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Legitimacy, Support and Endorsement: Narendra Modi's Social Media Engagement with Celebrities

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Abstract: The temporal spread of celebrity engagement with Modi, and perhaps politics in general, underlines the challenges of public brand performance in contemporary India.



During the early and mid-2000s, a series of public relations challenges plagued the outreach machine of Narendra Modi. Antagonistic live interactions with television commentators, made media appearances unpredictable (Sardesai 2014)^[1] He also had difficult interactions with business associations over accusations of communal bias, was handed embargos on diplomatic interactions, and had his visa revoked by the United States on the grounds of severe violations of religious freedom (Amruth 2007; Kohli 2013).^[2] While he continued to do exceptionally well in elections, winning three state elections with thumping majorities, he continued to be a polarising figure in Indian politics. A number of mainstream films directly addressed the 2002 Gujarat riots and pointed towards politicians and the administration as the perpetrators of the riots.^[3]

Since the mid-2000s, Modi embarked on a campaign of brand management (Rajagopal 2016) that pitched his communications around economic development and soft power, especially in his online communications, moving away from the strongman image (Chakravartty and Roy 2015). One of the hallmarks of Modi's strategy was to target younger voters, particularly those for whom the riots were an event prior to their own political consciousness.

Research has shown that celebrities can play an important role in changing the conversation and often distracting from the core issues in elections (Weiskel 2005). Voters with limited involvement or experience with the political system can have less stable preferences and be easier to sway (Burton and Netemeyer 1992), making for useful swing voters.

Modi began his campaign for prime ministership with a few declared allies from among celebrities or public figures in India, but well before the end of his campaign, his cachet among celebrities had soared. Within a couple of years of his prime ministership, a large number of leading figures from the entertainment field or other walks of public life had interacted with Modi in some public form such as through photo opportunities together, or through interactions on tweets. Past heads of government largely restricted their interaction with the celebrities to formal state events such as fundraising or award ceremonies,^[4] casual interactions,^[5] as outreach to celebrities' fanbase,^[6] some behind-the-scenes lobbying^[7] or the occasional shout-out to the industry's role in nation-building.^[8]

Modi inherited a unique situation in that his ascent to political leadership coincided with the expanding use of social media, through which interactions with other citizens and celebrities alike was made vastly easier. As a result, a vast range of celebrity engagements, both in the campaign period and the subsequent leadership of the government, were enabled and widely disseminated with greater access to digital media outreach online.

In this article, using data from Modi's tweets, we will examine the celebrity engagement by Narendra Modi in both before and after his victory at the 2014 elections. We use all of the 9,040 tweets from the handle @narendramodi between February 2009 and October 2015 and study the timing and content of messages that have references to celebrities. Our goal was to study the tweets from the start of Modi's Twitter campaign up until 18 months of his prime ministership to

examine pre- and post-election engagement with public figures.^[9]

Modi and Celebrities since 2009

Marketers have long studied celebrity endorsements and brand promotions (Knott and St James 2004); for politicians, the association with a celebrity offers an extension into the celebrity’s cultural cachet. Proposing a typology of celebrity intersection with politics, Marsh et al (2010) propose that a celebrity can either be an activist for causes of their interest in various levels, active politicians themselves, or willing participants with politicians who use their celebrity status. Thus, while there may be benefits for both parties in a celebrity endorsement of a politician, the choice of affiliation can also backfire for one or both parties involved, if each others’ images are at odds with the existing support basis. While celebrities may self-characterise to either choose to be private about their voting behaviour or self-describe as politically neutral, even their tacit presence may play a role in changing campaign dynamics—for one, they shift the nature of media coverage towards the personalised or dramatic elements of leadership style (Meyer and Gamson 1995).

Examining Modi’s Twitter feed, we found 414 instances of tweets with the mention of celebrities, including those in which multiple celebrities were mentioned. Celebrity-related tweets showed a slight upward trend between 2009 and 2015. We find that celebrities were used inconsistently till late 2011, but that there were three periods of engagement with celebrities. First, in mid-late 2013, a key phase in the 2014 campaign acceleration; the second in the two months prior to the general election from March May 2014; and the third was in late 2014, around the 6-month mark of Modi’s election, particularly around the “Swachh Bharat” (Clean India) campaign. In Table 2, we list the key public figures who were tweeted to during this period.

Table 1: Celebrities Tweeted to by @narendramodi. Excludes Professional Politicians, Min Threshold 5 Mentions

| Public figures tweeted about through @narendramodi | Pre-2014 General Elections from 02/2009 | Post |
|--|---|------|
| APJ Abdul Kalam | 6 | 16 |
| Sri Sri Ravi Shankar | 9 | 10 |
| Sachin Tendulkar | 6 | 12 |
| Baba Ramdev | 13 | 3 |
| Amitabh Bachchan | 9 | 6 |
| Lata Mangeshkar | 4 | 7 |
| Anupam Kher | 5 | 5 |
| Salman Khan | 5 | 5 |
| Sania Mirza | 0 | 9 |
| Suresh Raina | 0 | 8 |
| Rajinikanth | 3 | 5 |

| | | |
|----------------|---|---|
| Kapil Sharma | 1 | 6 |
| Pawan Kalyan | 4 | 2 |
| Hritik Roshan | 1 | 5 |
| Mike Bloomberg | 0 | 6 |
| Irfan Pathan | 2 | 3 |
| Kailash Kher | 0 | 5 |

(Source: Data collected by the author)

First, we see that spiritual gurus have been particularly central to Modi’s outreach—besides Ramdev and Ravi Sankar, Modi also tweeted to Amritanandmayi till October 2015. Second, not all, or even a majority of the figures listed here publicly expressed electoral support for Modi. The references to most of the celebrities were either congratulatory or casual, suggesting an important role for implicit celebrity engagement. Third, we see that among these are several figures with pan-Indian appeal. For example, ormer President APJ Abdul Kalam, has been able to generate immense reverence among young Indians and seen as an icon as a self-made man, which was a also an important part of Modi’s own brand image. Cricketer Sachin Tendulkar and singer Lata Mangeshkar, both, like Kalam, are awardees of the Bharat Ratna, the highest civilian award in the nation. Sania Mirza, another youth icon and popular tennis star, as well as long-standing superstars of the Hindi and Tamil film industries, Amitabh Bachchan and Rajinikanth respectively.

All of these top 10 holders^[10] of the most followed Twitter accounts till October 2015 had been tweeted to or referenced by @narendramodi by the time of his election in 2014.

Figure 1

While Modi mentioned a range of athletes in tweets, in this data set, cricketers offered the most value in terms of retweet rates. While tweets that referred to entertainers consistently outperformed the average non-celebrity-related tweets, in terms of retweets and favourites in both the pre- and post-election periods, tweets with references to cricketers had the most throughputs via retweets and favorites in the period after Modi's election to Prime Minister (Table 2). Tweets about non-cricketing sportspersons, on the other hand, showed no significant difference in retweets or favourites from the average non-celebrity tweet indicating that the cliché of India being a cricket- and movie-obsessed nation probably holds water on social media. We find that in both the pre-election and post-election periods, tweets that mention celebrities are significantly more likely to be retweeted and favourited than tweets that do not.

Legitimacy, Support and Endorsement

Three broad themes—legitimacy, support, and endorsement—underlie the chronological blocks of celebrity-themed tweets, each theme corresponding to a distinct set of temporal exigencies specific to that point in Modi's standing in the public. The first phase of celebrity engagement for Narendra Modi was when celebrities' willingness to associate with him became a means for him to gain legitimacy in the public. During this phase, he was fairly outside of the circle of Delhi politics, and still mired in the post-riots controversial image. This phase had perhaps the most important symbolic valence, since the very presence of a major celebrity alongside Modi would ostensibly ratify his political positioning to the star's following.

The first major celebrity to appear in his tweets was Amitabh Bachchan, who took a role as brand ambassador for the Gujarat state tourism campaign in 2010. Bachchan's association with Modi had a backlash in the media (Bal 2010), Bachchan himself had to defend his decision and note that he believed Modi was a secular figure (NDTV 2010). Bachchan has a towering figure in fan following, but had earlier associated with anti-BJP parties, including the Samajwadi Party. In the past, Modi had tweeted in March 2010 that there was a conspiracy to undermine Bachchan's affection for Gujarat (*Indian Express* 2010).

WoW ! What a nice light-hearted chat with Narayan Murthyji on diverse issues, so delighting

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [July 19, 2011](#)

Shri Ratan Tata would be waiting for me, I should move on now.

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [June 2, 2010](#)

Name-dropping to accumulate power: During this early phase of tweeting, name-dropping also played the role of suggesting collegial relationships with respected public figures. This extended to casual mentions of business leaders including N R Narayana Murthy and Ratan Tata, it is important to note that both Murthy and Tata did not run Gujarat-specific businesses, but can be seen as business icons with a pan-India appeal. Tata and Murthy did not have known associations or publicly acknowledged support for Modi, unlike similarly placed business leaders such as Gautam Adani,^[11] Anil Ambani, Mukesh Ambani or Sunil Mittal.^[12]

Hashtag Development: Around 2013, during the second tweets to celebrities, the strategy moved from seeking legitimacy through celebrity connection to gaining consent. At this point, it was already clear that Modi was a key contender for prime minister, and the focus of the campaign was to not address or reference the riots or Hindutva and to keep the conversation going on development, and keep at development. Here, we find a widely retweeted set of messages from Modi sent to a number of celebrities in September 2013. In it, he appears to appeal to them to help push forth greater voter registration.

The tweet presents an agenda—that of encouraging electoral participation—that is normatively non-contentious, and part of responsible citizenry. The tweet went out to a diverse number of public figures, including Shah Rukh Khan, Sachin Tendulkar, and even his political opponent from the Congress party, Shashi Tharoor.

This tweet has great appeal for the casual reader, just like the tweet to Tata, because the wording allows for the reader to interpret that they are in conversation with Modi or are witnessing a

dialogue between Modi and a celebrity. The message of voter-registration cuts across party lines becoming a national issue, and Modi appears willing to reach out to public figures across a spectrum of interests and affiliations to create more awareness about that national issue.

Dear [@deepikapadukone](#) lets encourage voter registration among 18-24 yr olds. Large number of them unregistered. EC drive presently underway.

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [September 20, 2013](#)

Posing to engage: The next phase of celebrity engagement, in the last phase of campaigning, saw Modi pose alongside a number of film stars, with no explicit endorsement from them. Such celebrity engagement included a kite-flying session with Salman Khan, and casual meetings with Rajinikanth, Vijay, and a number of southern film stars, a region where the BJP was particularly weak. Indeed, some of these actors, including Salman and Vijay, explicitly noted that they were not endorsing Modi—Salman even said he would vote for a Congress party candidate. However, the willingness of the celebrities to pose alongside Modi and Modi’s willingness to engage with them suggests a two-way acknowledgement of each other’s’ importance. Posing and tweeting with southern film stars, Modi undercut the idea that the BJP was largely a northern party, and likewise tweeting favourably about Muslim public figures including Abdul Kalam, Salman Khan, A R Rahman, and Sania Mirza undercut suggestions of Modi’s anti-secular credentials.

Met Pawan Kalyan. This was our first meeting & I am impressed with his passion & commitment to serve the nation <http://t.co/rwgxQTEWZZ>

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [March 21, 2014](#)

It was wonderful meeting noted Malayalam actor Suresh Gopi pic.twitter.com/jfKwYFNuDA

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [March 5, 2014](#)

Figure 3: Narendra Modi with Malayalam cinema star Suresh Gopi

With Rajinikanth ji pic.twitter.com/ErTqvfr8Lx

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [April 13, 2014](#)

Figure 4: Narendra Modi with Tamil cinema star Rajinikanth

With noted film personality in the south, Vijay pic.twitter.com/LKbyhQ197b

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [April 16, 2014](#)

Figure 5: Narendra Modi with Tamil cinema star Vijay

Selfie with Modi: The fourth phase of Modi’s engagement with actors was post his election, when he started tweeting to celebrities to take part in his signature Swacch Bharat campaign. The selective targeting of celebrities was built off a very successful similar earlier initiative, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge,^[13] which urged celebrities to first take the challenge themselves, and then publicly call on a few other individuals to take it on. This indeed would eventually be the basis of some of the most successful social media engagement by Modi and the BJP, which came around hashtags or quick acts of affiliation—including the “SelfieWithModi” hashtag in which people were urged to take pictures of themselves as having voted, to go with a picture of Modi with a vote mark, or the “FitIndia” hashtag, which challenged people to exercise and post pictures of themselves doing so.

Honoured to accept the invitation of PM [@narendramodi](#) to join Clean India campaign. Just landed in Bucharest & heard d news. Action on return

– Shashi Tharoor (@ShashiTharoor) [October 2, 2014](#)

[#swachhbharat](#) I started cleaning my own surroundings and learnt so much. Started with my lanes In juhu pic.twitter.com/GkBVdEljcg

– Hrithik Roshan (@iHrithik) [October 25, 2014](#)

Selfie with my daughter Sara [#BetiBachao](#) pic.twitter.com/0byTeBZFnp

– Sachin Tendulkar (@sachin_rt) [July 2, 2015](#)

Figure: Tweets responding to hashtags created by @narendramodi campaign on Twitter feeds of actor Hrithik Roshan and cricketer Sachin Tendulkar

By this point Modi's presence on social media was exponentially more significant by sheer numbers, than that of a vast majority of the celebrities he was reaching out to. It highlighted an important continuation of his engagement with social and social media elites. Unlike the past heads of state, who were reserved in publicising their interactions with major figures in the industry, Modi tweeted about interactions with executives from corporations that are widely recognised in India including Sundar Pichai of Google, Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook, and Bill Gates, the erstwhile chairman of Microsoft. These interactions reiterated Modi's technocratic brand.

Was great meeting you [@BillGates](#). Got to spend some time talking to you during the meeting with President [@fhollande](#) pic.twitter.com/4CDUYwHj2g

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [September 28, 2015](#)

Interacted with top CEOs. We held extensive discussions on opportunities in India. pic.twitter.com/BwjdfM1DaZ

– Narendra Modi (@narendramodi) [June 25, 2017](#)

Figure 8: Modi's tweets to major figures from the business world

Social Media for Direct Communication

Perhaps one of the most successful elements in the celebrity interactions from Narendra Modi's social media account in its most recent avatar is the alignment of Modi with the national interest.

Modi presented policy initiatives like demonetisation and the goods and services tax (GST) as patriotic moves, and the sacrifice involved in supporting them as part of a citizen's duty (Pal, 2017), making their criticism either appear personal, about Modi, or an implication of one's own black money. Thus, even figures who had in the past been critical of Modi and faced its consequences online were careful to support the move, having learned that it can be deeply expensive to oppose Modi publicly.[\[14\]](#)

A tacit consensus of a social elite with what is projected as national interest may be the more concerning trend for the future of social media in politics.

Farsighted. Extremely smart. And not politically motivated. Will bring such a positive change for Indian economy. Great move [@narendramodi](#)

– Shah Rukh Khan (@iamsrk) [November 9, 2016](#)

Figure 10: After actor Shah Rukh Khan in a television interview rued the rising intolerance in the country, he was attacked online. Note that even after his tweet supporting demonetisation, he was trolled.

Narendra Modi's social media engagement has served as an outreach mechanism to mainstream media. In particular, his tweets that include mentions of celebrities are more likely to find their way into print news than others (Chakrabarty 2018). Modi's engagement celebrities with 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. 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 temporal spread of celebrity engagement with Modi, and perhaps politics in general, underlines the challenges of public brand performance in contemporary India. Before 2013, few celebrities would speak up for Narendra Modi; since 2014, few celebrities actively speak against him.

What Modi recognised early was the value of celebrities in signalling harmony. Each celebrity figure retains a preserve of public trust in their following. This trust, in turn, acts as a powerful antidote to discordant voices proposing a different narrative than the one the celebrity would appear to endorse. Over time, the image validated by the celebrities emerges as a common voice of the social elite; anything that differs from that remains an alternate narrative at best.

Endnotes:

[1] A significant case was the walkout of an interview with Karan Thapar on *Devil's Advocate* on the NDTV network

[2] His visa was revoked under the INA Act which prohibits foreign government officials who are "responsible for or directly carried out, at any time, particularly severe violations of religious freedom"

[3] Feature films included *Parzania* (Dir: Rahul Dholakia, 2005), *Firaaq* (Dir: Nandita Das, 2008), *Vilapangalkkappuram* (Dir: TV Chandran, 2008), *Kai Po Che* (Dir: Abhishek Kapoor, 2013) as well as a feature documentary, *The Final Solution* (Dir: Rakesh Sharma, 2003)

[4] Indira Gandhi was *pictured* with celebrities at several occasions, including at the Prime Minister's drought relief fund, <http://www.bollywoodgoogly.com/blog/bollywoods-rendezvous-indira-gandhi/>

[5] Atal Behari Vajpayee had interactions with celebrities both from his period as a minister in the Desai cabinet to his prime ministership, <https://www.indiatvnews.com/entertainment/celebrities-throwbacks-pictures-of-former-pm-atal-bihari-vajpayee-with-aishwarya-rai-bachchan-sridevi-and-other-bollywood-stars-458387> (last accessed Dec 24, 2018)

[6] Examples include Rajiv Gandhi's outreach to Amitabh Bachchan, https://www.huffingtonpost.in/murtaza-ali-khan/the-strange-case-of-amita_b_9626868.html (last accessed Dec 24, 2018)

[7] While rarely seen around public celebrities, Nehru protected Satyajit Ray's role in the sensitive portrayal of India when he was being attacked by a parliamentarian, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl1526/15261180.htm> (last accessed Dec 24, 2018)

[8] Manmohan Singh spoke of Bollywood Soft Power as a means of international diplomacy, <https://www.wired.com/2008/06/bollywood-soft/> (last accessed Dec 24, 2018)

[9] Celebrities are defined as figures from public life including entertainment, sports, spirituality, and business persons. All personal pronouns used in the sample of tweets were categorised as individual callouts, and if the person referenced was a known public figure, as ascertained by a group of trained coders with contextual familiarity, they were noted as celebrities. The specific definition of a celebrity for this project was that the individual would need to be known for their association with a recognisable field of work, carry the credibility of expertise in a field, and have a public recognition that is typically accompanied by fandom. By this definition, politicians such as former policewoman Kiran Bedi and former military general V K Singh would both be considered celebrity candidates by virtue of their fame and public standing

[10] <https://www.buzzfeed.com/andreborges/here-are-the-most-followed-indian-celebrities-on-twitter>

[11] Gautam Adani was among the business leaders who expressed support for Modi, including in his post 2002 spat with the CII at which he was confronted by various business leaders. *India Today* (2003): "CII tenders apology to Narendra Modi following tiff," 24 March, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/20030324-cii-tenders-apology-to-narendra-modi-following-tiff-793205-2003-03-24>

[12] Some business leaders who had expressed support for Modi, including as Prime Minister, pre-2010 included Anil Ambani and Sunil Mittal, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/modi-pm-material-for-anil-ambani-sunil-mittal/articleshow/3980296.cms> (last accessed Dec 25, 2018)

[13] When Aamir Khan spoke out against the government after the lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq, he was dropped as brand ambassador by the e-commerce company Snapdeal because people started uninstalling the app in response to his statement. Khan later supported demonetisation publicly, <https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/aamir-khan-on-demonetisation-4371854/>

[14] Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis is a progressive neurodegenerative disease, for which a number of celebrities and common citizens alike took part in an “ice bucket” challenge in which people would pour a bucket of ice-cold water on themselves, post the videos of that online, and tag some number of others on social media to do the same, to make the idea spread virally. This was largely successful, as the ALS “Ice Bucket challenge” became an internet phenomenon in 2013 with celebrities and common citizens alike doing the challenge.

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