Fragile Hegemony: Modi, Social Media, and Competitive Electoral Populism in India

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Direct and unmediated communication between the leader and the people defines and constitutes populism. I examine how social media, and communicative practices typical to it, function as sites and modes for constituting competing models of the leader, the people, and their relationship in contemporary Indian politics. Social media was mobilized for creating a parliamentary majority for Narendra Modi, who dominated this terrain and whose campaign mastered the use of different platforms to access and enroll diverse social groups into a winning coalition behind his claims to a "developmental sovereignty" ratified by "the people." Following his victory, other parties and political formations have established substantial presence on these platforms. I examine emerging strategies of using social media to criticize and satirize Modi and offering alternative leader-people relations, thus democratizing social media. Practices of critique and its dissemination suggest the outlines of possible "counterpeople" available for enrollment in populism's future forms. I conclude with remarks about the connection between activated citizens on social media and the fragility of hegemony in the domain of politics more generally.

Keywords: Modi, populism, Twitter, WhatsApp, social media

On January 24, 2017, India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), proudly tweeted that Narendra Modi, its iconic prime minister of India, had become "the world's most followed leader on social media" (see Figure 1). Modi's management of—and dominance over—media and social media was a key factor contributing to his convincing win in the 2014 general election, when he led his party to a parliamentary majority, winning 31% of the votes cast. This article explores the role of media and social media in the constitution of Modi as a political brand, as a political style, and as a populist political project.[2] I also examine responses to Modi's social media strategies by his challengers.

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[2] On the making of Brand Modi, see Pande (2014).

Figure 1. Modi's social media presence.

The literature on social media and popular politics has focused on the use of such media by social movements (e.g., Gerbaudo, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2013) and election campaigns, concluding that it increased their effectiveness (e.g., van Noort, Vliegenthart, & Kruikemeier, 2016). But the themes of this literature, such as new forms of civic engagement and the logic of "connective" action, also provide a lens into a different form of popular politics: populism. A definitive and constitutive element of populism is direct and unmediated communication between the leader and the people, creating popular consent for antidemocratic authority exercised by the leader. Dissolving, to an extent, the line between politics from above and below, populism today both relies on and exceeds electoral democratic politics.

How have social media, and communicative practices typical to it, become primary sites and modes for constituting competing models of the leader, the people, and sovereignty in contemporary Indian populism? I reconsider the relation between the media and populism by challenging the binary of elite and popular media, because populism today involves precisely the breakdown of such distinctions. I analyze how the use of social media allowed the Modi campaign to access and enroll different social groups into a winning coalition behind his claims to a "developmental sovereignty" ratified by "the people." Although initially the social media terrain was clearly dominated by Modi and the BJP, parties previously skeptical of the uses of social media have now established substantial presence on these platforms. In India today, a form of competitive electoral populism is at play, in which all parties are populist, offering varying but overlapping populist agendas based on different conceptions of the leader and the people, and social media is a constitutive feature of the terrain for these contestations. I examine the strategies of some of these parties, emerging subaltern politics, and the use of social media to voice criticisms of Modi

and offer alternative leader-people relations partly by using social media as a counterarchive—for example, practices of using Modi's previous speeches and tweets to criticize his current policies or fact-checking his claims. I also suggest that a democratization of social media is under way, and new modes of questioning, satirizing, and criticizing Modi are constantly emerging. These practices of disseminating such critiques suggest the outlines of possible "counterpeople" available for enrollment in populism's future forms. I conclude with remarks about the connection between activated citizens on social media and the fragility of hegemony in the domain of politics more generally.

News Media and Modi's Populism

Populism is a paradoxical politics, both inherently authoritarian and inherently democratizing. In the first case, populism bears the traces of Marx's idea of Bonapartism and Gramsci's Caesarism, referring to great leaders who arrive to resolve a general crisis in the name of the people, the true source of sovereignty. Populism is democratizing in the sense that its attempts to create a singular people from the endless heterogeneity in society never succeeds, but "the attempt to construct such a bridge defines the . . . political articulation of social identities" (Laclau, 2007, p. 154) and brings into politics groups so far excluded from it.

Murray (2010) notes that populist leaders consolidate disparate ideological positions or political demands into a shared antagonism to prevailing forms of political power and authority by dividing and simplifying the social field into two distinct camps, championing the people over a corrupt elite. The much-noted poverty, simplicity, and shallowness of symbols and slogans deployed by aspiring great leaders are efficacious precisely because they help reduce the heterogeneous particularistic content of social identity in the project of creating a homogeneous people. Heterogeneous elements of society are unified and stabilized by the emergence of an "empty signifier"—a concept or name (nationalism, India First, Modi, etc.) embodied in a leader who poses the people as standing for all of society and claims power in their name from a parasitic minority that clings illegitimately to power.

In today's media-saturated world, constructions of the leader and the people are mediated by popular culture and mass media (Mazzoleni, 2007), the first functioning as the reservoir of meaning from which populists draw their style and content and the second as the site and mechanism for their dissemination. Populists decry the decadence of democracy, position themselves as "true" democrats representing a pure people's sovereignty, and voice popular grievances and opinions they claim are ignored by governments, mainstream parties, experts, and the media. But such a people do not exist a priori; they are composed by the leader's discursive and narrative strategies, which today rely on media and social media, enlisting their capacities "to influence the opinions and attitudes of mass audiences" (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015, pp. 312–313). Partly, this is due to populist style. Populists, Mazzoleni (2007) notes, have distinctive public speaking skills and media-genic personalities, they use highly emotional, slogan-based language and a "verbal radicalism combined with political marketing skills" (p. 5). Their persona and use of media leads to fast dissemination of their message and an emotional identification with them, binding together sections of society into a people, and the people to the leader. How do these aspects of populism work in the case of Modi?

Modi has spent most of his political life in Gujarat as a functionary of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the organization pushing the Hindutva project to create a Hindu nation. In the late 1980s, he was sent by the RSS as its representative to Delhi. Modi participated in the Ram Janambhoomi movement, which destroyed the Babri Mosque in Ayodhya in 1992–1993, plunging northern and western India into a cauldron of interreligious violence, in which thousands of Muslims were killed (see Figure 2). He also visited the United States on behalf of the RSS to liaise with the nonresident Indian population, who later became his fervent supporters. He became the general secretary of the BJP in the late 1990s, returning to Delhi.

Figure 2. Modi participating in the movement to destroy the Babri Mosque.

Modi became the chief minister of Gujarat in 2001, and he won three consecutive terms. His success hinged on recomposing the people who would be his core constituency at a time when party-voter relations were going through realignment in Gujarat and elsewhere following the long-term decline of the Congress Party, economic liberalization, and the Babri Masjid (mosque) destruction. Modi campaigned as *Hindu hriday samrat* ("the emperor of Hindu hearts"), successfully detaching Dalits, tribals, and other caste and class groups from crumbling party loyalties and enrolling them in his Hindutva coalition. He courted Hindu godmen such as Asaram Bapu, Sri Ravi Shankar, and Murari Bapu and yoga gurus such as Ramdev, who had large presence on the new spiritual television channels and national followings.

In 2002, a total of 59 Hindutva volunteers returning from Ayodhya were incinerated in a train at Godhra Station in Gujarat by some Muslims, and their charred remains were paraded in Ahmedabad, the regional capital, by the extreme Hindutva group, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. More than 3,000 Muslims were killed in the subsequent large-scale violence. Modi was accused widely in the media of inaction, complicity, and even giving direction to the violence. Interviewed by Karan Thapar, the epitome of the elite media, Modi looked uncomfortable, and ultimately walked out. For Mukhopadhyay (2013), this was a turning point in Modi's media strategy. He started attacking elite media figures, alleging corruption. This became credible after revelations of shadowy links between corporations, top media figures, politicians, and fixers, giving rise to the sobriquet of "paid media" to refer to those outlets that were consistently

critical of Modi.[3] Modi spun criticisms of himself as attacks on Gujaratis at large, raising slogans of "Garvi Gujarat" and "Gujarati asmita," or "pride" (see Figure 3). He cultivated allies in Gujarati television, which was taking off at this time. Among Modi supporters, that he was hounded by powerful national media colluding with the Congress Party–led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) governments in Delhi, but that no charges were proved relating to his role in the 2002 violence, enhanced his status, both as a victim and as an invincible man of integrity who had passed a trial by fire.

Figure 3. Modi stands for Gujarati pride.

Law and order was another key aspect of Modi's leadership appeal. Criticized for extrajudicial executions of young Muslims suspected of terrorism, Modi defied human rights activists, justifying the executions on grounds of national security. These executions had wide popular support and added to Modi's profile as a strong leader. He was hailed as *Gujarat ka sher* ("lion of Gujarat"), setting the stage for his later claims to a "56-inch chest."

In the state election campaign of 2007, Modi added *vikas purush* ("development man") to his Hindutva and Gujarati chauvinist personas. Two prominent newspapers, *The Economic Times* and *The Times of India*, in their Delhi and Gujarat editions, began to champion Modi's growth model (Ahmad, 2013). Modi's projection of himself as a development man coincided with discussions in the media on paths to rapid growth other than that of the UPA government, whose employment and food guarantee programs, based on demands from grassroots movements, were criticized as "povertarian" sops-for-votes. In contrast, Modi championed a hard developmentalism, with decisions centralized in his hand. He painted social movements such as the Narmada Bachao Andolan as antidevelopment and actively discouraged unionization of workers. His vision of infrastructure, circulated on social media, put him in a lineage of Indian developmentalists such as Nehru and Indira Gandhi, and East and Southeast Asian developmentalists more broadly.

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[3] This is exemplified by the "Radia tapes," leaked in 2010, of recordings between such a set of agents. For a brief report, see Jebaraj (2010).

Modi held well-publicized Vibrant Gujarat events to attract foreign investment to Gujarat. Showcasing urban development in Ahmedabad and regeneration in postearthquake Surat, he spoke of emulating East Asia in creating a grid of smart cities, harnessing international development discourse to his project. He publicized the top rank given to Gujarat among Indian states on the World Bank's good governance criterion of "ease of doing business." Modi's growth strategy was projected in the media as antipopulist, even as his political strategy and style were populist. In the next section, I describe how Modi came to embody the political project he articulated, and how this embodiment was key to constructing a people who would ratify that project.

Recomposing the Leader and the People via Media and Social Media

Social media, its culture, and its communication practices enabled Modi's rise from local leader to prime minister. Theories of populism rightly point to the leader's composition of the people, but populism today also involves the self-recomposition of the leader himself. Moving from Hindutva to development, after 2009, Modi's physical image was made over. Glossy spreads of Modi attired in designer clothing and accessories, surrounded by laptops and mobile phones, playing golf, walking with lions, meeting foreign leaders, hosting film stars and sports heroes circulated in the media and social media, marking the transition from RSS *pracharak* (propagandist) to fashionista (see Figure 4). His wardrobe was made over by famous designers. His spokespersons now referred to him as a "youth icon"; Modi promised massive job creation aimed at this potential constituency and often appeared with the supreme youth consumer item of choice, the mobile phone, to consolidate his identification with youth aspirations (see Figure 5).

Figure 4. Modi's makeover from RSS pracharak *to man of the world.*

The prime minister using his phone.
Credit: www.narendramodi.in
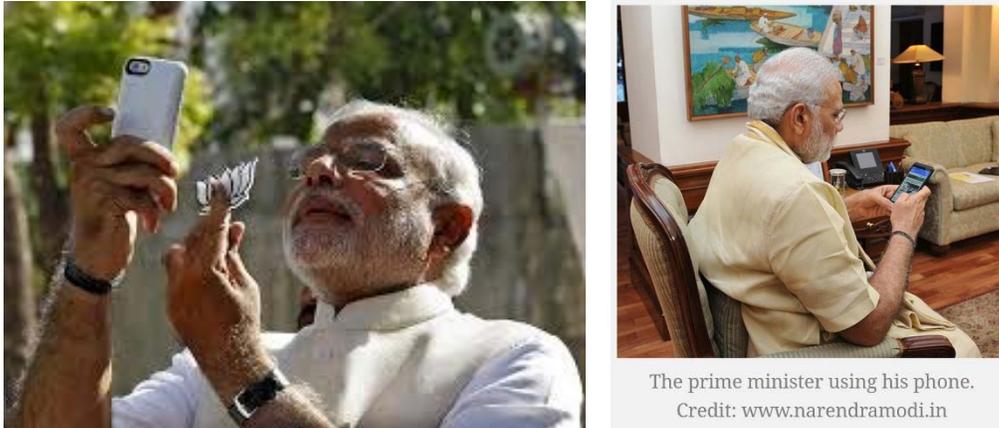
Figure 5. Modi, the self(ie)-made man.

Modi's images embodied the aspirations of the beneficiaries of neoliberal reforms, who wanted more of them. Indeed, Modi used a PepsiCola slogan, "*ye dil mange more*" ("this heart desires more") to address this social category he named "the neo-middle class" (Jaffrelot, 2013). Rapid capitalist growth leading to upward mobility for those outside the old elite had wide appeal. Embodying a "desire for development" (Nigam, 2011) and delivering the unfulfilled promise of "India shining" (Kaur, 2016) enabled Modi to compose a people beyond Hindutva.

Modi recruited television to present a credible alternative to the leadership of Manmohan Singh, the scholar-technocrat prime minister of the UPA government. As the terror attacks in Mumbai in November 2008 were unfolding, prominent Indian news channels showed a split screen with burning buildings on one side and Modi castigating the government for intelligence and security failures on the other.[4] On the *Aap Ki Adalat* ("The People's Court") program on India TV hosted by friendly anchor Rajat Sharma, Modi demanded that the UPA government stop writing "love letters to Pakistan" and threatened that if he became prime minister, he would "do what he had done in Gujarat" and "respond to Pakistan in the only language it understands."[5] In 2013, Modi began to use cardboard replicas of the Red Fort as the backdrop to his speeches, again to appear as an alternative to Singh as prime minister (see "Narendra Modi Speaks," 2013).[6] Photos of Modi next to portraits and statues of Vivekananda, the Hindu monk-philosopher also circulated, placing Modi within a widely accepted version of muscular Hinduism.[7]

Modi's strategies dovetailed with those of private television channels in a competitive market. Modi exploited their business logic, and channels, in turn, rode on Modi's popularity from 2013, creating

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[4] This video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=92LD42AKgV0.

[5] This video is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pxn1u2OR7q0.

[6] The significance of this is that it is the prime minister who addresses the nation on August 15, Independence Day, from the Red Fort.

[7] On Vivekananda and the Hindu right, see Sharma (2012).

hashtags likely to be picked up by Modi supporters. Important media houses became open Modi partisans. Arnab Goswami, then an anchor with Times Now, blazed this trail on English-language television. The owner of Zee TV, Subhash Chandra, endorsed Modi and later became a BJP-supported member of parliament. *Dainik Jagaran*, a Hindu daily with 45 million readers, became Modi's open supporter. When the BJP announced Modi as its prime ministerial candidate for the 2014 elections, prominent news anchors, not all of whom were Modi partisans, demanded that the UPA do likewise, and to have U.S.-style debates between Modi and the UPA's nominee. The UPA's refusal to name a prime minister candidate or to agree to debate created a sense of defensiveness on its part. BJP spokespersons began to refer to Modi as "prime minister in waiting."

The UPA's second term coincided with the global economic downturn, and the double-digit growth figures nearly halved. Meanwhile, allegations of corruption against members of the UPA government and the Gandhi family began to swirl in print and television media. Modi developed a narrative that linked India's slowdown to elite corruption, and to "policy paralysis." In an extremely funny speech, Modi created an alphabet primer based on alleged UPA scams ("A for Adarsh scam," 2013). Such news stories enabled Modi to make the classic populist gesture of painting the corrupt elite as enemy of the well-being of the people, using a "low" language that Moffitt and Tormey (2013) identify as a key element of populist political style.

Modi used social media penetration to sidestep and attack traditional media. Modi's social media swarm identified particular journalists and media figures for concerted attack, including professional and personal vilification and allegations of financial corruption and decadent personal lives. Terms such as "paid news" became commonly used on social media to denigrate Modi's critics. This vilification of the media reached its zenith when, after he was sworn into office, one of Modi's ministers coined the term "presstitutes," which, hashtagged to #Presstitutes, spread widely as the opprobrium of choice for media figures critical of him, helping delegitimize media criticism of Modi.

While mass media changed perceptions of Modi, social media provided a deep and intimate identification between Modi and potential voters who participated in building Modi's platform. Several themes and terms used by Modi in his campaign speeches were crowdsourced, based on comments and suggestions collated from the Modi and BJP platforms and forums on social media set up to interact with supporters. Modi interacted with voters via Google Hangouts, with sessions streamed live on YouTube and his Google+ page, and in the Chai pe Charcha sessions, where potential voters gathered at designated tea shops to engage in discussions with Modi through online video hookups (Chadha & Guha, 2016, p. 4395).

Some slogans and memes launched on social media directed at different segments of the possible "people" include:

- India First, an all-inclusive nation
- *Sabka saath, sabka vikas* (With all, for everyone's development)
- *Bhrashtachaar me doobe log* (Congress leaders drowning in corruption)
- Recovery of black money and redistributing 15 lakhs of rupees to each citizen
- *Congress mukt Bharat* (Congress-free India)

- *Ma-bete ki sarkar* (the government of mother and son) or *Damaad Shree* (referring to Robert Vadra, Sonia Gandhi's son-in-law, accused of land scams)
- *Shahzada* (prince, referencing Rahul Gandhi and the Gandhi dynasty, who were enemies of democracy)
- *Mamooli chai wala/gareeb ma ka beta* (Modi as ordinary tea vendor; son of a poor mother, contrasting with the Gandhis)
- *Dand/Sazaaa do.* (Punish them!)
- Sickular. Vote bank politics. (Congress and other parties that used secularism cynically for votes only)
- *Mar Jawan Mar Kisan* (death to the solider, death to the farmer)—a highly emotive inversion of an old Congress slogan *jai jawan jai kisan* ("Victory to the soldier, victory to the farmer"), which invokes gruesome killings of Indian soldiers from Pakistani territory and farmer suicides
- *Unke liye Ganga ek nadi hai, mere liye Ganga ma hai.* (For them the Ganges is a mere river. For me, Ganga is Ma.)
- *Mujhe Ganga Maiyya ne bulaya hai.* (I have been called by Mother Ganges.)
- I am Hindu Nationalist (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. I am Hindu Nationalist.

These memes elicited fear, panic, trauma, joy, and love—and thus strong affective links between the people and the leader.

At the same time, Modi articulated his development project in bland, bite-sized slogans, such as:

2Z: Zero Defect, Zero Effect
3D: Development, Demography, Dividend
3S: Skill, Scale, Speed
3W: Roadways, Railways, Iways
4P: People, Public, Private, Partnership
4T: Technology, Transport, Tourism, Travel
5F: Farm, Factory, Fiber, Fashion, Foreign

Constructing a people, a leader, and a people-leader relationship needs a narrative of decline and

crisis, the backdrop against which the leader emerges to take the people out of the impasse. With these slogans, Modi signified diverse aspirations, fears, and resentments, which called out to the molecular citizen to identify with and accept the unity under that sign (see Figure 7). In the next section, I explore how these constructions were produced, consolidated, and disseminated via social media.

Figure 7. Molecular Modis.

Constructing and Inhabiting the Modi-Sphere: An Outsider's View

Social media connects users, facilitating community building, collaboration, and participation (Bruns, 2015). While Modi's campaign tapped into social media's promise of "radical innovation and participation" (Chakravartty & Roy, 2015, p. 319), it retained an element of central control while enabling more decentralized practices of constructing a people, building many-to-many communication around forms of one-to-many communication. Team Modi coordinated its strategies on Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other platforms.

Modi took to social media to bypass elite media and to establish unmediated relations with the population to compose a specific people. His well-publicized love for social media was also part of his political makeover. Ahmad (2013) recounts Modi telling prominent journalist Shekhar Gupta that he checked social media on his iPad first thing every morning. In a heavily viewed Google Hangout session, Modi invited the audience to follow him on multiple social media platforms.[8]

Modi's use of social media identified him as a man who was ahead of the times and was constitutive of his technopopulist project. Identification with social media, and technology in general, allowed Modi to seek support beyond Hindutva. Modi spoke of WiFi connectivity as a right, making it a central feature of smart cities. The ability to log on to social media from anywhere in India became part of the "desire for development" (Nigam, 2011) among the aspirational "neo-middle class."

Modi's social media campaign reflected classic and new forms of populism. Heading into the 2014 general elections, I conducted a cyberethnography (in the spirit of Geertz's [1998] notion of ethnography as "deep hanging out"). I joined debates in the comments sections of Internet news sites to observe the constitution of the people and leader, recording the reception of Modi's claims by readers, their affective

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[8] This video can be at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AC4kxzRVQ3Y.

relations with Modi, and how Modi supporters interacted with opponents. The comments section allowed for greater anonymity than other social media platforms (though this is now changing with sign-ins linked to named Google, Facebook, or Twitter accounts), and so many commentators likely expressed more extreme views than they would if they were identifiable. I followed websites of national news dailies and some exclusively Web-based new portals. My own comments were mostly factual, but they were sometimes provocative and sarcastic to elicit responses from Modi supporters—*bhakts* (the initially pejorative but now widely used term for "the faithful ones") in social-media parlance—who dominated these pages.

Bhakts aimed to delegitimize Congress figures with charges of conspiracy, corruption, and ineptitude. Attacking its foundations, they excoriated Nehru (India's first prime minister) for his alleged dissolute lifestyle and affair with Lady Mountbatten, losing the 1962 war with China, "creating the Kashmir problem," allegedly conspiring to get nationalist hero S. C. Bose assassinated, and sidelining other stalwarts of the anticolonial movement such as Sardar Patel. This replicated Modi's attempt to create an alternative narrative of nationalism and postcoloniality, which held that many Hindutva figures, particularly Patel and Bose, functioned within the Congress. These unsubstantiated allegations became self-evident facts.

Another strategy was to maintain communal polarization between Hindus and Muslims. Since the days of the Rath Yatra, the BJP had adopted its stalwart L. K. Advani's concept of "pseudo-secularism," which mutated into the word *sickular* on social media. While Modi adopted an inclusive language, his fans identified the Congress and other parties opposing Modi with Muslims, a group who were in turn identified with Pakistan and vilified as "porkies." Their faith was regularly abused.

Figure 8. Cartoon lampooning Congress secularism, showing its leader saluting terrorists to "appease" Muslims, while berating the army chief.

Bhakts attacked Modi's opponents with terms such as *libtard* (liberal retard), *AAPtard* (retarded follower of the Aam Aadmi Party), *sickular*, *porkistani*, *commie*, *sepoy*, and *Macaulay putra* (the last two denoting mental slaves of the West), demanding they "go to Pakistan." These categorizations drew sharp antagonism between Modi followers and opponents, the us-versus-them that underpins all constructions of "the people" and their "enemies" in populist politics. Nearly identical comments by different accounts appeared on the same story on the same site and on similar stories on other sites, suggesting coordination.

In early 2014, after referring to published accounts of Modi's role in 2002 to question his suitability for the post of prime minister, I was blocked from posting comments on many news portals. On some sites, my sign-in was derecognized and my account blocked by the external log-in protocol. Subsequently, I opened a Twitter account in April 2014 to observe the well-reported crescendo of online support for Modi as the general elections approached.

Though Modi had opened a Twitter account in 2009, Pal, Chandra, and Vydiswaran (2016) note that it was in 2012, after declaring his intention to become prime minister, that he became active on the platform, tweeting challenges to the UPA government, accusing it of bad faith and incompetence, and raising slogans and promises listed previously. BJP handles provided links to videos of Modi's speeches, which were retweeted by his supporters.

Modi used Twitter to reach youth and first-time voters. After being endorsed by the Bollywood star Ajay Devgn in August 2012, Modi followed several celebrity accounts, including megastars Amitabh Bachchan from Bollywood and Rajinikanth from the Tamil film industry. Modi established affinity with these stars by visibly interacting with them on Twitter, and his messages were heavily retweeted among their millions of followers. Additionally, he consistently tweeted on youth themes. During the Cricket World Cup, Modi tweeted on Indian captain Dhoni as "Captain Cool," suggesting he was *au fait* with the sport, which is a passion in India. Modi's campaign also consistently released hashtags suggesting development and nationalistic appeal, such as #IndiaDevelop (Pal et al., 2016).

Modi's top tweets attacked the dynastic nature of the Congress Party, and the Nehru-Gandhi family at its helm. He mocked Sonia Gandhi's Italian origins and the naming of government projects after members of the family (Pal et al., 2016). His referring to Rahul Gandhi, the UPA's presumptive prime minister candidate, as Rahul Baba ("Baby Rahul") ridiculed and infantilized him, portraying Gandhi as unfit to lead the country.

In addition to delegitimizing the Congress and the Gandhis, Modi aimed to create and tighten affective bonds with his Twitter followers by launching hashtag campaigns. Pal et al. (2016) suggest that the #SelfieWithModi hashtag from the 2014 elections was an "example of interaction and reciprocity . . . that got people talking about the leader as one of their own. Anyone could take a selfie . . . and could then themselves be part of a hashtag thread they shared with their leader," thus "shaping the citizenry's imagination of its political leader" (p. 59).

Modi used Twitter as a way of composing the people that he would lead and deriving sovereignty

from them. Among youth, his active presence on social media contrasted with the absence of competing political figures, who thus appeared not only out of touch but aloof and arrogant. Retweets and likes were taken as endorsements of Modi's narrative and his programs. During a town hall meeting chaired by Mark Zuckerberg at Facebook headquarters in California, Modi joked that because of his active online presence, he faced several elections every day.[9]

Apart from centralized recruitment of followers and their diffused self-enrollment into Modi's project, an amorphous self-composing of the people and their composing of the leader are evident in Twitter practices by Modi's 28.7 million heterogeneous followers.[10] Some follow him for his developmental and technocratic governance claims. Their tweets and hashtag usage reflects support for specific initiatives: #SwachchBharat, #MakeInIndia, #StartUpIndia, #JandDhan, and so on. His #SelfieWithDaughter asked fathers to tweet photos with their daughters and created a ritual of union with the leader while reinforcing a patriarchal model of the family. Under the hashtag #MannKiBaat, Modi solicits content for his monthly radio monologue and asks for feedback. Modi also uses Twitter for "twiplomacy," engaging with international leaders, giving the sense of being their equal and their friend, followed by world leaders such as Barack Obama, Shinzo Abe, and Li Xinping. Pictures of Modi hugging world leaders are retweeted as affirmation that Modi had stature on the global stage. Another set of followers celebrates Modi's overt identification with aspects of Hindu culture, such as with #YogaDay or keeping religious fasts or praying in temples. *Bhakts'* tweets eulogized Modi as a superman: his legendary 56-inch chest, his lion-like attributes (See Figure 9). This portrayal fulfills a desire among many Indians to see India as a *vishwaguru* ("teacher to the world") and to be recognized among the leading countries of the world—a reality that apparently had not come to pass due to Congress corruption and incompetence and one that Modi would activate.

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[9] This event can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-N0d4NaMr7g.

[10] However, there are frequent reports that many of this number are "fake" followers (see, e.g., "Massive Networks," 2017).

Figure 9. You have to acknowledge: even a lion in the forest is not as carefree. And Indian prime ministers always speak from behind a cage on Republic Day and Independence Day. So no wonder that Putin salutes him, that Obama bows his head in respect, that Pakistan soils its pants, and China can no longer sleep in peace. The country salutes such a fearless and lion-hearted PM. Are you not proud of him? (Translation mine.)

Another layer of support is located in the realm of the utterly irrational, where photos were circulated of Modi's face appearing in natural phenomena, such as waterfalls (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Modi's face in a waterfall.

Twitter *bhakts* undertake hit-and-run takedowns of politicians opposed to Modi: Rahul Gandhi is portrayed as Pappu ("stupid boy"), and Mayawati, the Dalit leader, attracts negative comments about her looks. Self-styled "Internet Hindu warriors" post anti-Muslim, anti-opposition tweets, morphed photos and videos, jokes and cartoons, which are then liked or retweeted. Thus, Twitter became an arena for circulating and endorsing official information on Modi, but also a vast reservoir of half-truths and untruths, fake news, rumors, and slander against Modi's opponents. Several Twitter handles that posted violent or sexually explicit threats against critics, threatened rape violence and death, are followed by Modi. "Proud to be followed by PM Modi" is the ultimate badge of honor for Modi supporters, displayed prominently on their profiles. Many young people tweet Modi, begging to be followed or at least for their tweets to be replied to, liked, or retweeted by him.

My final account of "deep hanging out" is on five WhatsApp groups of school and college friends and family members. I aimed to observe, in a restricted-access setting, middle-class support for Modi, what criticism of Modi was permissible, when moderators stepped in to stop a conversation, and when people either left or were asked to leave the groups as a result of their posts about Modi. When I joined my school's WhatsApp group, my classmates were aware of my political affiliations and activities, and initially I was asked not to hold back my views.

Like other platforms, the groups were dominated by Modi supporters. In 2016, the moderator of my school group asked me to apologize for calling Modi an "agent of transnational capital" and for stating that his Make in India program was detrimental to labor and the environment. I complied, but a group member who held an office with the BJP left the group. I was informed that he left the group because the BJP social media team wants complete access to party members' WhatsApp accounts, and my posts, and any evidence that he associated with me, would show him in a bad light.

Factual and logical refutations of Modi's claims of success of his programs posted in the groups often elicited the response that this was "boring" and "too serious." I was taunted for "knowing everything happening in India while sitting in London." When I objected to Indian army action of firing pellets, blinding many young protesters in Kashmir, I was attacked for being antinational. Following my criticism of the so-called surgical strikes on Pakistan, a few of my classmates threatened to report me to the intelligence services. Many joked, echoing speeches by top BJP leaders, that I "should be sent to Pakistan." At this point, I bade good-bye to the group and left it. I was soon contacted by one of the moderators, who said that there was a strong feeling of a vocal minority that I should rejoin because they felt I was saying what they could not, due to the jobs they held or fear of appearing "too political." After this, more people on the group began posting anti-Modi messages.

WhatsApp functioned as a conduit for hoaxes and jokes. When criticisms of Modi's lack of delivery became loud in 2016, one post circulated on each group claiming that UNESCO had named Modi "the best prime minister in the world." Some forwards of this message were prefaced with a comment directed to me ("he won't agree but even UNESCO thinks Modi is the best"). When the post was revealed to be a hoax, I forwarded this to the groups and conversation on the topic stopped, with members claiming they had had "enough of politics" for the day.

Similarly, jokes and cartoons about Rahul Gandhi's alleged stupidity, Mayawati's looks, Lalu Yadav's corruption and lack of intelligence, Sonia Gandhi's Italian origins, and the like were common features in all groups. However, if I posted jokes and cartoons about Modi, group members objected and asked that the groups not be used for "politics." This cycle repeated about once every two weeks in my school group. In the other groups, discussion of politics is banned, though it still filters through, often as jokes and cartoons.

On social media, posts by and about Modi have an interpellative function through which millions self-enrolled in the Modi project, responding to centrally coordinated dissemination of party information but also to fake news, forged documents, cryptohistories, conspiracy theories, jokes, cartoons, hoaxes, and morphed photos and videos of political opponents. These platforms are the sites for the construction by the leader of himself and of the people but also, reciprocally, for the construction by the people of themselves and of the leader. These practices resembled what Gerbaudo (2012) calls "a choreography of assembly" (p. 6), which revolves around an emotional scene setting and scripting of performances of oneness. The comments sections themselves were "emotional conduits" that acted to condense "individual sentiments of indignation, anger, pride and a sense of shared victimhood" into "political passions driving the process of mobilization" (p. 14). Whether these constructions have political stability and durability is open to question, as Modi's legitimacy is challenged by competing populists.

Social Media, Counterarchives, and Composing the Counterpeople

In criticizing Habermas, Fraser (1990) challenges his singular conceptualization of the public sphere, arguing that along with dominant versions of the public sphere emerged "competing counter-publics," which constituted a "counter-civil society of alternative associations" (p. 61). Although the context of Fraser's critique and my focus here are very different, her identification of the existence of competing and contentious ways of constituting the public is relevant in these times of expanding and deepening social media penetration. In this section, I borrow elements of Fraser's critique to outline the emergence of publics and their associational forms that are opposed to Modi, and I offer alternate possibilities for composing the people, the leader, and their mutual relations.

For Fraser, it is subordinate groups who seek to form alternative publics. But as I argued at the outset, populism muddies the distinction between bourgeois/subordinate that animates Fraser's critique: Sections of the bourgeoisie and of subaltern groups combine under the leader into a new formation of the people. It is because of the endless heterogeneity of the population that there are, always, many possible peoples. In the context of India's highly competitive electoral politics, this implies multiple and competing projects of composing the people beside the currently dominant one.

Although most political parties and figures had limited social media presence until 2014, they increased their activity on social media platforms after Modi's victory. Competing with Modi's construction of the leader, the people, and their interrelations are those of Arvind Kejriwal and the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP), Rahul Gandhi and the Congress Party, Mayawati and the Bahujan Samaj Party, Mamta Bannerjee and Trinamool Congress, and so on. I will focus on Kejriwal and Gandhi. I will also highlight the rise of

new social movements of Dalits, students, and farmers as nonparty instances of decomposing Modi's constructs.

The Aam Aadmi Party emerged from the India Against Corruption (IAC) movement that started in 2011. Initially, leading activists of the movement such as Arvind Kejriwal (now Delhi's chief minister) worked closely with the BJP in highlighting the corruption of the UPA government. They were social media–savvy and had support in the media. When they had mobilized millions on the streets of Delhi demanding the resignation of then chief minister Sheila Dikshit, prominent TV anchors had likened it to the Arab Spring. Together with the Modi media blitz, the IAC movement created a sense of impending collapse of the Congress. The main beneficiaries of this were the BJP and Modi. However, Kejriwal and his followers became the BJP's adversaries when he led a section of the IAC to become a political party, AAP, despite the opposition of BJP luminaries in the movement. Kejriwal went into the Delhi assembly election of 2013 accepting Modi's leadership, with the slogan "Modi for PM, Kejriwal for CM." But Modi and Kejriwal became rivals when AAP first formed a government in the support of the Congress and, in a reelection, won 67 of 70 seats, the other three going to the BJP.

Both the IAC and AAP were adept users of social media. With his almost 11 million Twitter followers, Kejriwal ranks second only to Modi among Indian politicians. Drawing an exaggerated contrast with Modi, Kejriwal's muffler-man image embodies the name of his party (Aam Aadmi Party means "The Common Man's Party") and renders him sartorially indistinguishable from millions of Delhi's lower-middle-class and poor residents (see Figure 11). If Modi dressed up, Kejriwal dressed down. In addition to Twitter, AAP has used WhatsApp very effectively and now has a vast distribution network on that platform[11]. The Indian Express tweeted that Kejriwal was now the new social media star, with one of his speeches watched by 48 million people.

Figure 11. Arvind Kejriwal as muffler man.

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[11] In the 2017 Punjab elections, AAP social media strategists claimed that they reached 700,000 people in one hour via WhatsApp forwards (Rana, 2017).

Rahul Gandhi, too, has joined Twitter since April 2015, a relative newcomer, and has 2.2 million followers. The Congress Party official account has close to 2 million, and some individual leaders have six-figure followings. Congress and AAP supporters post links to Modi's videos from the past, where he holds positions totally contrary to those he professes today. They punch holes in Modi's claims of success of the Gujarat model and circulate stories alleging corruption scams involving Modi's associates. They use social media to make the case that Modi's charges against the UPA government were false and that his performance in power has fallen short of his promises and people's expectations. Congress-affiliated handles on Twitter also question Modi's growth claims, lampooning his unorthodox policies as #Fekunomics and #Jumlanomics. Congress leaders claim to represent inclusive nationalism, drawing a contrast with Modi's affiliation with exclusionary Hindu supremacist politics.

Social media did not help Modi win power in many states in 2016 in which the narrative of developmentalism he had assiduously cultivated could not dislodge other contending models. Congress Party, AAP, and other parties made heavy use of social media during the assembly elections of 2017 to satirize Modi and his floundering development agenda. But Modi announced a massive demonetization of currency, deactivating 85% of notes in circulation. On the back of this policy, he cleaved the electorate into rich versus poor, while his surrogates used social media to push an openly majoritarian message. Anti-Dalit and anti-Muslim messages were used in the election campaign, and in addition to social media, violence against Dalits and Muslims was used to consolidate the majority Hindu vote, recalling Blom Hansen's (2001) point that violence is constitutive of Hindutva's collective political identity. In the end, these narratives and the use of social media to push them won Modi the politically important state of Uttar Pradesh by an unexpectedly large margin, though the Congress won the state of Punjab and a plurality of seats in two other states. Losing parties used social media to spread reports of electoral malpractice by the BJP to delegitimize its victory, though these charges remain unproven.

Emerging challenges to Modi's domination of social media came from Dalit or Dalit-friendly groups and platforms such as Dalit Camera and Roundtable India, which points to the anti-Dalit bias of Modi's BJP (though also of other parties) at a time when Modi had included Dalits within his construct of the people. Relatedly, student organizations question Modi's youth icon status based on criticism of his education and youth policies, as they resist repression of their activities on campus. The new farmers' movements use social media, especially WhatsApp, for mobilizing and coordinating actions. Additionally, some highly active but dispersed individuals produce and disseminate content on social media.

To form a counterpeople, there must be a counterarchive on which to build a counternarrative. Modi had used media reports, WikiLeaks, and statements and speeches by Congress and UPA leaders themselves to build his counternarrative. The most important counterarchive for Modi's critics proved to be Modi's own speeches and statements archived on YouTube. Early into his prime ministership, the hashtag #CM_Modi_Trolls_PM_Modi was deployed. Clips showed Modi, the campaigner, opposing key UPA policies such as the rural employment guarantee, universal identity cards, general sales tax, foreign direct investment in retail, price increases, and the falling value of the rupee and promising to reverse them when he came to power. These were juxtaposed with recent footage, after assuming office, when he supports these policies, with news of price increases and the fall of the rupee, much more than in the UPA days. Variations on Modi's #AchheDin hashtags were developed to mock Modi's failure in delivering key

aspects of his promise. Modi's clip threatening Pakistan on Aap ki Adalat were juxtaposed with pictures of his unannounced visit to Pakistan prime minister Nawaz Sharif's family birthday party. Indeed, Modi's clampdown on social media in Kashmir or in areas of farmers' or Dalit movements, and record numbers of requests by his government to social media firms to suppress content, is highlighted to indicate the hollowness of his claims over social media.

Takedowns of Modi highlighted the lack of clarity on his marital status, secrecy over his educational qualifications and his degrees, and his relations with disgraced godmen. The term *feku* (someone who tells tall tales) gained wide currency. Attacks on his person reached a high point when, during Barack Obama's 2015 visit to India, Modi was photographed wearing a very expensive suit, giving rise to Rahul Gandhi's jibe about Modi leading a "*suit-boot ki Sarkar*" ("a government for the well-heeled"). Unverified stories of his allegedly extravagant tastes, cartoons and jokes lampooning his 56-inch chest, rumors, sexual innuendo, and slander also were released on various platforms, aimed at separating Modi from his brand and to show him as someone whose claims of a humble background and identity with the poor and the youth were inauthentic and noncredible. Modi's opponents also attack the media, with those now seen as closely engaged in protecting him from criticism labeled #Modia or #GodiMedia ("media sitting in Modi's lap"). More recently, exposing the disastrous consequences of demonetization, continued attacks by Pakistan, and lampooning his personal style are common on social media.[12] Twitter handles such as @SMHoaxSlayer and @alt-news fact-check and expose Modi and the BJP's exaggerated claims.

Human rights organizations, Dalit groups, and student movements opposing Modi circulated footage of the crackdown on campus Dalit activists following the suicide of Dalit student leader Rohit Vemula at Hyderabad Central University in 2016 and, more recently, atrocities on Dalits and Muslims by Hindutva cow protection vigilante groups. This challenged Modi's composition of the people, which had included Dalits and youth, without whom such a people would not have satisfied the electoral arithmetic to come to power. The ubiquity of the mobile phone made it possible to film such actions and to post them almost immediately on social media, where their circulation takes a logic internal to the platform.

Modi's social media dominance was challenged also by activists who searched out threatening or abusive tweets from Modi fans and reported them to Twitter, forcing accounts to be suspended or shut down, and reporting to relevant police jurisdictions when needed. Videos and photos sent out by Modi-friendly accounts were identified as altered and morphed, and those who posted them were lampooned and humiliated as #LowIQBhakts. Television anchors such as Arnab Goswami, Rahul Kanwal, Sanjiv Chaudhary, Rohit Sardana, and Gaurav Sawant, who are explicitly pro-Modi, were extensively trolled. The journalist Swati Chaturvedi, in her 2016 book *I Was a BJP Troll*, exposed the role of trolling, and other Twitter handles exposed fake news and its role in Modi's image maintenance.

Although vigorous challenge to Modi exists now on all social media platforms, I do not imply that a counterpeople has already emerged. True, Modi's critics were united in a common opposition, but

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[12] However, following the assassination of Gauri Lankesh, a Kannada-language journalist ridiculing Modi and Hindutva in her writing, a prominent satirical site, Humans of Hindutva, has closed down.

between AAP supporters and those of the Congress and Dalit, feminist and communist groups, there are also incommensurate positions. There is appreciation for the AAP's rapid rise, the simplicity of its leaders, and the high degrees of voluntary labor undertaken by its activists; but there is also suspicion of its RSS-affiliated origins and its past of opposing caste-based reservations. These have produced ephemeral solidarities on social media. There is appreciation for the energetic challenge posed to Modi by Rahul Gandhi and the Congress, but unease about lingering allegations of financial wrongdoing and its identification with dynastic politics. The radical presence of Dalits on social media has pluralized the very idea of solidarity while simultaneously problematizing it, as they have been critical of the communist parties. What is clear is that Modi as leader and his composition of the people is less firm today, making it possible for its component parts to be recombined into another version of the people. But Modi's dominance over this social media continues because he has, for now, a fuller narrative than his challengers.

Conclusion: Populism as Continuous Contention, or the Fragility of Hegemony

In discussions on populism, it is important to remember that in two of its predecessor forms, Bonapartism and Caesarism, the strong leader emerges to compose the people in response to multiple crises. As Mouffe (1988) notes, crises, to become politically charged contradictions and antagonisms, require discourse. In this article, I have shown that Modi's social media discourse and strategy identified a number of crises: an economic crisis, seen in declining growth rates, falling employment, and rising prices; a crisis of parliamentarianism in the classic Gramscian sense (Frosini, 2016), seen in the inability of other parties to represent those they claimed as core supporters; a crisis of security and law and order, seen in the terror attacks on the border and gang rapes in the capital; and a crisis of morality, seen in the alleged corruption of scam-tainted ministers. In sum, they represented an "integral crisis," in which "conventional hegemonic apparatuses are no longer able to build consent by normal means" (Caruso, 2016, p. 143). Modi's "verbal radicalism" sharpened these crises into contradictions between the then-leaders and the people and created antagonism between them.

These strategies of becoming the leader of the people happened at a time of rapid growth and the "irruption of the masses into political life" (Frosini, 2016, p. 524) through media and social media, to which Modi introduced a plebiscitary dimension by, for example, asking for call-and-response in public rallies and via tweets, retweets, forwards, and likes on social media, so that "faith and irrational passions become determining elements of political life" (Frosini, 2016, p. 529). Social media has thus become part of the "private apparatuses of hegemony," having a "complementary role in exerting political power" (Caruso, 2016, p. 142). However, as I have noted, the people do not exist prior to their composition as such, suggesting the contingency, indeterminacy, and thus instability involved in the very idea of "the people."

With Modi's ascendancy in 2014, and the movement style of his politics—one subsequently emulated by AAP and the Congress (and other parties)—the separation between party and social movement style and content has virtually dissolved. As Caruso (2016) notes, within media, especially social media, "a 'participatory' turning point has occurred. Everyday life and 'ordinary people' have been firmly placed in the communication flow. Newspapers, websites and television programs are constantly

asking the viewer/reader to intervene with votes, comments, remarks and testimonies." This simulates "the dissolving of intermediate bodies of democracy into direct relationship between people and power" (p. 154). In that sense, Indian populism today would be virtually unimaginable without media and social media.

However, for two reasons, today's populism cannot become hegemonic, and we will not have the long-duration rule by populists as seen in the days of classic populism. First, the crises to which populism is a response are continuous, and newer dimensions of it are revealed daily. In Modi's case, the crises of growth, jobs, and agricultural productivity have deepened due to his own policies, such as demonetization. That the leader who promised to resolve the crisis, and to compose a people around such a promise, is unable to fulfill his promise is testing Modi's capacity to maintain his hold over the people and prevent their disintegration into alternate compositions. Second, social media provides a platform for continuous interrogation of the claims of leaders and their supporters, allowing for attempts to undermine the ruling leader–people configuration. Rather than produce anything as stable as hegemony, social media in India is a vehicle for a politics of continuous contention between varieties of populism and a contested terrain.[13] In such a context, because all compositions of the people are unstable and therefore transitory, the formation of a historic bloc as the bearer of hegemony is difficult: Ruling notions of the people and the leader, under constant scrutiny and attack within and outside of social media, retain a fragility that cannot be contained by persuasion and consent alone, relying increasingly on active coercion by state and nonstate entities and the complicity of a plurality of the population.

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[13] Modi's government has record number of requests to Facebook and Twitter to block users and content, most recently on Kashmir and demonetization (see Sanyal, 2017; Singh, 2016).

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