

IDENTITY, ALTERITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA: Coercing Silence

Richard Rego♦

Abstract: With the advent of social media and digital imaginaries, the right-wing cultural politics has taken the centre-stage in India's popular imagination. On this digital landscape, images are manipulated to create identities, thereby othering the self and producing alterity. Digital India, which was launched to wire the nation, has paved the way for digital imaginary, and has become a contested site which dominates the public discourse by displaying right-wing political power and a cultural nationalism as defined by groups owing allegiance to the ruling dispensation. Instead of providing an even-playing field for a multiplicity of identities, the digital imaginary has endangered identities. Social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook are used to shame and silence non-conformists to alienate and subjugate, thus othering the self. Within the theoretical framework of discourse analysis, this article examines tweets posted by trolls to name and shame the other to create alterities. Using a case-study of television journalist Rajdeep Sardesai, who for a while quit Twitter owing to attacks on him by trolls, it argues that the online space is a pliable domain on which dominant voices create identities and alterities to suit their agenda. It concludes that images are used to create fake identities along religio-nationalist ideologies, and hate speech and propaganda devices employed to other the self and create alterities.

Keywords: Alterity, Dissent, Identity, Narendra Modi, Rajdeep Sardesai, Social Media, Troll, Twitter.

1. Introduction

The open exchange of information can have a positive global impact... almost every country in the world agrees that

♦ **Dr Richard Rego**, Associate Professor of Mass Communication in the Department of Communication, St Joseph's College Autonomous, Bengaluru, teaches Film Studies, Indian Cinema, and journalism. His research interests include film studies, journalism, social media discourses, and community radio.

freedom of expression is a human right. Many countries also agree that freedom of expression carries with it responsibilities and has limits, (Twitter).¹

In the information age, the social media have helped us wire with a vast population, network with people we don't know, and build communities online. They fascinate us, easily create bonds, and keep us connected all the time. Online media are said to be democratic, since they don't have the traditional gate-keeping or censoring mechanisms. Anyone with access to internet can communicate online without fear.

Communication is a process of expressing ourselves and creating bonds. In this process, we assert our self, and create identities. In so doing, we create images of ourselves and others. Social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have brought with them an environment of multi-way communication, and people, especially the youth, have been hooked on to these modern online platforms.

But the recent events in the online public sphere call into question the democratic claims of these social media platforms. Do these platforms really nurture communication, build bridges between people and communities, establish relationships, affirm our self and identity, and enhance the process of meaning making? Or do they other the communicating self and create alterity? While the recent social media attacks and targeting of some non-conformists suggest that relationships, communication, meaning-making, and identity creation have been polarised for ideological ends, the announcement from the microblogging site Twitter [cited above] raises a few questions about the democratic claims of Twitter.

2. Claims and Terms

In the backdrop of the right-wing cultural politics unfolding in the online public sphere, this article examines the digital discourse on identity and alterity. It claims that Twitter trolls with right-wing leanings use online platforms to create identities and alterities, a

¹Twitter, "Tweets still must flow," *Twitter*, 26 Jan. 2012 <<https://blog.twitter.com/2012/tweets-still-must-flow>> (15 August 2016).

dangerous bipolarity of 'us *vs* them' on India's religio-political landscape by othering persons with differing beliefs and value systems, and thus falsifying the utopian notion of the digital and social media as democratic platforms of free speech. I argue that the right-wing elements have been using social media such as Twitter to silence dissenting voices against the ruling political dispensations and right-wing ideologies, thus busting the myth of social media as 'open' 'democratic platforms'.

This research does not intend to establish innocence or culpability of the journalist or political leaders concerned. Neither is it meant to find fault with public personalities and parties. Political vendetta or legal judgments are not its concern, though that is the context within which the discourse took shape. In analysing the discourse around Rajdeep Sardesai quitting Twitter, this article questions the presupposition that the new media platforms provide democratic spaces for public debates. It examines the creation of identities, and by subjecting them to public hate speech, and muzzling dissent creates alterities on such democratic landscapes, thus subverting the ideals of democracy.

The term 'right-wing' is employed to refer to the subscribers of the right-wing *Hindutva* ideology. Though all trolls do not belong to the right-wing *Hindutva* affiliations, I employ the two terms synonymously, since it is the right-wing ideology that emboldens and emerges from the online attacks on ideals enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Such troll attacks take place mostly on Twitter and Facebook, in cases involving the 'secular *vs* *Hindutva*' debates in India. While liberal groups also use social media and keep voicing their opinions, they tend to be minority and feeble voices, hence are drowned in the chaos noise of the dominant discourses. Terms 'internet Hindus' and *bhakts* are borrowed from the online twitter discourse initiated by the parties involved, and they are not creations of the researcher.

3. Context

Referring to the 2002 Gujarat carnage, the then Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee had asked the Chief Minister (CM) Narendra Modi to follow the *rajdharm*, or to uphold rule of law. It meant that the

CM had failed in his duty, and had been partisan in favour of the violent majority, which had unleashed a reign of terror against the minority. Many of the English news media held the CM responsible for his refusal to act fairly and his failure to protect the minority Muslim community in Gujarat. Consequently, such media houses have been the targets of trolls owing allegiance to the right wing religio-political leadership. Rajdeep Sardesai, an English TV journalist, known for his secular and liberal views, has been one of the vocal critics of both the right-wing agenda and the dominant digital discourse of hate speech, and consequently a prime target for social media trolls.

Following attacks on him, Sardesai, on 30 April 2016, announced that he was taking a 'detox break' from Twitter. "Enough of character assassination and slander for awhile [sic.] with no legal recourse," he tweeted.² The announcement, mixed with hurt feelings at being targeted, became a social media spectacle, with many newspapers, television channels, and digital platforms reporting and launching a debate on the type of politico-cultural discourse the social media were engendering.

Earlier, on 26 January 2012, the micro-blogging site Twitter, in a blog post, announced that it would block some tweets in select countries to adhere to the changing norms of those specific countries to fall in line with their legal requirements. It opened the announcement with an acknowledgment that the open exchange of information can have a positive global impact, and almost every country agrees that freedom of expression to be a human right, though in ascribing it to 'almost every country'.³

Twitter itself did not own up to both its statement and its prescriptive limits. What it prepared the reader for about the announcement was that it had planned to curb *that* freedom of expression, *that* 'human right' by its own admission in certain select territories. The implication was a clear willingness on the

²Scroll Staff, "Rajdeep Sardesai announces Twitter 'detox break' citing character assassination, slander," *scroll.in* (30 April 2016) <<http://scroll.in/article/807434/rajdeep-sardesai-announces-twitter-detox-break-citing-character-assassination-slander>> (15 May 2016).

³Twitter, "Tweets still must flow."

part of the platform to negate identities and create alterities by othering the person in communication. The statement by Twitter betrayed a willingness to compromise with the freedom of expression of the communicating subjects, to put it in parenthesis, which it called a universal 'human right'. After affirming the universal human right to freedom of expression, its willingness to curb it in the name of "many countries also agree that freedom of expression carries with it responsibilities and has limits,"⁴ in the same breath, was to accepted how easy it was for even a big corporation like Twitter to compromise with human rights which constitute human identities.

4. Freedom of Expression and Self

With the advent of the internet in the 1990s and the social media in the first decade of the 21st century in a big way, freedom of expression without fear of pressure by government or corporations received a fillip. The Internet, then in its nascent stage, was seen as a "utopian platform for free speech and equality," (Bartlett and others 3)⁵ and a democratic platform free of government control, which would affirm selfhood and identity of individuals.

But, freedom of expression carries with it a real possibility of its negation. That is, it can be violated by anyone, anytime, thus negating very identity of the other. It is vulnerable to exploitation by economically and politically more powerful and digital influentials like those with better digital access and internet wealth. People with an ability to voice out better could violate and negate this freedom of the less powerful or the powerless. History bears witness to the many threats under which the freedom of expression has been circumscribed. In the general context of mass media, Esarey and Qiang⁶ note that Chinese Communist Party

⁴ Twitter, "Tweets still must flow."

⁵Jamie Bartlett, Richard Norrie, Sofia Patel, Rebekka Rumpel, Simon Wibberley, *Misogyny on Twitter*, London: Demos, 2014, 3.

⁶Ashley Esarey and Xiao Qiang, "Political Expression in the Chinese Blogosphere: Below the Radar," *Asian Survey*, 48:5 (Oct. 2008), 752-772 <DOI: 10.1525/AS.2008.48.5.752> (13 August 2016).

controlled the mass media prior to the advent of the internet. While their research makes a departure in terms of political controls in the digital age in favor of democratic discourse and freedom of expression in the Chinese blogosphere, post-internet experience has not been entirely different. Indian experience with freedom of speech and expression has not been very different either - from the Emergency years (1975-77) to current days, negation of identities has been a *leit motif* of political discourse.

It is in the nature of the self to transcend the negation of freedom, and ascertain an intensified human desire for and movement towards attaining it; thus the self affirms its transcendence. In other words, freedom aspires to overcome its limits. Desire to communicate and express oneself is at the core of human existence. To this end, the human self finds possibilities in the form of temporal tools. The internet, and very specially the social media, has helped highlight this transcendence through the incessant communication activity online, and nurture human hopes of a less controlled and a more user-friendly platform for self-expression.

Unlike the traditional mass media monitored by multiple gatekeepers, the digital and social media tools of networking and information dissemination, which are owned and controlled by profit-seeking commercial identities, are thought to be more democratic than their legacy predecessors. The digital media are constructed as democratic because netizens are posited not only as consumers of information but more importantly as producers of the content, thus challenging the monopoly of commercial media organizations.⁷ In pitching consumers primarily as citizens who express themselves freely, which leads to the production of online content, the online/social media become an occasion for netizens to assert their identity and self. The top-down and one-way model of media paves the way for horizontal, multi-way

⁷Brian D. Loader and Dan Mercea, "Networking Democracy? Social Media Innovations in Participatory Politics," *Information, Communication & Society*, 14: 6, (2011), 757-769 <doi:10.1080/1369118X.2011.592648> (5 September 2016).

participatory social media, thus putting power of communication in the hands of netizens, which acknowledges their identity.

5. Shrinking Public Sphere

In its initial phases, the power of the internet and social networking through social media was understood in terms of enhanced political consciousness and participation and "digital democracy." (Carter, 134)⁸ Consciousness - political or otherwise - brings in awareness of the self, and a possibility of active participation in the world, aided by digital democracy, which empowers it. While cyber literates saw the internet as a newer form of democratic governance, for the believers in people's power, it could enable stronger participatory democracy because of the emergence of online *Agoras* and Habermasian forums.⁹ In the information age, the internet and the social media serve as modern-day public spheres, where the transcending selves express themselves and create, and ascertain their identities.

Since the 1990s, the Internet has grown manifold, and the social media have expedited the spread of the internet and networking. "Social media have become a fact of life for civil society worldwide, involving many actors - ordinary citizens, activists, non-governmental organizations, telecommunications firms, software providers, and governments."¹⁰ These networking platforms have helped connect people of diverse backgrounds, cultures and affiliations.

⁸Dave Carter, "'Digital democracy' or 'information aristocracy'?" Economic regeneration and the information economy," in, *The Governance of Cyberspace: Politics, Technology and Global Restructuring*, ed. Brian D. Loader, London: Routledge, 1997, 133-49.

⁹Agoras were Greek places of exchange of ideas, whereas Habermasian forums are the public sphere for public discourse and debate. Loader and Mercea, "Networking Democracy?"

¹⁰Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media - Technology, the Public Sphere, and Political Change," *Foreign Affairs*, (Jan/Feb. 2011) <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2010-12-20/political-power-social-media>> (14 June 2016).

Over the years this free and democratic platform has assumed risky and offensive proportions for many people, exposing them to a number of threats ranging from rape, killing, abuse, public shaming, and humiliation, thus othering their identity. The free and vast public sphere has been showing signs of shrinking and implosion. Liang argues, "there is a rapid shrinking of democratic spaces of dissent." (Liang 389)¹¹ The shrinking has further intensified inequalities in the cyber-world and fears in the empirical world. Bartlett and others argue that the real-world inequalities have been transferred to the virtual world¹². Nevertheless, the transfer of inequalities on certain targets have taken a variety of forms unseen and unexpected of the online world.

6. Modi and Digital Alterities

In the run up to the Parliamentary elections that resulted in his taking over as Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi posted his vision of a Digital India in a YouTube video. High-speed Digital Highway uniting the nation, connecting the 1.2 billion Indians and driving innovations, transparent and open governance, the government engaged with the people through social media, and 'netizens as citizens' of India, were a few of his articulations.¹³ Netizens is a portmanteau (internet and citizen) for people who are actively engaged on social media or in online communities. The active online participation of internet citizens in the on-goings of a society is seen to be virtual participatory citizenship, the virtual substitution for the actual, or an online clone of the offline citizen, a mix-up of identities with their alterities. Alterities are

¹¹Lawrence Liang, "Censorship and the Politics of Micro-Fascism," *Television & New Media*, 16:4, (2015), 388-393 <DOI: 10.1177/1527476415573952> (10 August 2016).

¹²Bartlett and others, *Misogyny on Twitter*, London: Demos, 2014, 114 <www.demos.co.uk/files/MISOGYNY_ON_TWITTER.pdf> (20 June 2016).

¹³Narendra Modi, "Shri Narendra Modi shares his vision for Digital India" <<http://www.narendramodi.in/shri-narendra-modi-shareshis-vision-for-digital-india-5944>> (02 July 2016).

virtual clones of real identities, who are mistaken for the real, but who don't embody a real self. In other words, alterities were a politically motivated project to keep the citizens occupied not with real issues, but with virtual issues.

Modi's unique but "successful U.S. presidential-style election campaign was the arrival of a new kind of national politics in which the cult of the individual trumps the identity of his political party, creating a new form of ownership of the political."¹⁴ This ownership of the political was constructed, in part, with the help of digital imaginary or the set of social constructions of the entire gamut of cultural notions and practices circulated over the digitised online networkings,¹⁵ in the social media. The social media platforms became the new digital handmaids at the beck and call of the political masters to create digital alterities of the real but contesting selves. This, at the fingertips of cyber-savvy youth, heralded a new national, cultural narrative centered around an individual Modi.

The immediate roots of these alterities could be traced back to the digital discourse surrounding Modi, in which Gujarat occupies the pivotal role. After the 2002 communal carnage, the then Gujarat CM Modi, who was accused of colluding with the rioters, had been trying for an image-makeover employing a variety of communication tools and programmes, portraying himself as innocent and helpless, and a victim of the English media's propaganda. Later, (after his second consecutive victory in the Gujarat Assembly elections in 2007), he positioned himself as a "visionary, *Vikas Purush* (the Development Man) of India, and

¹⁴Liang, "Censorship and the Politics of Micro-Fascism"

¹⁵Bonnie Nardi and Young Ming Kow, "Digital Imaginaries: How we know what we (think we) know about Chinese gold farming" *First Monday*, 15:6-7 (2010) <<http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3035/2566#authorhttp://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3035/2566>> (15 August 2017).

even the future prime minister of India, replacing his negative identity in the public domain."¹⁶

In this self-promotional project, both the traditional and the digital played a major role, after Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) declared him its prime ministerial candidate on 13 September 2013. Never did he miss an opportunity to posit himself as a loyal soldier of the RSS (the fountainhead of the right-wing ideology), and the face of the *Hindutva*. The collage of images surrounding Modi varied from a victim of English news media to a non-compromising nationalist, saviour of *Hindutva*, a 'no-nonsense man', to the only one capable of confronting America and Pakistan, and a man with 56 inches chest. These images assume significance in the context of the then Prime Minister Dr Manmohan Singh, who was accused of being too soft and silent, because of which corruption was said to be rampant, and his Government's apparent failure to resolve the Kashmir problem (of terrorism and violence). Modi carefully harvested these images on the palms of smartphone users.

Since then, Modi has cultivated a devout digital fan following online, too, who proudly call themselves 'Internet Hindus' for their online behavior of abusing minorities and non-conformist ideologies. The term 'Internet Hindu' is attributed to Sagarika Ghose, an Indian television journalist, who in a tweet defined Internet Hindus as "swarms of bees... They come swarming after you at any mention of Modi, Muslims or Pakistan!"¹⁷ These are "a specific group of people online who describe themselves as Hindu nationalists and who operate in well-organised groups to attack - in foul language - those perceived as liberal."¹⁸ A major trait of these Internet Hindus is othering of identities by creating a sense of alienation, which is deeply rooted in this mixing up of religious

¹⁶Vinod K. Jose, "The Emperor Uncrowned - The rise of Narendra Modi," *The Caravan*, 01 March 2012 <<http://www.caravanmagazine.in/reportage/emperor-uncrowned-narendra-modi-profile>> (2 July 2016).

¹⁷Debarshi Dasgupta, "Shiva's Tridents - Abrasive, savvy, right-wing, ubiquitous - they're 'Internet Hindus'," *Outlook* (19 Nov. 2012) <<http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?282925>> (5 March 2014).

¹⁸Dasgupta, "Shiva's Tridents."

and political identities of trolls who carry out the project of alterities.

The digitally circulated religio-political ideology is at the heart of this online unity. Besides feeding on hatred for religious minorities, scheduled castes who are socio-politically alienated from mainstream Hinduism but, who, now avail constitutional protection from atrocities, and non-conformists like secular-minded people and a few English journalists, this unity also thrives on misogyny. The reason is that most of them are men, and hence women journalists like Rana Ayyub, Barkha Dutt, and Sagarika Ghose have been at the receiving end of their malice. As Dasgupta hints at,¹⁹ because of the constitution of troll-armies, gender plays a major role in othering the self. Gendered othering is expressed in a variety of gestures of macho display and chest-thumping, after Modi, who referred to himself as a "man with a 56-inches chest,"²⁰ that is, a man of extraordinary courage.

Modi's populist and macho off-line self-references have gone down well with his cheering acolytes, and helped an understanding of the online phenomenon of trolling by Internet Hindus. In asserting their dominance against the voices of dissent, internet trolls tend to reproduce these offline vagaries online.²¹ In this transference of identities and reproduction of alterities, Sriram Mohan argues, "there is an opportunity to nuance comprehension of how certain dominant modes seen off-line reproduce themselves in the online sphere."²²

¹⁹Dasgupta, "Shiva's Tridents."

²⁰Rajiv Srivastava and Arjumand Bano, "Will take a 56-inch chest to turn UP into Gujarat, Modi to Mulayam," *The Times of India*, (24 Jan. 2014) <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Will-take-a-56-inch-chest-to-turn-UP-into-Gujarat-Modi-to-Mulayam/articleshow/29269342.cms>> (23 June 2016).

²¹Bartlett et al., *Misogyny on Twitter*.

²²Sriram Mohan, "Locating the "Internet Hindu": Political Speech and Performance in Indian Cyberspace," *Television & New Media*, 16:4 (2015): 339-345 <DOI:10.1177/1527476415575491> (21 November 2015).

7. Politics and Media

The immediate background of the hate speech and trolling is related to a political controversy involving leaders from the United Progressive Alliance-II (UPA-II) government, especially its leading ally the Congress party headed by Sonia Gandhi. In 2010, the UPA-II had signed a contract to purchase 12 Agusta-Westland AW101 choppers (owned by the parent company Finmeccanica) to carry Indian VVIPs. After the Italian authorities unearthed a scam involving the company's CEO bribing Indian politicians to secure this contract, the deal - seemingly worth \$450 million - came under legal scanner.²³

Though the alleged direct beneficiaries were top political leaders from Congress, on 28 April 2016, the UK-based newspaper *Mail Today* carried news that Christian Michel, a UK-based 'middle-man' was paid Rs 50 crores (approx. \$8 million) to "manage the Indian media and smoothen the deal in favour of the political class, as is the custom with arms companies in organising foreign junkets for media persons."²⁴ "To manage the Indian media," here, means to stop Indian journalists from publishing the news of this scam. It was also reported that in 2013, Finmeccanica arranged a fully paid Italian tour for Indian journalists, which included some of the top Indian journalists.²⁵ Though there is no

²³Ruchi Bambha, "Five things to know about Agusta Westland VVIP chopper scam," *The Economic Times*, (28 Jun. 2016, updated 11 Jul. 2018) <<http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/five-things-to-know-about-agustawestland-vvip-chopperscam/articleshow/51992563.cms>> (5 July 2016). Mohammed U. Shaikh, "Agusta Westland scam: Finmeccanica invited Indian journalists on a fully paid tour to Italy," *India.com*, (27 Apr. 2016), <<http://www.india.com/news/india/agusta-westland-scam-finmeccanica-invited-indian-journalists-on-a-fully-paid-tour-to-italy-1142753/>> (1 June 2016).

²⁴Mail Today Bureau, "Businessman and alleged 'middle-man' Christian Michel was paid Rs 50 crore by Agusta Westland to 'manage' the Indian Journalists and media," *MailOnlineIndia*, (28 Apr. 2016), <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/indiahome/article-3564532/Businessman-alleged-middle-man-Christian-Michel-paid-Rs-50-crore-AgustaWestland-manage-Indian-journalists-media.html>> (1 June 2016).

²⁵Shaikh, "Agusta Westland scam."

evidence of Sardesai being involved either in the paid junket or having received money ('be managed'), the Twitter went viral accusing him and other journalists. Besides political debates in the Indian Parliament, Twitterati used hashtags like *AgustaWestland*, *AgustaPatrakars* (Agusta journalists), *SoniaBribedMedia*, and *PaidMedia* to attack some of the top Indian journalists, especially Sardesai, directly employing foul and abusive language.

Simultaneously, a few Twitterati complained and started sharing Direct Messages (DMs) sent from Sardesai's Twitter handle containing abusive language. Apparently, the DMs sent from Sardesai's handle contained derogatory references to their mothers: *Teri maa ki boo aa rahi hai* (your mother is "stinking"), *Go, ask your mother, Will your mother entertain us?*²⁶ Sardesai was accused of using foul language against mothers and Twitterati.

As Sardesai quit Twitter on 30 April 2016, citing personal attack on his dignity, more foul and abusive language followed: '#RajdeepsQuitsTwitter' hashtag started trending. Twitter users also employed other hashtags to taunt Sardesai, #Rajdeep Sardesai, #AgustaPatrakars, #AgustaWestland, #Presstitutes, #AwardWapsi, #SoniaGandhi, and many others, linking him to a variety of people, affiliations, and issues. Internet trolls, didn't miss a chance to attack someone against whom they had some grouses; it was one man against a host of anonymous trolls or troll farms, owing allegiance to the right-wing *Hindutva* ideology and its icon Modi, with very few voices supporting Sardesai or pleading for sanity on Twitter.

²⁶Sandipan Sharma, "Rajdeep Sardesai's Twitter walkout is victory for sanskari trolls," *Forstpost*, (02 May 2016), <<http://www.firstpost.com/india/rajdeep-sardesais-desperate-twitter-walkout-is-victory-for-sanskari-trolls-2758314.html>> (24 June 2016). Hemani Bhandari, "Finally, Twitter trolls got to @sardesairajdeep," *Indian Express*, (01 May 2016), <<http://indianexpress.com/article/trending/trending-in-india/rajdeep-sardesai-quit-twitter-abusive-dms-2778117/>> (24 June 2016). Ayub Dawood, "After Abusive DMs From His Handle, Rajdeep Sardesai Deletes Twitter Account," *Scoopwhoop.com*, (30 April 2016), <<https://www.scoopwhoop.com/After-Abusive-DMs-From-His-Handle-Rajdeep-Sardesai-Deletes-Twitter-Account/#.6tkilvsh>> (2 July 2016).

8. Method

This research employs content analysis of the tweets that followed Sardesai quitting Twitter. Usually, when an event of significance happens, it goes viral on social media only during that period/the day that person or event is in the news, after which a lull follows. Since Sardesai deleted his Twitter handle on 30 April 2016, tweets on his handle were not available for collection. Hence, this researcher retrieved the available 490 tweets post-deactivation, using the trending hashtags #RajdeepQuitsTwitter, #Agusta Patrakars, #AgustaWestlands, #Presstitutes, #PaidMedia, and #SoniaBribedMedia, all of which referred to Sardesai quitting Twitter. These included tweets which quoted the original tweets of Sardesai, or replies to comments about his quitting Twitter. The tweets were open coded and analyzed in order to look at the emerging themes, and memos were written down. The patterns were categorized keeping in mind the direct as well as implied meanings, and were interpreted within the discourse analysis framework.

9. Data and Discussion

Of the 490 tweets, 23 were either sympathetic to or supportive of Sardesai; they stated they would miss him on Twitter, he was a 'good journalist'; some criticised trolls for the 'insane campaign'. Of these 23 tweets, 11 were either news, articles or links to news about Sardesai quitting Twitter or news features about trolling/abusive practices on social media. They affirmed his identity as a human being, a professional, and a man of principles, thus all of them, in some way, upholding his dignity.

Other 467 (95.30%) tweets were sarcastic or outright abusive of Sardesai, with loaded and ridiculing words, pictures, video links, and retweets. The sheer number of anti-Sardesai tweets point to the gravity of hate-speech, a ready willingness to pounce on a person posited as their enemy, and encroach on his personhood. The trolls also called him names and held him responsible for some alleged crimes such as corruption and criticism of Modi and for attacking *Hindutva* ideology, for being a secular or left-wing, lacking morals, being intolerant, and being a coward.

10. Othering Victim

The pattern and tone of the anti-Sardesai comments were negative and often nasty by accepted social norms. They explicitly posited two opposing religio-political camps: one of Modi, his party the BJP, the mother-affiliation of the right-wing ideology the RSS, and even *bhakts*. These were pitched against the second camp of Sonia Gandhi, her son Rahul Gandhi, their party Congress, secular ideology, and the left-wing. One, a self imagined victim of English media and secular forces, and the other, the 'aliens' posited as the enemy, the contemptuous, bereft of human dignity. In nine instances, Sardesai was associated with the Delhi CM Arvind Kejriwal, though the latter belongs to a different political dispensation, opposed both to the Congress and the BJP.

There were 52 direct mentions of AgustaWestland, connecting Sardesai to the chopper scam. These were either hashtagged #AgustaWestland or #AgustaPatrakars, meaning journalists bribed by AgustaWestland. Seventeen of these were wrongly spelled as Augusta, signifying either the lack of knowledge or carelessness, or a laziness to verify their own communication in the public sphere, and an eagerness to condemn their victim. The idea behind hashtagging the company embroiled in a scam served to discredit their targeted self and, portray him as a hypocrite who, in his professional life, exposed and investigated wrongdoers, but in his personal life as one who himself indulged in such corrupt practices. The severity of the impact of such a condemnation comes from the fact that the trolls took law into their own hands, digitally and socially, and condemned a person who was not even investigated, against whom no legal proceedings or First Information Report (FIR) was filed. By its very nature, the social media gives everyone an impression of an omniscient and omnipotent self, without having to bear the burden of providing evidence or logic, as shown by the tweets.

Presstitute is a derogatory term used to refer to the journalist. The term is a portmanteau of 'press' and 'prostitute', meaning the journalists who have compromised journalistic ethics for monetary gain, or sold their soul of journalism to the highest bidder, as prostitutes are traditionally thought to do. The

derogatory term generates contempt for the person concerned, and debases him in the eyes of the public, questioning his identity in the vitriol of troll attack.

The journalist was called a coward 75 times, either directly or hinting at it with words like 'runs away' and *dharpok* (coward). The trolls said that all his journalistic life, he went on attacking *bhakt*s, but when his name appeared in the bribed journalists' list in the AgustaWestland scam, he deactivated his handle, unable to face the truth [of the alleged corruption]. The tweets also mentioned that he attacked the right-wing, but did not have the guts to face a similar criticism even once. In this right-wing digital discourse, the journalist's 'cowardice' in quitting Twitter and avoiding scrutiny by the Twitterati, was considered to be evidence enough of the guilt he was accused of. The one-sided online slug-fest was constructed as 'scrutiny' and the loud and most abusive users of the social medium behaved like self-appointed jurists. The term 'coward' was used to construct a negative identity of Sardesai.

11. Name-Calling

Name-calling is another tool of propaganda. Trolls use it as a "device to make consumers form a judgment without examining the evidence on which it should be based. Here, the propagandist appeals to our hate and fear."²⁷ When a word like 'coward' is repeated in 65 different tweets and many more times within the same tweets, and then connected it with a scam, the public is forced to believe in the propaganda of the trolls,²⁸ a negative image of the person is created in the minds of the readers, and the

²⁷Julius Yourman, "Propaganda Techniques within Nazi Germany," *Journal of Educational Sociology*, 13:3, (Nov. 1939): 148-163, 149, <<https://blog.uvm.edu/acmyers/files/2013/04/Propaganda-Techniques.pdf>> (20 June 2016).

²⁸Nazi leader Joseph Goebbels has been attributed the famous propaganda principle, "Repeat a lie often enough and it becomes the truth." Tom Stafford, *BBC*, "How liars create the 'illusion of truth'," 26 Oct. 2016 <www.bbc.com/future/story/20161026-how-liars-create-the-illusion-of-truth> (15 August 2017).

person is made vulnerable. In this unilateral condemnation, the target is deprived of any evidence to the contrary. Name-calling makes the accused vulnerable in the eyes of the public, as seen in this trolling trajectory, and makes the social media believe in the 'crime' they are accused of.

Another troll hinted at the same attribute, "Modi thrives on trolls, you should have thick skin." The import is that the journalist could even grill a brave Modi, the mascot of *Hindutva* and the '*vikas purush*' of Gujarat, and yet, the latter was undeterred, but he himself could not face even a bit of criticism. While the 'victim Modi' faced and even thrived on criticism, the journalist caved in; he did not have the 'thick skin' of Modi to face abuses. The protagonist Modi and antagonist Sardesai were counter-posed in an 'identity *vs* alterity' mode to contrast their constructed and imagined characters as spectacles for the public.

The Twitter discourse is marked by abusive language - attributing a variety of vices like corruption, 'presstitution', and alcoholism. The tweets often labeled him a drunkard. At other times, the tweets said that he had too much of 'Old Monk' and had lost his senses, or his hangovers as still continuing. Some connected his Twitter account-hacking claims to be his illusion under hangovers. They debunked his claim of his Twitter account being hacked, portraying him as a liar. Instead, they said, he had an extra dose of Old Monk the previous night, and under the stupor, sent the abusive messages insulting mothers; and then suddenly realized that he had sent them. Upon regaining sobriety, he had feigned hacking as a cover-up. Continuous bombarding of many such abusive, sarcastic messages left no scope for the victim to defend oneself, making his identity as a person prone to attacks, and forcing him to surrender or avoid such conflicting platforms.

In tagging Modi while abusing Sardesai, trolls associated the latter (and other journalists who share similar views) with anti-nationalism. It is in keeping with their image of Modi as the icon of *Hindutva*. Criticizing Modi is equal to criticizing *Hindutva*, and criticizing *Hindutva* is equal to criticizing the nation (*Hindustan*) of their conception and articulation. In the final analysis, Modi is

systematically equated with the nation; his image is created along national lines. He assumes a pseudo identity that misappropriates the identity of the nation. In this Modi-centric nationalist discourse, any voice critical of Modi is posited, not just as against the man from Gujarat, but against Hindu religion and as anti-national. Therefore, the journalist was constructed as an enemy of the nation, alienating him from his own self. The presumed argument is: if you are not with/for Modi, you are against Modi and, therefore against the nation, both online and offline. Thus, transference and reproduction of offline vagaries take place effectively online, too, manufacturing convenient identities, and othering the inconvenient ones.

In a similar vein, a tweet accused him, "After peddling lies and anti-nationalism, and a disgrace to Journalism, [he] quits Twitter?" But the tweet did not mention what lies, anti-nationalism, and disgrace were peddled. This points to the limitations of Twitter: by its very nature, Twitter encourages quick and unsubstantiated comments, and does not support an informed debate or the free exchange of opinions, thus muting the possibility of a democratic discourse, and a search for truth.

Of the nine associations of 'anti-nationalism' with the journalist, eight accused him of being anti-national, whereas one tweet counter-questioned the trolls if quitting Twitter itself was anti-national. A troll hoped, "Want to see #RajdeepQuit Antinationalism." Yet another said, "What an amazing news this is. Big blow to anti-nationals and so called secular pundits #RajdeepQuitsTwitter." One more tweet read, "If you are a true nationalist, then do us a favor, quit journalism, along with Sagarika [his wife], quitting Twitter is not enough." As pointed out earlier, the digital imaginaries of nationalism and anti-nationalism were constructed in trolls' terms, in favor of *Hindutva*, and not according to the Constitutional ideals. In the first, he was synonymised with anti-nationalism, but without any basis. Therefore, it is not enough for him to quit Twitter; he should quit anti-nationalism, as well. The demand by the troll is that Sardesai stop criticizing Modi and the right-wing aggression. Or else, he would continue to face attacks on his identity. The second tweet

painted him as a leader of the anti-nationals, thus dumping all the liberal voices also as anti-nationals. The nationalist discourse was posited as the struggle between 'secular *pundits*' and 'nationalist' *Hindutva-vadis* or the right-wing trolls. The third tweet apparently 'forced' him to choose between his journalistic career and a 'national' tag, thus condemning the journalist with journalism itself as anti-national. Trolls, here, are characterized by the use of force against those who don't fall in line with their aggressive online posture.

12. Gujarat Carnage

Troll attack on Sardesai also needs to be examined in the context of the post-Godhra violence in 2002. Soon after Modi took over the reins of Gujarat as CM for the first time in October 2001, a train compartment was set on fire on 27 February 2002. Fifty-eight *kar sevaks* (religious volunteers, who had gone to construct a Ram temple on the disputed site in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh), were burnt alive in a train on their return, in Godhra in Gujarat. On the next day, violence broke out across Gujarat, and over a thousand people were killed or burnt alive or raped, rendered homeless, and reduced to nothingness, most of whom were Muslims (official figures say 790 Muslims and 254 Hindus were killed,²⁹ whereas unofficial sources claim more than 2500 Muslims were killed).³⁰ Many of the secular English newspapers and television channels covered this violence extensively, and the CM was blamed for collusion with the arsonists. Some accused him of inflaming the rioters and refusing to act against the perpetrators of violence, even when frantic calls were made to him for help. Sardesai was a part of NDTV English channel which had done a commendable job as a journalist.

²⁹Christophe Jaffrelot, "Communal Riots in Gujarat: The State at Risk?" *Heidelberg Papers in South Asian and Comparative Politics*, Working Paper No. 17. University of Heidelberg: South Asia Institute, Department of Political Science, 2003, <<http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/volltextserver/4127/1/hpsacp17.pdf>> (5 June 2016).

³⁰BBC, "Gujarat riot death toll revealed," *BBC News*, (11 May 2005), <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4536199.stm> (5 June 2016).

In 2010, Karan Thapar, a television chat show host on CNN-IBN channel, told Modi in his TV show that people were accusing him of pogrom, and "of being prejudiced against Muslims."³¹ In 2012, Sardesai also posed some uneasy questions to Modi during his election rallies, reminding him Sonia Gandhi's accusation *maut ka saudagar* (agent of death), and then asked him if the 'ghosts of Godhra' were still haunting him. Modi has always made known his displeasure at such uneasy questions by English media. His supporters have shared this perception and reacted violently not only on social media, but also in face-to-face meetings.³² Ever since, Modi has shared a relatively uneasy relationship with the English media. Both Modi and his followers used every chance to attack and humiliate Sardesai and portray him in poor light.

The admirers of Modi associate English media and any voice of dissent with the anti-Modi faction. And since Modi is projected as a super-hero, the mascot of *Hindutva*, any criticism against him is not taken kindly by trolls, which is seen in the tweets under consideration.

13. Falsified Self

Hence, trolls hashtagging Sardesai with Modi, the year 2002, Godhra or any link with secularism is to be seen as a direct attack on Sardesai and the critics of right-wing *Hindutva*. It is an attempt to silence and isolate him, not just on issue-based agenda, but is an open politicized discourse, thus pitching dissenting voices as anti-Modi, anti-*Hindutva*, and therefore, necessarily as anti-national. Pitching anyone as anti-Modi or anti-national serves to unite trolls divided by different affiliations, under one umbrella,

³¹Karan Thapar "Narendra Modi: Hindu leader abruptly ends TV interview after being quizzed," *IBNLive.com*, (06 June 2010), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKN_3ILULpY>(2 June 2016).

³²On 28 September 2014, at Madison Garden Square, a mob manhandled Sardesai while he was covering a Modi-rally in New York. India Today, "Rajdeep Sardesai heckled by a mob outside Madison Square Garden," *India Today*, (28 Sept. 2014), <[http://india today.intoday.in/video/rajdeep-sardesai-modi-crowd-frenzied-modi-fans-new-york/1/393219.html](http://india.today.intoday.in/video/rajdeep-sardesai-modi-crowd-frenzied-modi-fans-new-york/1/393219.html)> (10 June 2016).

and serves the cause of *Hindutva*. Thus it becomes easier for hordes of trolls to gag free and independent opinions, and suppress individual voices of dissent. Dissent is essential to selfhood, and gives the self an identity of its own, distinct from others. Since the right-wing politics demand uniformity, dissent subverts such an artificiality. Hence dissent is overcome by subjugation and denial of identity. In this endeavor, social media becomes a market-place not just for free exchange, but more importantly for misappropriation/misrepresentation of the other by trolls.

Crying 'fake' by labelling someone a 'liar' is yet another device used by trolls in othering the self, where a person is isolated from the mainstream, and alienated from their own familiar environment. This easily silences a person, and the person becomes a stranger to self and others. When Sardesai announced that someone had hacked his Twitter account and had sent abusive DMs to others from it, 65 tweets said that it was a lie, called it a 'fake' hacking, and dumped him as a liar 'peddling lies'. These mentions evoked sarcasm employing smileys, short forms (*LOL*), and sharing links supporting these views. A tweet sarcastically announced that Sardesai would win a Nobel Prize for 'deactivating a hacked account'; others ridiculed him for 'sending messages from a hacked account', taunting an impossibility of having access to a hacked account even after the hacking. Some trolls accused him of bluffing and trying to distract the "alert" Twitterati from seeing through his corruption in AgustaWestland scam. While the veracity of neither camp can be ascertained, a larger question is does this episode merit so much of attention, negative or positive; debunking someone as 'fake' or 'bluff' negates any scope for the victim to prove his innocence or ascertain his personhood. The end result is that the victim is given a 'fake' identity, and his identity is othered.

In other words, falsifying every claim of the journalist serves the trolls' agenda of silencing an active voice in his professional life, and also serves as a warning to other liberal voices. The design smacks of dishonor as a device to discredit credible voices doing their job and working within the framework of the

Constitution. Shooting the messenger is a ploy of the troll-farm. In doing so, the troll-farms impose their own opinions to others.³³ This, in turn, deprives the public sphere of its public or democratic nature, by manipulating the online forum in favor of the aggressor. Consequently, the public sphere no more remains public where the free exchange of opinions can take place. The discourse is engineered as 'against discredited anti-nationals' versus self-proclaimed *bhakts*, united by their right-wing mascot. The dominant discourse thus silences the dissenting voices and establishes itself as a hegemon, crushing the communicating self. In doing so, not just the victim's identity is othered, but by feeding falsified claims to the public, their alterity is also created.

14. Sarcastic Alienation

Sarcasm and humour are employed to alienate the other. Cole argues that trolls often make their attacks seem harmless, and even acceptable by employing emoticons or 'an acronym such as 'LOL', or 'a joke'.³⁴ Humour is used to make violence socially acceptable. But the mere use of emoticons and short forms like 'LOL', 'ROFL' doesn't make the attack any less vicious. "After #RajdeepQuitsTwitter next should be #BarkhaDutt. If this happens I too will quit from here [smiley];" "Missing my friend Rajdeep... from TRP [smiley] #RajdeepQuitsTwitter," "Pappu @OfficeOfRG is the only one who didn't understood [sic.] Why #RajdeepQuitsTwitter [smiley];" "@sagarikaghose: why did you quit Twitter? @sardesai Rajdeep: go ask your mother! [smiley cat]." On the face of it, the funny tone generated by smileys and sarcasm make these comments look harmless, but when read

³³Felix De Silva and Martin Engelin, "Troll Detection: A Comparative Study in Detecting Troll Farms on Twitter Using Cluster Analysis," *KTH Royal Institute of Technology, School of Computer Science and Communication*, (2016) <<https://kth.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:927209/FULLTEXT02.pdf>> (2 June 2016).

³⁴Kirsti K. Cole, "It's like she's eager to be verbally abused: Twitter, trolls, and (en)gendering disciplinary rhetoric," *Feminist Media Studies*, 15:2 (2015): 356-358 <DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2015.1008750> (17 July 2016).

against the backdrop of right-wing assertions, they manifest their aggressive intent of tarnishing the image of the victim, and alienating him. The process of alienation creates the othered self, and is thus alienated.

Conducting and publishing polls are an election time media practice to bring in an element of 'mood of the nation' to spectatorship, and project people's participation which Sardesai's channel also used to do. Trolls, in an effort to mock and shame Sardesai, employed polls as a sarcastic device. Seventeen such instances of troll pollsters were identified, either directly posting a poll for the Twitterati to answer or/and retweet an already tweeted poll.

Instead of giving options and making the readers/ electorate vote for certain propositions, the troll pollsters preposterously came up with propositions and percentage of votes assigned to each of the propositions (instead of 'secured' votes). For instance, "Reasons for #RajdeepSardesai disappearing: i) suicide, ii) killed by Bhakts." Another tweet asked, "What view of #darbaris about @twitter after #RadeepQuitsTwitter? [poll] i) Communal twitter-33%; ii) Hindu writer - 17%; iii) RSS Twitter - 50%; iv) Modi's Twitter 0%." A third poll declared, "80% say Barkha Dutt & Rajdeep Sardesai bribed." These poll trolls indicated the manipulation of 'data' by the right-wing, which is an immoral practice, and mockery of empirical research practice. By this token, it seems, it displays the trolls' utter disregard for anything scientific, and that they do not hesitate to manipulate evidence if it suits their agenda. The trajectory of the polls suggests that the trolls were the self-appointed nationalist judges condemning the victim based on an engineered majority, negating the victim's existence to nothingness. Citizens as netizens, who feed on such sarcastic, falsified, and contemptuous feeds are, then, othered, defeating the digital dreams with which the PM had launched this 'digital India' campaign, creating a nation of alterity and othered selves.

15. Conclusion

Digital India campaign was expressly launched to wire and unite the nation, it was expected that people would find a democratic and people-friendly platform to express themselves freely. While the social media have ushered in an era of relatively free and ready communication, they have also created an imbalanced society by tilting the balance in favor of the voices louder than the usual and the religio-politically constructed self, or those enjoying political power.

While technologically, social media provide an even playing field, the right-wing elements in India have swarmed them and have tried to silence critical voices and persons with different opinions. Though Sardesai's is only a case studied here, other instances like TV journalist Ravish Kumar quitting Twitter on 28 August 2015 due to right-wing troll attack against him,³⁵ women journalists like Rana Ayyub, Barkha Dutt, and Sagarika Ghose being attacked violently and threatened with rape³⁶ online, only supports the conclusions of this study. This is a trend observed on Twitter: intolerance to anything divergent from the dominant politico-cultural discourse, which negates the individual identity of the other. Coercion is used to compromise identities of persons, create alterity, to play this out in the social media domain.

The analysis of the tweets in the backdrop of Rajdeep Sardesai quitting Twitter reveals that while a majority of the Twitter public attacked Sardesai for various reasons, including for quitting, a few supported him, or sympathised with him. The trend points to Noelle-Neumann's "spiral of silence,"³⁷ which justifies silence of

³⁵Kamayani, "NWMI demands end to online abuse of Ravish Kumar and protection for journalists," *Kractivism*, (28 May 2018) <<http://www.kractivist.org/nwmi-demands-end-to-online-abuse-of-ravish-kumar-and-protection-for-journalists/>> (30 June 2018).

³⁶Caravan News, "Barkha Dutt Threatened; Rana Ayyub, Ravish Kumar Have Already Received Threats," *The Caravan*, (07 June 2018), <<https://caravandaily.com/portal/barkha-dutt-threatened-rana-ayyub-ravish-kumar-have-already-received-threats/>> (10 June 2018).

³⁷Christopher Simpson, "Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's 'spiral of silence' and the historical context of communication theory," *Journal of Journal of Dharma* 43, 1 (January-March 2018)

the majority at the crimes of a violent minority. The trend betrays an ever growing fear of the majority either believing the propaganda made by the vitriolic vocal minority, or are simply scared to ascertain what they know to be true, lest they also should be attacked. The silence of the majority, in turn, emboldens trolls to go public with their nefarious designs in subjugating identities, and othering the target's self.

The pattern of abuse, vocabulary, and a variety of devices employed in gagging dissent online, denying people their fundamental right of expression betrays a conscious design to subjugate the silent public majority, on a platform otherwise known to be democratic. The digital discourses in the Sardesai and other related cases points to the social media canvas that is dominated by the right-wing, identifying Modi, BJP, RSS, and *Hindutva* (understood as an extreme ideology) with warped nationalism and Hinduism (understood as 'religion'), and they as correct by default, whereas anyone not in consonance with these agencies are portrayed as anti-BJP, anti-*Hindutva*, and anti-Modi, and therefore, as anti-national. Such a hegemony becomes a ploy to othering identities, discredit and shame critical voices, silencing dissent, and making Twitter, assumed to be a democratic platform, a privileged site for alienation and abuse of human rights.

Technically, the digital public sphere is an open forum, and it embraces all forms of diversities. But the type of unilateral and closed discourse resorted to and monitored by the right-wing trolls on Twitter in some cases, closes doors to divergent views, as seen in the Twitter data. The data also points to a uniform nature of the contrived discourse, engineered by trolls owing allegiance to a certain religio-political dispensation. In doing so, the trolls misappropriate the public sphere and negated its human and democratic nature, depriving access to the independent voices.

While the popular belief is that the democratic social media encourage bottom-up as well as horizontal paradigms of

Communication 46:3 (Summer 1996): 149-73 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1996.tb01494.x>> (31 July 2016).

communication, this analysis of right-wing trolling suggests a dual nature to social media (such as Twitter): the digital public space is controlled by troll-constructed images for political and ideological gains. On the one hand, because of their open nature, we can speak of 'freedom of speech and expression' in this online public sphere, and 'uncensored articulation', on the other, we long for the missed 'free speech values'³⁸ and the deprived individual self-expression in the same public sphere. In attacking a person unwilling to subscribe to the right-wing ideology, the 'ideological drift'³⁹ in digital networking and social media to negate identities and create alterities is clearly visible. Thus, liberals and those who dare to articulate their self openly, othered and condemned to alienation.

³⁸Jack M. Balkin, "Digital speech and democratic culture: a theory of freedom of expression for the information society," *New York University Law Review*. 79:1 (2004), Faculty Scholarship Series Paper 240 <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1239&context=fss_papers> (23 June 2016).

³⁹Balkin, "Digital speech."