

## Social Media as a Platform for Incessant Political Communication: A Case Study of Modi's "Clean India" Campaign

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The 2014 elections were dubbed the first "social media election" in India, when more than 56 million election-related tweets were posted during the campaign. Despite his landslide victory, Prime Minister Narendra Modi seems to be in incessant political campaign mode on social media, launching the "Clean India" mission in late 2014 among other development-oriented initiatives. This research examines the effectiveness of social media as a platform for continuous dialogue with citizens in modern politics and its implications for the mainstream news media in India. The article uses the theoretical framework of agenda building in the digital age to outline the results of an empirical study that includes a social network analysis to profile Modi's Twitter followers and the key influencers in the Clean India campaign. The study analyzes year-long Twitter data in relation to the Clean India mission to identify common terms and trends, relationships between supporters of this campaign on Twitter, crossover between social media and the Indian mainstream news media, and the news media's response to the changed political landscape.

*Keywords:* *social media, Clean India, political communication, Modi and media, political campaign, Twitter*

On May 26, 2014, Narendra Modi was sworn in as the 15th prime minister of India after his party won a landslide victory in the general (federal) elections. Modi and his party, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), successfully used new media technologies, particularly social networking services and platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and various party websites, to attract the attention of the educated middle-class youth voters as well as the mainstream news media. Despite giving only a handful of interviews to selective news media outlets during his nine-month quest to be the prime minister of India, Modi was everywhere, both in person and online. He traveled 30,000 km, addressed 437 public rallies in person, appeared as a 3-D holographic projection in thousands of other rallies, and held numerous *chai pe churcha* (conversation over tea) meetings with citizens during the election campaign ("Modi's Campaign of Mass Mobilisation," 2014; "Narendra Modi Embraces," 2014). He tweeted about his daily visits and replied to controversies on Twitter, Facebook, and other new media platforms. News media representatives

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(journalists, editors, photographers) followed Modi wherever he went, reporting any newsworthy nuggets of information he put out on social networking services, including Twitter (Rodrigues, 2015).

During his first year as prime minister, Modi continued his election campaign strategy in the nonelection period by continuously communicating with his followers on several social media platforms, government department websites, and public broadcasting services (All India Radio and Doordarshan television networks). Apart from sporadic interviews to privately owned Indian news media organizations or journalists, he largely ignored the omnipresent mainstream news media in India (Malik, 2014; Rajghatta, 2016). There are more than 850 private television channels, more than 100,000 registered news publications, and more than 450 privately owned FM radio stations in India (Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2015), in addition to more than 400 public radio stations in the tax-payer-owned All India Radio network and 33 television channels operated by the public service broadcaster Doordarshan (Prasar Bharti, 2015). His reservation toward mainstream news media stems from his years as the chief minister of Gujarat, when several national media outlets and their journalists held Modi responsible for the religious riots in Gujarat in 2002 in which scores of people were killed (Kaul, 2014). However, Modi rebuilt his image as an efficient administrator, making Gujarat a favored investment destination for corporate India. Modi has carefully crafted his image since 2013, using online social media platforms, particularly gaining publicity by associating with celebrities online (Pal, 2015). As prime minister, Modi has continued his direct, but strategic, engagement with his followers on various online platforms, launching a number of social campaigns as part of his broader "Digital India" agenda. The second half of 2014 saw a flurry of campaign launches by Modi, including the Digital India campaign on August 21, 2014; the "Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana" (Prime Ministerial People's Fund Scheme) on August 24, 2014; the "Make in India" global initiative on September 25, 2014; the "Clean India" campaign on October 2, 2014; and the "Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao" scheme that ensures the rights of female children on January 22, 2015 (PMIndia.gov.in, 2016).

In his Independence Day speech on August 15, 2015, Modi emphasized the significance of the Clean India campaign, by stating that it was his government's "biggest achievement" ("Swachh Bharat Campaign Our Biggest Success," 2015). He praised young people for being the project's "biggest brand ambassador," and said that "people from all walks of life, spiritual leaders, media friends, celebrities, everyone" ("Swachh Bharat Campaign Our Biggest Success," 2015, para 7) had worked hard to create an awareness about the Clean India campaign. In this research, we use the case study of Clean India (or "Swachh Bharat," the Hindi term for Clean India) campaign to examine the effectiveness of Modi's social media strategy as a platform for continuous dialogue with citizens and the mainstream media. We examine this strategy within the evolving theoretical framework of agenda building in the digital era. Modi's use of the Internet to communicate with citizens and the news media is comparable to any government in the world embracing e-governance.<sup>1</sup> This article outlines the results of an empirical study, which includes an examination of Modi's Twitter account @narendramodi and his followers' response to his call to make India clean by 2019.

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<sup>1</sup> See sites such as <http://digitalindia.gov.in/>; <https://www.mygov.in/>; and <http://www.narendramodi.in/>

The social network analysis of Modi's Twitter account profiles his followers, including key online influencers who have engaged with the Clean India campaign and the mainstream news media. The study investigated more than a year's worth of Twitter data from October 2, 2014, to November 13, 2015, to identify common terms and trends in this public conversation around the Clean India mission on Twitter, connections between top *twitterati*, and the mainstream news media's response to the changed political communication landscape. The Oxford Dictionary says *twitterati* are prolific users of the social media application Twitter or those who have a high number of followers on Twitter. At times, a member of the *twitterati* is also referred to as an *influencer*. An influencer is a person who has the power to influence many people, as through social media or traditional media. The specific research questions for this empirical research included

*RQ1: How has Modi used social media platforms, particularly Twitter, to promote and propagate his Clean India campaign?*

*RQ2: How have *twitterati*, including the mainstream news media, responded to Modi's Clean India mission call?*

In this article, we consider past research about the use of social media by politicians during election campaigns and nonelection periods. We outline the results of an empirical research study, in which Twitter data were collected for 13 months and analyzed for their significance as a tool for incessant campaigning and agenda building by the Indian prime minister, particularly considering the existence of a digital divide in a developing nation.

### **Election and Postelection Campaigns on Social Media**

Social media are defined as a group of Internet-based applications that allow for the creation and exchange of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), enabling two-way communication and enhanced participation. "Social media can be defined as digital multiway channels of communication among people and between people and information resources and which are personalized, scalable, rapid, and convenient" (Katz, Barris, & Jain, 2013, p. 12). Twitter as an online news and social networking service has gained significance in political communication as a microblogging platform that allows users to post and read 140-character short messages, known as tweets. During the 2015–16 U.S. presidential campaign, more than a billion tweets related to the election were posted (Levy, 2016). Launched in 2006 as a social networking site, at present Twitter has more than 328 million monthly active users across the world (Statista.com, 2017). Although Facebook is more popular with more than 1.9 billion monthly active users than Twitter (Statista.com, 2017), businesses, governments, and scholars often use Twitter data to analyze social media users' online conversations because of the openness of its platform, which allows easy access to its data for research (Ahmed, 2017).

During India's 2014 general elections, the interaction between social media conversations and the mainstream media's coverage of these conversations resulted in the 2014 elections being dubbed India's first "social media election" (Khullar & Haridasani, 2014; Pansar, 2014). As many as 56 million election-related tweets were posted between January 1 and May 12, 2014, during the general election campaign

(Merelli, 2014). Then prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi and his BJP used a number of social media networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Google+ to engage with many of the 150 million first-time youth voters (Rodrigues, 2015). The head of BJP's IT cell, Arvind Gupta, is noted to have said that "with technology and social media, we have been able to create an alternative medium with which we can directly communicate with the citizens. This is very important in this election" (quoted in Goyal, 2014, para 3). At the time of his election, Modi's Twitter handle @narendramodi had approximately 4 million followers, whereas his opponent Congress Party leader Rahul Gandhi's @rahulgandhi2020 account had 55,000 followers.

In 2014, Indian political parties' utilization of various social media platforms to propagate their messages often resulted in a one-way communication process despite the appearance of a reciprocal dialogue (Chada & Guha, 2016). However, the ever-increasing level of political communication on social media sites left little choice for the mainstream news media. As a result, many Indian journalists followed political leaders online on social networking sites and reviewed their parties' engagement with citizens (Kaul, 2014). Not only did the mainstream media closely monitor these social media conversations but also many journalists were quite active on Twitter, including NDTV's Barkha Dutt and CNN-IBN's Rajdeep Sardesai who had nearly 1.5 million followers each. Although approximately 100 million of the 800 million voters were active on social media during the 2014 Indian elections (Kemp, 2014), it is argued that mainstream media's use of social media as a news source—regularly reporting what was being said by politicians and others on social media sites—increased social media's influence on the election outcomes (Rodrigues, 2015).

Social media networking services have provided politicians the world over a significant means to reach and interact with potential supporters. In a number of countries across the world, scholars have noted the use and impact of social media in election campaigns, including the Swedish 2010 election campaign (Larsson & Moe, 2012), the UK 2010 election campaign (Graham, Broersma, Kazelhoff, & Haar, 2013), and U.S. President Barack Obama's 2008 and 2012 election campaigns (Bimber, 2014). Larsson and Moe (2012) analyzed the 2010 Swedish elections, and found that Twitter activities were largely dependent on other mediated events during the election campaign such as televised debates and offline political rallies. Graham et al. (2013) researched election candidates' Twitter behavior and found that during the 2010 UK election campaign, most British politicians used Twitter mainly as a "unidirectional form of communication" (p. 692). However, a group of candidates used Twitter to interact with voters by mobilizing, helping, and consulting with them, "thus tapping into the potential Twitter offers for facilitating a closer relationship with citizens" (Graham et al., 2013, p. 692). Similarly, Bimber (2014) found that in the 2008 and 2012 U.S. presidential election campaigns, digital media provided "opportunities for strategic as well as tactical innovation in electoral contexts" (p. 134). Presidential candidate Barack Obama and his campaign team used digital media tools as an integral part of their campaign, in which they seemingly used social media's capacity to sustain citizen enthusiasm and initiative.

Since his election in May 2014, Modi has continued his engagement on the Internet by simultaneously launching several of his government's policy- and politics-focused campaigns offline and online on social networking sites and the Web. He has increased his popularity on Twitter, Facebook, and elsewhere exponentially since the election campaign. At present, Modi trails former U.S. President Barack

Obama and current U.S. President Donald Trump as the third most popular political leader in the world on Twitter, with more than 32 million followers for his Twitter handle @narendramodi. In addition, his official prime ministerial Twitter handle @PMOIndia has nearly 20 million followers. The Obama administration following the 2008 election also initiated a process of consulting with citizens on a regular basis. White House Director of New Media Macon Phillips noted that there were three parts to the process: "publicizing the President's message; increasing the visibility of White House Administration's activities for the public, and creating opportunities for citizen input in government" (quoted in Katz et al., 2013, p. 16). In their study of how Obama and the White House used social media to engage with citizens to fulfill their promise of "responsive governance," Katz et al. (2013) observed that although the White House frequently engaged in social media outreach to the public, it avoided putting itself in a position that required "anything more than a nominal reaction" (p. 108).

### **Agenda Building in the Social Media Era**

In the past, scholars have theorized about political actors' (inside and outside the political decision-making arena) interest in raising public support for their causes as agenda-building models. Cobb, Ross, and Ross (1976) wrote that "the process by which demands of various groups in the population are translated into items vying for the serious attention of public officials can appropriately be called *agenda building*" (p. 126). They propose three models of agenda building: The *outside initiative* model accounts for the process through which issues arise in nongovernmental groups, which then become part of the public agenda; the *inside initiative* model describes issues that arise within the governmental sphere and whose supporters do not try to expand them to the public; and the *mobilization* model accounts for the ways decision makers attempt to implement a policy by expanding an issue from the formal to the public agenda. In the past, traditional mass media occupied a key position in the public communication process as a precondition for political agenda building (Denham, 2010). However, the Internet and social media technologies have offered an alternative avenue for civil society and political leaders to draw attention to their causes, as shown by the use of social media technologies by the civil society in the Arab Spring and anticorruption movement in India in 2011 (Howard et al., 2011; Rodrigues, 2015).

Chadwick (2013) argues that the "technologies, genres, norms, behavior and organizational forms" (p. 4) of traditional mass media and online communication in agenda building produce a new, hybrid media system. This new hybrid media system has been changing the relative power of actors in political and media systems, as well as the nature of political communication fundamentally. As a result, as has been the case during election campaigns and the postelection period, political leaders in recent years have been using social communication platforms such as Twitter to launch agenda-building campaigns. In the process, the political leaders either bypass the mainstream media or coerce the mainstream media to follow their lead in agenda building on issues of importance to them and their public. Parmelee (2014) refers to this phenomenon of politicians using social media messages as creating "information subsidies" (p. 434) for journalists in traditional media. However, Pfetsch, Miltner, and Maier (2015) note that a significant consequence of agenda building in the light of the hybrid media system is that the "interface" between the media and political agenda has become porous and is not open to mutual "interpenetration" (p. 53).

Meanwhile, in a study of the changing patterns of news production and consumption in the United Kingdom, Newman, Dutton, and Blank (2012) found that the mainstream news media use the Internet to maintain and enhance their communicative power. They argue that the Fourth and Fifth Estates<sup>2</sup> are increasingly building on and responding to each other in the new news ecology of the contemporary era. Similarly, Conway, Kenski, and Wang (2015), in their study of the 2012 U.S. presidential election, found a "symbiotic relationship" between agendas in Twitter posts and traditional news media. They say research suggests that "traditional media and Twitter feeds of politicians, campaigns, and parties are involved in a source cycle" (p. 374).

### **The Clean India Mission**

In India, public sanitation has long been a social, economic, and political issue. The rural sanitation program was first introduced in 1954 as part of the First Five-Year Plan, which was then reintroduced in 1986 as part of the Central Rural Sanitation Program, and later in 1999 as a demand-driven approach under the "Total Sanitation Campaign" (Indiawaterportal.org, 2011). According to 2011 census data, less than 31% of rural households had access to toilets (Census of India, 2011). In the early 2010s, India had the largest number of people who practiced open defecation (626 million) and the greatest number of child deaths in the world due to poor water, sanitation, and hygiene conditions (Indiawaterportal.org, 2016; "626 Million Indians Lack," 2012). Following his landslide victory in 2014, Modi launched yet another version of the sanitation program.

The Clean India mission (the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan) was launched in New Delhi on October 2, 2014, on the birth anniversaries of Mahatma Gandhi and former Prime Minister Lal Bahadur Shastri (Rukmini, 2014). Modi called on Indian citizens to fulfill Gandhi's vision of a clean India by his 150th birthday in 2019, which is also the year when the next Indian general elections will be held. Modi advocated every individual to devote 100 hours every year toward cleanliness. According to the World Health Organization, inadequate sanitation caused India to lose nearly \$54 billion in 2006, which was equivalent to 6.4% of India's GDP ("Inadequate Sanitation Costs," 2010). As an active member of the twitterati, Modi invited nine public figures to make a contribution toward the Clean India mission and asked them to invite nine additional people to do the same, forming a chain reaction to assist the mission (Rukmini, 2014). He also urged people to share their contributions on social media using the hashtag #MyCleanIndia. The public figures invited by Modi included Sachin Tendulkar (cricketer), Kamal Hasan (actor and producer), Salman Khan (actor), Priyanka Chopra (actress), Anil Ambani (industrialist), Shashi Tharoor (opposition party leader), Mridula Sinha (governor of the state of Goa), Baba Ramdev (Yoga guru), and the *Tarak Mehta ka Oolta Chashma* (a popular Indian sitcom) team.

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<sup>2</sup> The first three estates are the legislative, the executive, and the judicial branches of the government. The Fourth Estate—the mainstream press—is assumed to have the responsibility to be a watchdog of the performance of the government and those with power in contemporary society such as corporate entities. Dutton (2009) says the Fifth Estate includes the blogging community, as well as all of the networked individuals who are enabled by the Internet (i.e., social media) in ways that can hold the other estates accountable.

By inviting opposition leaders and celebrities to the cause of Clean India, Modi extended the campaign beyond the narrow confines of party lines (Singh, 2014). Political commenters noted Modi's cleverness in hijacking Mahatma Gandhi's inheritance from the opposition, the Congress Party, by taking Gandhi back to the masses by appealing to Indians to honor his legacy and his wish of seeing India "not only free but also clean and developed" (Singh, 2014, para. 7). The Clean India mission aims to promote cleanliness and hygiene and to eliminate open defecation in India by forming a partnership between central and state governments and the citizens. Conversely, cleanliness in India is traditionally linked to the caste system, in which people from a specific caste are expected to clean public and private garbage and toilets as their vocation. It was this legacy of social division that Gandhi wanted to eliminate by promoting a self-help ethos in the sanitation sphere in India. By associating Gandhi's spectacles with the Clean India movement, Modi and his government have evoked Gandhi's aim of social transformation, in which the stigma and social exclusion associated with sanitation are challenged. "Clearly, in the context of cleanliness, questions relating to exclusion and dignity need to be fore-fronted and to be tackled with the same determination and political will" (Jha, 2015, p. 5). In terms of politics, it is also an apolitical message, with most Indians calling for and agreeing that a universal effort needs to be made to improve cleanliness and sanitation in India. Jeffrey (2015) argues that Modi's Clean India campaign is influenced by a call for action by nonresident Indians, who were Modi's staunch supporters in the 2014 elections. Modi's campaign to attract foreign investment with his "Make in India" campaign also inevitably shines a light on the standard of sanitation in the country.

### **Method and Data Collection**

In this study, we used a grounded research approach to collect data related to social media messages from the Twitter platform and analyzed it for patterns of conversation around the Clean India campaign. This qualitative approach to develop a theory about the Clean India campaign on Twitter allowed us to understand how Modi used the platform to communicate his message and whether he had any influence on his followers in terms of promoting the message of the Clean India mission and prompting action. We used key terms such as *Clean India*, *Swachh Bharat*, and their derivatives to search for related messages posted on Twitter. We analyzed these tweets by identifying social networks created for the common purpose of cleaning the country and the interrelationship between key influencers, including Modi himself and his two accounts, @narendramodi and @PMOIndia. For logistics reasons, the data collection focused on the first year of the campaign from its launch in October 2014 to November 2015.

The Twitter data for this study were obtained using Twitter's application programming interface (API) for Python. Between November 3 and 6, 2015, Twitter provided 15,822 unique tweets that contained the following (non-case dependent) terms, including as hashtags, *cleanindia*, *clean AND india*, *mycleanindia*, *swachhbharat*, *swachh AND bharat*, *swachhbharatabhiyan*, *swachhbharatchallenge*, and *swachhbharatmission*. Using this API, Twitter provided matching public tweets published in the previous six to nine days, with the earliest tweet being from October 27, 2015 (Twitter.com, 2016b). There is no guarantee that these are all of the matching tweets, as Twitter is known to limit how many matches it provides, depending on the quantity of results. Nevertheless, the results identified 8,578 different accounts that were actively discussing the Clean India campaign at the time. To expand the data's time

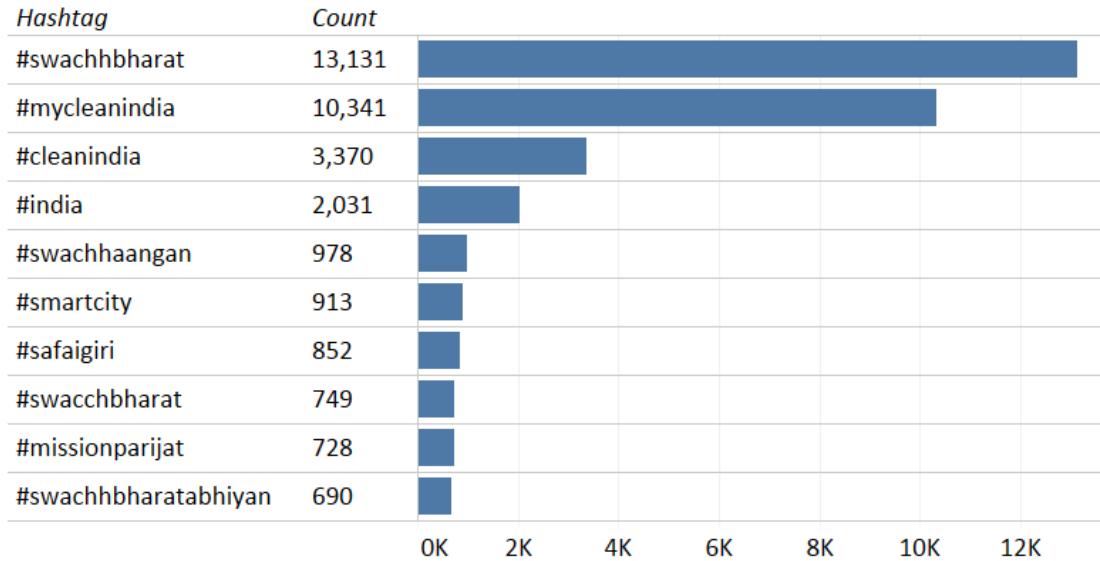
period and completeness, we obtained further historical tweets from Twitter for each of those accounts using the API. Twitter provides only up to 3,200 historical tweets per account at any time (Twitter.com, 2016a), but for most accounts, this included all tweets posted back to at least October 2, 2014. A small amount of additional tweet data was manually collected for the @narendramodi account going back to July 2014, using the advanced search interface provided by Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>). In total, 19,088,016 tweets were obtained from Twitter and stored in a series of comma-separated value files. As many as 62,448 tweets relevant to the Clean India campaign were identified by singling out the tweets between October 2, 2014, and November 13, 2015, and searching for the same terms as for the initial tweets, allowing for some minor spelling errors for *Swachh* and *Bharat* (see Table 1). Most of the filtering and evaluation was automated using Tableau software. Table 1 shows that in that time period, 2,188 tweets were posted by Modi's Twitter handle @narendramodi and his prime ministerial handle @PMOIndia.

**Table 1. Clean India-Related Tweets Between October 2014 and November 2015.**

Variable	Measure
Number of accounts in data	8,578
Number of tweets in data collected	19,088,016
Time period	October 2, 2014–November 13, 2015
Number of Clean India tweets	62,448
Number of tweets from @narendramodi or @PMOIndia	2,188
Number of Clean India tweets from @narendramodi or @PMOIndia	99

## Results

A sorting of the nearly 62,500 tweets between October 2014 and November 2015 using the above terms showed that the two most common hashtags used by users were #swachhbharat with more than 13,000 tweets and #mycleanindia with more than 10,000 tweets (see Figure 1). These were followed by variations such as #cleanindia and #india in which the terms *clean* or *swachh bharat* appeared in the text of the tweets or another hashtag. Modi and his government used the hashtag #mycleanindia, urging followers to respond to his call to organize local efforts to "clean India" and send photos and messages about their achievements.



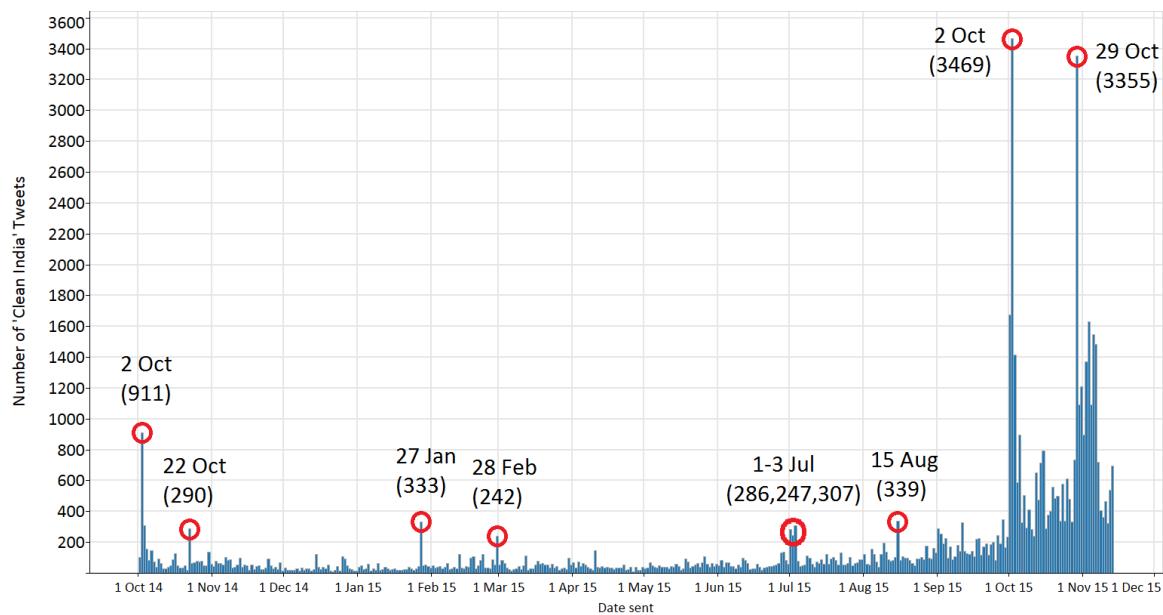
**Figure 1.** Ten most popular hashtags in Clean India tweets (October 2014–November 2015).

A closer look at the most active Twitter users in Figure 2, according to the number of tweets sent in relation to the Clean India campaign, shows that individuals and nongovernment groups and organizations dominated the Clean India conversation on Twitter during the 13 months studied. The top-three Twitter accounts were @swachhbharatapp, an unofficial Clean India application created by @mahekrmshah (Mahek Shah, an IT graduate); @sbmvns or swachhbharatmission, a group that includes a team of BJP supporters; and @CleanupTN, a group based in Tamil Nadu (a state located in southern India) dedicated to environmental issues and cleanliness in India. Of the top 21 users advocating Clean India, the Indian Ministry of Railways had two Twitter handles, @RailMinIndia and the Minister for Railways' personal account @sureshpprabhu.



**Figure 2. Top 21 Clean India twitterati (October 2014–November 2015).** The software used to obtain the data from Twitter replaced any Devanagari alphabet letters with question marks (cf. the description of the @sbmvns account, समाज में स्वच्छता के प्रति आग्रह-अभियान चलाना।पर्यावरण के प्रति जागरूकता उत्पन्न करना।— "raising awareness about cleanliness in society"). If an account did not have any description text at all, it was recorded with a null value (cf. the @hc\_sharma account).

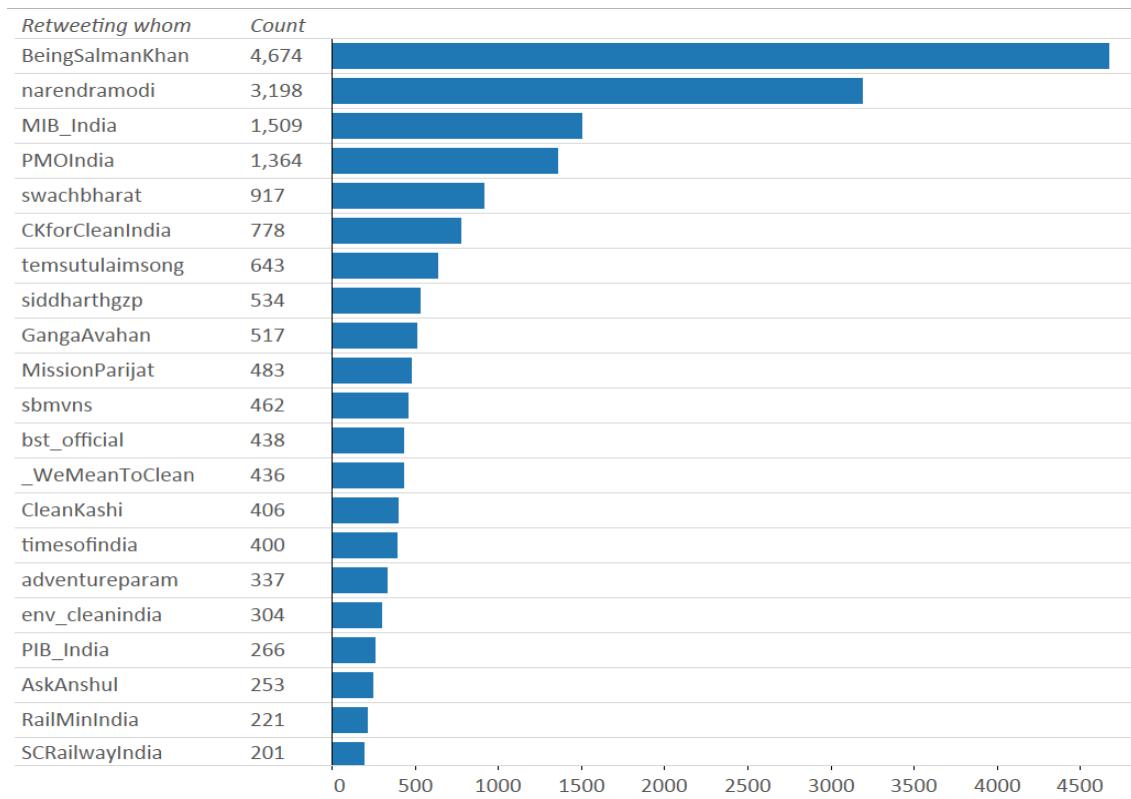
However, it is the peaks of conversational traffic during this 13-month data that shed light on what or who was driving the Clean India agenda on Twitter. Figure 3 shows that the conversation peaked around the following dates and their corresponding events, as identified from news reports covering these events: There was a surge in Twitter activities around anniversaries such as Republic Day on January 26 (or January 27) and around Independence Day on August 15; the union budget for 2015 was presented on February 28; the launch of the new government's digital program by Modi on July 1, 2014; and the release of the Swachh Bharat report on July 3. In addition, retweets by Bollywood star Salman Khan around October 22, 2014, and the prime minister congratulating him for his efforts also drew attention on Twitter.



**Figure 3. Peaks of Clean India activity on Twitter (October 2014–November 2015).**

During the year, a large number of retweets responded to messages from Modi's two accounts and Salman Khan's @BeingSalmanKhan (see Figure 4). Messages sent by Modi @narendramodi, PMO India @PMOIndia, the official account of the national campaign Clean India @swachbharat, and the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting @MIB\_India were often retweeted.<sup>3</sup> Other popular twitterati included the ICICI Bank CEO Chanda Kochhar (@CKforCleanIndia) and Temsutula Imsong (@temsutulaimsong), a young woman from Varanasi who was praised by Modi for taking up the task of cleaning one of the filthiest river banks in the city.

<sup>3</sup> The official account of the national campaign for Clean India @swachbharat has since been changed to @swachhbharat.



**Figure 4. Whose Clean India messages were retweeted.**

The data in Table 2 show that most often there was a one-way conversation between Modi and others in this campaign. Modi did not retweet any message or reply to anyone. However, other twitterati continued to reply to or mention @narendramodi's account in their posts. Of the data collected, the number of tweets sent out by @narendramodi and his @PMOIndia account were small compared with those of some of the more prolific twitterati. The data also show that only a handful of retweets (mostly of @narendramodi's tweets) were sent by the @PMOIndia account. However, Modi's tweets were retweeted often by others, as were tweets sent by the @PMOIndia account.

**Table 2. Engagement By and With @narendramodi and @PMOIndia.**

Account	@narendramodi	@PMOIndia	Other
Number of Clean India tweets	61	38	62,349
Clean India retweets by account	0	13	42,490
Clean India retweets of the account's tweets	3,198	1,364	37,933
Clean India reply tweets by account	1	0	4,011
Clean India reply tweets to the account	120	46	3,025

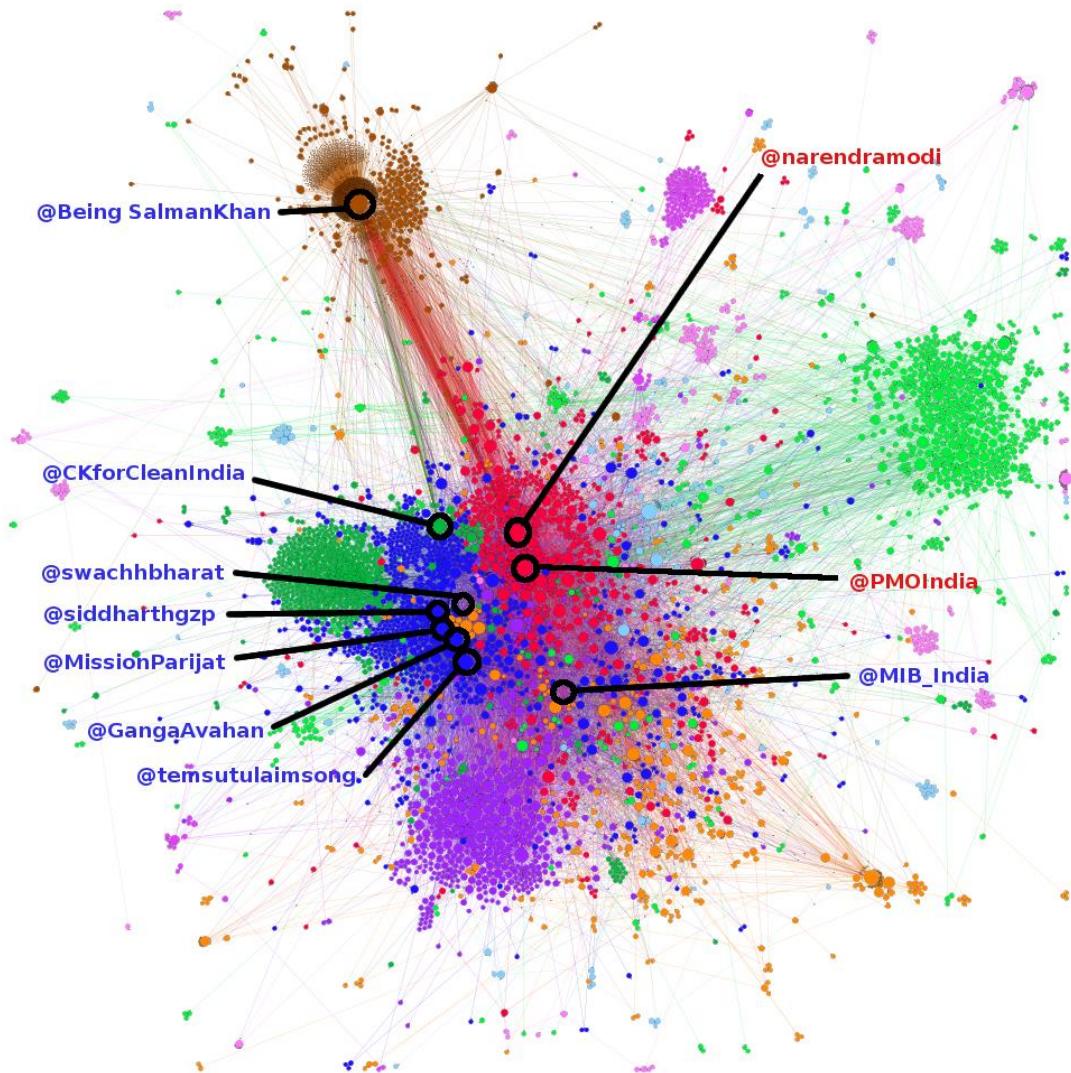
Figure 5 shows the information flow of this Twitter conversation, with the size of each node indicating how often each account's Clean India tweets were retweeted by others and the edges (connecting lines) linking each retweeter to the original author (retweetee). The key influencers indicated on the graph correspond to the top-10 such retweetees listed in Table 2. Those accounts with similar retweeting behavior are grouped by color.<sup>4</sup> @BeingSalmanKhan and @narendramodi were the most retweeted accounts in the data collected. The multitude of edges seen between the @narendramodi and @BeingSalmanKhan groups show the strength of the relationship between these two accounts. However, Figure 5 also shows that other top influencers in this conversation did not have the same level of strong relationship with @BeingSalmanKhan, whereas many of Salman Khan's retweeters remained separate from the rest of the key influencers. There is also no media presence among the top-10 influencers in this Twitter conversation related to Clean India.

The mainstream news media's engagement with the Clean India conversations on Twitter remained at medium range, with little direct communication between Modi and the mainstream news media. In Figure 6, the size and color of the nodes indicate the degree to which each account's Clean India messages were retweeted by others. As indicated by the labeled nodes, news media were not key influencers, and most were not part of a major discussion group. However, when we compare Modi's 60-odd tweets with online news articles published by mainstream news outlets, there is a near perfect match in the data. The mainstream news media either reported on what Modi said in these tweets (e.g., praising Salman Khan and others for their Clean India efforts) or reported on his Republic Day or Independent Day speeches in which Modi mentioned Clean India as a significant initiative of his government. Almost every @narendramodi tweet on Clean India resulted in a news story.

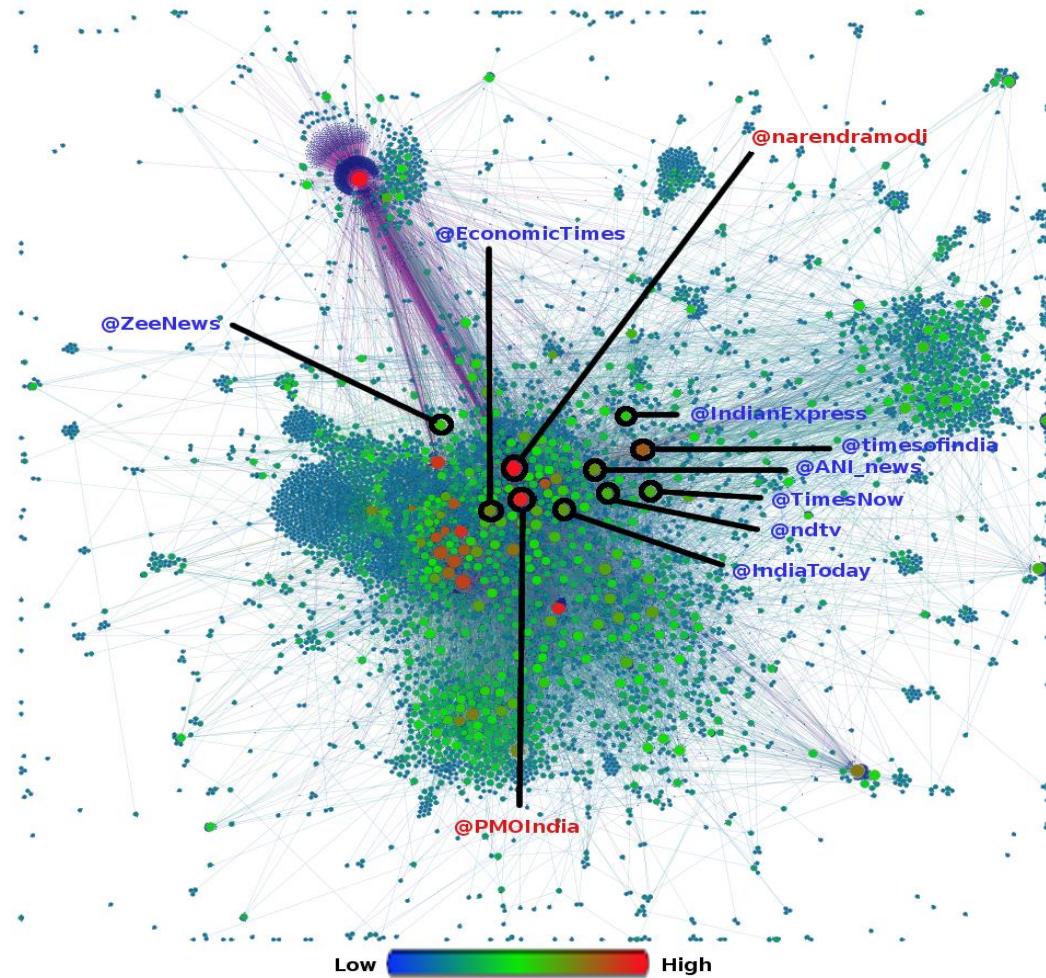
### Discussion

Irrespective of the media system prevailing in a country, politics and the media are intertwined in their existence, which manifests in political communication. Politicians need to articulate, influence, and shape their public discourse to meet the expectations of their citizens. For this, they need to use the prevailing media environment in a country or era. In contemporary times of hybrid media systems, there is a range of sources of information accessible to the public, politicians, and others engaging in public discourse. These actors require judgment and management in deciding which medium is the most appropriate for communicating a political event or process (Chadwick, 2013). In Modi's case, his government is using the mobilization model for its political agenda-building strategy (Cobb et al., 1976). Modi and his government are extensively using new media technologies and social platforms to not only inform the public about its policies but also as access to a large source of information about citizens' views and wants in terms of tweets and retweets, Facebook likes and comments, and ideas posted on various government websites (ANI, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> This graph was produced in Gephi, an open source graph visualization and manipulation application, using Blondel, Guillaume, Lambiotte, and Lefebvre (2008) to determine the clusters and Lambiotte, Delvenne, and Barahona (2009) to help display them. Only the top-10 groups (in terms of their percentage of the nodal population) are identified. The remaining nodes are not significant to this graph and have been filtered out.



**Figure 5. Social network: The top 10 Clean India twitterati whose tweets were retweeted.**



**Figure 6. Mainstream media's engagement with the Clean India campaign on Twitter.**

In this study of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's articulations on Twitter in relation to his Clean India campaign, it is clear that, postelection, Modi continued his election campaign strategy of engaging with his online followers by posting his messages on social media platforms and the Web. The Clean India campaign was part of the BJP's election manifesto, tapping into the desire of educated youth and middle classes to see the economic growth in the country manifested in basic amenities for all and cleaner communities ("10 Clean Cities," 2014; "Youth on a Mission," 2013). To some extent, Modi and his party merely captured this social longing for a cleaner India, particularly among a younger and urbanized Indian population that was vociferous in its call for change in the lead-up to the 2014 elections (Virmani, 2014). Although we note that not every tweet using or referring to the terms *Clean India* and *Swachh Bharat* may have been captured in the data collected for this study between October 2, 2014, and

November 13, 2015, a significant majority of Modi's tweets during this period show that, on a weekly basis, he posted tweets about events related to and mentioning Clean India and the Swachh Bharat mission.

A further examination of the tweets sent by his @narendramodi account showed that during the year Modi used every occasion to propagate the Clean India campaign by associating it with popular, well-known public personalities including film actors such as Salman Khan and Kamal Hassan, sports stars Sachin Tendulkar and Suresh Raina, business tycoon Anil Ambani and ICICI bank chief Chanda Kochhar, and fellow politicians. These popular public personalities are also social media influencers or twitterati, who are followed by millions on Twitter. Despite an appearance of a penchant for being associated with celebrities and popular public figures, Modi's message on the Clean India mission remained sharp, including when tweeting links to news articles and YouTube videos related to the topic. Meanwhile, Modi also used his regular broadcast on All India Radio and Doordarshan (the two public service broadcasters) to urge listeners to participate in the Clean India mission. The program—*Mann Ki Baat* (Hindi for "speaking from the heart")—has been broadcast near the end of every month since October 2014, in which the prime minister discusses some of the selected issues raised by the public, including the Clean India campaign ("Narendra Modi Touches People," 2014).

However, the significant level of traffic created around the Clean India campaign on Twitter indicates that there is a community of individuals who engaged with the movement, not just Modi or his government. These individuals or twitterati included former IT graduate Mahek Shah with his @swachhbharatapp account, the @sbmvns account operated by a group of party supporters, and a filmmaker and a group of volunteers associated with a project called "mission parijat" that encouraged communities to clean up their locales. These individuals and groups posted photos of cleanliness events, clean streets, and the construction of toilets. They chided local and state authorities to do more to clean their town and city streets and their administrative systems. Several phone apps were launched by the central and local government departments in 2015 (e.g., the Swachh Bharat Mission App by the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation; the Swachh Delhi App by the New Delhi government). The globalization process and the Internet have increasingly reduced the impact of the elite powerbase dominated by politicians and the mainstream news media as information gatekeepers (Coleman, 2013). Even in developing countries such as India, a section of the population that is well versed with new media technologies has been pushing its agenda in the elite public space, seeking answers and endorsing action by politicians. However, Modi-endorsed celebrities remained an important component in the public discourse around the Clean India campaign. Film star Salman Khan's tweets from @BeingSalmanKhan were retweeted the most in the sample data collected (see Figure 4), followed by @narendramodi, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting's @MIB\_India, and Modi's prime ministerial account @PMOIndia.

One of the aims of this research was to carry out a social network analysis to profile followers and other participants including key influencers in Modi's Clean India campaign on Twitter. Surprisingly, none of the top-21 twitterati engaging with the Clean India campaign were journalists (see Figure 2). Although, news media and journalists continued to remain observers of this conversation online, almost every time @narendramodi tweeted about the Clean India campaign, it was reported as a news story. Most of Modi's tweets had a further news value of being about or related to a prominent or famous

personality involved in a Clean India event. Modi helped generate public interest by strategically tweeting about celebrities and other individuals such as Temsutula Imsong's efforts in the Clean India campaign. This in turn significantly increased the level of conversation on Twitter about the mission. The presence of film star Salman Khan, and other celebrities, created a significant buzz around the topic of Clean India. Similarly, other individuals such as the ICICI bank Chief Executive Officer Chanda Kochhar @CKforCleanIndia and the SwachhBharat application @swachhbharatapp created by an IT engineer made a large contribution to the campaign. The Swachh Bharat app generated the highest number (approximately 2,190) of tweets (see Figure 2).

The mainstream news media such as *The Times of India*, the *India Today* network, and NDTV had a medium level of activity around the Clean India Twitter campaign, but their Twitter accounts did not interact with Modi's tweets directly. Modi's one-way communication in relation to mainstream news media continued online on Twitter, where he did not retweet or reply to others. In fact, this Twitter communication strategy concurred with Modi's relationship with news media when he was accused of shunning reporters in the early period of his prime ministership (N. Basu, 2015). Meanwhile, a year on, the mainstream news media were critical of the progress made by the government toward the Clean India mission, noting the "garbage crisis" in parts of Delhi, India's capital city (S. Basu, 2015). Despite the involvement of celebrities, who turned the Clean India events into a photo opportunity, on-the-ground reality was that only a proportion of the target toilets were constructed during 2014–15 and many remained unused ("Swachh Bharat Abhiyan," 2015).

### **Conclusion**

The aim of this empirical study was to examine the effectiveness of social media as a platform for continuous dialogue with citizens in modern politics and its implications for mainstream media in India. Using Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Clean India campaign as a case study, we have presented an analysis of 13 months of Twitter data. Research shows that Modi has continued his political agenda-building strategy via social media using Twitter and other platforms such as Facebook, various government ministry websites, YouTube, and the largely government-funded Indian public service broadcasters. A network analysis of Modi's Twitter accounts shows that, when required, Modi used celebrities' names and popularity on Twitter to promote his schemes such as the Clean India, Digital India, and Make in India campaigns by posting selfies with movie and sports stars, foreign dignitaries, or enlisting them to participate in his campaigns. Every time Modi added a 140-character message on Twitter about a launch of an event or congratulating a celebrity's efforts in the Clean India effort, mainstream media reported it as a news story.

Modi's Twitter handle @narendramodi and his prime ministerial Twitter handle @PMOIndia work in synchronicity to inform millions of followers of his and his government's activities. However, Modi does not engage with his followers, nor does his Twitter handle retweet information from other users (see Table 2). It is very much one-way traffic in terms of his engagement with his followers. This is a familiar political communication strategy. In the year after taking office as prime minister, Modi remained elusive, not giving interviews to Indian mainstream media (apart from three interviews to foreign media—*TIME*, CNN, and Facebook Founder), causing an outcry from them about a lack of accountability. The Indian

mainstream news media industry, as large as it is, no longer has a monopoly on the means of production and distribution of information. As noted by Newman et al. (2012), the authoring and distribution networks offered by social media have enabled more political parties, voluntary groups, and individuals to enhance their "communicative power" and form their "own online networks" (p. 15).

A comparison of Modi's social media strategy with political leaders elsewhere sheds further light on his strategy. Katz et al. (2013, p. 16), when examining the Obama administration's engagement with U.S. citizens on social media following his election in 2008, outlined three different modalities in which the public's use of social media interfaces with the government: first, as a source of information for the government; second, as a channel through which the government can inform the public of its policies; and third, as a modality of gathering citizens' viewpoints and opinions as a form of power sharing, in which the public would be directly involved in setting policy for the government. How far these citizens' viewpoints and opinions feed into policymaking needs to be investigated further. Katz et al. say that Obama's political communication strategy, which included gathering a vast amount of information about citizens' views, message broadcasting, and social media engagement, gave rise to a myth of making governance more responsive and transparent, with the belief that a large range of competing objectives will provide a consensus around national policies. It remains to be seen whether Modi's direct communication strategy with his followers is creating a mirage of a government that is responsive to the people's needs. Further research is required to test the effectiveness of Modi's communication strategy in terms of mobilizing the masses to clean India and affecting change at the local communities' level.

However, this research analysis will not be complete without considering the fact that there is a significant digital divide in India, where limitations on access to new media technologies and an inequality of digital literacy clearly exist (van Dijk, 2005). It is estimated that approximately 350 million of the 1.3 billion people use the Internet (Kemp, 2015). Approximately 134 million are social media users and about 590 million Indians are mobile phone users (Kemp, 2015). In contrast, approximately 360 million Indians lived below the poverty line in 2011–12, according to the Indian government's Planning Commission estimates (Katyal, 2015). Therefore, the impact and aims of Modi and his government's social media strategy need to be considered within the limits of the social media reach/use. However, it is evident from the concurrence of what makes news and Modi's tweets in relation to the Clean India campaign that there seems to be a level of synergy between the social media conversations and the mainstream media's coverage of these conversations for their readers/audiences. Modi's political communication during nonelection times is not limited to social media; it is visible on the Internet and is covered by the omnipresent mainstream news media, and Modi has access to the two public service networks, which he uses to reach a large segment of the population without having to subject himself to unfriendly journalists. Journalists are aware of this trend—what Castells (2007) refers to as "mass self-communication" by political leaders on social media platforms—which in turn is disempowering the mainstream news media and its role as the Fourth Estate (Malik, 2014).

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