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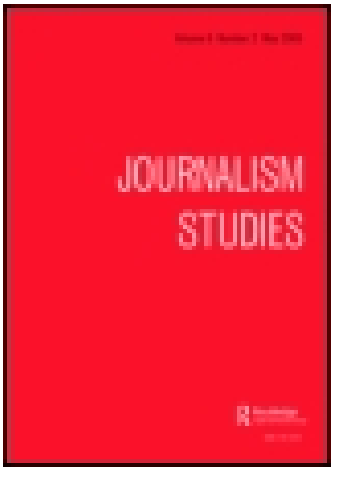

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Thomas Poell & Sudha Rajagopalan

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CONNECTING ACTIVISTS AND JOURNALISTS
Twitter communication in the aftermath of the 2012 Delhi rape

Thomas Poell and **Sudha Rajagopalan**

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This article examines how feminist activists, women's organizations, and journalists in India connected with each other through Twitter following the gang rape incident in New Delhi in December 2012. First, the investigation draws on a set of +15 million tweets specifically focused on rape and gang rape. These tweets, which appeared between 16 January 2013 and 16 January 2014, were collected and analysed with the DMI Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset. Second, to gain further insight into how Twitter enables and shapes civil society connections, the article builds on 15 semi-structured interviews with Indian feminist activists and journalists, who actively participated in Twitter communication on the gang rape incident. The analysis of the Twitter and interview data reveals how the platform allows these actors to make ad hoc connections around particular protest issues and events. These connections alter both activist and journalist practices, and ultimately facilitate the current transformation of public discourse on gender violence. Twitter helps to keep this issue consistently on the front burner. In this sense, a significant shift from the past has occurred, when media coverage typically died out after an incident ceased to be news. Yet, our study also suggests that connectivity is tempered by Twitter's limited Indian user base, and users' focus on the "crime of the day."

KEYWORDS activism; civil society; connectivity; Delhi rape; gender violence; India; journalism; Twitter

Introduction

The 2012 New Delhi gang rape of Jyoti Singh Pandey, called Nirbhaya or Damini before her family agreed to make her name public, sparked mass protests and attracted worldwide media coverage. More fundamentally, in the following year, it triggered pivotal changes in public attention for the problem of gender violence in India. Historically, Indian mainstream news reporting on sexual assault and harassment has been quite rare, bearing a regrettable resemblance to banal crime briefs or sensational stories rather than demonstrating a deep engagement with the subject of violence as an enduring social feature (Joseph 2006, 2014). Landmark cases like the 1974 Mathura rape and the 1987 Shah Bano verdict have led to spikes in media coverage, but have not changed the character of media discourses (Katzenstein 1989, 62; Phadke 2003, 4567; Mody 1987, 939). The Delhi rape in December 2012 and the agitations it occasioned are similarly marked by unprecedented mediatization. After the incident, major news outlets began to devote attention to gender violence as a social problem. This time traditional media have been

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complemented by a hotbed of protest and outrage on social media platforms. This largely middle-class wave of protest, involving a turn to digital media to sustain and channel public anger, has been noted by scholars (Rao 2013; Sen 2013). The purpose of this article is to examine this recent discursive shift and to unpack the ways in which Twitter communications may have fostered new connections and altered the nature and longevity of public conversation on violence against women. In doing this, the article will address the transformations in activism and journalism and the significance of these changes for civil society relations in India.

Twitter and other social media have been considered central to the current changes in public discourse, as they have provided the rising middle class with the opportunity to voice its concerns and grievances about institutional corruption and the failure of the judicial system to act against gender violence. Over the past years, the number of internet users in India has grown to 213 million, of which about 93 million use Facebook and 33 million Twitter (Patel 2014). While only a relatively small section of the Indian population uses social media, they are nonetheless very voluble and seen as influential in shaping debates and conversations in other media outlets (Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, and Agur 2014; Ahmed and Jaidka 2013). Among the most active social media users are many journalists, feminist activists, students, and more generally young middle-class women and men. Thus, social media potentially constitute vital points of connection between these different actors (Rao 2012; Shah 2012; Chattopadhyay 2011, 2012; Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, and Agur 2014).

This article focuses on Twitter, which is regarded as a particularly important platform for "public" communication. Recent research has especially devoted attention to the impact of Twitter on public communication during the December protests in the direct aftermath of the Delhi gang rape. Ahmed and Jaidka (2013, 125) found that "the common man and activists unleashed a wave of citizen journalism through their posts and retweets." In turn, Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, and Agur (2014, 1068) show us that Indian and foreign journalists used Twitter to "monitor updates and get immediate responses from activists at events." Building on these studies, the present investigation adopts a longer-term perspective to gain insight into the more durable connections and day-to-day exchanges between journalists, feminist activists, bloggers, and women's organizations on the platform around the issue of gender violence. This approach can provide deeper understanding of the enduring impact of Twitter on public communication and enhance our understanding of how this platform and other social media promote connections between key actors in Indian civil society.

Mobilizing Around Women's Issues

To understand how Indian women's organizations and feminist activists use social media today, it is important to note that the "movement" for women's rights in India has not been homogeneous or centrally organized in previous decades. This plurality is one of issues and positions, but also one of styles. By the 1980s, strategies of connecting with other actors and publics became particularly diverse. "Demonstrations, street plays, seminars, symposia, group meetings, and mass parades were resorted to. Postcards, letters, telegrams, etc., were sent to the judiciary and the government" (Krishnaraj 2012, 330). This means that the current spectrum of groups and voices speaking up on issues related to gender violence, on a variety of online and offline platforms, is not a "new

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splintering" of an otherwise "cohesive" movement, but very much in keeping with the historical, plural nature of the movement and its methods. As Tharu (1986, 122) clarifies, the movement has never had card-carrying members, no centralized organization, and "even an intra-group consensus is often not assumed or demanded."

While some women's groups have had party affiliations and sought change through legislations, others have focused on "empowerment" through grassroots work to enable communities of women to become full participants in society and in the political process (Calman 1989, 945–946). Further, women's groups have fought on other fronts such as issues of the environment and displacement (Krishnaraj 2012, 331). They have also evolved along axes of caste and regional identities, given how gender discrimination works closely with these other pervasive forms of social exclusion. Various activists and scholars have rightly pointed out that this multiplicity of groups, perspectives, issues, and strategies should not be understood as "fragmentation," but appreciated as a form of "diversification," or in the words of Calman (1989, 942) as competing "tendencies."

Digital media have led to a further fanning out of activist positions and strategies within this spectrum of groups. For instance, the women's organizations whose Twitter activity we have investigated in this project and whose representatives we have interviewed vary enormously in their methods and goals. In many of these cases, the term "organization" can only be used loosely. Often an organization has less than a handful of people steering its activity both offline and online. For these projects, the support bases are ephemeral publics that modulate the frequency and nature of their involvement. Some members of these publics only post blogs and tweets, while others are also or only present during offline activities. Their use of new technologies is a common feature, as they all have successfully integrated digital platforms into their activism; they maintain active websites, blogs, Facebook pages, and Twitter handles.

This embrace of new technologies for activism must be framed within the context of the rise of a new generation of middle-class activists, an important force behind the recent protests against poor governance, as well as against gender violence. This emergent wave of middle-class activism has been referred to as the "India Shining" variety—those that are persuaded of the necessity of neo-liberal policies and garner sympathy from corporate and technocratic India (Sitapati 2011, 41–42). Their activism is exemplified by the India Against Corruption campaign, which also relied heavily on social media to build its support base. This new strand of activism is attributed to the growing estrangement between the state and new confident publics that have risen in the post-liberalization decades, a process that appears to them to be bogged down by a seemingly out-dated mode of politics and governance. These activists hate the political class and claim to speak for all (42). Critics have complained that such movements have a pronounced neo-liberal, urban middle-class vocabulary and bias, ignoring the greater culture of violence and other groups' long on-going protests in the country (Shah 2012; Mani 2014). Cultural critic Mani recently argued that feminist discourse in India today is not engaged with systemic gender violence, but tied up with neo-liberal public sentiment and its accompanying emphasis on sexual freedom as a single barometer of women's rights (Mani 2014, 28). The use of digital media by many in this new activism also lends itself for critique, as it appears to indicate a disconnect from "ground realities" rather than committed engagement with activism. Roy (2012) emphasizes that the new generation of activists "must decide whether to go the glossy Twitterati way or take the road to Tahrir," suggesting that being vocal on social media alone is an intrinsically non-radical act. The "road to Tahrir"

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represents a mode of street agitation, where the "Twitterati way" is inadequate when not accompanied by such action. From this point of view, the digital platform is far removed from the "street" or "public square."

In light of these new forms of mobilization and activism, as well as the critique with which they have been met, it is of interest to see how Twitter communication gives shape to an evolving public discourse on gender violence. To what extent does it facilitate new connections between the wide variety of feminist activist groups, as well as between activists and journalists? And, how do such connections shape public discourse on gender violence? This, in turn, helps us address the larger question of social media's role in shaping new civil society alliances and networks.

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Method

The starting point of this analysis is a dataset of approximately 15 million tweets containing the words "rape" or "gangrape," sent by more than 5 million unique users over the period of a year, from 16 January 2013 until 16 January 2014. These tweets have been collected and analysed with the Twitter Capture and Analysis Toolset of the Digital Methods Initiative (Borra and Rieder 2014). Subsequently, from this dataset, the 10 keywords most frequently included in tweets pertaining to the Delhi gang rape case have been selected: "India," "Delhi," "Nirbhaya," "Damini," "Delhigangrape." "Delhirape," "MumbaiGangRape," "Asaram," "Suryanelli," and "Tejpal." Querying the full dataset on the basis of the 10 keywords generated a subset of 1,008,460 tweets, specifically focused on the Delhi gang rape case and related issues. These tweets were sent by 311,611 unique users.

To identify the key mainstream journalists, women's organizations, and feminist activists and bloggers in this large set of users, we have coded the top 100 most "mentioned" and most "mentioning" users for occupational background, and whether they are connected with an Indian or international organization. Note that news organizations were left out of the analysis, as most of these organizations primarily use Twitter to disseminate and promote their own news content (Hermida 2013). To trace the Twitter network in which the identified journalists, women's organizations, and feminists were entangled, we coded all of the users mentioned by these actors. Taken together, the two rounds of coding produced a list of 24 mainstream journalists, 16 feminist activists, bloggers, and writers, and 19 women's organizations.

To examine how journalists, women's organizations, and feminists associated with each other, we have analysed four important ways in which users connect with each other on Twitter: by "following," "mentioning," "retweeting," and by using a common "hashtag." First, we investigated, for each selected user, which of the other identified users followed this user.[1] This analytical step provides insights into how content circulated between users. Second, the mentioning patterns have been reconstructed by querying the dataset for the mentioning activity of each selected user. Third, we have explored the retweeting activity of the users to determine how they reinforced each other's tweets and potentially produced collective accounts. Finally, the investigation traces the use of hashtags by the key users to determine whether they organized their Twitter communication in a shared manner.

To gain insight into what was exactly exchanged between the central users, we categorized the tweets that were disseminated through mentions, retweets, and organized by particular hashtags. In the case of the mentions, we collected a sample by

scraping for the tweets in which one of the selected users was @mentioned at the start of the tweet. For the retweets, we, subsequently, focused on sets of the 100 most frequently shared tweets. Not to impose any preconceived categories on this material, two coders independently labelled the collected tweets through emergent coding (Stemler 2001). We first assembled categories by examining the material, and, subsequently, consolidated a checklist of keywords and phrases in a coding manual (see Appendix A). In addition to coding the tweets for the discussed issues, we also coded them for their apparent "purpose," distinguishing between tweets that appeared to aim for "conversation," "information exchange," "proclaiming a point of view," or "promoting an event or publication."

To contextualize the analysis of the Twitter data, we conducted, between February and April 2014, 15 semi-structured interviews via Skype with eight feminist activists and seven journalists and bloggers. The eight activists are:

- Jasmeen Patheja of Blank Noise, an organization committed to ending street sexual harassment.
- Rita Banerji of 50 Million Missing, an organization that creates awareness about female gendercide.
- Anja Kovacs of the Internet Democracy Project and Genderlog, which is a curated online platform for gender issues.
- Sakshi Kumar of Justice for Women, a Twitter-based organization set up in the aftermath of the Delhi rape with the specific purpose of spreading information about the crime.
- Meghana Rao of Breakthrough, a human rights organization with campaigns against domestic violence.
- Bina Nepram of the Manipur Gun Survivors Network, concerned with gender and violence in conflict areas in north-east India.
- Bhavana Upadhyaya, a social worker.
- Swarna Rajagopalan of Prajnya Trust, a non-governmental organization (NGO) for advocacy and research on gender and security.

The seven bloggers and journalists included both independent writers as well as those working with news organizations:

- Nilanjana Roy is a freelance writer and literary critic who has written on gender issues for *Business Standard*, *Telegraph* (Kolkata), and the *International New York Times*.
- Harini Calamur is a jounalist and Head of Digital Content at Zee Media.
- Nirupama Subramanian is a journalist with *The Hindu*.
- Rohini Mohan is a journalist whose work has appeared in *Tehelka*, the *Caravan*, *The Hindu*, and also on Al Jazeera and CNN-IBN.
- Natasha Badhwar is a freelance writer and columnist for *Mint*, co-curator of Genderlog, and a teacher of journalism.
- Deepika Bhardwaj is a journalist and film-maker.
- Anindita Sengupta is a writer, poet, and founder-editor of Ultra Violet, a site on contemporary feminism, whose articles on gender have appeared in *The Hindu*, *Deccan Herald,* and *The Guardian*.

These interviewees have been selected from the reconstructed Twitter communication networks, and by using word of mouth in the Indian activist and journalistic communities. All of them agreed to be named in this article. The interview sessions lasted an average of 60 minutes. The semi-structured interview approach was most suitable for exploring the largely uncharted terrain of Indian social media practices, as it allowed the

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interviewees to answer our open-ended questions from their own particular perspectives. Using the Delhi gang rape as a prism, our questions for interviewees centred around their use of Twitter in the aftermath of the rape, the role of Twitter in occasioning new connections with other concerned actors, and their observations about connections and exchanges on Twitter around the subject of gender violence. Once the interviews had been transcribed, we read them several times and tagged segments of interest, and identified central themes (Corbin and Strauss 2008). Analysing the interview data, we took into account that the interviews took place 14 months after the Delhi gang rape. Interviewees' observations combined specific recollections of Twitter activity after the incident with deeper reflections on their own Twitter experiences and on the vocabulary and tone of Twitter discourse in the subsequent year.

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Connecting Activists and Journalists

Examining the connections between the identified journalists, women's organizations, and feminists, the fundamentally transnational character of this core Twitter network around the issue of gender violence in India becomes immediately evident. While most of these key users were located in India, many of them were linked to transnational news organizations, such as CNN, the BBC, and Reuters, or international women's organizations, such as Women Under Siege, Half, UN Women, and The Pixel Project. Of the 59 selected users, 37 (63 per cent) could be identified as "international." Probing the follower lists of these "international" users, it becomes clear that they were strongly connected with the selected Indian journalists of mainstream news outlets such as the *Hindustan Times*, NDTV (New Delhi Television), and *India Today*, as well as with Indian feminists and women's organizations, including 50 Million Missing, Genderlog, Justice for Women, and M for Change. Thus, Twitter seems to very much open up Indian public discourse on rape to the world at large.

Looking more specifically at the extent to which different types of users "followed" each other, it becomes clear that there are many interconnections as well. Numerous links can especially be observed between mainstream journalists and feminist activists, bloggers, and writers. Of the 24 identified journalists, no less than 21 (88 per cent) followed one or, in many cases, more of the feminists from our list. Vice versa, of the 16 feminist activists, bloggers, and writers, 14 (88 per cent) followed one or more mainstream journalists. Thus, the set of key users does not fall apart in different clusters, and these users appear to be highly aware of each other's points of view and issues of concern. This corresponds with the research by Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, and Agur (2014, 1065), who found that journalists' use of social media reflected the ideas and interests of "city-based women's groups, activists, university students and intellectuals." Of course, it should be observed that follower lists are rather static entities. To understand how users in practice interacted and connected with each other around the issue of gender violence, we need to examine how they employed "@mentions," "retweets," and "hashtags."

Starting with @mentions, one of the more personal and potentially "conversational" methods of connection, it is striking how many users employed this technique. Over two-thirds of all users tweeting on gender violence in India, 216,241 out of 311,611, included one or more @mentions in their tweets. Looking more specifically at the @mentioning activity of the selected users, the connections especially between the journalists and the feminist activists, bloggers, and writers become evident: 15 of the 24 selected journalists

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were @mentioned two or more times in the feminist tweets, while 10 out of the 16 key feminists were mentioned at various times by the journalists. Hence, these users not only "followed" but also actively engaged with each other on the platform.

A similar impression of an interconnected set of users emerges when we examine the retweet activity of the users. About 30 per cent of all users, 92,613, retweeted at least one tweet, with the most active retweeters sharing hundreds of tweets. While the percentage of retweets in the overall set is still not as high as during protest events or disasters, when often more than two-thirds of the tweets are retweets, retweeting nevertheless provided a (lightweight) means through which users connected with each other, and produced collective accounts (Poell and Borra 2012). Focusing more specifically on the retweet activity of the selected users, it is especially notable that a substantial part of the tweets that were retweeted came from within the group of key users. No clustering appeared to be taking place here either. Journalists, particularly, frequently shared tweets of women's organizations, feminist activists, bloggers, and writers. Taken together, having examined some of the key ways in which users connect on Twitter, the overall impression is that the platform greatly facilitated connections between different types of actors throughout the year following the gang rape case.

This is not to say, however, that these actors constituted or tried to constitute a community. Rather, they appeared to consider Twitter as a platform for general public communication. This is suggested by how these users organized their tweets through hashtags. Instead of primarily tagging their messages through issue-specific hashtags, such as #Damini and #Nirbhaya, they chose to use general hashtags, such as #India and #Delhi. Over the past years, it has become common practice among activists during major protests to disseminate their messages through particular hashtags. #g20report, #sidibouzid, #25jan, and #occupywallstreet are prominent examples of such hashtags, which effectively established temporary, issue-specific communication spaces. The users in our dataset clearly did not make such an effort. Of the selected users only 9 out of 59 employed the hashtag #Nirbhaya a few times, while none of them took up #Damini. They did occasionally use these pseudonyms for the Delhi gang rape victim in their tweets, but not as hashtags. By contrast, #India was used by 52 (88 per cent) of the selected 59 users, with some of them tagging hundreds of tweets with this hashtag. All this indicates that Twitter was very much treated as an open communication space for general public debate.

The image of an open communication platform, through which users can easily connect, was also put forward by the interviewees. Most of them agreed that Twitter has been important in bringing women's organizations and activists together, who may otherwise not have found each other in a country as vast as India. For example, Binalakshmi Nepram, the founder of the Manipur Women Gun Survivors Network, stresses that Twitter has been enormously valuable for her. As 90 per cent of her followers are located in other parts of India, Twitter significantly counteracts the north-east's isolation from the rest of India.[2] Moreover, as Rita Banerji, founder of the women's organization 50 Million Missing, makes clear, the platform not only allows Indian feminists to overcome geographical distances, but it also allows them to address a variety of societal actors: ranging from other activists, journalists, and NGOs to academics, public servants, politicians, governments, and international organizations.[3] Confirming this observation, Nirupama Subramanian, journalist with *The Hindu*, and activist and film-maker Deepika

Bhardwaj maintain that Twitter allowed them to raise issues related to gender violence with policy makers and politicians.[4]

An especially important theme in the interviews, which corresponds with the findings of Ahmed and Jaidka (2013), was that Twitter appears to substantially lower the barrier for people in India to become involved in activism and to be drawn into activist communication. For example, Jasmeen Patheja from Blank Noise, a community public art project that seeks to confront street harassment, told us about a tweetathon she ran after the Delhi gang rape, in which people from different professions were invited to make a pledge to keep the streets safe for women. Many of these people had never been involved in activism; for them Twitter provided an easy entry into the campaign for public safety.[5] Social media connectivity, however, not only lowers the barrier to entry into activism, but also lowers the cost of setting up an activist project or organization. Many of the key feminist projects and campaigns in the public discourse on gender violence in India, including 50 Million Missing, Blank Noise, and Justice for Women, mainly take shape through social media, requiring relatively few organizational resources to reach larger publics. A prominent example, in this regard is Justice for Women, which started as a Twitter hashtag. Its founder, Sakshi Kumar, remembers how she began to use the hashtag #justiceforwomen in the summer of 2012 after a young woman from north-east India was assaulted by a group of 20–25 men. The hashtag #justiceforwomen was meant to raise awareness and to function as an open call to ask people what could be done against gender violence. As the assault case triggered a lot of media attention and public anger, the hashtag quickly began to trend in India and, subsequently, worldwide. Encouraged by the massive support she received, Kumar developed the idea to set up a Twitter-based network to organize self-defence workshops for women in cities across India.[6]

Taken together, social media connectivity boosts the enduring pluralism of India's women's groups, but more importantly, it also facilitates connections, hitherto difficult to establish, between journalists and a wide variety of activist and civil society groups, projects, and campaigns.

Exchanges Between Activists and Journalists

While connectivity emerged as the guiding principle in tweets about the Delhi gang rape and gender violence, journalists and activists find indications of conversation and exchange on Twitter to be less promising. Swarna Rajagopalan, director of Prajnya, an advocacy and research group for women, peace, and security, says: "I think, too many people coming into Twitter, use it primarily to broadcast. And that's a waste."[7] Other interviewees echoed this view of Twitter. As Harini Calamur, responsible for digital content at Zee Media explains: "It's not primarily a content medium. It's a great place for instant reactions, it's a great place for publicizing your work, and it's a great place for forming connections."[8]

These observations are confirmed by the content analysis of the @mentions. Examining a sample of tweets in which the selected users address each other at the beginning of the tweet, it becomes clear that only some of these users actually treated Twitter as a tool to converse. While the sample contains tweets most likely to aim for conversation, only 35 per cent of the @mention tweets, as Figure 1 shows, could be coded as "conversational." In the sets of top retweets, "conversational" tweets were even less present. The following message by feminist blogger Vidyut, sent on 7 December 2013, is a

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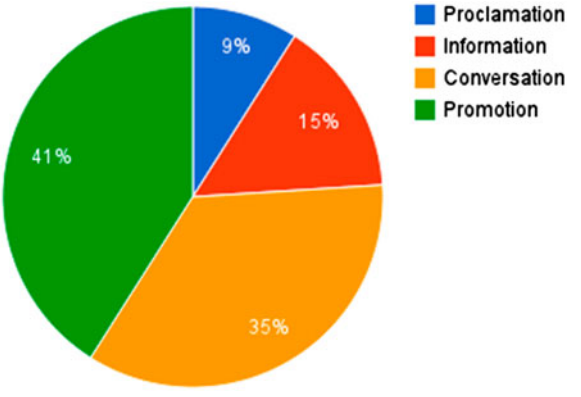

FIGURE 1
Purpose @mentions

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good example of a conversational tweet from the @mentions-set: "@kavita_krishnan so what you are saying is that mass criticism in Tejpal case was right and Delhi Gang Rape was wrong? @AListRap @Charakan." Here Vidyut, a feminist blogger, is involved in a direct dialogue with activist Kavita Krishnan with the purpose of understanding her publicly expressed views on public reactions to widely publicized rape cases. However, most of the tweets that mention other users are promotional (45 per cent). Consider a typical promotional tweet from journalist Paloma Sharma to feminist blogger Rita Banerji, who runs 50 Million Missing: "@Rita_Banerji 'If you can't prevent rape enjoy it'—Why I am outraged by the CBI [Central Bureau of Investigation] Director's remarks: http://t.co/jJeW0bVu4i #rape #India" (14 November 2013). This tweet is addressed to Rita Banerji, but it is not conversational. Instead @mentioning is used to spread the word about an article that she has published.

In terms of discussed issues, clear differences can be observed between the different sets of top retweets. The top 100 retweets for all users, based on the 10 selected terms, are especially focused on new rape cases: 56 per cent of these retweets consist of rape reports (see Figure 2a). Mainstream news sources and also Indian and international celebrities figure prominently in this larger dataset. The mass of users appears especially interested in headlines about rape and celebrity proclamations of support or dissent. In turn, the top retweets of the selected feminists, women's organizations, and journalists are more varied (see Figure 2b). Besides reports of new rape cases (23 per cent), there is also attention for governance (14 per cent), the legal system (25 per cent), and public safety (14 per cent). Hence, for the key actors in public debate, Twitter functions as a space for articulating opinions and exchanging information on a range of topics related to gender violence.

This also becomes evident in the analysis of the top retweets of these actors featuring the widely used hashtag #India. In these retweets, there is also attention for other issues, including the effort to understand the cultural context in which rape occurs (9 per cent), statistics about rape (8 per cent), as well as protests against gender violence (9 per cent) (see Figure 2c). Particularly striking is that a small number of retweets in this set also focus on questions of caste and religion (1 per cent), which are otherwise not discussed in the top retweets. The general absence of this issue in the most shared retweets is another indication of the overall urban middle-class character of Twitter communication on gender violence.

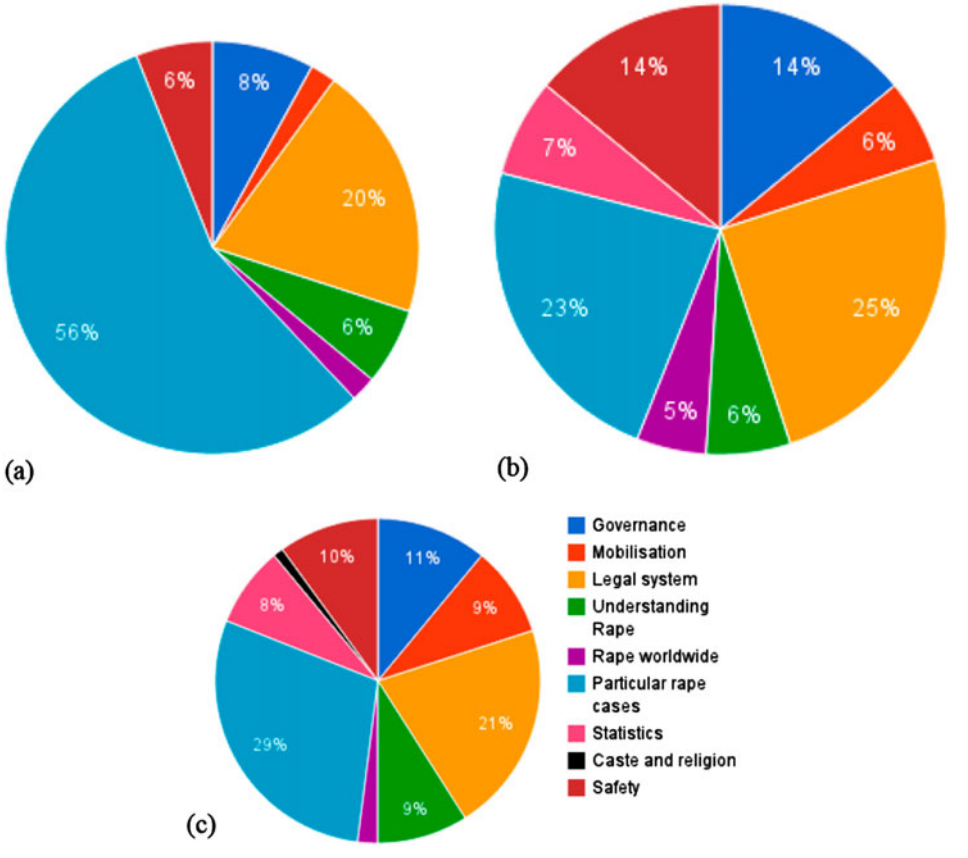

FIGURE 2
(a) Top retweets all users; (b) top retweets selected users; (c) top retweets #India selected users

The interviews helped to further contextualize these findings. Reflecting on the limited accommodation of substantive conversation or dialogue, all interviewees underscored that Twitter should be used in combination with other blogging platforms that allow more reflection and depth. Rohini Mohan, who writes for *Tehelka* and *The Hindu*, finds disquieting the "bestiality" and "voyeurism" on Twitter,[9] while journalist Anindita Sengupta finds Twitter discourse very polarized. Corroborating our Twitter findings, Sengupta recalls that most people on Twitter were mainly exercised by the question of suitable punishment and retribution.[10] They also appeared to be more interested in the "crime of the day" rather than enduring systemic violence, a tendency shared by other forms of media coverage of gender violence (Joseph 2014). Natasha Badhwar, columnist and film-maker who co-curates Genderlog, a crowdsourced group website on gender violence in India, found she first needed to reflect and write a considered piece and so chose to write columns on the rape in print media rather than respond on Twitter, where reactions tended to be impulsive and near-sighted.[11] Furthermore, print and television continue to be influential. Many of those interviewed noted that Twitter is mostly reactive to mainstream reports, which corresponds with our analysis of the general set of retweets, as discussed above. Connectivity is further circumscribed by the fact that Twitter is

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primarily used by a new generation of activists. Traditional women's organizations and activists have not yet embraced the platform, a fact also borne out by work on digital media cultures in India (Kovacs 2010).

More fundamentally, our interviewees critically reflected on the pronounced middle-class base of activist Twitter communication, which was also highlighted by the journalists interviewed by Belair-Gagnon, Mishra, and Agur (2014). Twitter's middle-class exclusivity was suggested in a number of indirect ways. Anja Kovacs of the Internet Democracy Project, who also curates @genderlogindia, reminds us that Twitter is used only by a small segment of India's vast population and therefore activism through other channels of communication continues to be essential.[12] Some interviewees suggested that Twitter communication and exchange are circumscribed due to the headline-centred interests of the general users. This resonates with the critique of middle-class movements like India Against Corruption that focus disproportionately on the question of accountability and appear less interested in addressing systemic injustice and exclusion. The interviewees suggested that most users who tweet on gender violence want to know what the system is capable of delivering, and do not engage with long-enduring forms of violence and everyday sexism. The analysis of the retweets from the general set of users confirms this: most of these retweets inform about new rape incidents and court verdicts, and call for suitable forms of punishment. Few of these tweets address the broader subject of patriarchy and common misconceptions about rape.

Finally, the near-absence of tweets on the interplay of gender, caste, and ethnic biases in violence against women suggest that Twitter exchanges on gender violence exclude vital issues and voices. Among the coded tweets, a small percentage of tweets focused on rape in disputed territories of India, at the time of the partition, after the recent communal riots in Uttar Pradesh, and the rape of Adivasi and Dalit women. Nilanjana Roy's observations underscore the exclusivist nature of the Twitter community:

> It [Twitter] has great potential. But it's good to be aware of the demographics of Indian Net usage, which is still predominantly male, and which has vast skews towards urban, affluent, English-accented India … There's a major problem with language dominance—if Indian social media end up being ruled by a handful of dominant regional languages at the expense of a variety of local dialects, we'll exclude far too many communities and groups. There's an even bigger problem with gender skews and caste skews: Indian Twitter is an actively hostile environment for women seen as "outspoken" and often for people from lower castes, and this is very, very problematic. Women in particular often end up either censoring themselves, or wading through streams of abuse, if they voice controversial opinions.

In sum, both the coded retweets and observations of the interviewees suggest that Twitter's potential as a platform that facilitates civil society networks is undermined by its exclusion of vital voices in India's civil society, and its proclivity for information dissemination rather than dialogue.

Conclusion

Social media provide essential connections between journalists and a wide variety of feminist activist groups concerned about pressing social issues in India. The Indian women's movement, with its multiplicity of groups, perspectives, issues, and strategies,

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and lack of centralizing organizations, profits from social media connectivity, which raises its activist profile and facilitates connections with mainstream media. This connectivity strengthens Indian civil society and the democratic process by allowing these groups and other social actors to collaborate in common action around particular issues, as well as by helping journalists report about such action and issues. The data and interviews indicate that social platforms allow Indian feminist activists and journalists to make *ad hoc* associations around issues of common concern. While activism has become more diffuse and personalized, news reporting around the subject of gender violence has become open to a more fluid inflow of information and opinions, operating as it does in an "ambient media system" where news is ubiquitous and sources are many (Hermida 2010). Journalists, activists, and interested users participate in this ambient environment, collectively generating and sustaining attention for issues related to gender violence.

Twitter specifically helps to keep the problem of gender violence consistently on the front burner and in that sense marks a significant shift from the past, when media coverage has died out after an incident has ceased to be news. The sustained interaction around this issue builds a solid foundation for activism because it endures even when there are no agitations or other intermittent forms of activism around which to coalesce. Coupled with the connections with journalists who work both freelance and for large media organizations, these sustained conversations and engagement on Twitter about gender discrimination and violence are a vital form of political engagement.

Yet, our study also shows the limits of this kind of connectivity. While news of gender violence is "everywhere" on Twitter, our findings indicate that the platform's limited user base erodes its potential for dialogue. Less than 20 per cent of the Indian population has internet access, and only a small percentage of these users is on Twitter. This is reflected in the dominance of male, urban, middle-class, English-speaking users on the platform, and the absence of local languages, and representatives of rural communities and lower castes. Moreover, the potential for dialogue is further weakened by the inherent features of micro-blogging, which lends itself more to real-time information sharing around the event or crime of the day, rather than to substantive debate about enduring systemic violence. Consequently, our journalist and activist interviewees do not rely on Twitter alone, but also use a variety of other online and offline media platforms for networking and building civil society relations. It is in combination with these other efforts that social media communication has a fundamental impact on India's civil society relations and its democratic political culture.

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

NOTES

1. Data collection took place on 20 January 2014.
2. Binalakshmi Nepram, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 2 April 2014.
3. Rita Banerji, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 13 March 2014.
4. Nirupama Subramanian, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 26 March 2014; Deepika Bhardwaj, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 21 March 2014.
5. Jasmeen Patheja, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 29 March 2014.

6. Sakshi Kumar, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 11 March 2014.
7. Swarna Rajagopalan, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 19 February 2014.
8. Harini Calamur, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 23 February 2014.
9. Rohini Mohan, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 2 April 2014.
10. Anindita Sengupta, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 4 April 2014.
11. Natasha Badhwar, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 21 March 2014.
12. Anja Kovacs, Skype interview by Sudha Rajagopalan, 19 March 2014.

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Appendix A

Coding Manual

Category	Example sentences
Governance	#police in #India won't file #rape cases. Some have raped victims!; @pmoindia: why aren't you accepting #verma suggestion to remove politicians accused of #rape.
Mobilization	The biggest movement against worldwide rape culture is now taking place in #India; Prosecution angry Indian citizenry urge court to "hang 'em high" in Delhi gang rape case.
Legal system	Have all our systems collapsed?; "No shortcuts on rape: make the legal system work"; Ordinance on rape law #India signed today on a Sunday by president; No #justice for the #suryanelli gang #rape victim is injustice to the #women.
Understanding rape	Consensual rape: understanding the (oxy)moron; Blame Victim RT @highheelswaali: Of course; "If girls look sexy boys will rape." Is this what Indian men really believe?
Rape worldwide	You thought India was dismissive of rape? Indonesian judge suggests rape victims enjoy the sex; #India makes to the top 10 global news items for #Rape!; yet 1 in 5 women are sexually assaulted in US.
Particular rape cases	This is one of the worst gang #rape / #sextrafficking cases in #India!; 16-yr-old raped by 40 men over 40 days; Brutal rape and murder of 3 young sisters sparks outrage in India.
Statistics	India has seen an increase of 336% of child #rape cases from 2113 cases in 2001 to 7112 cases; 143% spurt in #rape by #juveniles in #India in 10 years!
Caste and religion	Rape victims suffer in silence after Hindu–Muslim riots in India; Sexual assault and gang rape during September communal violence in Uttar Pradesh.
Safety	India asks what has changed since the #delhigangrape. Women don't feel safer but the urban conversation has changed; Women in new Delhi are signing up for self-defence courses in droves following a brutal gang rape last month.

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