abuse as an interplay of the Internet's structure and the specific local histories and processes that create certain moral expectations and assumptions. Indeed, this pushes us to think about what might constitute the moral geographies of online spaces.

Focusing on what users do in a specific context leads to my second point, highlighting the theorizing of social media use as a kind of performance. Udupa framed her treatment of Twitter abuse as analyzing performance, a framework that allows for questioning what are the intentions and interpretations of these performances, what are the roles of actors and audience, and to what extent are these performances tied to identification.

I was looking forward to an explicit treatment of performance, which seems to dwindle after the literature review section, but the fact that performance serves as theoretical base for this paper, even in implicit terms, advances thinking about what it is people *do* on social media. Thinking about social media use as performance could lead us to deeper and perhaps more broadly applicable analyses of this online abuse, interrogating the intentions and interpretations of both the abusers and the abused. This might contribute to broader discussions on social media conflict, as well as considerations of the use of performance as political act, such as those related to "disidentifications" (Muñoz 1999).

Performance as a mode of analysis also leads us to what is perhaps the most important aspect of this paper, a classical anthropological question: Who has the right to speak in a particular context and what does this tell us about power relations? Of course, the fact that the paper focuses on social media is not coincidental. With seemingly endless examples of popular media and scholarship suggesting that social media, and Twitter in particular, create new avenues for political engagement and voice for those who are often silenced, Udupa's paper provides an important contribution for thinking about the ways that political repression and silencing may become reestablished even through the media which on the surface seems so revolutionary. And in detailing the small negotiations that users make—blocking users, ignoring them, responding with intentions of productive debate, or simply lashing back—we see not only the "verbal art" that emerges through online abuse, but also the active choices those who are abused must make on a case-by-case basis. These choices are not just about responding to critics, but bring us back to thinking through the valuation that individuals place on making their own voice heard and their choices about the extent of abuse they will endure.

Her example clearly illustrates the ways that implicitly held ideas about who has a right to voice, to presence, etc. are made explicit through the types of abuses (policing) that occur. As she explains, women journalists are primary targets, and the abuses their critics write to them are generally formed on sexual themes: prostitution, the vagina, and illicit sex, and aimed at individuals rather than political arguments. Udupa writes that her goal was not strict linguistic analysis, nor to represent the full range of abusive language used on Indian Twitter, but rather to focus on the contextual factors of the abuse. This is an important goal, but I also wonder if future research might lead her to Critical Discourse Analysis, which takes such context into account, in order to parse out the ways gender and the "right to speak" are intimately connected in this context, as well as the ways shaming associated with sexuality (even when based on entirely

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untrue occurances) are a particularly powerful approach.

And while myself, seemingly Udupa, and I would guess most readers tend to see the targets of abuse as those who are the sympathetic characters in the story, the paper does not limit us to this view. More subtly, the paper demonstrates the ways that Hindu nationalists may also feel silenced, seeing "paid media" as influential of hegemonic political stances, and understanding their own positioning as subaltern or unheard. From this vantage, we see not a unidirectional policing of "voice" on social media, but instead a negotiation of two groups who are in some sense threatened through silencing by the other.

And on a third level, we see issues of voice in the interplay between India and "The World." If Twitter abuse opens the field of political debate to a broader social sphere (as did tabloid journalism (p. 10), this broadened field may have implications for how Indians envision themselves and their nation. Udupa acknowledges many individuals' use of Twitter may be interpreted as a way to give India as a whole a voice on a global forum where they can assert their country as a global power; to "challenge the gnawing stereotypes of India," as she phrases it (p 16).

What we see then is the complexity the issue of online abuse may represent. From local to international levels, abuse is a form of contestation of social forms, whether they be centuries-old vestiges of colonialism, newly emerging exercises of power, or fall somewhere in the middle.

This paper is an important contribution to thinking about issues central to media anthropology, but also has wider implications for subaltern studies and gender studies that make it equally valuable for a broader audience.

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Sahana Udupa (udupa@mmg.mpg.de)   **July 9th 2015**

Dear members

First of all, many thanks to Veronica Barassi, John Postill and Philipp Budka for organizing the e-seminar. Discussant Nell Haynes has given such detailed and insightful comments – thanks indeed. Based on these comments, I have organized my response under different themes,

although there are still many points I need to carefully think about. Thanks again to Haynes for her thorough reading and very helpful comments.

Context-specificity and the national frame:

Haynes recognizes rightly that the approach to Twitter – or any social media platform – should be context-specific which entails attention to specific modes of practice and cultural habits cohering around media in a given socio-historical period. Although contextual understanding would mean that we move away from understanding media as global technologies with predictable and prescriptive usage patterns, I would hastily add that this should not lead us back to methodological nationalism. As anthropologists of globalization have been arguing, the local-global dialectic is a key mediation of contemporary media in the "new world-space of cultural production" (Wilson and Dissanayake 1996: 1). This dynamic is arguably played out with a momentum unseen in the previous phases of media expansion. Perhaps there is something more global about Internet-enabled technologies, but the global-local dialectic is pertinent in a polymedia context of print, television and new media precisely because of the inter-connections that emerge between different media discourses. In my study of print journalism and polymedia in urban India (Making News in Global India 2015), for instance, I have argued that global and local formations are embedded in the translocal and reterritorialized field of news. This shapes a mediatized local where stakes over the local are more keenly fought and contested. This is especially important at a time when local news has become a key focus for commercial journalism, and the local has gained significance for the news media as at once an object of representation and a mediating context. These arguments are made in relation to the study's focus on how news media co-create "global cities" in the South, as several cities forge a direct connection with the global economy. The point is that global-local connections are today so prominent that it is increasingly difficult to think of media as "national" media. This does not mean a fraying of the national frame, but a recognition of the intricate global, national and local flows that define media practices.

To chase "Indian Twitter" would be elusive also because of the vast linguistic plurality (with 22 official languages) and the vibrant diversity of cultures and histories it indexes. Without doubt, Twitter is still dominated by English. But even this factor cannot lead us to the assumption of "Indian Twitter".

This long qualification should not however take away the basic point on contextualizing Twitter that Haynes correctly notes as the approach of this paper.

"Who speaks?"

This theme raised by Haynes is the core concern of the paper. Increasingly, the presumed democratic potential of social media is hemmed in by all manner of techniques and tactics to produce a certain kind of discourse. For sure, it is a contested field. In our case, this is reflected through different layers of abuse generation – local, national and global – as well as the different motivations that drive them – from asserting India as a global power to challenging corrupt

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politicians. However, the middle class composition of online political debates and the Hindu nationalist party's social media strategies have revived the discourse of Hindu India, inspiring a new generation of tech-savvy youth to take up Hindu nationalism as an ideological project.

Twitter brevity

Haynes notes that: "While…the 140 character limit of Twitter may contribute to the rapid and hostile nature of abusive exchanges, ethnographies of Twitter from other contexts remind us this outcome is anything but inevitable." This is an important observation. It would be very helpful to get more references in this line. The argument that market inflected brevity plays a significant role comes from the conversations I had with many online users who said it is much easier today to hurl an abuse without having to break one's head over the niceties of communication with longer prose. They added brevity demands that they are sharply provocative. There is certainly no necessary connection between terse prose and abuse, but this is one of the key factors that conditions peer-to-peer communication. This is again, of course, context-driven.

Choice of Twitter in a polymedia context

How did Twitter become the preferred platform to voice political opinion? To add to this point, Daniel Miller's (2011) arguments on "political moralities" of different social media platforms are useful. Drawing on this concept, my (other) paper on "Internet Hindus" (2015) has traced Twitter's transition from a forum for "silly updates" to a platform for political debates in Mumbai city. It might be useful to revisit it briefly to understand the choice of Twitter for political discourse in India: 'Twitter's transition from a platform for "silly updates" to one with the capacity to organize voluntary work – at least among English-educated middle-class groups during crises [terrorist attacks and floods] – was significant in the brief social trajectory of the microblogging site in Mumbai. By 2010, it had experienced yet another transition. Although routine updates and the impulse to organize tweets for social causes or business interests did not disappear, Twitter came to be perceived more as a platform to share information, opinionate, and remain up to date on "hard news". This transition coincided with Twitter's official branding in later years of its inception as a "real-time information network" where the user can "have access to the voices and information surrounding all that interests her/him". Soon Twitter users commenting on politics and news events or tagging stories on "current affairs" were more common. Twitter became a high ground for opinion exchange, as opposed to what was increasingly seen as frivolous Facebook – a result of assigning "political moralities" to different media technologies'.
(435-436).

Moral geographies

Haynes makes a fascinating observation on "moral geographies" of online spaces. This, I suggest, is especially important if we consider the gendered dimensions of online discourse. In the paper, I note that abuse can at once be about distant strangers and known people in the local public domain. Shame comes out through these spatially flexible moral geographies.

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Performance

The aspect of performance certainly needs more elaboration, as Haynes suggests. The paper has largely understood performance as "practice" – what people do that is related to media and combines it with Bakhtian ideas and the concept of "sound". But clearly, there is more to performance. Muñoz could be an interesting lead if we read the Internet as arenas where tensions unfold between the intimacy of identification that Mbembe implies and "disidentificatications" as performances that "envision and activate new social relations" for minoritarian counterpublic spheres (Muñoz 1999: 5). This tension defines the context for exclusions in as much as they spur the enthusiasm to enter online debates.

A critical discourse analysis of social media texts is a useful method indeed, and I would take this suggestion to examine the reproduction of gendered relations in and through the phantasm of normative sexuality.

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Thanks and Regards
Sahana

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)   **July 9ᵗʰ 2015**

Dear All,
Thank you Sahana and Nell for your paper and comments. The discussion is now open to all.

We are looking forward to your comments.
Veronica

Gabriele de Seta (notsaved@live.com)   **July 10ᵗʰ 2015**

Dear Sahana,

I enjoyed reading your paper and I look forward for its final version. Here are some comments - please note that I'm quite ignorant about India so my points are mostly theoretical.

1) You describe instances of offensive, and potentially abusive, comments on Twitter. I think it is really important to avoid conflating offence or abuse with things like "flaming" and "trolling" that have specific historical traits on different online platforms - you can find several references on these phenomena since the 1990s, and they are typical of discussion boards and mailing lists,

with very different social dynamics than simply offending someone by mentioning him on Twitter with some vulgarities.

I think that your argument would not lose any strength if you just describe these events as "abuse" or "offense", and it might actually help you refine the scope of what practice you're talking about. What you describe in this paper are quite unrefined sequences of (mostly chauvinist and sexist) swearwords, at times even automated, and at times potentially criminal (rape threats, etc.) deployed in reaction to specific political positions.

2) This Roshni quote is very interesting: "For someone like me who is really serious about work, when people are questioning my work and ethics, it kind of hurts me a lot, especially on social media. And it went on and on. I tried to reply to some of them. But after a point it really got to me". I wonder if there might be something to say in here about the "seriousness" with which Twitter and other social media are experienced in India, or among a certain community of Indian users, to the point that a series of offensive mentions is perceived as physically painful. How is abuse constructed among different communities of users and political identities? How does the idea of a "violent right wing" play in the emotional experience of being offended on Twitter by a Hindu nationalist? Given the numerous anti-harassment tools that Twitter provides (unfollow, private accounts, block lists, harassment reports), it is interesting to see that the people you interviewed highlighted their striking emotional reactions to vulgarities that have been part of the Internet since its early days.

3) On your idea of "noise": if you argue that the goal of these right-wing abusive accounts is to "noising out" the debate by being the "loudest", probably "spamming" of "flooding" might be digital media practices that resemble it quite closely, especially if some of these accounts are automated. If this is the case, the emphasis could shift from the discussion of "verbal art" which seems quite unrelated to rude and vulgar insults, towards the organized practice of silencing someone by flooding his tweets with abusive replies. The question then becomes: silencing from which audience? And how successful can these attacks be, in which political context?

I hope these three comments make some sense. I guess that my general point is avoiding the conflation of different digital media practices (trolling, abuse, offense, harassment, insult, threatening...) and linking them to the rising creativity of users, because the consequence is that the interpretation becomes political in itself: when it's right-wing, it's abuse, when it's left-wing, it's participatory activism and empowerment. I am not seeking to justify the bunch of Hindu nationalist harassers that you discuss. I'm just wondering if going deeper into how both sides of this debate construct ideas of "abuse" and "offense" might bring up more details about your arguments.

Anyway, I wrote a paper on trolling on Chinese digital media platforms that might be useful: http://twentytwo.fibreculturejournal.org/fcj-167-spraying-fishing-looking-for-trouble-the-chinese-internet-and-a-critical-perspective-on-the-concept-of-trolling/

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Best,
Gabriele de Seta

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   **July 13ᵗʰ 2015**

Many thanks for a very rich paper, Sahana.

I'm interested, among other things, in the practical implications of your research for activists. You wrote (p. 23):

"Whereas class privileges and political connections help women from affluent families to shield from the debilitating effects of abuses in some measure, women from middle class background lacking this significant protoagentic privilege (Clark et al. 2010) are increasingly pushed to the dilemma of participation and withdrawal, forcing them to go mild, 'neutral' or completely silent."

This and other passages in your working paper reminded me of a digital rights conference I attended this past March in Manila, i.e. RightsCon 2015 (Silicon Valley meets SE Asian civil society, as it were). To quote from my notes on that meeting:

"A presenter from the South Asian region drew laughter when she said that we are too 'beholden to the beards'. She also added that internet libertarians [in the West] may not like the word 'protection', but that in many countries more state protection from the fanatic mobs was actually needed."

Later, in the group discussion with participants with different parts of Asia and beyond:

"A range of responses to hate speech against women, LGBTIQs, religious minorities, secularists and others were presented and taken up in the lively discussion. These included various forms of humour (mockery, parody, satire), with lessons to be learned from the Soviet era; the use of critical, rational, research-based evidence to counter dogma; and meeting online discourse with more discourse, not less. In addition, the role of men working alongside women to respond to sexist cyberbullying was highlighted, as well as the importance of building coalitions with like-minded groups...."

So I'm wondering, do these various responses to 'hate speech' (a term you don't use in your paper, by the way) work in an Indian Twitter context? Is 'hate speech' a useful notion anyway? How does it relate to your preferred term, 'abusive exchange'?

Also, you dismiss 'legal terminologies' at the outset but surely lawyers and the legal field (e.g. the fear and/or threat of defamation) are an important part of the world you are studying? e.g. half way through the Manila conference on of the Indian delegates shared the good news that India's Supreme Court had struck a draconian internet law used by police to arrest critics of the government.

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Best wishes

John

Julian Hopkins (julian.hopkins@monash.edu)   **July 14th 2015**

Thanks Sahana for the interesting read that raises and provokes important questions about the intersections of the public sphere, politics, gendered discourse and social media.

In Malaysia, there is also a similar phenomenon whereby political parties are supported by 'cybertroopers' (Hopkins 2014) who engage in group actions and attack those they disagree with. Women are often targeted with gendered and racialised ad hominems, such as attacks on some female Malay politicians who are seen as 'betraying' their 'race' and not embodying suitable 'feminine' traits (e.g. http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/bikini-smear-campaign-against-daps-dyana-nothing-but-gutter-politics-say-po).

The discussion of 'organized trolling with automated abuses' is interesting, but could perhaps be explained more clearly. I assume that it refers to some form of bots that simulate a number of different users. The argument that accusations 'take a life of their own, claiming salience through their reiterative power,' struck a chord with me – reminding me of how the size of the audience (evidenced through statistical calculations of likes, follows, retweets, etc.) attains a symbolic power that justifies reporting in the news, and also performs a pseudo-democratic role. For the National Day celebrations in 2012, the Malaysian government sought to tie in patriotism and support for the government and online prominence through an attempt to achieve 'a world record of one million tweets,' however a close analysis revealed automated tweets and the use of clones (https://politweet.wordpress.com/2012/09/07/merdeka55-twitter-report/).

Given the use of Bakhtin and the interest in speech, I think that Sahana may be interested a paper by Doostdar (2004). It uses Bakhtin's concept of 'speech genres' and, if I remember correctly, presents a debate in Iranian blogs around the use of 'vulgar' language and criticisms of the latter being used to reinforce more conservative viewpoints. This would also relate to the discussion on p14 regarding 'the potential democratic effects of colloquialism in media production.'

A question I would have is whether Sahana thinks that her paper could benefit from integrating genre as a way of discussing how speech patterns become centripetal forces that cluster particular practices and forms of social interactions (e.g. Lüders et al. 2010)?

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Sahana Udupa (udupa@mmg.mpg.de)   **July 14ᵗʰ 2015**

Conflation

Many thanks for your comments and the reference to your article, Gabriele. While I do agree that "flaming" and "trolling" and many more terms are discussed as specific online practices with distinct trajectories on different platforms, the purpose of this paper is to ethnographically chart the overlaps and blurred boundaries between online practices which are so entwined that keeping them separate could serve well for some analytical purposes but would be less fruitful if we were to understand how 'practice' unfolds on the ground. In the paper, I mention 'gaali' in several cultural contexts – college campus to insult comedy events, and how these tangled and mutually provocative practices turn into 'abuse' for specific political purposes. The slips, slides and slants of the Internet's shifting jargons and practices pose a challenge to the ethnographer, but the least one could do is move beyond compartmentalized categories and umbrella terms, and capture, with as much nuance as possible, where comedy stops and insult begins, or how comedy clandestinely morphs into abuse, or 'trolling' as persistent following feeds all of them through Internet architectures. To analyze them in a particular social-political-cultural context would be any ethnographer's mandate, but so is the task to unpack umbrella concepts like trolling as an aspect of the interlocking and historically shaped practices that constitute online verbal art. Yes, one cannot divorce political positions from an analysis of Internet cultures. Historical factors matter because the same Internet ecology could intersect with a variety of intentions and purposes which too often elude the neat divide between 'progressive' and right-wing politics. One should be mindful of the political purchase of these terms in specific contexts. In India, for instance, there is a new found confidence around the English tag "right-wingers" because a section of the Internet youth feel let down by the secular Indian state's 'appeasement' of the religious minorities as well as its 'inefficiency' and 'corruption'. So, many strands of urban youth politics converge and collide on the Internet media – and I am still working on making sense of some of them.

Tweets, emotional reaction and activism:

Great point. A section of Internet users in India – as elsewhere – is more affected by online discussions especially when they connect with other media practices and social networks. For instance, in the case of Roshni, gaali became severe when Twitter IDs became identifiable and local worlds of acquaintances turned into a hostile web of connections that pushed her to a defensive position. Friends and colleagues were aware of this flare-up, and so did her employer. It is this local-global dialectic channeled via the national imaginary that strikes a severe blow on the confidence of many online users. This relates to John Postill's important question on activism and hate speech. Thanks to John for sharing notes from the Manila conference. I am not ready to side with state protection at the moment. However, some institutional mechanism to address

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growing hostility on online media should be in place. Hate speech is increasingly debated in India today – although my purpose in this paper is to make an anthropological contribution by highlighting different strands of verbal art conceived more broadly. I am looking at hate speech and Internet regulation in an upcoming paper based on ongoing debates in India and global discourses.

Even as we discuss this, two female online users (one a film star and another an activist) have come out openly to complain against online harassment they faced when they posted a critical comment on the "selfie with daughter" initiative of the current government which was aimed at sending out the message of gender parity and creating awareness about female foeticide/infanticide. Here is an excerpt from the candid "open letter" from the film star:
"On the morning of 28th June, I made the grave mistake of expressing my views on an initiative called#selfiewithdaughter<https://twitter.com/#!/search?q=%23selfiewithdaughter> …. Most people found it to be a sweet gesture and a means to create awareness about female infanticide. I, sadly, didn't find the idea very palatable. Keep in mind that I have an eleven-month daughter of my own. And then, at the risk of sounding overly-Shakespearean, the floodgates of hell opened. I was subjected to a tsunami of hate tweets. 48 hours of non stop trolling. The tweets were targeted at me, my family, my 'Muslim' husband, my 11 month old daughter and, of course, my non-existent, dwindling, no-good career as an actor. Men and women alike said the most vile things about me, stripping me of all my dignity as someone's daughter, wife and mother and most importantly a woman…So here's the thing. What is the point of taking selfies with your girls when you're also responsible for creating the most toxic environment for them to grow up in? How will taking a photograph nullify the misogyny and patriarchy that is so deeply entrenched in our society? Why bother to increase the number of girls being born when you choose to treat them with such indignity and disrespect? All those who trolled me incessantly for forty eight hours, did you for once stop and think that I, too, am someone's daughter? Did you ever ask yourselves how you'd feel if it were your daughter at the receiving end of all that hate? I'm guessing the answer is a big, resounding "No". Because, you know, you were too busy pouting for the camera & getting 'likes' and 'RT's to your
#selfiewithdaughter<https://twitter.com/#!/search?q=%23selfiewithdaughter>"
accessed 3 July, 2015
http://www.twitlonger.com/show/n_1smtdi6

Best
Sahana Udupa

John Postill (jrpostill@gmail.com)   **July 15ᵗʰ 2015**

Sahana wrote: "So, many strands of urban youth politics converge and collide on the Internet media – and I am still working on making sense of some of them".

I always tend to think of most influential activists on Twitter as no longer being youths, i.e. early 30s- to late 40s (I'm thinking mostly of Spain and Indonesia, especially among the more tech-minded activists).

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Of course, the vernacular understanding of 'youth' varies greatly from one country to the next (e.g. in Spain someone in their late 30s can sometimes be referred to as "un/a joven", "a young person").

This is probably too big a question, but what are the age and generational dynamics at work online in what you are calling 'urban youth politics' in India? I'd be curious to know a bit more about those strands you mention in passing.

In the literature, and especially the news media reports, on the new protest movements in the Arab World, Occupy, indignados, etc, we often heard about 'young', 'tech-savvy' protesters. Yet in my experience there's a very wide age range once you start looking behind the headlines.

Many thanks

John

Gabriel de Seta (notsaved@live.com)   **July 15ᵗʰ 2015**

John, Sahana, & all:

I agree about the vernacular understanding of youth in different places (and in different media contexts!). Giving a comprehensive answer about urban youth politics in India might be too big a question, but I think that intersecting it with questions of scale might be a good way of reducing its scope.

What I mean is that some numbers might help – without getting quantitative and statistical – to get a sense of how many people/users/accounts are involved in the specific Twitter events Sahana is focusing on. How many active users does Twitter have? How big is the percentage of Indian ones? What are their demographics? How many of them broadly engage in politics? How many accounts are actually involved in ONE exemplary case of "trolling"? How many of them are abusers, and how many are abused? How many abusers are automated accounts? Are they always the same group? How long do these incidents last? If this process narrows down the scope to a few hundred people and sporadic but recurrent events, it's probably easier to figure out the demographics and the specific user groups involved, and to do so on a fairly detailed qualitative way.

Best,
Gabriele

Guido Ipsen (guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)   **July 15ᵗʰ 2015**

Hello all,

Not having had the time to follow the discourse intenively so far, I just chanced to come across the question of "youth".

As a person involved with teenagers and young adults both on a scholarly and on a personal level, I should like to argue that we are right in the middle of what Postman foresaw as the "end of childhood". Moreover, the idea of youth is culture-specific.

Media are a social merger, and to me it is much better to try and categorize users by their specific media usage profile rather than to apply outdated terminology that causes problems of definition than instead of clarifying matters.

Just a small thought on the margin, maybe.

Best,
Guido

Sahana Udupa (udupa@mmg.mpg.de)   **July 15th 2015**

Cybertroopers and Genre

Thanks to Julian Hopkins for his very useful suggestions and references. Cybertroopers in Malaysia offer a good comparative case, and we notice the globally shared cyber practice of automated trolls (yes, bots with multiple users and repetitive messages with set frequencies, anonymizing services etc.) which are increasingly put to service for augmenting social media influence.

Thanks for drawing attention to Lüders et al. paper. One could make a compelling argument about genres as centripetal forces, but I am not convinced how calling something a genre would add value to our already socio-centric analysis of communication processes. The concept of genre developed by Lüders et al. is an important intervention in communication studies to critique medium centered analysis (where they take a cue from Umberto Eco's criticism of Marshal McLuhan). They propose the mediating layer of genre between the medium and social practices to bring society and media closer. However, the claim that "text and context interact and condition each other in the production of genres" (950) is already present in an anthropological perspective. More important, the argument that multiplication and differentiation of genres is a "principle" of modernization of society is too much of a baggage to carry for those inclined to turn away from the linear model of modernization. There is certainly a lot of value in documenting personal/social media practices like story-telling and selfie as mediating layers between new media technologies and practice, but considering them as genres that "play a crucial role in overcoming contingency and facilitate communication" would hold good only for certain practices that have stabilized as online cultures of communication. Going by this definition, the erratic ebbs and flows of abuse would not even fall into the category of genre since they remove contingencies as much as they mount them, and there is enormous ambiguity

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in abuse spaces – a point that Judith Irvine advances brilliantly in her work.

Youth politics

Thanks John, Guido and Gabriele for your comments on youth politics and demographics. 'Youth' is indeed a slippery category and I would not bracket online practices as youth politics. I don't use it in the paper, but I mention it in the response because my broader project will investigate the imagination of youth politics that pervades online cultures of political participation. From politicians who invoke the idea of a 'new generation' leading 'new India' to self-presentations of online users as tech-savvy youth who have the 'power to trump' established authorities, the imagination of new media as young and for young people is quite deep in India, similar to other national contexts. This does not mean that people who drive online discourses are necessarily young. The leading figures on online media – the 'influencers' – could come from any age group. Some of the largest 'influencers' on social media are 'old' politicians and Bollywood stars. However, the demographics of Internet use in urban India are still skewed towards younger age groups. According to the IMRB survey in 2012, 18-35 age group constituted the largest online user group in Mumbai city, comprising over 75 per cent of total Internet users. This brings us back to reach versus impact – an old debate in media studies – but with new media, my approach is primarily qualitative.

Different strands of youth politics converging on new media: I would have more to say after my next leg of research.

Best
Sahana

Guido Ipsen (guido.ipsen@uni-dortmund.de)   **July 15th 2015**

Hello all,

Thanks Sahana for the clarification upon the concept of youth, and naturally the data you present is representative not only for India.

Yet, the fact that a (factually) younger audience is attracted by and participates in the new media is not necessarily significant (quote: "

18-35 age group constituted the largest online user group in Mumbai city, comprising over 75 per cent of total Internet users").

In order to interpret as much from existing data, we should have a sample that is completely pervaded with and used to the technology in question; which I guess is not the case for India, as it cannot be for any other country. Traditionalism and other motivations that keep the older generation from using, e.g., smartphones, exist everywhere and must be taken into consideration. But these (older) people have not known new media in their formative years, and once they are

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gone from the field the scenario will doubtlessly look different. Again, usage profiles remain the crucial factor. Unless we have an idea which means older people use in order to harass people publicly (or semi-publicly), we cannot know that it is simply the media that makes the younger generation different, or vice versa, for that matter.

But I am not mentioning this in order to make a point that your general idea is to be challenged. Hence, don't take this as a fundamental critique, please. I am just stating that older people may not be abusing social media for the simple fact that their generation has not known such practice because they have not known the technology long enough. In the future, things will be different for an older generation. I don't guess we may predict that today's 18-35 year olds will cease to use the internet once they are 68-85?

Guido

Sahana Udupa (udupa@mmg.mpg.de)   **July 17th 2015**

Thanks, Guido. First of all, let us not mix up the issue of youth with the arguments in the abuse paper. The young-old distinction as a question of media usage is not as relevant for the discussions on abuse presented in the paper. Second, media usage patterns are a useful indicator of many trends but it is more fruitful to examine the cultural constructions of young versus old, or the ways that particular generations get associated with the political moralities and popular representations of media forms. This debate is not limited to new media. In Making News in Global India, for instance, I have shown how the Times of India, the largest circulated English newspaper in India (in fact the paper with the largest circulation for any English newspaper in the world) – drove the narrative of young "new readers" as the symbol and agents of liberalizing India ready to assert its place as a global power. For the TOI and other English newspapers this was also guided by the rationale of monetizable readers. Such constructions are important in that they index generation as a "principle of difference, identity, and mobilization" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001: 2). So, the challenge is really to trace how 'young', 'youthful' and such cognate terms gain particular meaning and valence in a polymedia context, especially as a proxy for liberalization friendly publics.

Sahana Udupa

Veronica Barassi (v.barassi@gold.ac.uk)   **July 22nd 2015**

Dear All,

This is just to notify that the E-Seminar is now closed. I would like to thank Sahana Udupa for her thought-provoking paper and all of you who contributed with your thoughts and questions to a lively discussion.

I also would like to send a special thanks to Nell Haynes for her comments.

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We will let you know when the transcripts will be available online.
Veronica

Sahana Udupa (udupa@mmg.mpg.de)   **July 22ⁿᵈ 2015**

Thanks to Haynes for her excellent comments, to Veronica, John, Philip and media anthro members for group messages as well as very helpful private messages.

Best
Sahana Udupa

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