

The Writing Is on the Wall, or Is It? Exploring Indian Activists' Beliefs About Online Social Media's Potential for Social Change

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This study examined how activists in India, the world's largest democracy, perceived online social networking sites' potential to bring about social change in a country with a large digital divide and a partially free press. Analysis of closed and open-ended survey responses indicated activists were positive about using SNS in their work, believing SNS helped transcend geographic and temporal borders and reach out to wider audiences. Despite the digital divide, they did not view lack of Internet access or technical skills as a major challenge to using SNS for activism. Overall, Indian activists said that a social movement needs to use both online and off-line activism tools together to reach its full potential.

Keywords: activist, social media, social network site, India, digital divide, press freedom

Demonstrations around the globe have redefined "people power," as *TIME* magazine acknowledged in December 2011 when it announced its person of the year: "The Protester" ("Person of the Year," 2011). An accompanying slideshow featured Anna Hazare, an Indian activist who in April 2011 won the country's support for his hunger strike against corruption (Joseph, 2011). Online social media were key to Hazare's anti-corruption campaign: A Facebook page set up by his supporters, titled *India against Corruption*, boasted more than half a million "likes," while "protests" dominated Indian trending topics on Twitter throughout his strike (Dhume, 2011).

India is not the only country where citizens have used social media to organize protest activity. Mobilization of citizens during the Arab Spring and Occupy protests demonstrated the importance of activists' new ways of using online social networks to communicate with people in an increasingly wired society (Harb, 2011). Researchers studying issues surrounding social media and activism have worked mostly in developed, Western countries or, in the wake of the Arab Spring, nondemocratic countries. This

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study contributes to the burgeoning literature by interrogating the usefulness of social media for activists in India—a democratic, powerful global economy (Graham, 2011), yet also a developing country characterized by deep socioeconomic and digital divides and a limited free press. Moving beyond previous studies that explore whether social media can play an influential role in activism, this article adds to the literature by asking what circumstances allow online social media to benefit Indian activists, and whether these digital tools can create a counter public sphere that provides potential alternatives to off-line forms of communication and mobilization. Examining how Indian activists perceived the usefulness of online social media for promoting and organizing activism requires recognizing the contextual specificities of India, where only 16% of a population of 1.2 billion has access to the Internet (“Asia Internet Use,” 2014). Such an analysis of ways activists used digital technologies to spread information and raise awareness may reveal innovative, novel methods for reaching out to more than a select few via social media.

Using a closed- and open-ended survey of Indian activists, this article explores the extent to which online social media have helped or hurt activism in the world’s largest democracy. It analyzes whether and how engagement in online social networks (i.e., writing on digital walls) leads to online and off-line action, and whether and how social media can serve as an effective means of disseminating alternative information and mobilizing people around social and political causes. Studying social media’s potential role in creating a counter public sphere (Fraser, 1990) despite limited Internet access takes on added importance, considering India’s media are only “partly free” (“Freedom of the Press 2014,” 2014). This article furthers understanding of whether and how activists can use online social media platforms to raise awareness and mobilize voices in developing, democratic countries without universal Internet access or a free press—benefits that developed countries often take for granted.

This study’s findings suggest that issues related to the digital divide prevent social media tools from occupying a primary role in bringing about social change. However, the study also attempts to avoid a technologically deterministic perspective that assumes the digital divide precludes the use of online social media for social change. As such, this article quantitatively and qualitatively analyzes Indian activists’ survey responses, seeking nuanced explanations of whether and how social network sites (SNS) benefit activism by not only informing and mobilizing constituents but also establishing an online counter public sphere.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Internet and Activism

Like blogs and independent news websites, social media have proven to be crucial alternative media tools for activists (Kenix, 2009; Raghavan, 2009), especially given that mainstream media tend to marginalize and discredit social movements, as previous research has shown (Gitlin, 1980; McLeod & Hertog, 1999). For example, the “protest paradigm” suggests mainstream media tend to focus on the violence, numbers, and spectacle of protests rather than their underlying causes or significance (McLeod & Hertog, 1999). Recent research on the protest paradigm has shown that traditional mainstream newspapers like the *New York Times* still adhere to it, marginalizing and discrediting protesters, whereas

new media like Twitter and the online citizen journalism site Global Voices come closer to breaking free of that paradigm (Harlow & Johnson, 2011). Faced with negative coverage in the mainstream press, activists historically have turned to alternative media, often even creating their own media as a way to control and disseminate their own message (Downing, 2001; Rodriguez, 2001).

The Internet, as the latest form of alternative media, offers activists a fast, easy, cheap way to create and spread their message without interference from the gatekeepers of mainstream media (Cleaver, 1998; Postmes & Brunsting, 2002). Globalization, or the transnational spread of economic, technological, and cultural forces, is intrinsically connected to the rise of the Internet and new communication technologies (Castells, 1997; Thussu, 2006). Just as globalization deterritorializes space and extends boundaries beyond geographic and political lines (Canclini, 2001; Sassen, 1991), technology allows activists to communicate with and mobilize disparate populations simultaneously, unencumbered by geographic or temporal restraints.

The world started to notice the Internet's potential contribution to activism in the mid-1990s, when the Zapatistas in Mexico successfully used the Web to stage the world's "first informational guerrilla movement" (Castells, 2004, p. 75), creating an online campaign to drum up international support that eventually helped turn back the Mexican army.

Despite the Zapatistas' success and, more recently, activists' and protestors' use of Facebook and Twitter to mobilize Egyptians during the revolution in 2011, scholars are divided over the importance of the Internet's role in activism. Some have contended it facilitates or amplifies traditional off-line activism (Juris, 2005; Vegh, 2003), but others have argued that online ties cannot generate the same levels of meaning and trust required for off-line collective action (Diani, 2000; Polat, 2005). The latter group has characterized online activism as a weak effort leading to "clicktivism" and "slacktivism" (Morozov, 2011; van de Donk, Loader, Nixon, & Rucht, 2004). Given the importance attributed to social media and other digital technologies in recent bouts of collective action, these scholars seem perhaps overly negative in overlooking the possibility that the Internet is creating a new form of activism. Online collective action often sets the stage for off-line action that might not have occurred otherwise (Rolfe, 2005; Wojcieszak, 2009), and studies have found online social media useful in moving online activism off-line (Harlow, 2012; Harlow & Harp, 2012) as "virtual actors . . . case very real-world political outcomes" (Howard, 2011, p. 145).

Scholars have extolled the democratizing potential of the Internet's ability to open space for marginalized voices and counter-information (Curran, 2003; Kellner, 2000), creating what Fraser (1990) called counter-publics. Criticizing Habermas' idealized notion of the public sphere, Fraser suggested that rather than one exclusive sphere, there exist multiple counter public spheres where subaltern identities can be articulated and alternative ideas and information circulated and debated. The Internet, which encourages participation and interaction in a DIY culture, is seemingly such a space. However, scholars like Lim (2003) and Atton (2004) have warned that the Internet is not an automatic "cure" for an ailing media system. This is especially true in India, where only about 16% of the population has Internet access (Internet World Stats, 2014). According to recent reports, about 100 million Indians use Facebook

(Mishra, 2014) and some 33 million use Twitter (Patel, 2014). Still, the number of social media users, though large and growing, represents only a fraction of the country's billion-plus population.

Tempering this increase in Indian social media and Internet users is the fact that access to information technology in India depends heavily on socioeconomic factors such as class, gender, education, and geography (Schwittay, 2011). For example, a report from the Internet and Mobile Association of India (as cited in "With 243 Million Users," 2013) stated most Indians who access the Internet do so via cheap, basic cell phones. Of the 110 million people who access the Internet via cell phone, the report said, 25 million are rural users, the majority of whom (70%) rely on cell phones for Internet access because they do not have personal computers. Besides not owning computers, the report noted, another hurdle is not knowing English, the dominant language of the Internet. Scholars have contended that the proverbial "digital divide" concerns not only technology access but also an economic, cultural, and political divide encompassing lack of access to technologies, lack of computer and Internet literacy, and even lack of interest (Bonfadelli, 2002; Castells, 2001; Diani, 2000; Fuchs, 2009; Goldstein, 2007).

Activists and advocates in less wired countries have in fact found ways around the digital divide and used new technologies to serve themselves and their communities (Friedman, 2005; Wasserman, 2007). However, this phenomenon has been little studied in India, and scant information concerns how useful social media are to Indian activists promoting counter-mainstream discussions and mobilizing people to participate in online and off-line activism. The issue becomes especially important in the context of the prevalent limitations to digital access and know-how in the Indian community. Pan, Yan, Jing, and Zheng (2011) argued that who uses the Internet and how they use it are indicators of whom the new medium serves most and what kind of "systemic changes" (p. 128) will result. If only a select few have access to digital tools and these few lead counter-mainstream conversations related to social change, then the new order is not necessarily relevant to or representative of the entire public. In such cases the Internet and social media do not democratize public conversations but perpetuate exclusion, substituting one ruling elite for another rather than overturning the system as a whole. Therefore, understanding how Indian activists use technology for their activism helps shed light on whether new media, despite the digital divide, can provide all citizens—or only certain ones—with a channel to voice opinions and help effect social change. Based on preceding literature regarding the potential for using digital tools for activism in a digitally divided country, this study poses the following research questions:

RQ1: Do Indian activists believe the Internet and social media sites help or harm a democracy with a large digital divide?

RQ2: How important are the roles of different types of media—such as alternative and community media, television, and social network sites—in activism in India?

RQ3: What do Indian activists consider the greatest challenges of incorporating online social network sites into activism?

India: Social Movements and Digital Media

Social movements in India have expanded from fights to address the issues of industrial workers, farmers, and indigenous tribes to struggles focused on environmental concerns, women, and human rights (Raina, 2004). Ray and Katzenstein (2005) showed the vital role social movements played even before 1947, as the country fought for its independence from England. Following India's independence, activists tackled issues such as poverty alleviation, equality, and social justice, factors that have defined social movements in the country over the years (Ray & Katzenstein, 2005). However, after the Indian economy was liberalized in the 1980s and 1990s, the Indian government privatized several welfare programs, leading to the creation of many nongovernmental organizations and decline of "traditional protest-forms of organizing within the social movement sector" (ibid., p. 9).

An estimated 20,000–30,000 nongovernmental organizations work in India (Kudva, 2005). Activist work and social movements generally center on the rights of peasants, tribes, Dalits (people at the bottom of the Hindu caste hierarchy; see Schwittay, 2011), women, the industrial working class, and the environment (Shah, 2004). Despite the so-called digital revolution, social movements remain relatively absent from the online realm, and traditional grassroots movements have been slow to embrace new digital technologies as part of their fundraising and mobilization strategies (Kovacs, 2010). Moreover, little is known about what kind of Internet access Indian activists have and what they think of social media's role in their activism. This study helps to fill that void.

Apart from the ability to reach a wider audience, online media provide forums for alternative voices, allowing activists to bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media. These outlets are crucial in India, a country Freedom House listed as "partly free" in its 2014 press freedom index and ranked 78 of 197 on its global press freedom scale ("Freedom of the Press 2014," 2014). The threat to India's press freedom has been steadily increasing. Reporters Without Borders issued a statement saying it was "concerned by the steady decline in freedom of information" ("Media Freedom Threatened by Violence, Censorship and Curbs on Access to Information," 2012, para. 1) and in 2014 classified India's state of the media as a "difficult situation" (Reporters Without Borders, 2014, p. 29). For example, Indian media owners and powerful politicians have been known to pressure editors and reporters to align their editorial slant with the country's ruling political and economic interests ("India's Press Under Siege," 2014). If journalists cannot freely express their opinions, then there is little hope for activists' and other marginalized voices excluded from the mainstream media. The country's media themselves believe they perform their public watchdog role poorly because media businesses focus on celebrity news and urban coverage to increase their profit margins (Rao, 2008). An alternative online space where citizens can inform and be informed is all the more important, in these circumstances.

In countries with similarly repressed media systems, social media are often viewed as platforms for alternative opinions and counter-mainstream discussions. Tang and Sampson (2012) found the Internet to be a space for discussion and proliferation of alternative ideas in China, where "the role of media is to 'direct' public opinion rather than to reflect it" (p. 457). Freedom House classified Chinese media as "not free," ranking the country's press freedom at 183 out of 197 ("Freedom of the Press 2014," 2014). The scholars found that citizens could, by expressing outrage online, collectively shape and even

direct mainstream news agendas. In a situation where the media are censored, they concluded, Internet postings are often picked up by mass media, whereupon interaction between the two can create a vehicle for citizen mobilization.

Scholars and journalists have noted similar instances in which Indian citizens' use of social media forced the mainstream media to take notice, resulting in citizen mobilization. For example, the Indian media were forced to start reporting on alleged links between a few high-profile journalists and a lobbyist after citizens used Twitter to express their outrage at the press's silence on the issue (Desai, 2010). Women also used Facebook effectively to protest against a right-wing Hindu group whose members beat up women for visiting a pub in the southern Indian city of Bangalore (Chamikutty, 2009). Indian and international media gave the protests, known as the "Pink Chaddi" or Pink Underwear campaign, broad coverage (Mackey, 2009) as a successful example of the use of social media in activism. The Pink Underwear campaign spawned several imitations, and the right-wing Hindu group was forced to back down considerably (Narain, 2009). Thus, not only have social media allowed Indian audiences—or at least the mostly urban middle class that has Internet access—to speak their minds freely, but the globalizing quality of the technology also allows diverse people throughout the country to come together around an issue or cause (Chattopadhyay, 2011). This study therefore poses the final research question:

RQ4: How do Indian activists see the functions/affordances of social media in activism?

Methods

Because little is known about the role of social media in activism in India, we consider this an exploratory study. This study used a Web-based survey of closed- and open-ended questions to analyze the extent to which activists believe social media play an important role in India. The survey was sent out on September 6, 2010, and closed on October 15, 2010. Its main questions focused on subjects' use of new technologies—SNS in particular—for purposes of activism. The activists' names were collected via snowball sampling methods, resulting in a convenience sample (Potter, 1996), which, though not generalizable, is justifiable as no master list of Indian activists was available. The survey was translated into Hindi, India's official language, and respondents had the option to answer questions in that language. The lead researcher is fluent in Hindi and ensured cultural nuances and meanings were not lost in translation.

Although Web surveys typically garner low response rates (Dillman et al., 2009; Greenlaw & Brown-Welty, 2009), this method was consciously chosen over others because the purpose of this study was to look at the use of new technologies for activism. To increase the number of respondents and improve the response rate, two sampling methods were used. Initially a list of activists working in grassroots movements and nongovernmental organizations was created in an attempt to incorporate different causes, genders, and geographical areas; however, the resulting sample of 92 activists was skewed toward those based in metropolitan and urban areas. These activists then were e-mailed the link to the survey. The second sampling method involved asking them to forward the link to friends and post it on listserves and activist-related websites.

The final response rate from the e-mail list was 38.04%; 35 respondents answered the survey via links provided in e-mails sent directly to their inboxes. No response rate can be determined for those who responded via a link posted on a listserv or common website, or who were forwarded the link by one of the original 92 activists approached by e-mail. This second method brought 56 respondents to take the survey, for a total sample of 91. While interpreting the results, it is important to bear in mind that no question was mandatory. Furthermore, no incentive for completing the survey was offered, so the respondent dropout rate was high. Despite this drawback, we think this exploratory study offers meaningful insights into Indian activists' perceptions of the use of social media in activism.

Closed-ended survey questions were used to answer research questions 1–3. For RQ1, respondents were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) how much they believed SNS and the Internet generally threaten democracy and social justice because many people lack access to these technologies. To answer RQ2, respondents were asked to show, on the same scale of 1 to 5, how much they agreed with statements about the current importance of the role of various media (printed alternative media, community radio, television, online alternative media, and SNS) in social movements. For RQ3, a multiple-choice question asked respondents to choose the top three challenges to incorporating SNS into activism. Responses were then ranked according to the number of responses received for each option.

To answer RQ4, respondents' open-ended survey answers were examined qualitatively using a discourse analysis approach. This approach, which begins with a "long, preliminary soak" (Hall, 1975, p. 15), allowed us to immerse ourselves in the text, probing the respondents' answers for various themes. This method "allows the researcher to not only discern latent meaning but also the implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of text" (Fursich, 2009, p. 4).

Results

Sample Overview

The general results showed that 59% of respondents were male and 41% were female. About 70% were 35 or older, and 47% held a master's, M.D., or doctorate degree. Almost 33% of respondents said they had been activists for between 11 and 20 years. About 81% said they used SNS for activism. Regarding sites of activism, 66% said their activism took place equally on- and off-line, 22% said their activism occurred off-line, and 12% said mostly online. Most respondents—82%—lived in a city or urban environment.

In response to a question about the geographic scope of the issues they were involved in, about 37% of the respondents said their activism focused on national issues, followed by 33% who said their activism focused on local issues. Almost 30% said their activism centered around state issues. The respondents said their activism concerned several topics, including gender equality, rights for sexual minorities (LGBT) and sex workers, the environment, sustainable development, civil and human rights, and transparent governance.

As for activists' technology use, most (81%) said they used SNS such as MySpace and Facebook for activism purposes. Of the respondents who said they used SNS for activism, the majority (97%) reported using Facebook, followed by about 51% who said they used Twitter. Google's social network site Orkut was the third most cited site for activism purposes, with 32% reporting that option, but this response may no longer hold as Google announced it would close Orkut in September 2014 (Oreskovich, 2014).

SNS and Social Justice

In answering RQ1, which measured how much activists believed SNS and the Internet help or hurt democracy and social justice, most respondents (41%) disagreed with the statement that SNS and the Internet are bad for democracy. Still, more than a fifth of activists (22%) said SNS and the Internet threaten democracy and social justice. Interestingly, when we compared whether respondents believe SNS is bad for democracy with whether they currently use SNS for activism ($\chi^2 = .573$, $df = 2$, $p = .751$), and with whether their activism occurs mainly online, mainly off-line, or equally online and off-line ($\chi^2 = 3.722$, $df = 4$, $p = .445$), results showed no significant differences. In other words, whether or not the surveyed activists used social media for activism did not affect the extent of their belief that SNS and the Internet do not threaten social justice or democracy.

Importance of Media in Activism

RQ2 asked respondents' opinions on how important a role various media currently play in activism (see Table 1). Most respondents (60%) said printed alternative or activist media currently played an important role in social movements, and 55% said online alternative or activist media had an important role. About 45% agreed that SNS currently play an important role in social movements. Just 41% considered television important, and only 34 % said community radio played an important role in social movements.

Table 1. How Much Indian Activists Agree Various Media Currently Play an Important Role in Activism.

	Printed alternative or activist media (<i>N</i> = 32)	Online alternative or activist media (<i>N</i> = 33)	Social network sites (<i>N</i> = 33)	Television (<i>N</i> = 32)	Alternative or community radio (<i>N</i> = 32)
Strongly agree/ agree	60%	55%	45%	41%	34%
Neutral	25%	33%	24%	31%	38%
Strongly disagree / disagree	16%	12%	30%	28%	28%

Note: The numbers are reported frequencies. Because none of the queries in this online survey were mandatory, *N* corresponds to the number of respondents who provided answers to a particular question.

Challenges of Using SNS in Activism

When considering RQ3, which asked about the top challenges of SNS use in activism (see Table 2), respondents' answers had more to do with individual dedication than with lack of Internet access or digital know-how. Most respondents (69%) named lack of response from the target audience as the greatest challenge of using SNS in online activism. Activists also cited their own lack of time (50%) and low member participation (46%) as major challenges. Only 35% named lack of Internet access, and 31% mentioned the technical skills they needed for using SNS as a challenge. It is noteworthy that the site of respondents' activism—mainly online, mainly off-line, or on- and off-line equally—did not relate significantly to whether they believed lack of Internet access was a top challenge of using SNS in activism ($\chi^2 = 1.852$, $df = 1$, $p = .174$) or whether they saw lack of technical skills as a major challenge ($\chi^2 = .490$, $df = 1$, $p = .480$).

Table 2. Top Challenges Indian Activists Identified for Using SNS in Activism.

Challenges in Rank Order	Frequency (%)
Non-responsiveness from target audience	69%
(Activists') Lack of time	50%
Insufficient member participation	46%
(Activists') Lack of Internet access	35%
Technical skill (of activists) in using SNS	31%
Fear of government surveillance	19%
Fear of corporate surveillance	7%

Role of SNS in Activism

RQ4 asked how Indian activists view the role of social media in activism. Qualitative exploration of respondents' open-ended answers revealed four overarching themes: *globalization*, *complementariness*, *appropriateness*, and *divisions*. A subtheme of solidarity emerged within the globalization theme, and

notable subthemes within the divisions theme included the digital divide and clicktivism or slacktivism. Analyzing the open-ended questions was important, as respondents' answers lend credence to the statistical findings above. The broad themes discussed in this section are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. How Indian Activists Saw the Role of Online Social Media in Activism.

Themes	SNS Role in Activism
<i>Globalization</i>	Make communication faster, efficient, and cheaper. Transcend geographical and temporal boundaries. Make the global local, and the local global.
<i>Complementariness</i>	Combine well with grassroots work. Encourage engagement. Allow both online and off-line work (better than just one).
<i>Appropriateness</i>	Prove useful only in certain circumstances. Allow customizing to issue and context. Target specific populations rather than all.
<i>Division</i>	Divide activists into elites and non-elites. Highlight lack of Internet access and skills across the board. Encourage false sense of participation with online activism.

Globalization

One of the most prominent themes in Indian activists' discourse about the impact of online social media on activism was globalization, or the idea that online social media extend activists' reach, allowing them to communicate simultaneously and instantaneously with disparate populations. The respondents saw added value in the ability of SNS to transcend spatial and temporal boundaries, making the global local and the local global. This globalization, then, resulted in creation of a transnational counter public sphere where like-minded activists could come together and find support for their causes.

Numerous respondents called attention to the way SNS have given their activism both visibility and force, using words like "efficiency," "faster," "cheaper," and "easier." "They have helped in reaching out beyond borders," one activist noted. Another said, "It's the cheapest way to reach out to a large audience." Yet another said SNS have "helped social causes due to massive cross continental reach." Several respondents pointed out that SNS can be used to spread information to potential new adherents, allowing activists to do more than just "preach to the choir." For example, one respondent said, "People ordinarily unaware of a number of issues get to know about them when friends post them on their walls/share news of such events." Another similarly stated:

Networking sites have helped spread information on issues much more. . . . It cannot really replace activism and social movements, but it can aid and abet the cause to some extent with a set of people who otherwise may not have been connected at all to these issues.

Within globalization, there emerged subthemes of solidarity and support from strangers in a transnational counter public sphere. Indian activists saw the rapidity and global reach of SNS as able to generate support from strangers, creating a transnational network of dialogue and solidarity both on- and off-line. As one respondent said: "They [SNS] have definitely helped. Two points come to mind, sharing of information/dialogue sharpens the understanding of issues emerging and this creates an awareness. Secondly, obtaining solidarity from others on issues being carried out offline." Likewise, another activist noted: "[SNS] have helped. . . . Since then we see the bigger picture and know that there are more with similar concerns. Serves as an encouragement." And another stated: "This is a place for sharing and exchanging information and ideas and raising awareness on issues. And the other role would be give each other support and solidarity." One activist summed it up: "More people than ever are realizing that they share passion and perspectives on certain issues than ever before; the potential for building momentum for change by utilizing these connections is tremendous."

Complementariness

Another theme emerging from Indian respondents' comments was the way SNS complement off-line activism, working as its ally. As one respondent noted, "There cannot be a 'this' or 'that' situation, both are very important." Most activists agreed that SNS become fairly powerful tools when used in conjunction with off-line activities, but many characterized this as a one-way street: Online activism had not yet gained enough strength or importance to stand alone as an effective agent of change. As one respondent observed, "I think you can have effective offline activism that doesn't involve online work but I don't think the opposite is true. Online activism needs to always be backed, on some level, with offline activism."

The respondents also generally accepted the idea that alone, SNS were not as useful in activism because signing online petitions or creating issue pages are less effective means of pressuring ruling groups and institutions, compared to off-line activities with much stronger impact, such as organizing marches and strikes. For example, according to one activist,

It's a perception problem. One hundred people signing an online petition do not carry as much weight with "the authorities" as 100 people turning up for a demonstration in person. Offline activism needs greater time, effort, expense and commitment, so it counts for more.

The Indian activists also realized these online networks' potential to provide a convenient, participatory platform that could encourage engagement. They acknowledged, however, that online

involvement is only a starting point and must be followed by activities on the ground to be truly effective. As one activist stated, "All online works need to translate to offline activism." Another activist said,

I think that real change happens in the real world. But we do need to have outlets that help us figure out the confusing world we live in. I think the Net can help educate us; petitions etc. are not going to lead to fundamental change.

Appropriateness

A third common theme surfacing from Indian activists' discourse was appropriateness. Many were adamant that online social network sites and other digital tools, while often useful, were not appropriate instruments in every circumstance. Respondents remarked that not all activists or target populations have the same needs, skill sets, or even the same Internet access, indicating SNS are hardly a universal tool for activism. For example, one activist commented, "Every time you can't use the same things everywhere or all the time." Another respondent said that whether online or off-line tools are right for the job depends on "the issue and the context." Some activists noted that an online campaign might be useful for recruiting resources, avoiding long phone calls or lines at the post office, gathering signatures for an online petition, or even allowing the elderly or disabled to participate in activism. But others insisted that in some cases, nothing can replace the power of showing up in person, as the Internet cannot always influence those who need to be reached. Still, another respondent pointed out, this drawback should not necessarily deter activists from pursuing new ways of doing business: "Media (of any form) and activism need to be customized to the specific target audience needs. It has to be sexier and peppier for the participant. As long as we innovate, there will be a following." One respondent said the real benefit of SNS is their adaptability to being used together with traditional forms of communication:

Internet, including old-fashioned email, mailing lists such as those on Yahoo Groups and Google Groups, online petition sites, and networking sites such as Facebook have helped social movements by quickly mobilizing individuals in support of causes. However, as access to these is class-specific, at least here in India, we use them in conjunction with other modes of communication such as mobile phones and non-virtual meetings and rallies.

Divisions

The final major theme coming out of Indian activists' discourse was divisions, in terms of both digital access and the divide between dedicated activists and slacktivists. This theme builds on the idea of appropriateness, as divisions influence when, where, and to whom a particular tool might be appropriate. In a country where not even a quarter of the population has accessed the Internet ("Asia Internet Use," 2014), some activists were concerned about the reach of SNS, as well as the resulting changes—if any—in the nature of activism in India. They were aware these digital tools were available only to a limited, specific kind of demographic. One respondent said:

They have helped a CERTAIN TYPE of activist. The grassroots activists in India have little access to the Internet and literacy is not high enough for them to be Internet savvy either. This is more the activism of an elite, which tries to mobilize its own kind and their small communities that then impact on larger issues.

Still, most activists generally agreed that in a digitally connected world, it is important to begin utilizing online spaces for activism. "With the increase in the number of people accessing the networking sites, online activism will gain equal importance as off-line activism to create mass awareness and also pressurize the officials to act," one respondent predicted. Another respondent noted that SNS are important for activism because "more and more people are getting on the Internet and read about issues on such sites." Another respondent said:

In a country like India, as the Internet penetration grows, reaching out to people to generate awareness and influence opinion is becoming easier. . . . One of the key issues is to be able to capture the imagination of people through the Internet.

The subtheme of slacktivism or clicktivism also surfaced in respondents' discourse about divisions created by SNS: in this case, divisions between dedicated, committed activists and those who lack such fervor. Some activists worried that SNS impart a sense of participation in activism to people who actually make no contribution to it. Certain sites, they said, allowed people to discuss social change, sign online petitions, and even express support for a particular cause without stepping out into the streets. They feared the false sense of participation provided by online activism would negatively affect off-line activism, which they still perceived as more important and effective than online activism. Thus, Indian activists believed that to truly express support for a cause, it is important that the public participate in off-line activism rather than simply endorsing it online. These actions, they argued, created a distinction or division between those who were true activists and those who were not. As one activist noted, SNS in fact have hurt activism, because "activities have become symbolic and people join the fan page or groups to look like they support something, but when it comes to the grassroots level or off-line involvement, there's very little participation." Another activist said people's online participation and engagement must be taken with a grain of salt:

[SNS] might become more active but might also involve cynicism as it also becomes a refuge of lazy activists; who don't move away from computer terminals into the heat and dust of the Indian street where the real battles are to be fought.

Still, as one activist acknowledged, clicktivism is a form of activism:

While Internet "activism" can be a simple and relatively meaningless way to appease one's need to "participate" in social movements, it can also be the seed of real social change if taken more seriously. I think it is a major part of the future of global activism, by being the tool that brings people with similar passions together to create international awareness and synergy on an unprecedented scale.

Similarly, another respondent expressed optimism that SNS could lead “from armchair activism to proactivism. The movement would catch on. I see more collaborations between the offline and online works.”

Discussion and Conclusions

This study’s quantitative and qualitative results improve understanding of the role online social media play in activism in a country with only a partly free press and limited Internet access. This study shows that Indian activists were generally optimistic about the potential uses of online SNS in activism, despite severe limitations imposed by the digital divide. For example, the number of respondents who said SNS do not threaten democracy or social justice was twice that of those who saw it as a threat, suggesting the former group of Indian activists believe SNS could be a useful tool for social change. They were positive about the role of SNS in activism, regardless of whether they considered themselves off-line activists, online activists, or both. This indicates that notwithstanding their personal experience with Internet technologies, the respondents saw SNS and other digital tools as contributing to activists’ work for social change.

This optimism about social media’s potential for activism, despite the digital divide, is further supported by analysis of the main perceived hurdles to using new technologies for activism. Only about a third of the surveyed Indian activists named lack of Internet access or technological know-how as the main obstacle to SNS use in activism. This suggests the technological determinists may be overly pessimistic to assume that the digital divide automatically inhibits the use of technology for social change. The surveyed activists did not think about social media’s potential role in activism in a technologically deterministic way. Rather, they recognize the nuanced potential benefits of using online tools in the right settings with the right audience.

This finding lends empirical support to news and other anecdotal accounts of online social media playing an influential role in India’s political and social spheres (Pandit, 2011). Many Indian politicians, including the country’s newly elected Prime Minister Narendra Modi and various government departments, use Twitter to communicate with digitally connected Indians (“How Indian Government Is Using Twitter,” 2014). Thus, most respondents’ agreement that social media play an important role in activism is understandable, as they see social media as a way to communicate with and mobilize their constituents as well as get their message heard in political realms. When asked to name important media tools in activism, more than half (55%) of the respondents named online, alternative news sites, and 45% named SNS. The surveyed activists also ranked online, alternative news sites and SNS higher in importance than either television or radio, perhaps reflecting a lack of confidence in mainstream media. Among other types of media for promoting activism, however, printed news was considered most useful. This finding reflects the reality that most of India is not online. Though Indian activists engage with new communication tools and are aware of and optimistic about their potential, they have not completely discarded their traditional methods of information dissemination and consumption. Further, printed media’s continued preeminence for activists could relate to the ways Indians generally communicate with social media tools. A recent Pew Research study on the social media habits of Indians showed that few respondents expressed political views via social media platforms, which were used mainly to stay in touch with family and friends or share

music and movie reviews (Poushter, 2014). The researchers also said they found similar patterns in “other emerging and developing nations” (Poushter, 2014, para. 3).

In general, the Indian activist respondents indicated optimism about the potential for beneficial use of social media in activism. They acknowledged the importance of the way SNS allow audiences to speak their minds and publish their own opinions, thus creating a counter public sphere open to alternative discourses (Pandit, 2011). Further, as analysis of the open-ended questions indicated, the respondents saw SNS as useful for extending activists’ reach beyond not just spatial and temporal boundaries but also the limits set by the mainstream media gatekeepers that traditionally marginalize activists and their views.

Meanwhile, these Indian activists recognized that online activism in a digitally divided country is insufficient to bring about change. The digital divide was evident even among the survey respondents, who were mostly educated, urban Indians with Internet access and thus do not represent India’s general population. Though they expressed concern that lack of Internet access could create an elite population of activists and an elite form of activism, they largely saw the digital divide as a waning problem. Additionally, despite apprehension that online activism could lead to clicktivism—a less dedicated form of activism—they saw the Internet as a way to bring in supporters who otherwise might not have involved themselves in a cause. Indian activists’ open-ended responses suggested an overall positive outlook about the potential of SNS in activism, regardless of any digital divide. Thus, this research showed that even in a digitally divided country without a fully free press—or perhaps *because* press freedom is limited—social media can be used effectively to attract various supporters to a social cause and open channels of communication with sections of society that the activists did not previously have access to. This study contributes to existing scholarship by expanding the discussion beyond whether social media are important for activism to critically consider how, under what circumstances, and to what end activists find social media beneficial.

We recognize that scholars must refrain from exaggerating social media’s role in social movements in countries with a large digital divide. In many cases social media are a useful means of communication and perhaps even mobilization, but they are certainly not the central method. Most respondents were optimistic about using digital tools to support their work on the ground but adamant about not seeing them as a replacement for it. The surveyed activists repeatedly mentioned the complementary roles of online and off-line activism, recognizing that both were necessary for any kind of positive social change. The need to use SNS, however, did not replace the need to use traditional, off-line methods, they said. They did not necessarily see the off-line versus online divide that many scholars tend to emphasize, but rather viewed the two as together forming what activism is in India today.

Like most research studies, this one has its limitations. The respondent sample was acquired via convenient and snowball methods and thus is not representative of all activists in India. Still, this method is justifiable: To better understand how Indian activists employed digital tools, we specifically targeted those with Internet access. Another shortcoming is that most respondents lived in urban areas; Indian census results released in 2011 show that almost 69% of India’s population lives in rural areas (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2011).

Despite its lack of generalizability, this study can be seen as a foundational step toward future research that could examine how SNS are gaining acceptance among activists involved in some of India's longer running grassroots movements, and even among populations without Internet access. Researchers could consider the extent to which SNS and digital tools are being employed for activism in rural areas, since this study examined responses from mostly urban activists. Future research also could build on this study by considering the extent to which SNS act as counter public spheres in other developing countries lacking a free press. In Facebook's government transparency report of 2014, India led the list of countries that had asked the website to censor content that was visible to their people (Stampler, 2014). If the government controls the information published on social media, then deeper study of whether this interference affects online activism would add value to the study of the role of SNS in activism in developing countries.

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