Innuendo as Outreach:
@narendramodi and the Use of Political Irony on Twitter

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Our analysis of tweets from @narendramodi demonstrates how the Indian prime minister used political irony, enacted through sarcasm and wordplay, to refashion his political style and practice into a more broadly appealing populist ethic. We deconstruct confrontational Twitter messages laced with innuendo to explore the use of language as a means of political self-representation. Modi's use of irony provides a form of political spectacle and demonstrably resonates on social media, as quantified by the high retweeting of his sarcastically worded messages. We identify three rhetorical strategies in these tweets: (1) appeals to the base through the use of popular idiom, (2) creation of a shared cognitive environment to allow followers in on inside jokes and a means of affiliating with the leader, and (3) the performance of righteousness in underlining the leader's use of wit and restraint. We argue that the use of political irony in these tweets must be seen as part of a longer-term performative effort to recast Modi's political image from a regional strongman into a sophisticated communicator.

Keywords: Twitter, India, Narendra Modi, sarcasm, irony, populism

Narendra Modi has more than 35 million followers on Twitter and 43 million likes on Facebook, a combined tally greater than that of any other elected leader in the world.[1] He has more direct social media

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connections to citizens than any mainstream media channel in India. The 2014 Indian general election, which Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won resoundingly, has become the subject of multiple best-selling accounts and is referred to as the election that changed India (Sardesai, 2014). Modi's use of digital technology through the campaign garnered much attention—in addition to Twitter and Facebook, Modi's team invested in a suite of online outreach platforms including YouTube, Pinterest, and LinkedIn (Pal, Chandra, & Vydiswaran, 2016). Modi himself interacted with the citizenry through a range of online and mediated channels, including much-publicized three-dimensional hologram meetings at which Modi delivered virtual speeches to his campaign crowds.

Social media enabled a new form of populist outreach for Narendra Modi. Unlike his appeals to his conservative base supporters, who are stoked by his fiery right-wing oratory on stage, his online rhetoric lacks an overtly confrontational tone and instead projects an image of a technocrat who stands for economic development. Recent work has suggested Modi's 2014 election campaign featured a pointed effort to rebrand the leader from radical Hindu nationalist to tech-aware statesman using technology to speak unmediated to the citizenry (Kapoor & Dwivedi, 2015; Modgil & Manik, 2015; Pal et al., 2016).

Political irony presents a form of personality politics, in that the use of sarcasm is centrally tied to the image it creates of the speaker. The sardonic political attacks entertain but also emphasize Modi's wit. The subject matter and framing of the messages, often incorporating popular culture and current events, signal the persona of a keyed-in politician who is responsive to the contemporary context in appealing to his constituents. Modi's 2014 campaign broke with the typical BJP electoral strategy of unified ideological campaigning, opting instead for a personality-centric effort that focused on his image as a centrist development figure in the mainstream national media while selectively engaging the party apparatus and traditional base in more localized outreach (Jaffrelot, 2015). The campaign also saw Modi limit unvetted interactions with the press to offset an antagonistic relationship born of the Gujarat riots; rather, he ran a more directly managed media strategy, with social media at its center (Jaffrelot, 2013; Sardesai, 2014).

Analyses of Modi's social media feed have shown frequently positive, uplifting messaging, with a keen understanding of technology and global economic issues and avoidance of direct conflict and incendiary topics (Pal, 2015). Here we examine the use of sarcasm through the lens of populism to understand how this fits within Modi's broader online strategy of political rebranding for new constituencies while at once offering common idioms and innuendo for base supporters. Specifically, we examine Twitter as a performative space where particular sorts of images and personas can be deployed. In Modi's case, we are interested in how irony functions within his political re-creation. We are inspired by Moffitt and Tormey's (2014) notion of populism as a political *style*—one that draws on dynamics of insiders and outsiders and is fostered by performances like Modi's enlistment of sarcasm and irony against political opponents.

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[1] Barack Obama was the most followed elected official until his presidency ended. As of September 2017, although Modi trails U.S. president Donald Trump (who has 38 million followers) on Twitter, he has more followers on Facebook (42 million) than the U.S. president (22 million).

Related Work

Three bodies of work are relevant to this research. First, we discuss social media in politics to frame why leaders invest in social media in terms of who they expect to reach and what they expect to achieve. Second, we discuss research on sarcasm in terms of its value in political discourse as well as the challenges in capturing it online. Third, we look at work on populism that can be helpful in understanding how Modi has used social media in recent years.

Social Media and Message Reach

In most low- and middle-income countries, where often only a small (and typically young) group of economic elite uses social media (Leetaru, Wang, Cao, Padmanabhan, & Shook, 2013), the reasons for being online need not be voter conversion. Studies show that leaders in and out of power have a range of motivations for being online (Barberá & Zeitzoff, 2016), regardless of the kind of political system in place (Reuter & Szakonyi, 2015). For most politicians, social media are primarily a means of presenting themselves as likable—an impression-management activity (Lilleker & Jackson, 2010). There is sufficient evidence that national leaders, including in much of the global South, invest in social media irrespective of actual voters' use of social media (Pal & Gonawela, 2016). Examiners of media outreach in Modi's 2014 campaign have proposed that social media engagement was about organizing a popular discourse of modernity and development around Modi (Jaffrelot, 2015), which distances the more negative news media attention around his association with Hindutva antecedents, refocusing instead on a technology-savvy modern image (Kaur, 2015). The brand output of the 2014 Modi campaign came to be known for its effort in differentiating which message went to which segment of the population (Jaffrelot, 2015; Kaur, 2015; Modgil & Manik, 2015); thus, the use of sarcasm must also be understood from within the frame of being aimed at a specific audience of people who can relate to the language and references. Irony denotes the use of contemplative wit to combat detraction, and its use offers a nod to the sharp follower able to process the sarcasm and perhaps propagate the entertaining message.

In the performative space of Twitter, sarcasm is helpful in approaching the separation of Hindutva-oriented content, which is traditionally more divisive than the pan-Indian patriotic rhetoric of "India First," through which Modi has gained a more secular standing and which can be harder to voice against (Pal et al., 2016). While the strategies and motivations of various politicians have been examined, less work has been conclusive on what specific elements of their communication appeal to the online publics. Social media allow politicians to craft their message by controlling their output, but research also finds that social media represent the community that can shape the image of the politician by choosing which messages to propagate (Leng, 2012). The affective sensibilities evoked by these messages drive engagement with politicians' content (Bronstein, 2013), stressing the importance of rhetorical crafting to make such messages relatable. Few have specifically investigated the role of sarcasm and humor in political content that is retweeted online. Penney (2016) examined interactions with viral messages around U.S. presidential candidates, including tweeters' attempts to foster a sense of citizenship, trigger dialogue, and highlight issues not covered by mainstream newscasters. Penney found that "snarky comments" that do not overtly seem like marketing are successfully used to get attention. What also

matters with political tweeting is the attention of influencers such as journalists, who often retweet humorous content, even in a political context (Molyneux, 2015).

Irony and Sarcasm

Verbal irony has been defined as a rhetorical trope that involves the substitution of a figurative for a literal meaning. However, linguists have long debated its precise meaning, arguing that some measure of contextual effect—that is, of having special meaning to the reader—allows for a more nuanced understanding of the concept (Wilson & Sperber, 1992). The general agreement on spoken irony is that it involves the use of words to express something other than the literal meaning (Attardo, 2000) and that a necessary precondition for irony is a shared cognitive environment (Wilson & Sperber, 1992). In political speech, this would be some shared awareness of nested context between the speaker and the audience. Linguists have also argued that sarcasm is at the heart of irony, and they have consequently treated the two as highly related or interchangeable (Muecke & Muecke, 1969). Ironic utterances suggest familiarity between parties (Eisterhold, Attardo, & Boxer, 2006), so to pass a sarcastic comment that is then understood is, in itself, an enabler of affiliation.

Irony has traditionally been considered a rhetorical means of persuasion, particularly in politics (Partington, 2007), where the ability to master irony and sarcasm highlights the politician's intelligence (Nuolijärvi & Tiittula, 2011). There is a long history of politicians using sarcasm, often as a veiled means of personal attack (Crowell, 1958) and one that is increasingly tied to populist movements (Knight, 2015). Sarcasm has been found to be valuable in terms of recall, but also in enabling things that are harder to say outright. Research has shown that in public communications, irony and sarcasm have higher emotional appeal than direct statements, even when there is a trade-off with clarity (Lagerwerf, 2007), but research also has shown that, while irony has more expressive effects on audiences than literal statements, it also offers the speaker more protection by virtue of the construction of irony being more allusive than precise (Colston & O'Brien, 2000). Allusive sarcasm continues to be part of direct political attack, particularly online, as was most recently seen in Donald Trump's use of suggestive tweeting in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and in Italian politician Beppe Grillo's use of charismatic and comedic online engagement with citizens (Miconi, 2014).

Ironic speech and the weight of political performance are of particular importance in the postcolony. In his "Provisional Notes on the Postcolony," Mbembe (1992) noted that twisting popular political phrases (with derisive and obscene wordplay) was a means by which Cameroonian and Togolese citizens undercut the power of political propaganda—not only behind closed doors but in rallies and public spaces and in the presence of leaders as well. Modi's use of sarcasm builds on a longer tradition of slogan humor during political rallies, but in using English, and often fairly complex allusions, it signals affiliation with a specific middle- and upper-class ethos. The use of irony as a form of signaling has been studied elsewhere in the postcolony. In her book *Shaken Wisdom*, on the use of irony in African literature, Gloria Onyeoziri (2011) wrote that "the multiple and constantly changing meanings associated with ironic discourse need to be understood within the framework of communication and of the communities where that communication takes place" (p. 13). In other words, to make sense of how ironic language is

deployed, we must understand both the speaker's choice to invoke it and the community called into being through this strategic use of language (Onyeoziri, 2011).

This is not to say that traditional forms of ironic speech were absent in Modi's campaign outside of the online realm. The use of innuendo such as slogans, political jingles, and rhyming jibes aimed at rivals was typical through both his Gujarat and national campaigns. While street sarcasm and humor need to be terse and easy to repeat—thus, a series of jibes at opponents rhyming with "Ab Ki Baar, Modi Sarkaar" ("This time, Modi in government") (Baishya, 2015), Twitter allows more flexibility for complex thoughts. Modi's 2014 campaign was personalized around his candidature and government in Delhi, a departure from the ideology-oriented campaigns typical of the BJP (Sardesai, 2014). This personalization, however, offered far more leverage to both exalt the leader and vilify the opponent.

Populism

In his book *On Populist Reason*, Laclau (2005) wrote, "there is nothing automatic about the emergence of a *people*" (p. 200). Although the basic notion of populism has been hotly contested (Ionescu & Gellner, 1970; Laclau, 1977), there is general consensus that populism involves a performance, usually in the body of the leader and the followers, and that there is a necessary antipluralistic element to populism, an imagined antagonist. Such an antagonist emerges from the creation of an "ideal people" as a subset of the citizenry, and the remainder, by their very exception, are part of an immoral, corrupt elite or its lackeys (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012).

We argue that Narendra Modi's social media presence is a space of populist performativity in which a particular political vision of who is authentic and who is illegitimate is created through the leader's messaging and its reception online. Sarcasm is embedded in the performance of populism—through a shared wink, the accessibility of the sarcastic tweet signals inclusion into the inside joke (Eisterhold et al., 2006). For readers, the tweet offers a means of affiliating with others with the same worldview when they employ affordances such as likes and retweets, whereas for the leader, the framing shows an ability to attack political opponents through wit instead of crude confrontation (Nuolijärvi & Tiittula, 2011). The higher emotional appeal of sarcastic messages furthers the outreach agenda by increasing reaction from online denizens (Lagerwerf, 2007), but it also helps maintain a useful distinction between politics "as the circulation of content" and politics "as official policy"—a distinction made by Jodi Dean (2005) in a study on the effectiveness of Internet-originated political communication. The use of humorous innuendo in place of aggressive direct confrontation allows for a form of populist rhetoric in which the speaker is posed as a clever, connected leader contrasted against an uncool and bureaucratically minded opponent. As Panizza (2005) noted in the introduction to *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*, populism is the "language of politics when there can be no politics as usual" (p. 9). Unlike the political style of ideological movements, such as the Hindutva-oriented BJP, the 2014 campaign was marked by the personalization of the political campaign. Although the BJP's nemesis, the Congress Party, was attacked as corrupt and ineffective, the BJP campaign focused its vitriol at individuals leaders in the party. Canovan (1999) noted that "populism is not just a reaction *against* power structures but an appeal *to* a recognized authority" (p. 4). Modi's use of sarcasm and irony, and the wide retweeting and favoriting of these messages helped

both in illustrating his stance against an "illegitimate elite" and in strengthening his appeal as someone representing a people's voice.

While Modi's populist ascendance at the national stage has been equated with a resurgence of Hindu chauvinism (Jaffrelot, 2016), his online persona has not invoked the more typically populist styles of explicit othering (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014). With the rise in right-wing movements around the world, there have been several cases of populist claims to legitimacy through some form of othering, typically delivered through a constructed crisis point in a state's sociopolitical trajectory, such as Dutch politician Geert Wilders's welfare chauvinism (De Koster, Achterberg, & Van der Waal, 2013), Australian far-right politician Pauline Hanson's objections to Asian influx (Wear, 2015), and Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte's claim to rid the country of crime through brute force (Curato, 2017). In Modi's case, the history of the 2002 riots and his longer association with the social core of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh as a lifelong *pracharak* meant that the populist case had to be made outside the traditional party base. The online populism of @narendramodi was then framed within the longer thread of online Hindutva (Mohan, 2015), in which diaspora populations were early drivers of the BJP's online following (Therwath, 2012). Thus, unlike Wilders, Duterte, or Hanson, a divisive campaign might have hurt rather than helped Modi, whose party in the early 2010s was already a dominant force in national politics.

There are also domestic drivers through which one can examine Modi's populist brand. Filc (2011), drawing from Canovan (1999), posited the notion of a "post-populist" leader who relies upon a populist habitus drawn from movements and leaders of years past. Modi's political tweeting continues from his past branding as a defender of an "ignored majority" Hindu population, and it aligns with personality politics used by other national candidates, including Indira Gandhi at the Centre, and state politicians such as M G Ramachandran in Tamil Nadu and N T Rama Rao in Andhra Pradesh, who have in their own populist campaigns represented themselves as the sole leaders who represent the people's voice (Pandian, 1986). The Modi of large-scale public speeches and three-dimensional holograms represents a much more traditional Indian populist ethos with fiery rhetoric, whereas social media and their bite-size messages to a primarily wealthy, urban, educated audience offer an alternative populist vision crafted to appeal to a sense of national well-being. Although social media do not reach many of the traditional rural and peri-urban upper-caste Hindu voters of the BJP, they do extend Modi's appeal to a new young urban constituency.

The use of an overall positive tone, avoidance of divisive Hindutva topics, focus on feel-good messaging, and patriotic sentiment signal a new form of populist outreach in which the viewer is asked to react not to the politician and everything that person stands for but rather to a broader message that can be abstracted from that whole. In this process, social media open opportunities not only to the rebranding politician but likewise to the citizen, who can now find an acceptable meeting ground to engage with a politician who carried a certain cachet in the past.

Methods

We conducted a mixed-methods study of tweets from the handle @narendramodi, first coding each tweet individually to identify themes and then performing an in-depth analysis of a selection of tweets coded under "sarcasm" for a descriptive account of the subthemes and style of innuendo. We mined 9,040 tweets from the account @narendramodi between February 2, 2009 (the date the account was started), and October 2, 2015. Each tweet was hand-coded by two researchers and triangulated by a third. This study is a follow-up to work on a smaller sample of tweets on the differences between pre- and postelection themes in Narendra Modi's social media output (Pal et al., 2016). Because @narendramodi is the Indian prime minister's verified account, and he tweets in the first person, we attribute all tweets to him.

We binned tweets according to key dates in the Modi campaign that serve as markers for the evolution of the social media discourse (see Table 1). These bins changed slightly over the period of this study as it expanded over time. The first block extends to the end of 2011. In this block, the tweeting was irregular and relatively unsophisticated in the use of hashtags and language. We found more consistent management of Modi's Twitter account starting in 2012, when it started operating almost daily. The second block of tweets extends to the end of the state election in Gujarat, in which Modi won his third term as chief minister.

Table 1. Coded Blocks.

Block	Period	Significance	Number of tweets
1	February 2, 2009– December 31, 2011	Early tweets, irregular tweeting	615
2	January 1, 2012– December 17, 2012	Tweets until 2012 state election	930
3	December 18, 2012– December 31, 2013	Post–state election into early national campaign	1,606
4	January 1, 2014–May 14, 2014	Mid-campaign, leading into election results	1,458
5	May 15, 2014–November 14, 2014	First six months postelection	1,217
6	November 15, 2014–May 14, 2015	Six months to end of first year in power	1,521
7	May 15, 2015–October 2, 2015	Start of second year, until the end of 2015 U.S. tour	1,693

The third block of tweets covers the period through December 2013. During this phase, Modi was declared the BJP prime ministerial candidate and began early campaigning for the 2014 election. The fourth block covers the busiest period of the 2014 campaign, starting with the new year and ending at the conclusion of the election in May 2014. The fifth block begins with the declaration of Modi as prime minister and covers his first six months in office. The sixth block covers his next six months, when a

number of policy initiatives were launched and assembly elections in several states took place. The last block starts with Modi's second year in office and ends after his U.S. tour.

Coders assigned up to three more specific thematic codes that related to the text of each tweet. These themes comprised a growing list that was expanded as new topics emerged and was reduced during periodic collapsing of overlapping themes. We used an expansive rather than restrictive coding mechanism, creating new thematic codes when we could not agree on a tweet fitting neatly into a single category. The top 10 themes are listed in Table 2. Although sarcasm is not among the most common themes, it appeared fairly consistently, in 126 instances. We did not code explicitly for "populist" tweets, but the word *people* was the third most commonly occurring word, appearing 770 times. To verify sarcasm-related tweeting, we ran a fourth round of binary testing for sarcasm through the entire sample of tweets. Table 2 shows three broad topics that Modi tweeted about—political issues (foreign affairs, elections, events, BJP), development issues (science and technology, development), and affiliative messaging such as regards in various forms (greetings, gratitude, tributes). While an overview of these themes is valuable in understanding the topical spread of Modi's tweeting, we focus here on sarcasm-themed tweets.

Table 2. The 10 Most Common Themes.

Theme/code	Tweet text contents	% of total
Foreign affairs	Issues directly related to Indian foreign affairs	11.8%
Elections	Election campaign, polling	9.9%
Events	Announcements of political events	8.3%
Development	Poverty, development	7.1%
Greetings	Greetings, regards to citizens or communities	6.9%
Gratitude	Thanks posted to citizens or communities	6.7%
International	Global issues that are not related to foreign affairs	5.5%
Science and technology	Science, technology, e-governance	5.5%
Tribute	Tributes or praise for individuals or communities	5.4%
Bharatiya Janata Party	Party-related messages	4.7%

Sarcasm was not one of the early themes we identified. Initially, we coded what we termed "wordplay," referring to tweets that used figures of speech such as alliteration, hyperbole, metaphors, or business buzzwords. During iterations with coding, we found that many wordplay-themed tweets were sarcastic, and we added this theme for coding through the entire sample. Some of the sarcastic tweets even made the news for their wording (Sinha, 2015).

Data Item Examples

Date: 21 Sep2012
Block 2
Tweet text: *Assam & FDI issues prove PM ji has redefined our democracy as 'Govt. OF foreigners, BY foreigners & FOR foreigners'*
Themes:, Gandhis, Investment, Criticism, Foreign Affairs

Region: Assam	Language: English	Callout: None
Link: None	Hashtag: None	Media: None
Retweets: 593	Favorites: 179	

This tweet is a criticism of the prime minister Manmohan Singh, with a suggestive reference to migration of Bangladeshis into Assam ("for Foreigners") and Foreign Direct Investment ("of Foreigners") to sarcastically attack the Italian birth of Congress party leader Sonia Gandhi ("by Foreigners").

Date: 5-Apr-2014
Block 4
Tweet text: *Congress' 1 point programme is to facilitate the Son Rise in Delhi. The Nation is secondary…only the Son's career must be safe. Very sad.*
Themes: Gandhis, Wordplay, Sarcasm, Congress, Confrontation

Region: None	Language: English	Callout: None
Link: Yes	Hashtag: None	Media: None
Retweets: 787	Favorites: 573	

This tweet is a categorized as criticism of the ruling Congress Party, which the tweet claims, through the sarcastic wordplay on 'Son Rise' (homophone of 'sun' referring to Sonia Gandhi's son Rahul) to be interested in primarily the maintenance of the Gandhi family in power. .

Analysis

We used two forms of analysis. First, we studied the frequency of sarcasm-related tweets alongside other-themed tweets through the phases as well as their reach in terms of retweeting and favoriting. Second, we contextually analyzed the language and framing of selected tweets that characterized some of Modi's discourse on technology.

Reverberation Measures

A tweet was categorized as viral if the measure of retweets was an outlier for the specific time period. Outliers were found for each block through the statistic of median absolute deviation (*MAD*; see Table 3). This is a robust method for outlier detection that, unlike standard deviation, is insensitive to the presence of outliers and immune to sample sizes (Leys, Ley, Klein, Bernard, & Licata, 2013).

Table 3. Percentage of Outliers by Block.

Block	Count	Moderate outliers	Extreme outliers
1	615	8.5%	4.4%
2	930	12.8%	8.1%
3	1,606	12.6%	6.1%
4	1,458	12.3%	6.7%
5	1,217	12.5%	6.7%
6	1,521	12.8%	7.5%
7	1,693	8.2%	4.4%
Total	**9,040**	**11.5%**	**6.3%**

The *MAD* is a metric of dispersion—that is, how much the data were spread around the median. It is defined as

$$MAD = b * M_i(|x_i - M_j(x_j)|),$$

where x_j is the set of retweet counts corresponding to n tweets, and M_i is the median of the series. Assuming normal distribution in the absence of outliers, the constant scale factor b = 1.4826. The outlier cutoff is taken as two times the MAD to identify moderate outliers and three times the MAD to identify extreme outliers. This is inherently a subjective decision, but because 95.0% and 99.7% of data points are likely to be within two and three deviations from the median for a normal distribution, we thought two and three were good conservative cutoffs.

A tweet with retweet count x_i was considered an outlier if it met the following criteria:

$$x_i > M + 2 * (MAD)$$

for moderate outliers and

$$x_i > M + 3 * (MAD)$$

for extreme outliers, where *M* was the median for a given block. Here, we only considered positive outliers—that is, retweets that significantly outperformed the median for the period. After applying the *MAD* outlier detection, we found a total of 1,038 moderate outliers and 566 extreme outliers.

Textual Analysis

Next we analyzed the tweet text to highlight aspects of the communicative practices on the social media feed. For this process, team members reviewed all the sarcasm-coded themes, selected the most retweeted among these, and discussed them as a group to analyze their subtext.

Results

        The top 10 themes (see Table 2) include several themes that one would expect to appear in the feed of a political leader, but as shown in Table 4, these typical themes were less likely to be widely popular among followers, as measured through the chances a tweet would be an outlier in terms of its retweet rate. Instead, the themes (selected from those with a minimum of 50 cases) that were emotive in nature (corruption, sarcasm, Gandhis) and those on subjects of popular interest (cricket, entertainment) evoked a greater popular response from the Twitter universe.

Table 4. Selected Themes and Outlier Rates (Minimum 15 Instances).

Theme/code	Total instances	Moderate outliers	Extreme outliers
Cricket	102	56.9%	36.3%
Gandhis	71	40.8%	25.4%
Sarcasm	126	34.1%	26.2%
Entertainment	174	21.3%	13.8%
Corruption	94	22.3%	18.1%
Hinduism	383	19.1%	10.7%
Science and technology	494	7.7%	3.4%
Development	640	8.0%	5.2%
Foreign affairs	1,066	6.2%	3.3%

        Sarcasm is an attribute theme (i.e., about the style of message framing), unlike cricket and technology, for example, which are subject themes. We found patterns in the timing of the use of sarcasm. Sarcasm was very closely concentrated around election cycles ($p < .001$), thus particularly around blocks 2, 3, and 4 (see Table 5). Blocks 2 and 4 were immediately before an election.

Table 5. Number of Instances of Sarcasm by Block.

Block	Instances of sarcasm	Extreme outliers among sarcasm
1 ($n = 615$)	12	1
2 ($n = 930$)	22	15
3 ($n = 1,606$)	24	3
4 ($n = 1,458$)	62	14
5 ($n = 1,217$)	3	0
6 ($n = 1,521$)	1	0
7 ($n = 1,693$)	2	0

It was also around elections that sarcasm-themed tweets resonated most, which is intuitive because popular sentiment around typical sarcastic subjects such as insulting opponents would appear to be elevated in the middle of a campaign. As shown in Table 5, most extreme outliers took place during campaign-related blocks. Using an independent samples *t*-test to examine the retweet rate of sarcasm-themed tweets compared with the rest of the sample in the key election periods (blocks 2 and 4), we found that they were significantly more retweeted (see Table 6).

Block	Sarcasm	*n*	*M*	Independent samples *t*-test
2	0	908	144.9	$t_{21.105} =$
	1	22	460.2	−4.806
				$p < 0.001$
4	0	1,396	560.1	$t_{64.513} =$
	1	62	876.3	−4.750
				$p < 0.001$

Table 6. Mean Sarcasm Retweets by Block.

To conduct a deeper read of specific sarcasm-themed tweets, we arranged in descending order of popularity (adjusted retweets to the median of the block) the 10 highest retweeted messages coded under sarcasm (see Table 7). We see a high concentration of these in block 4, right before the general election.

Shared Cognitive Environment

Our next step was to examine the text of tweets used over time to understand some strategies used in crafting them. Sarcastic tweets presuppose or suggest a shared cognitive environment. Thus, the use of the term *Rahul Baba* ("Little Boy Rahul") to refer to Rahul Gandhi was intended to infantilize him and characterize him as incapable and undeserving of leadership, but also to refer to him as a boy in relation to his mother, Sonia Gandhi, as the main seat of power in the Congress Party. Similarly, we found the use of *madam* to refer to Sonia Gandhi, which suggests faux deference to her, winking at sycophancy within her circles. Messages with these terms were retweeted widely, and references to *Rahul Baba* or *Madam* over time became a signifier for one's politics.

Another means of invoking populism was through reference to popular culture in ironic tweets. The second tweet listed in Table 7 refers to hugely successful comedy show host Kapil Sharma, suggesting Modi's political opponent's discussions were funnier than a comedy act. The seventh tweet is layered with several references. First, Modi referred to Rahul Gandhi as *Shahzada*, an Urdu/Persian term meaning "princeling," to suggest his alienation from grassroots politics and his being born into a wealthy family. Strategically, Modi used the Urdu/Persian term, associated with Muslims, instead of the Hindi term for "prince," *Rajkumar*. Modi went on to note that Mr. Gandhi showed up at the state of Rajasthan without informing the chief minister (i.e., he does not respect authority) and that he rode on the motorbike of a history-sheeter, a term in India for a career criminal (i.e., he has poor judgment). Finally, Modi suggested that Mr. Gandhi was influenced by *Dhoom 3*, a reference to a popular movie franchise about motorbike

gangs. This last reference is affiliative in signaling Modi's own familiarity with what is new and popular among young people.

Table 7. Selected Extreme Outliers by Block.

Rank	Block	Tweet text	Number of retweets
1	4	3 AKs are very popular in Pakistan: AK-47, AK Antony & AK-49, whose party talks of referendum in Kashmir & shows Kashmir being in Pakistan.	2,610
2	4	The way Rahul Baba is making statements with a dash of comedy in them, I think the TV show of Kapil Sharma may soon have to shut shop.	2,545
3	4	Rahul Baba says "27,000 crore posts are vacant" & "2 out of 1" children are malnourished in Guj. Only he can explain how this can happen.	2,057
4	4	India needs a strong Government. Modi does not matter. I can go back & open a tea stall. But, the nation can't suffer anymore.	1,728
5	2	Pradhan Mantri ji, 60 cr people & 19 states are in darkness. Country wants to know is there any coalition dharma you are following here too?	1,349
6	4	People of Delhi had a unique experience recently! They saw a unique coalition between Congress A team & B team	1,603
7	4	Shahzada came to Rajasthan without informing their CM & rode on a bike belonging to a history sheeter. Perhaps he was inspired by Dhoom 3.	1,601
8	4	Manner in which Cong, SP & BSP are mocking my poor background shows their mindset. Yes, I am proud I sold tea. . . . I never sold the nation.	1,596
9	4	Didi wanted Bangladeshi infiltrators removed in 2005. Now due to votebank politics she supports them. People didn't expect such Poriborton!	1,477
10	4	They looted the nation in the name of the poor but now it is the son of a poor man who is challenging them. They are not able to digest that	1,460

We found in these tweets that the use of popular culture was a means of signaling affiliation and a shared cognitive environment with others who get the inside joke, but this was also a means of reinforcing the leader's subscription to the same cultural articles that the common Indian, particularly the young, consume, at the same time helping to establish Modi's opponent as a disconnected elite.

Righteousness

Among the more evocative uses of populist sentiment is the claim of righteous affiliation with the common Indian. In tweets 4, 8, and 10 (see Table 7), Modi appropriated a subaltern voice in claiming his humble background as a train station tea seller. The communicated modesty juxtaposes the nepotistic illegitimacy of the Gandhi family alongside Modi's own self-made libertarian credibility. Yet Modi avoided the populist charismatic style of Laloo Prasad Yadav, which extended to rejecting the elite (Witsoe, 2011). Modi's use of English metaphors departed from the typical linguistic style of vernacular proficiency at the expense of the bourgeois colonial language (Sonntag, 2001) and instead underscored his dexterity in navigating both worlds.

The tweets about Modi's tea-selling credentials were in response to Congress Party members' derogatory comments about Modi's background (Torri, 2015). Modi's response was swift but careful. The reference to his tea-selling was an insult to his father, yet instead of performing filial rage, he channeled measured moral outrage by sarcastically challenging the classist tone in the attacks. The tweets were widely retweeted and attracted responses from other Twitter users to hashtags such as #teaseller or #chaiwallah (Hindi for "tea seller"). For instance, several of the responses to tweet 8 used sarcasm in support of Modi (see Figure 1).

The tweets shown in Figure 1 responded directly to Modi's proud callout to being a tea-seller by suggesting that Modi stands upright and tall as a tea-seller (literally and figuratively, as seen in the top image, by Donald Bhai), whereas the prime minister at the time, Manmohan Singh, stands bent over in sycophancy serving tea to the head of the Congress Party, Sonia Gandhi. While Modi in this depiction represents a self-made son-of-the-soil, Singh is depicted as a lackey, evoking the colonial trope of serving a *memsahib* (European woman).

In the second image in Figure 1, the Twitter user Trinetra responded to Modi's tweet by posting a picture of Robert Vadra, the Gandhi son-in-law (*damaad*), and using puns referring to his alleged involvement in a land corruption scandal with the DLF real estate company. The implication is that the Gandhis sit atop a kleptocratic oligarchy, while Modi is righteous and incorruptible, reinforced by his willingness to embrace his subaltern past. The mischievous use of language, which we refer to as wordplay, emerged as a well-used tactic, appearing in 247 instances (2.7% of the sample), often in conjunction with sarcasm.

Figure 1. Public responses to tweet 8 from Table 7.

Appeals to the Base

Tweets 1 and 9 in Table 7 were callouts to the core populist electorate of the BJP, which is traditionally driven by nationalistic topics, opposition to illegal immigration, and anti-Pakistan rhetoric. In tweet 9, Modi attacked an opposition state chief minister in the east, Mamata Banerjee (referring to her as "Didi"), calling her out on immigration from Bangladesh, but in doing so he used her own campaign slogan, "Poriborton," which loosely translates to "transformation." Later in the same month, Modi tweeted "People from Bihar, Odisha & Marwaris are not welcome for Mamata Didi but those from Bangladesh are. Time to stop such votebank politics"—again highlighting a pan-Indian nationalist vision as opposed to a soft-on-immigration stance from Banerjee.

In tweet 1, the most retweeted in this sample, Modi used a mix of wordplay and sarcasm to attack Defense Minister A K Antony by using the "AK" alliteration to juxtapose Antony with Kalashnikovs (guns) in an insinuative reference to the Kashmir conflict. The suggestion was that the Congress Party was pro-Pakistan because of its perceived openness to discuss border issues, with Antony deemed as equivalent to the violent separatists in their divisive threat to Indian integrity. The tweet also highlights a populist tactic of questioning the opponent's patriotism, or implying an exclusion from what may be seen as a shared national value—in this case, territorial integrity.

Modi repeatedly referred to the Congress government as the *Delhi Sultanate* in sarcasm, a thinly veiled reference to the Muslim empire of North India, implying foreignness. Innuendo, such as Modi's 2012 reference to the Congress as a "Govt. OF foreigners, BY foreigners & FOR foreigners,"[2] protects against claims of defamation and highlights wit in the creative construction of messages; here it also set up an implicit anti-Muslim shout-out to Hindu chauvinists with plausible deniability.

rcastic messages among the tweets were almost always political in nature. There were few intersections with the themes of development or foreign affairs, none with technology. Because sarcasm as a theme more or less disappeared after the election, there were virtually no intersections with foreign affairs after mid-2014.

Discussion

Unlike in parts of the West, where the head of the government must face the professional press corps from time to time to take questions, Modi can craft one-way messages that address both the citizenry and the mainstream press through social media. While Donald Trump's presidency in the United States is raising the specter of a head of state who primarily communicates through tweets, Modi has been effective at such communication since the start of his prime ministership. Social media reach out not only to citizens who subscribe to the feed but also to the traditional news media—practically making social media Modi's sole means of public communication as a political actor.

Shared cognitive environments help create a sense of community between the leader and those who "get it," and the act of sharing irony through retweeting is by extension a means of affiliation. It is precisely this sense of community, of shared affiliation (and exclusion), that was key to Modi's reinvention of himself as a populist leader who could appeal not just to the specific Gujarati communities who voted for him as chief minister but to the broader, amorphous body of "the people." Creating and sustaining this online community that imagines itself as the people allowed Modi to recast himself as a populist leader who could successfully command the populist habitus that had been the imprimatur of old-school politicians such as Indira Gandhi and exude the technocratic savvy of someone who hobnobs with global tech executives and takes selfies with world leaders.

Whereas Congress leader Indira Gandhi's famous rebuttal to her own fractional opposition, "*Woh kehte hain Indira hatao, mein kehti hoon ki garibi hatao*" ("They say remove Indira, I say remove

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[2] Tweet on September 21, 2012.

poverty"), appealed quite commandingly to any and all listeners, Narendra Modi's imagining of himself on Twitter as a *vikas purush* ("development man") was more in line with the exclusionary, technocratic affiliations of his Twitter followers, who sought a leader in whom to place their insurgent hopes. Modi's show of thoughtful restraint in using well-crafted irony in place of direct confrontation spotlights the incisive wisdom of a *vikas purush* willing to fight through words rather than through the fiery rhetoric of a vengeful *pracharak*. The use of an overall positive tone—a focus on feel-good messaging and patriotic sentiment—signals a new form of populist messaging in which the message itself appears to be separated from the person who delivers it. The true victory of Modi's populist social media message is that it opened pathways for supporters to no longer have to explain themselves.

His tweeting about tea selling following the Congress leaders' mocking his lineage is a case in point. Sarcastic tweets are often funny tweets, providing a segue for the Twitterati to engage, but these are also a means for Modi's followers to point out the leader's charismatic, secular good humor. In this case, Modi's use of sarcasm alongside performative outrage (and the tweets' subsequent viral spread) branded the Congress as separated from the people for mocking tea sellers. However, social media by their very design are not aimed at consumption by the subaltern. Modi's embrace of the tea selling thus can be seen not as an expression of homophily but rather as a channel for the middle classes to affirm their condemnation of classism. This is especially true for sections of young, urban Twitter users who are largely separated from the experience of the underclass. Modi's use of humor and sarcasm is fundamentally tied to his use of technology and development, and his open embrace of modernity, all of which hold aspirational appeal for a young generation of Indians. In the proud but humorous Modi, who avoids a vengeful tone when responding to class affront, they find a leader who is not the antagonistic subaltern leader that has typically been associated with the radical left, but one who can look beyond the trivialities of class slights and keep his eye on modernity.

Twitter also allowed a young urban population that is typically excluded from the bustle of election campaigns in the streets to be politically engaged. While marching the streets and shouting slogans was left to the subaltern political workers, the creation of memes and images around "*Abki Baar Modi Sarkaar*" or, at the very least, forwarding humorous messages from the leader gave Twitter users a means to exercise their political selves. Sarcasm online allowed a more personal version of the slogan battles that happened on the streets in what has emerged as an ominous sign of the underpinnings of online populism. Social media allow for the leader to incite a call to action without explicitly doing so. Since the 2014 election campaign began, several liberal public personalities have been trolled with terms used in sarcastic effect—for example, *presstitutes* (press prostitutes), *libtards* (liberal retards), and *sickulars* (sick seculars), in what has been referred to as a 'Gaali' (abuse) culture online (Udupa, 2017). Followers of Modi, including several whom he follows on Twitter, have been at the forefront of trolling dissenting voices (Pal, 2015).

Several of Modi's tactics, such as the use of insulting labels for his rivals, have been in the global mainstream imagination since Trump's ascendance. It is also attractive to compare the two men because they both openly ignore the mainstream news media and, indeed, their respective core support bases. But a lot also separates the two—the crafted nature of Modi's tweeting, his dodging of potentially controversial topics, his care to avoid direct offense to any community of Indians, and his control over his party

apparatus in allowing a unified voice are all significantly different from strategies used by Trump and other populist social media figures in Europe. One particularly important distinction is that rather than use social media to ratchet up the more extreme supporters, Modi uses them as a means of opening doors to new stakeholders by changing the tenor of threat to one of innuendo.

We see on Twitter an enactment of politics that is purely surface (Baudrillard, 1994), disregarding Modi's past, his party's continuing street rhetoric, and even the core motivators that drive his traditional base. Sticking to a consistent neoliberal discourse and using sarcasm in place of attack is part of a larger media strategy that superficializes and obfuscates the social agenda of the BJP by keeping the focus on a single leader and his crafted messaging. Besides the vigilant curation of topics that Modi addresses on a regular basis, we see further evidence of this in selective silences on controversial issues such as Muslim lynchings, the beef ban, and the riots at Jawaharlal Nehru University, which were huge news items but saw practically no Twitter engagement from the prime minister.

Modi's use of sarcasm also suggests new directions for work on irony in the postcolony. Unlike during the colonial period, when irony and allusion were means of resistance against the structures of power without direct accusation, Modi's use of sarcasm is used in addition to direct criticism, as is typical in campaign cycles. The use of sarcasm in pre-election periods followed by its near disappearance in postelection phases also underscores the shift between being a challenger and a statesman. Once Modi became prime minister, sarcastic messaging was arguably no longer useful—even immediately after the general election, when there was a state election for which Modi served as a star campaigner, he used very little sarcasm. By that point, his feed was more populated by positive, aspirational messaging and discussions about technology and development.

Conclusion

Much work has noted that politicians' use of online mediascapes has potential long-lasting effects on political culture in India (Price, 2015). Further, it has been repeatedly suggested that a consistently managed social media engagement has reduced Modi's unmediated input to the mainstream media, which benefited Modi by streamlining his public message (Sardesai, 2014). The story of Narendra Modi's social media campaign tells us little about the leader's ability to win popular elections. The feed does, however, emphasize ways in which a man who was a pariah in elite news media in his home country took control of the media discourse through an approach that is still fairly new in India. To the outside world, Modi's heroism emerges not in his own political braggadocio but rather in his ability to be a man for all seasons— to talk consistently about a range of noncontroversial positive topics such as technology, development, and governance and at once pepper them with the occasional scathing attack through a sarcastic tweet that almost bares before us the old Modi.

Our analysis demonstrates that Modi used sarcasm frequently, that sarcasm-themed messages were more likely to be widely retweeted than the average message, and that the phrasing of the sarcastic messages shows a keen understanding of populist triggers. The power of Modi's message is in the juxtaposition of his past as a train station tea seller alongside his present as a selfie-clicking leader of a strong aspirational, but fundamentally nationalist, state. Sarcasm, through that frame, is a reminder that

before us is a restrained, witty leader who, if needed, can switch to the much more direct tone lurking beneath the surface. Sarcasm is as much a message from Modi as it is a message about him.

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