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Editorial Note

This issue of SubVersions brings together work done by early career researchers exploring the fraught contestations over space – both online and offline. From an ethnographic study that positions selfies as acts of self-representation that allow for negotiations with gendered embodiment, to a another which explicates the resistance politics of diary-type blogs written by women; from a reconstruction of 1960s Bombay replete with contested claims to the city, to a study on the functions of satire within the digital public sphere; from an exploration of the crowdfunding of Indie projects, to a critical examination of algorithmic discourses that govern one's relationship with photographs in the digital era – the papers in this edition explore notions of resistance, power and control. With the publication of this issue, SubVersions reaffirms its commitment to support and further emerging scholarship within and across a wide range of disciplines that lend themselves to analysing and questioning relations of power and knowledge.

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Of Real Identities: Expressions of Femininity and Sexuality in Online Spaces

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Abstract

Most mainstream media discourses frame discussions around selfies of young women in ways that see selfies as promoting narcissism, self-obsession and as damaging self-esteem. In most of these discourses, there has been a jarring exclusion of the voices of young women who are the central subject of discussion. In response to such an exclusion, this paper presents ethnographic research conducted with twenty young women in the age group of 13-19 years, exploring their engagement with selfies. The paper argues that selfies need to be read as sites where, through the act of self-representation, young women explore the specific experiences of their bodies, including their negotiations with social constructions of gender and sexuality. The paper also explores the contradictions that are present within the narratives of young women and how these might complicate our ideas of agency, resistance and empowerment.

Keywords: Selfies, Social Media, Self-Representation, Youth Studies, Feminist Media Studies

Introduction

I find it annoying when girls pout or make duck faces in their selfies. They think they are looking sexy but they are not actually looking at the pictures themselves. If they see it themselves, they will find it funny.
[Tanvi¹, 18]

There are some who will behave a certain way in person and behave differently on Facebook. On Facebook when you comment on their pictures, they will thank you and behave very graciously. In person, they will crib about you. They can be very friendly and sweet to people on such sites even when they aren't.
[Jessie, 16]

I don't believe in double standards or that girls should be virgins or anything. Do whatever you want to do. But anyone will tell you that putting a selfie with your cleavage showing or in skirts that show everything is a stupid thing to do.
[Sheela, 15]

I begin this essay with snippets of conversations I have had with young women on the subject of selfies. Statements such as the ones above came up in response to discussions centring on self-presentation, authentic selves and online versus offline interaction, with ideas of body, sexuality and femininity getting invoked in different ways. This article attempts to make sense of these different narratives.

Self-portraits have had a long history, much before the advent of digital self-portraits or selfies. The autonomous self-portrait is believed to be an invention of the Renaissance era, when artists began to construct themselves as the central figures of paintings (Woods-Marsden 1998). The self-portraits of the Renaissance era have been seen as “an attempt to care for the self, a kind of self-exercise and self-examination, a duty to the exploration and advancement of the self” (Avgitidou

¹ The respondents' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

2003: 132). Avgitidou (2003) states that throughout history, self-portraiture has been “a primary tool in visibility politics, a visual statement of: ‘I exist’” (Avgitidou 2003: 133). Such a reading of self-portraits can be seen in Amelia Jones’s (2014) work, where she points out that the self-portrait as an autobiographical act has been explored by a number of female artists, such as Claude Cahun, Cindy Sherman, Hannah Wilke and Laura Aguilar, as a means of understanding how subjectivity relates to representation.

The body has been at the centre of many of these self-portraits. The self-portrait, at a visible level, is expected to mimetically represent the body. But more significantly, the self-portrait also allows an examination of the relationship between the body and subjectivity. In the case of women's self-portraits, the body assumes special significance because while women continue to be identified and associated with the body they are also seen as lacking knowledge of the same. This can be seen in the way most mainstream media discourses frame the discussions around selfies of young women. Most of these discourses presume that teenage girls more than any other demographic participate in taking and disseminating selfies; at the same time framing selfies in ways that see them as promoting narcissism, self-obsession and as damaging self-esteem. Together, such assumptions have led to an increasing moral panic around the selfies of young women and the inevitably negative consequences of the same. In an article titled, “Selfies aren't Empowering. They're a Cry for Help”, Erin Gloria Ryan (2013) states, “Young women take selfies because they don't derive their sense of worth from themselves, they rely on others to bestow their self-worth on them — just as they've been taught”. In such narratives on the selfies of young women, the derision and even alarm around selfies has come from seeing them as foregrounding the importance of physical appearances of young women in their identity formation. There have been critiques of how such self-representations are in fact objectification of the body and how their existence in public spaces only serves to garner validation within the male gaze. Selfies are thus seen as leading to a further sexualisation or “pornification” of culture, considered a potentially worrying situation especially with regard to young women. Any attempt to understand the selfie as an expression of identity, body or pleasure is dismissed in favour of seeing the act of taking a selfie as catering to validation by the male gaze. However, as the coming sections demonstrate, the selfie needs to be read as a site where, through the act of self-representation, young women explore the specific experiences of their bodies, including their negotiations with the social constructions of gender and sexuality.

Methodology

In order to understand their experiences of taking and sharing selfies, I interacted with 20 young women in the age group of 13-19 years. I interacted with them both online and offline, conducting in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with 12 respondents and administering email questionnaires to 8 respondents. In-depth interviewing as a method was particularly useful for my project in order to understand the, often unarticulated, realities of the lives of young women; including the complex negotiations with power that they make in their day-to-day lives. I also employed the auto-photography method, which can be defined as “photography carried out by the research participant rather than the researcher as part of the research process” (McCarthy 2013:100). With the purpose of creating a site where the respondents could insert specific selfies as part of the research process, I created a “secret²” group on Facebook, called “The Selfie Project”. The group was created so that the respondents could have a safe space where they could share their images. Most selfies that the respondents shared consisted of a written comment stating why they thought the selfie was interesting, the context in which the selfie was taken, what they wished to convey through the selfie and the ways in which they thought the selfie could be read by the audience. By bringing together the different respondents, the Facebook group also became a site where the respondents discussed and debated their ideas of selfies. Through my use of auto-photography, I attempted to find a method that would make the process of understanding the selfies as collaborative as possible. Reflecting on the participatory nature of visual methodologies such as auto-photography, McCarthy (2013: 87) says that what underpins these methods are “a notion of sharing- arriving at understandings together”. She states,

This goes some way to redressing imbalances of power between researcher and participant, often cited as a major methodological obstacle in feminist research. These visual methods hope to allow for a process of 'reflection' by allowing the participant time to think about what she expresses to express; to be able to do this creatively; and to express what may be difficult to express in words alone (Guillemin and Drew 2010). Images offer avenues that go beyond the spoken word, allowing the participant to say things that may be difficult to express verbally (Hogan and Pink 2010); to show their world as well as speak it. (McCarthy 2013: 87)

² A secret group refers to a Facebook group, where the name of the group, its members, as well as the discussions happening on the group, in terms of both text and images shared by the members, can only be viewed by those who have been invited to the group.

However, I must emphasise that despite the collaborative nature of these methods and the attempt at highlighting the voice of the producers of images, my role as a researcher needs to be kept in mind. In the writing of this paper, only those narratives that I deem significant find their way into the text.

The Body in Online Spaces

When looking at acts of identity construction, what are the modes of self-presentation that are possible in online spaces? What are the markers of identity that become relevant and are privileged in online environments? The impact of online environments in identity construction, especially with regard to the construction of bodies has been studied by a number of theorists. Early theorisations on the internet constructed it as a space which allows individuals to author their own self-representations and construct multiple, fragmented selves in opposition to unified selves and bodies. Sherry Turkle (1995) points to the possibilities of such fluid, multiple selves as the evidence of the Internet's potential of "disembodiment". Jenny Sunden (2003) unpacks Turkle's ideas and describes the articulation of Internet as a site for disembodiment "as a space unconstrained by the meaning and matter of the corporeal where the disappearing body is tied to the ancient dream of transcending the body" (Sunden 2003: 4). Early studies on the internet (Rheingold 1995; Turkle 1995) focussed on anonymous online environments, including chat rooms and MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons). These studies found that the possibility of disembodiment and anonymity allowed users to engage in radical acts of identity construction. In these environments, users engaged in constructing online personae that differed from their offline identities (Turkle 1995). This was seen as an empowering aspect of online spaces, since it allowed those marginalised by their bodies to escape their marginalisation, express their hidden selves (Suler 2002), and explore various unconventional identities (Rosenmann and Safir 2006). Such a potential for disembodiment also had radical implications for how gender was understood. Jodi O'Brien (1999: 77) looking at the earlier writings on the body in cyberspace, states,

Current research, science fiction and wishful thinking suggest that cyberspace will be a realm in which physical markers such as sex, race, age, body type and size will eventually lose saliency as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/other. An implication of much of this writing is that since these features are not obviously discernible in cyberspace they will cease to be a primary means of structuring interaction and freed of any embodied corporeal experience, the mind will generate new forms for rendering self and other and for organizing interpersonal communication.

However, the studies mentioned above are, for the most part, centred on sites that allow the option of anonymity. In my interactions with young women, I found that their engagement with anonymous online environments, such as chat rooms or MUDs, was almost none. Instead, most of their engagement with online spaces consisted of their participation in nonymous – opposite of anonymous – environments, including social media sites. Unlike early users of the internet, who sought participation in interest-driven communities (boyd 2008), and embraced the possibility of anonymity, the young women I spoke to used online spaces to strengthen their communication with already-established networks of friends, acquaintances, family members, relatives and teachers. Zhao (2005) calls such “offline-based online relationships” as “anchored relationships”. He states that such environments are characterised by online users disclosing identifying information, including legal name and residential location. It needs to be noted that Facebook emphasises such a structure of being nonymous. The Help Center³ page of Facebook states, “Facebook is a community where people share and interact using their authentic names. When everyone uses their authentic name, you always know who you’re connecting with. This not only makes it easier for you to find who you’re looking for, but it also helps keep our community safe. If you notice an account on Facebook that may be impersonating someone else or using a fake name, let us know.”

A study by Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin (2008) finds that identity construction in nonymous online environments differs from those constructed in anonymous online environments. They state that within such environments identity construction tends to conform to established social norms and people tend to express hoped-for possible selves. Zhao et al (2008: 1821) state that as part of constructing these hoped-for selves, “...Facebook users may emphasize or even exaggerate the part of their possible selves that are socially desirable but not readily discernible in brief offline encounters, such as one’s character, intelligence, and other important inner qualities”. On Facebook, which is the site most used by the young women I spoke with, the possibilities of presenting these inner qualities was seen in curated lists of interests, including favourite books, music, films and hobbies. One’s inner self is also expressed in the status updates posted by users. Shikha highlights the possibility of such acts of identity construction afforded by Facebook when she states:

3 <https://www.facebook.com/help/112146705538576> [Accessed March 8, 2017]

People think I am a very intelligent person when they interact with me on Facebook. On Facebook, people say my posts are mostly sensible, like intelligent videos or good updates about different issues.
[Shikha, 17]

How do bodies relate to such acts of identity construction in online spaces? A number of studies have looked at how, despite the utopian narratives surrounding the liberatory possibilities of disembodiment afforded by cyberspace, bodies created in anonymous settings, through the use of *avatars*⁴, continue to adhere to specific kinds of bodies. Angela Thomas's (2007) study of avatars in *Second Life*, an online virtual world, found that most users create avatars that are thin and conform to heterosexual ideas of attractiveness. Commenting on the pervasiveness of thin bodies even in anonymous online spaces, which otherwise allow for explorations of multiple bodies, Connie M. Morrison (2010: 2) states, "in ideal worlds such as Second Life, and in competitive online spaces such as World of Warcraft, perhaps the message is that individuals should choose ideal bodies". The construction of bodies becomes even more significant in the case of nonynous environments, such as Facebook. The structure of Facebook is such that the home page of the user, which gives information regarding the user's identity, also requires a picture of them to be uploaded. As Megan Boler (2007: 140) states, "...despite the hypes and hopes of the freedom offered by transcending usual images of the other, there comes a point at which users crave information about the traditional markers of the body- to know the 'meat' that accompanies the textual bones". Through profile pictures and albums, these online spaces encourage the sharing of one's photographs as a way of displaying markers of identity but also for purposes of self-presentation.

With such a strong association between identity, self-presentation and the use of photographs in online spaces, what do young women seek to represent through their selfies? danah boyd (2007) points out that since bodies are not immediately visible in mediated spaces, the act of constructing bodies needs self-reflexivity. She states, "While text, images, audio, and video all provide valuable means for developing a virtual presence, the act of articulation differs from how we convey meaningful information through our bodies" (boyd 2007: 12). In the coming sections, I will look at how young women represent their bodies through the selfies that they share on social media and how they understand these acts of self-presentation.

4 Avatars are characters that represent online users in sites such as online discussion boards and role-playing games. Most sites allow avatars that are custom-designed by users.

“Looking Good But Not Too Sexy”: Presentation of Desirable Femininity through Selfies

On being asked which kind of selfies she most shares on Facebook, Zaara states:

I take a lot of selfies at events where I am dressed well and have put make up. Even at home, if I think my face is looking good I take a selfie. My checklist for a selfie that will get uploaded on Facebook is that my face should look good, my hair should look good, my eyes should look good and I should smile. If I am looking tired or if my hair is dishevelled, then I don't put up that selfie on Facebook.
[Zaara, 19]

“Looking good” as a criterion of a good selfie or a selfie that is likely to be shared, was echoed by most of my respondents. Most of them stated that anytime they felt like they looked good and were happy with their appearance, they would take a selfie. While some respondents would initially use the term “looking good” without any substantiation, on prodding a little, most young women would add qualifiers of “thin”, “unblemished”, “tall”, “smooth hair” as constituting good looks. A number of respondents also shared that they prefer to smile in their photographs. Some of the respondents revealed that they had certain ways of taking selfies that would highlight their best features. Meera shared that since she is conscious of her short height, she prefers to take selfies with her camera held above her head rather than taking full body shots from the front. Ayesha shared that earlier she would take photographs with her spectacles on, but she now takes them off so that her eyes appear bigger. These ideals of big eyes, smooth hair and skin, thin tall bodies need to be critically examined for the model of desirable heterosexual femininity that they construct. The smile too can be seen as adding to this construction of ideal feminine appearance, indicating innocence and a pleasant and non-threatening demeanour.

In the interviews with young women and in an examination of the captioned selfies they posted on The Selfie Project, what becomes apparent is that such a performance of ideal femininity is not limited to how young women present their own selves and their bodies but extended to their presentations of friendships with other young women. In The Selfie Project, a number of participants discussed representations of femininity that they consider ideal and those they reject. Some of the selfies posted and the discussions that followed focussed on the act of pouting in photographs. Sheela posted a selfie where she is smiling and captioned it as:

I don't pout. I prefer to smile anytime! Smiles all the way!
[Sheela, 15]

Some of the other participants responded by “liking” her picture. Tanvi commented on the picture, stating:

I agree! I never pout in pictures too.

[Tanvi, 18]

Interestingly, in my interview with Tanvi, she underlines this aspect of shared aesthetic choices between her and her friends, stating:

My friends and I make fun of girls who wear lipstick and pout in selfies, like they are models or something! We only make silly faces or smile in our selfies. It's so much better than these pouty ones, which look so wannabe.

[Tanvi, 18]

Tanvi's narrative points out that her idea of a friendship network is not just based on the aesthetic choices that she and her friends consider ideal but also in opposition to an 'other', in this case representations of femininity that come across as “wannabe”. Presenting her circle of friends as superior in this regard to other young women also invokes a sense of exclusivity implying the uniqueness of her circle of friends. Tanvi's use of the word “wannabe” highlights that stereotypically feminine poses, or those that are considered too sexualised are seen as undesirable. Tanvi is not alone in this belief. In addition to physical attractiveness, a number of respondents stated that they would not upload selfies where they come across as though “they are trying too hard”, or selfies where they look “fake”. While highlighting one's best features through different poses and expressions was seen as acceptable, most respondents considered applying too much makeup and then clicking selfies as undesirable. Similarly, the use of editing softwares such as Photoshop to enhance one's appearance to conform to conventional models of attractiveness, for example using editing tools to cover acne scars, was critiqued by my respondents. Also considered fake are exaggeratedly feminine or sexualised poses, for example close-up shots of one's cleavage or pouting lips – derisively known as the duck face in popular parlance. Thus, conversations revealed that for some of the respondents, a display of desirable femininity in their selfies should be effortless and innate. Selfies that point to the labour that goes behind the construction of desirable femininity, through makeup or sexualised poses, are considered undesirable. In such an assessment, young women seem to imply that being able to present an attractive, feminine self should be organic and not be revealing of external influence. Such a linking of the moral and the aesthetic is explained by Kelly Buckley (2010) in her work on young working class women's engagement with celebrity culture. Buckley states among the young women she interviewed,

“natural beauty” is not just seen as a physical quality but a moral quality; those seen as wearing excessive makeup are considered “fake” and “tasteless”.

In conversations with my respondents, I found that in addition to rejecting what they consider “fake” self-representations, there was a strong resistance on the part of young women to the idea of “being too sexy” in selfies. When asked what they defined as too “sexy”, the responses included “girls wearing short clothes, exposing a lot in their selfies”, “looking hot, not looking cute, different from pretty”, “wearing tonnes of makeup, pouting, wearing really short clothes in your selfie.” In these descriptions, there was a distinction made between looking “pretty” or “beautiful” and looking “sexy”. All the respondents without exception stated that while they wished to look good and look pretty in their selfies, for most of them sexy selfies had negative connotations. Buckley (2010) too highlights how in the narratives of the young women that she interviewed, wearing excessive makeup is directly associated with “excessive female sexuality”, thus connecting processes of beautification with the notion of sexual respectability. Interestingly, it was when they were asked to describe what they considered as selfies that are “too sexy” that the respondents used the photo elicitation method the most. I observed that in response to the question, the respondents rarely responded with their own narratives. Instead, most of them chose to either describe or share selfies of other young women. In doing so, most of them deliberately distanced themselves from such representations. Pinky was the most critical of sexualised self-representations. She showed me a number of selfies of other women, both on Instagram and Facebook, adding her comments on each of them. Commenting on one of the pictures, she said:

Most of these girls look at pictures of Deepika Padukone or Katrina Kaif and they think that since those are the women that boys of their class like, they too must look like that. So they copy their clothes, their makeup, their pouts. But they don't realise that these actresses get paid to look like that. Actresses also do item numbers, now will you do item numbers just to be like them? These 14-year-olds who wear tiny dresses and makeup in their selfies think they look hot. They actually don't realise that others are judging them. They are getting “likes” not because they look good, but because they are getting attention from desperate boys.

[Pinky, 14]

Pinky's response also constructs a sexualised display of self as being influenced by imagery from popular culture, and therefore being contrived and not “natural”. On being asked whether such selfies are popular on social media, some of the respondents agreed that sexy selfies get more “likes” than just pretty selfies. Trishna states:

The pouty, cleavage showing pictures do get more likes than my silly expression selfies. But then I don't care about such likes because they mostly come from cheap boys who don't know you, who have added you because they want to see your picture. I don't want random boys to look at my pictures in such a way.
[Trishna, 17]

In the narratives of young women where they reject sexy selfies, not only are they attempting to reject outside influence but are also underlining the importance of self-awareness with regard to acts of self-representation. Phrases such as “they think...but they don't know/they don't realise” show that young women are aware of how images of self can be read in different ways and the meanings can differ from the author's intention. By rejecting such self-representations, young women seek to construct themselves as self-aware authors. This awareness of audiences goes beyond a simple need for validation. However, this attempt to “speak” for themselves as authors has the opposite effect of valorising control and agency or of rejecting influence. In recognising the *need for control*, most young women articulate the acknowledgement of an audience and how this influences their acts of self-representation. I look at this in the coming section.

Complicating Empowerment/Disempowerment through Narratives of Femininity and Sexuality

In the previous section, I have looked at how young women take selfies where they attempt to highlight and accentuate their physical attractiveness. Almost as a corollary, discussions of what constitute “good looks” were followed by what the respondents considered unattractive in selfies. Neharika confessed that even though she likes wearing dresses and skirts, she does not upload selfies where she is wearing a dress because she considers herself too fat. Similarly, Meera stated that she does not upload selfies where she thinks she looks double-chinned. It appears that even in the absence of an audience or feedback, young women learn to adhere to certain standards to what constitutes ideal bodies in self-representations.

Does the above discussion of how young women understand ideal bodies and femininities mean that they have internalised the male gaze in their self-representations? Such an assessment of their own bodies seems to echo Foucault's (1979) ideas of biopower. Foucault explains that the central role of biopower is controlling the bodies of individuals, thus creating ‘docile bodies’ that turn their ‘gaze’ upon themselves and regulate and discipline themselves on a material level, according to the cultural expectations and requirements. How they ‘should’ behave, or perform, is not subject to individual interpretation but is determined by mass standards. Applying Foucault's ideas of

biopower explains the pervasiveness of certain beauty ideals, which can be evidenced at multiple sites. In the case of beauty ideals that are pervasive in the Indian context and are valorised by young women, the popularity of fair complexion shows the predominance of Brahminical ideals, one that excludes Dalit women who are mostly identified with darker skin tones. Such a relationship between skin colour and caste is reiterated in the work of Amali Phillips (2004) who looks at the significance of skin colour in marriage negotiations in Christian middle class families in Kerala. She states,

...based on the degree of conformity to such cultural ideals, Christians' preference for fair skin works to the advantage of certain categories of women by positioning them for better marital outcomes...social norms that compel women from supposedly "superior" communities to display the ideal beauty standards and corresponding attributes that define their superior status, tend to marginalize other women who fall short of the expected standards. They lead to the "erasure"(Jayawardena and De Alwis,1996: xi) of women from other communities who are collectively excluded from similar expectations based on cultural definitions of caste identity and social place. (Philips 2004: 269)

Similarly, in their study of how Indian magazine advertisements and television commercials construct ideal femininity, Radhika Parmeswaran and Kavitha Cardoza (2009: 217) find that advertising “educates customers into particular technologies of the self” with their “pedagogical doctrines of femininity - fairness, slimness, youthfulness, light skin, long legs, and big eyes...”. As Amali Phillips (2004: 254 notes, “...as culturally defined categories, beauty and health also encode values and ideas about position and privilege in their myriad manifestations in specific cultural contexts”. Identifying feminine beauty with able-bodied features- perfect skin, perfect hair, perfect body- also shows the invisibilisation of disabled people from most mainstream discourses around beauty practices. Thus, while the ideals constructing feminine beauty may seem ahistorical and apolitical, a deconstruction of the same reveals that certain communities of people, including the upper caste, upper class and able bodied women, are vested with more power even within the all-pervasive male gaze.

However, it is important to note that despite often conforming to and not subverting the expectations associated with a performance of heterosexual femininity, exploring the self-portrait as a genre has allowed these young women to explore the implications of such a performance. On asking how important it is to “look good” in today's context, Shikha replied:

It is important to have a healthy self-esteem, but you can't expect everyone to be happy about their appearance. We live in a society where some sets of people are accepted, some are not. Looking good is

important. Even today, good looking girls have better chances when it comes to getting a job. It becomes even more important during teenage and also when you are about to get married.

[Shikha, 17]

Pinky too attests to this when she says,

There is more pressure on girls to be good looking, especially because of the whole pressure around marriage. I have come across a lot of scenes even on television where they talk about how dark skin will create troubles when you want to get married. Because of this, the general tendency is to pit girls against girls in a competition. Because of this competitiveness around physical appearance, you start underestimating yourself which is not the case with the guys. All these upcoming cosmetic products, those add to this pressure- “buy this or use this, you will look good, you will be successful”. Look at our actors, you take only very good looking women, who are fair and thin. There are very narrow standards for what is beautiful. Even matrimonial ads ask only for tall, fair, thin girls. I feel girls should be judged according to their education, the way they carry themselves and the way they talk. One can do very little with their looks, it’s something you have since birth.

In Pinky’s narrative, not only does she point out the disproportionate ways in which women are identified with their bodies, but highlights the different institutions where this pressure to perform heterosexual femininity is reinforced, including the institution of marriage. She is also critical of seeing the consumerist discourse as a means of self-validation and questions the rhetoric employed in the advertisements of cosmetic products. Such a reflection on how societal structures impact notions of beauty was most seen in my discussions with young women on the theme of positive body image. In a discussion on the kind of selfies she prefers uploading on Facebook, Meera states:

As a teenager, I am quite conscious of my figure, especially when I put these full mirror selfies, which show your full body and not just your face. I am a little conscious of my hips. I have never been uncomfortable with how I look but somewhere down the line I thought I need to start losing weight and be a little more active. My parents wouldn’t be mean about it but they would say stuff like Meera you are putting on weight, stop eating so much. It is also because a lot of kids can be really rude, which is why high school can be so difficult on some people, because of the stress on physical appearance.

[Meera, 15]

It is interesting to note that Meera’s narrative moves almost seamlessly from selfies to her desire to lose weight, to the pressure that she faces from her family and her peers regarding her weight. In another conversation, Sheela recounted how one of her classmates, who is dark and overweight, was relentlessly bullied by the others in her class. According to Sheela, the bullying had such an

impact on the self-confidence of the girl that she refused to be photographed even on social occasions. Most young women I spoke to were thus able to draw connections between society's preoccupation with thin, fair bodies and how these hegemonic ideals shaped their self-representations. Their narratives question the rhetoric of "choice" which justifies beauty practices as arising from the innermost "private" selves and as an expression of their own notions of beauty rather than one enforced from the outside. In the narratives of Sheela, Pinky and other young women, there is anger expressed at the pressure they experience to look good. This anger was most expressed in narratives where they asserted the importance of being happy with one's appearance and having a positive body image *despite* societal pressure and lack of validation. Jyotsna highlights a possible rejection of beauty ideals when she states:

I have seen that photos that are not typically beautiful don't get a lot of likes. Sometimes photographs of my fat friends barely get 10-12 likes. I tell them to not care about likes, to upload what makes them happy. If someone likes it or not shouldn't be their problem.

[Jyotsna, 16]

Sheela too advocates a rejection of beauty ideals when she states:

People say that girls should look beautiful all the time, girls shouldn't be fat and those who are chubby should try lose some weight, stop eating outside. My friends tell me to lose weight, I tell them I don't want to. Losing weight might get me a few extra likes on my selfie. But I don't care because I am a national level football player. I can play because I have power in my foot. I don't need those likes to be a great football player.

[Sheela, 15]

Similarly, through my conversations with young women, I learned that a rejection of "trying to be sexy" as a form of self-representation should not be taken to mean an avowal of slut-shaming or denial of sexual subjectivity. Instead, the narratives point to complex ideas regarding the sexual subjectivity of young women. 'Sexual subjectivity' has been defined by Deborah Tolman (2009) as "a person's experience of herself as a sexual being, who feels entitled to sexual pleasure and sexual safety, who makes active sexual choices, and who has an identity as a sexual being" (Tolman 2009: 6). Were my respondents dismissive of the importance of sexual subjectivity? To understand this further, I asked them about other aspects that could also be seen as constitutive of sexual subjectivity. One of the questions I asked them was whether they thought it was acceptable for girls and boys their age to have romantic and sexual relationships. 15 out of the 20 respondents stated that young women experiencing sexual and romantic feelings should not be considered

inappropriate. Most of these respondents stated that such feelings are “natural” and “inevitable” during teenage years. Seven of the young women shared that they themselves are dating and are involved in romantic relationships. On being asked if she thought it was ok to be in sexual relationships with boys as a teenaged woman, Jyotsna stated emphatically:

You do get attracted to boys, if they look good, if they have a good voice. If you get physically attracted there is nothing wrong. If I want to be physical with someone, have sexual relationships with someone, it is my choice, no one should interfere. You should do it with full knowledge and try to be safe.
[Jyotsna, 16]

Jyotsna's words capture her sexual subjectivity – she sees herself as a heterosexual being, recognises that she has the right to express sexual desire and that she has the responsibility of making decisions regarding to her sexuality. She also expresses her agency in heterosexual relationships when she highlights the necessity of “full knowledge”.

However, there were ambivalences in these narratives. Not all the young women I spoke to were so unequivocal about their right to express sexual desire. A number of them grappled with what the appropriate age for engaging in sexual relationships is. Sheela, Ayesha and Shikha stated that young women below the age of eighteen should not engage in sexual relationships, and that they should focus on their school, career and other activities. In most instances, such an expression of their own sexual desire was absent from the narratives of my respondents. While the yearning for romantic relationships with boys, centred on love or emotional connection, was something they expressed, I noticed a hesitation on the part of most of my respondents when it came to seeing themselves as sexual beings. Most of them spoke about sexual desire in abstract terms, preferring to talk of how they would react to their friends or strangers being in sexual relationships. Interestingly, more than one respondent clarified that despite their ambivalence regarding age-appropriate sexuality, they were also against any kind of regulation of other's sexuality. Meera stated:

Just because I might or might not do something, doesn't mean that I can tell others what they should do. If a friend of mine wanted to have sex with a boy, I would ask her once, maybe twice if she is sure. But if she states yes, then I would tell her to go ahead.
[Meera, 15]

It seems that young women do not reject sexual subjectivity but question the decision to put sexy selfies. In such a complex articulation of how they understand sexuality, they seem to differ from popular understandings of girls' relationship to sexuality. One such study that explores the

relationship that young girls have with sexuality is by Ariel Levy (2005) who states that within a “highly sexualised” American culture young women are encouraged to be “sexy but not sexual”. Levy argues that a sexualised media culture has encouraged young women to present themselves in sexually explicit poses and conceive of themselves as sexual objects to be desired by men. Levy (2005) points out that such an expression of sexuality is not empowering since it does not allow young women to express their own sexual desire. Unlike a number of scholarly articles that have debated the harmful effects of sexualisation on young girls (Bragg and Buckingham 2009; Gill 2008), my objective has not been to look at the empowering or disempowering effects of sexualised self-representation. Instead, what has emerged in the course of my research is that reading these narratives of what young women think about sexualised self-representations in conjunction with what they think about sexual desire or sexual relationships presents an interesting paradox. Unlike Levy's (2005) thesis, ideas of young women being pressurised to be “sexy but not sexual” were complicated in my conversations with young women. Some of my respondents echoed feminist ideas in their avowal of personal choice when it came to the decision of being in sexual relationships. However, when it came to talking about sexy selfies, the popular opinion was “better be safe than sorry”. They evoked ideas of loss of control over representation, improper impression management, risk, and violence in their rejection of sexualised representations of self in online spaces. Here, too, was an examination of offline structures of violence and control as they act on the lives of young women.

Conclusion: Selfies as a Site of Incoherent, Contradictory Identities

With my initial objective, in this study, of exploring performative possibilities of the selfie as subverting the male gaze, the pervasiveness of heterosexual femininity in the selfies of young women came across as a puzzling phenomenon. As seen in the narratives of young women on what they consider as “good selfies”, notions of attractiveness remain limited to a narrow range of thin, fair, straight-haired bodies. However, one must be cautious of dismissing such acts of identity-construction as disempowering. It is here that my methodology, one that foregrounds the importance of listening to the voices of young women, becomes relevant. In further conversations, where young women reflected on their own notions and ideals of beauty, they began reflecting on the socio-cultural influences acting on them that pressurise them to conform to certain standards of attractiveness. In their narratives, there is an awareness that such appearances are not “natural”. Their affirmation of a positive body image over societal validation shows that such normalised performances of femininity are always under the threat of disruption. This is not to state that

young women have been able to actively reject hegemonic ideals of beauty. However, for many of them, the selfie becomes a site where struggles over meaning formation and identity take place. Reflecting on this process of identity-construction and a questioning of the norms that regulate it is the first step of challenging the disciplinary mechanisms operating on the body. Grosz's (1994) ideas of partial, "perspectival" knowledge is especially useful in my understanding of selfies since she rejects the binaries of disempowering, not-knowing victimhood versus an ahistorical, non-contextual notion of agency. For Grosz (1994: 196), "...the body can be regarded as a kind of hinge or threshold: it is placed between a psychic or lived interiority and a more sociopolitical exteriority that produces interiority through the inscription of the body's outer surface". Such an articulation of the body as a text that both projects one's "interiority" as well as is inscribed by disciplining regimes is where the potential for subversion and resistance lie. In "Making Selfies/Making Self: Digital Subjectivities in the Selfie", Katie Warfield (2014: 2) suggests employing a phenomenological standpoint in studying selfies, a standpoint which forges "...a connection between image and body, rather than a Cartesian/positivist cleaving of the image from the body that produced it". Describing her study done with female selfie-takers, she states,

By exploring the person producing the image, the place of production, as well as the potential emotional and bodily relationships users had to these new digitally-circulated images as a connected whole process, the discussion became not just one of what the images say to various readers, but rather what the relationship is between the producer and the image in the process of image-making and how does that relationship provide insight into the emerging digital subjectivities for this group of plugged-in young women? (Warfield 2014: 2).

Foregrounding the relationship between the text and its producer also highlights the confusion associated with online spaces' possibilities of multiple selves and identities and the impossibility of performing and presenting a stable gendered self. As seen in the sections above, issues of identity are of great importance to young women. However, their explorations of identity, particularly their attempts to articulate their subjectivity through self-presentation and representation, give rise to seemingly contradictory narratives of self. Their relationship with beauty ideals and display of sexuality remain ambiguous, even contradictory with their lived experiences. Despite their desire to look attractive in their photographs, most young women reject make-up and edited images as "fake". While young women stress on the importance of looking "natural", they also recognise that beauty ideals in themselves are not "natural". They take selfies that conform to narrow standards of beauty, yet their affirmation of a positive body image seems to hint towards a questioning of the desirability of conforming to hegemonic beauty standards. Most of these young

women also question the appropriateness of sexy selfies, yet they do not disavow the importance of sexual subjectivity. Why is it that when attempting to understand acts of identity construction, the selfie presents more dilemmas and contradictions than coherent narratives? Butler's (1999) central thesis in her theory about performativity is that gender is not something we are endowed with, but something we perform, through "conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (Butler 1999: 22) which make one an "intelligible" subject. While recognising the difficulties of identity construction, the function of the self-portrait becomes a site for young women where through "repeated stylization of the body" (Butler 1999: 43), young women are attempting to produce themselves as intelligible female subjects. In her work on 'Taiwanese girls' self-portraiture, Wang (2012) states,

...gender is never merely presented as a fact in self-portraits, because it is constituted in the act of self-presentation and representation. When we talk about girls' construction of identity, we are talking not about the conscious constructing and planning of the appearance of 'final' identity, similar to an architect's blueprint for a house, but rather the construction of gender through iterative acts, some deliberate and some unconscious. This reflects the frequent assumption about photography that there is an agent - the photographer - who plans the subject, and when and where to take the photograph; but in the everyday context of self-portraiture, it is more often the case that one thinks through and in the act of self-portraiture, that the action feeds into one's sense of being a subject (Wang 2012: 227).

It is this possibility of "thinking through and in the act of self-portraiture" that gives rise to seemingly incoherent and unstable constructions of gender and sexual identities. The selfie becomes a site where young women neither accept nor reject the male gaze, but perform complex negotiations. The selfie becomes not a display of young women's passivity but an unstable site where they grapple with concepts of subject/object, agency and influence.

To conclude, the selfie eludes the expectation of finding a unified self, identity or body. The value of the selfie lies not in the "truth" that it tells about the lives and bodies of young women, but in the multiplicities, incoherencies and contradictions it reveals. These contradictions make the process of identity construction and presentation one that requires constant engagement, even questioning. Thus, the selfie as a site continues to be enthusiastically adopted by young women, as well as anxiously analysed by all those seeking to understand young women.

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The Political of the Personal Blogs through Discussion of Women and Homes¹

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Abstract

This is a study of a cluster of personal diary-type blogs written by urban, English-speaking, heterosexual Indian women bloggers. Through interviews with them about their motivations to blog, a critique of family structures and middle class conception of 'home' emerged. This article discusses how diary-type blogs written by the women in my study were far from just trivial, day-to-day logs of everyday activities, as all personal blogs are considered to be. Instead writing blogs was a political exercise for the bloggers. The article focuses on their discussions about homes in the blog-entries they posted and in the explanations they offered about those entries in their interviews. Not all bloggers proclaimed their practice as feminist but their blogs are certainly indicative of it. This article seeks to unravel the 'political' in these personal diary-type blogs and suggests that there might be room to consider personal blogs among other online platforms of personal dissent and resistance politics along with more acknowledged ones such as Facebook, YouTube channels, and Twitter.

Keywords: Women's blogs, Urban India, Online dissent

¹ This article is based on M.Phil research completed under the guidance of Prof. Anjali Monteiro at the school of Media and Cultural Studies in the year 2014.

As internet-based communication is gaining growing interest in social movements, civil society activism, and collective action literature (Castells 2012; Van Laer and Van Aelst 2010; Postmes and Brunsting 2002; Diani 2000), internet is also being discussed as a crucial medium of communication in social mobilization processes, protests, and also social change through the route of development in India (Rao and Dutta 2016; Poell and Rajagopalan 2015; Rangaswami and Cutrell 2012; Pal and Dutta 2012; DeSouza and Dutta 2008). A large portion of the literature on internet usage in India has concentrated on specific groups of users, primarily students, academics, medical professionals etc. (Sampath Kumar and Kumar 2010; Madhusudhan 2007; Malhotra, Ahuja, and Ingle 2006; Kumar and Kaur 2005), but only aiming to understand the use of the internet for seeking information. A more engaged, networked individual, actively accessing the internet for mobilization is found in the literature on cyberculture (Biju and Gayathri 2013). Yet, some authors suggest that this literature mainly focuses on individual lifestyle dissent as an entry point for engaging with protests; and wonder whether personal resistance on social media platforms has the same effect as actual resistance on the ground. However, overall there is relatively less attention given to online resistance and political engagement in the literature as compared to online information seeking even when there is growing interest among internet users in utilizing channels of personal expression for personal dissent and resistance through platforms such as blogs, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, as seen in the case of Anna Hazare's anti-corruption movement that commenced in 2011 and effectively used Facebook to gain support base², Shaheen Dhada's arrest because of a Facebook post, and Aseem Trivedi's Cartoons Against Corruption (Biju and Gayatri 2013). The everyday production of media by the public in the form of satirical videos that made commentaries on Arvind Kejriwal, Rahul Gandhi, and Narendra Modi during the 2014 election season is also a part of this repertoire where entertainment, politics, and public participation has been seen to go hand in hand (Punathambekar 2015). The author sees these artefacts of media production, such as AIB videos (All India Bakchod), videos circulated by The Viral Fever etc., in conjunction with commentaries made on Twitter, jokes circulated on SMSs, and such other parodies.

In the last decade in India, there have been innovative gender based movements that included online media as an important component. The Pink Chaddi Campaign of 2009 was a landmark in this regard and recurs frequently in discussions about new campaigns ever since. It was

² See The Hindu (2011) "Anna Hazare Rules Indian Cyberspace", 28 August. *thehindu.com*. Available from: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/anna-hazare-rules-indian-cyberspace/article2406506.ece> [Accessed on 10th March 2017]

organized via a Facebook group in protest of slapping and beating of women in a pub in Mangalore by Right Wing groups (Mackey 2009). Some later efforts of campaigning in India were also inspired by the Pink Chaddi Campaign, for example the ‘Red Alert: You’ve got a napkin’ campaign³ and the ‘Kiss of Love’ campaign⁴. Another example of civic participation was seen in case of a university student from the US who came to India on a study abroad program in 2013. On August 18, 2013, she shared her experience of repeated sexual harassment she faced as a woman traveller in India, on the citizen journalism forum of CNN—CNN iReport⁵. The essay she wrote went viral and responses came in huge numbers. While digital platforms seem to be encouraging public participation in democratic politics and matters of civic engagement among technology-enabled population, these have received relatively less attention in the available literature.

Personal-political nature of blogs

Personal diary-type blogs studied in this essay have the personal-political nature, which is laid bare through interviews with the bloggers. Studies focused on blogs primarily see blogging as an exercise of identity formation on the part of young bloggers (Chittenden 2009; Blinka and Smahel 2009). Fashion bloggers are a section of this literature where bloggers are seen as breaking out of the stereotype of publishing just personal-nothing-of-consequence on the web to bringing first-hand accounts of fashion industry from fashion shows and owning up their fashion (Corcoran 2006). Tourist bloggers who construct and deconstruct the idea of the country they visit including India (Enoch and Grossman 2010), are nevertheless seen as active and agentic subjects. In the scholarship relating to blogs, Herring et al. (2004) have suggested that personal diary-type blogs, often associated with women, are neglected and considered trivial,

³ Based on the ‘Pink Chaddi Campaign’, the organizers of the ‘Red Alert: You’ve Got a Napkin’ campaign started a Facebook page calling people to send sanitary napkins to the Managing Director of a factory in Kochi that force-strip-searched women factory workers because a used sanitary napkin was found in the toilet. See Firstpost, (2015) “This is no Pink Chaddi’: ‘You’ve Got a Napkin’ Protest Against Kochi Strip Search Runs Cold”, 5 January. *firstpost.com* Available from: <http://www.firstpost.com/life/this-is-no-pink-chaddi-youve-got-a-napkin-protest-against-kochi-strip-search-runs-cold-2030105.html> [Accessed on 10th March 2017]

⁴ ‘Kiss of Love’ was a campaign started in Kochi against attacks on a coffee shop by a youth activist wing of Bhartiya Janata Party. See Firstpost, (2014) “Kiss of Love: Kochi’s Version of Pink Chaddi Campaign to Fight Moral Policing”, 30 October, 2014. *firstpost.com* Available from: <http://www.firstpost.com/india/kiss-of-love-kochis-version-of-pink-chaddi-campaign-to-fight-moral-policing-1778187.html> [Accessed on 10th March 2017]

⁵ See CNN iReport (2013) “India: the Story You Never Wanted to Hear”, 18 August. *ireport.cnn.com* Available from: <http://ireport.cnn.com/docs/DOC-1023053> [Accessed on 3rd February 2014]

emotional, and less important as compared to filter type blogs – the blogs that classify and annotate information available on the Web – or the ‘newsworthy’ blogs, mainly associated with male writers. Several studies relating to personal blogs have focused on analysing blogs as a media genre (Herring and Paolillo 2006; McNeill 2005; Miller and Shepherd 2004) or have empirically studied the socio-demographics of bloggers, their motivations and habits (Schmidt 2007). In this study, I attempt to unravel what could be the personal and political for the women bloggers in my study who write diary type blogs. Out of the few studies that have attempted to understand the personal and the political in blogging are those focused on the ‘mommy blogging’ phenomenon. For example, Morrison (2011) talking about the phenomenon of mommy blogging suggests that mommy bloggers are the intimate public. Often writing about the personal experiences while keeping largely silent about the topics that are public, Morrison (2011: 40) says mommy bloggers “balance personal vulnerability against the benefits of disclosure and publication. They describe transmutation of personal feeling and experience into communal identity and practice, and possibilities of collective social action that can arise from this identification”. In these intimate communities, Morrison says, the social taboos about what can be said about the condition and experience of motherhood are broken. Few studies though have made a direct connection between blogging by women users as their participation in feminist political activism, with the exception of a few (Keller 2011; Schuster 2013).

In the Indian context food blogs have been studied (Sarkar n.d.) to suggest that new meanings of regional cultures are constructed as women write recipes on their blogs. New roles for women in households are constructed as they go from being cooks in the kitchens to becoming story/recipe-writers. And histories, or as the author calls them, ‘her-stories’ refashioned as recipes are altered according to new household and family contexts. However, here blogs are only a part of the other outlets of recipe writing such as cook-books. In the personalised narratives in diary writing studied by Sreekumar (2009), women’s diary writing tells significant stories that cut through the dominant and official discourse of the state of Kerala. While the official indices portray Kerala as progressive state with high literacy rate among women as well as men, the personal narratives of women show the underbelly of the state where there is high sex crime and domestic violence. In Sreekumar’s book the gender paradox is laid bare through the personal narratives of women.

Method

The human interactions that are possible on blogs often give rise to an online community. However, the studies of virtual communities have shown that some of the criteria to define a

virtual community are that, firstly, public interactions need to take place among the members, which is a permanent feature of blogs I studied; there needs to be sustained membership of a minimal number, a criterion that was fulfilled by the bloggers' group in my study, most of whom have been blogging for over four years. And finally, in a virtual community social relationships develop among the members (Jones 1997 cited in Blanchard 2004). There is a difference in opinions regarding what constitutes an online community and an online group. What differentiates these groups from an online community is stronger ties among the members characterised by stronger interpersonal trust even in absence of direct ties (Putnam 1995 cited in Diani 2000). Identities of group members and solidarities among them are an integral part for the online communities geared towards mobilization that may then result in collective action and direct participation in activism (Diani 2000). It is then possible to identify and study such a community through cyber-ethnographic methods. The bloggers in this study indexed each other's entries on their own blogs and commented on each other's posts, but were mainly involved in writing their individual blogs. The blogger's group studied in this essay operated more as an online group. The blogs studied for the purpose of this article belonged to urban, middle class or upper middle class women, and the politics articulated by them is associated with their experiences within that context.

This article is based on interviews with ten bloggers, each lasting one hour on an average, coupled with reading of blog entries made by the bloggers for three months. All the bloggers involved in this study have spent a considerable amount of time living in some major city in India and are now stationed either in India or abroad but have maintained a large readership with Indian bloggers and readers. It was a simultaneous process of reading the blogs and talking to the bloggers about them. When, in the initial interviews, a critique of home was mentioned by a blogger, it became a key to probe further about the same notion in successive interviews. That the construct of home was central to the bloggers in my cluster became apparent to me during an interview with a blogger whose blogging name itself consists of the word 'homemaker'. Home and homemaker reappeared when the second blogger referred to the first blogger in her interview. It was similarly spoken about by other bloggers, who pointed me to the entries they had written about home, or just spoke about home spontaneously in their interviews. Home was therefore not only a word in the blog posts, but it was a construct with shared meaning among the bloggers, with many agreements and disagreements of course.

As each blogger led me to the next blogger, a cluster of bloggers was discovered without 'participating' in their group. Therefore, for the purpose of this study I was more a reader of

these blogs, not a participant in their cluster. Blogs are among those online platforms where it is possible to be a completely unobtrusive observer, and there are disagreements about whether this approach can be called ethnographic (Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff and Cui 2009). But at the same time, the interpretive method of understanding blogs as media texts does not entirely capture how the blogs were engaged with. Karlsson (2007) has suggested that the blogs can also be ‘read’ in the same way as post-structuralist reader response theories suggest how media texts are ‘read’. According to her, the hyperlinked texts and interactive capacity of blogs – that allows readers to even contribute to writing of the actual texts – renders the reading of blogs to be similar to the reading of (media) texts, which is idiosyncratic and non-linear. In this study, the construct of home emerged first as a theme during some of the initial interviews with bloggers; it then became the interpretive frame by which to understand their blog-posts and to ask questions to the rest of the bloggers in order to explore it further.

The Home metaphor

In what may seem to be a simple articulation of a perspective of any homemaker, a blogger, H, says, “What is a good homemaker?... I find I am generally content as someone who enjoys the company of her family, is reasonably organized, also has some time and interests of her own, and is willing to accept that her family does not always agree with everything she says”⁶. Here, in light of the negative judgements that women homemakers have to face about being ‘non working’ members of a family or the expectations of them to be exceptional women with skills to keep a house well organized, H owns up to the title of homemaker and gives it a positive meaning. While the title of ‘homemaker’ could denote lack of independence to spend money, being a ‘good homemaker’ is related to looking after all the household tasks, maintaining a clean, organized home, looking after the meals for family members, and doing a good job of it all. For blogger H, the label of a good homemaker is connotative of the burden that upper class respectable femininity bears. Not wanting to uphold such an ideal of a good homemaker, she says, “I am glad I am born today, when a homemaker need not, necessarily, even be a woman”. Here she breaks down the stereotype that homemaker is a woman and household responsibilities are woman’s responsibilities.

⁶ The blogger is cited to have said this in an interview she gave to an online discussion site, blogadda. See blogadda (2014) “Interview With Indian Homemaker”, 14 May. *blogadda.com*. Available from <http://blog.blogadda.com/2009/05/14/interview-with-indian-homemaker> [Accessed on 6th February 2014]

The place of a house-help is a contested one in middle class homes; however, bloggers address this in their blogs, articulating their understanding and importance of house-helps. Blogger B says on her blog, "...having a house-help is not necessarily demeaning or lazy on the part of parents...". Wanting to be a working parent, women have to rely on house-helps and in this context, B writes, "...I see my helper as a skilled individual who can take over tasks that she does better... Yelling at helpers is symptomatic of a mindset that does not respect this kind of work". B's discussion suggests an awareness of her privilege as a middle-class woman, but also a reflection on what needs to change.

Blogger H says in her interview, "...people think that divorce is something filthy, dirty, shameful". Giving examples of her friends who continue to remain married despite irreconcilable differences, H adds, "I don't know why staying married is so important". H says having honest discussions about taboo topics is the purpose of her blog, which she says we often avoid doing.

"I blog about the everyday life of an urban Indian homemaker and her reactions to what's happening in the world around her. So, I blog against violence and intolerance, and against our use of tradition, culture and religion to justify anything that common sense might refuse to accept; I write against gender bias, a lot of this, and our biases against girl children even in educated families; against all stifling stereotypes; about my kids.

H's blog receives very large number of comments, sometimes even exceeding a hundred for a post, where men and women share their experiences of divorce, maternity, abuse, matrimony, etc. Discussing the issues that remain 'off limits' for middle class households is therefore the form that H's blog has taken over the years. She says,

"I used to call [my blog] my online home, for a long time. Now sometimes I don't even feel it's my blog. It belongs to a whole lot of other people who bring more through the comments. Sometimes some people have written such long and such sensible, strong comments, they could have been blog posts themselves. Many have started their blogs and that's wonderful. But right now I feel I am part of the people who are there and who are on the blog. It is sometimes not so nice, but I am happy with that, at least the issues that are discussed are definitely the issues I strongly feel for.

With several bloggers populating her blog, H's blog is no more her 'home', but the metaphor captured the imagination of another blogger, N, who is a regular visitor of H's blog. Inspired by H, N put the metaphor to further use when she started a blog calling it her 'nest'. N's description of her own blogging in fact explains how difficult breaking some of the silences in the middle-

class household could be, particularly when a blog has several readers. N talks about the backlash she receives through comments for speaking about matters that she has felt strongly about, such as abuse in marital homes, child abuse, and others. She says other bloggers have told her not to say anything unless she has something good to say about the posts. N says, “We are always taught, we should never wash our dirty linen in public, that is why you never open your mouth. But that is how women are being controlled also. So unless we talk, how can I expect others to open up?”. N says she is a survivor of harassment and abuse at the hands of her mother in law. However, having survived and fought through it, she says it was necessary for her to break the silence and her blog is a place where she has found supportive community that helped her overcome the challenges.

The topics that bloggers discuss on their blogs are often the familial matters expected to be kept private, the matters that N refers to as ‘dirty linen’. The silences around them protect the power structures in families, that are also constituted partly by women, that work against women in households. Breaking the silence becomes a political articulation that threatens the traditional hierarchies. Bloggers in the cluster of blogs were acutely aware of the power that these articulations could wield and spoke about the risks they must negotiate in order to continue this exercise of speaking up and building solidarity through their blogs, with other bloggers.

Blogger B, started blogging several years ago, in the run up to her wedding. She says,

“I had a lot of angst related to my wedding. And blogging was a way to deal with that. So I blogged about some of the things that happened during the planning of my wedding, and my fiancé got upset, ‘coz I was quite bitchy in those posts. So I promised that I won’t blog about that, but actually I created another anonymous blog, where I blogged only about my wedding.

She has clarified in an interview for a women’s e-zine that it was the privileges that groom’s family gets that go unquestioned had upset her about her wedding.

However, some of the risks that bloggers take lead to a backlash that forces them to close down dialogue on the blogs. B recounts the case of a particular post where debate turned into personal attacks. She wrote a post titled ‘Why I wanted payment for labour and associated work’. Summing it up in a sentence she says, “Ideally I would have liked to get paid money, but I got a substantial gift from my husband, after both my pregnancies and labor/after I gave birth. And people [readers of her blog] were just not happy with that idea”. The debate that followed got abrasive, and B had to close down comments for that section. H mentions that sometimes the same blogger writes harassing comments under various blogging names. The harasser brings

down an army consisting of his/her own replicas upon bloggers. H says, “Sometimes there is the same IP (Internet Protocol), sometimes the same person writing from different IPs, but their style of writing is the same. So, you immediately know”. N says,

Some of them we just ignore and they move away, because they get bored after some time. But one particular guy keeps coming back after every few months. He will go to H’s blog, then my blog and then a few others’ whose comments he doesn’t like. And then back again to my blog.

Trolling⁷ is directed against creation of a space where bloggers sound each other out regarding their ideas of home, family, women’s place in the family etc. in the given context. For the bloggers who have faced certain resistance from their families to their blogging, online attacks from trolls pose further barrier to continuing to blog. As H suggests, other bloggers often come together to protect their blogs in case of attacks from trolls. Bloggers share IP addresses of trolls with each other and warn each other. They are also able to gang-up against a troll, spread the word against him/her fast via other means, such as through private Facebook groups.

Blogger D explains why she prefers the metaphor of ‘safe space’ for her blog, a variation of the home metaphor. Being a survivor of an abusive relationship that had rendered her homeless in a foreign country, she wanted to start a blog where she could create a space for others who could share their experiences of abusive relationships. In absence of in-person connections, she has blogged at length about her experiences. She says that it is her responsibility to create a safe space for her audience on her blog. Blogging, she says,

“is generating knowledge, breaking isolation and empowering people. In order for these, you have to have a safe space, you cannot create knowledge under threat, under unsafe conditions; you cannot create empowerment under unsafe conditions, and break isolation under unsafe conditions. To have a safe space, where you can come and say, I am suffering, that is very important. [If] you are suffering, the first reason of your suffering is you are unsafe... So having a safe space is important.

H’s blog and D’s blogs have grown in readership to the extent that they are not personal diary-type blogs as they used to be. Nevertheless, the content on the blogs still articulates the politics of ‘the personal as political’. B’s blog on the other hand continues to be a diary-type blog, which she likes to call ‘her space’. However, she says, “for me, in terms of space to air my views, I don’t necessarily feel restricted as a woman in doing so otherwise”. Fine-tuning the idea of her blog as her space, she suggest that it is a space for discussions that otherwise don’t take place.

⁷ Harassing the writer by responding in an offensive fashion to show disregard and disagreement with the writer’s views is termed as trolling

Discussion and conclusion

Blogs studied in this essay are publicly available for readers who may stumble upon them, to read. However, first person narratives, self-exposure, personal information, and ‘taboo’ topics discussed on these blogs complicate their nature, making it difficult to clearly mark them as either personal or public. The distinction between public and private spheres as separate political and social categories has been challenged by the notions that the personal is political, e.g. Gal (2002: 78) reminds us that the distinction between public and private arose from the nineteenth century social analysts in Europe and United States, who assumed that “social world is organized around separate and incompatible moral principles that are linked to either public or private, such as community vs. individual, rationality vs. sentiment, money vs. love, solidarity vs. self interest”. However, far from being incompatible, the principles associated with public and private spheres coexist in complex combinations (Gal 2002). As women bloggers share their stories of domestic violence, marital abuse, reflections on reproduction, the power structures that guard and enable these acts are threatened as the personal and private is brought into the public realm.

The complicated relationship between home and women is dwelt upon in feminist scholarship; for example, Narayan (1997: 7), speaks about the silencing of mother, wife and daughter that occurs in family settings, a phenomenon she calls the “politics of home”. However, how women came to be thrust upon with specific roles within households has a historical context of nationalist movement. Partha Chatterjee’s (1989) critical review of the nationalist project has elucidated ‘women’s question in nationalism’. Women became part of the nationalist project when the tradition of *suttee*⁸ became the prime example of why there was a need to ‘civilize’ Indian people. For the Indian nationalists, though, this civilizing mission had to ensure that India imitates the West only in material aspects and retains its spiritual aspects, since, according to them, the spiritual domain of the East was far superior to the West. This nationalist discourse, that India would adapt itself to the requirements of the modern material world without losing its true identity, condensed into separating the inner world from the outer world – the distinction between *ghar* and *bāhir*, i.e. the home and the world. The responsibility of adjusting to the material activities outside of homes came to be borne by men, while women had to take the responsibility of protecting the spiritual quality of the national culture, no matter how their external conditions of life changed. In other words, they must not become Westernized. In

⁸ A tradition of burning a widowed woman on her deceased husband’s pyre, prevalent mainly among upper caste Hindus in colonial India (see Chatterjee 1989; Mani 1987)

Chatterjee's writing there is evidence to show how this distinction came about from the 19th century writing of men and women both. In one of the excerpt that he cites, there is an explicit emphasis on the housework that women in middle class homes must learn in order to have a "feminine virtue" (Chatterjee 1989: 630). This particular historical context has governed the relationship between household and women. However more recently the idea of the 'new Indian woman' has emerged who is a professional, independent, glamorous woman, consumer of goods, who partakes in the imagination of modern India in the globalized world. The 'new Indian woman' is an upper/middle class English-speaking urban woman who transcends her location in the domestic world. She is a part of the 'modern' imagination of India. Her 'respectability', though, now rests in the virtuous deed of not giving her job priority over her family (Thapan 2004; Munshi 1998).

In the cluster of blogs considered in this essay bloggers think aloud about how they see themselves in the new contexts and reflect on what changes they wish to see in the set-up of homes. The discussions often border on contagious and controversial when the re-imaginings of families and homes don't sit well with the readers who resort to trolling on the grounds of protecting morality. The personal diary-type blogs I studied are far from being trivial and unimportant. This study suggests that there is room for further focused investigation on personal blogs, which may have potential to be considered among the range of other means of online public participation platforms along with Facebook, YouTube channels, Twitter etc. in the matters of protests, and processes of social change.

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A Tale of Two Cities: Reconstructing the ‘*Bajao Pungi*, *Hatao Lungi*’ campaign in Bombay, and the Birth of the ‘Other’

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Abstract

Through this paper, I attempt to reconstruct the period of uncertainty in the late 1960s that had become a part of the everyday for hundreds of South Indian families, including my own, living in Bombay. Stitched together with personal narratives and oral histories, I look at the mood of rebellion and anarchy that played a definitive role in the making and unmaking of the political history of Bombay as part of Shiv Sena’s flagship ‘*Bajao Pungi*, *Hatao Lungi*’ campaign. As a parallel narrative, I have textually analysed the cartoons illustrated by the party founder Bal Thackeray in his weekly magazine, *Marmik*, which attempted to incite the Marathi-speakers through the ominous portrayal of the ‘outsider’ in the city.

Keywords: Shiv Sena, outsider, identity, violence, urban politics, oral history, exclusion, resistance

“In the calm and quiet of night, I went to the house of Ganpati Maratham, and greeted him with Namaskar, informing him that I had come to take his interview.

Ganpati looked at me with surprise and said, “Oh, after so many years the old Marathi language is again spoken today. How do you know this language?”

“I took the subject ‘Old Marathi language’ for my Ph.D.,” - I replied.

He said smiling, “Nowadays this language is never heard. In my childhood, Marathi was spoken in pure form; now that pure language is heard only in a small habitation of Chambal valley. A hundred years ago in Mumbai, Madrasi governors, mayors and sheriffs were appointed. The Marathi people of that time used to call these people outsiders. Then, the Madrasi lungi was a topic for fun. Today, everyone wears a lungi.”

“Yes,” I said, “Recently in a fancy dress competition, one man wearing a dhoti received a prize from the Governor... What a strange garment.”

- Bal Keshav Thackeray, on what Mumbai
would become in AD 2065 if the ‘Madrasis’ took
over the state,
Published in *Marmik* on August 15, 1965¹

After having spent an entire day on the street, immersed in the emotionally-charged sights and sighs of a sea of mourners during the funeral procession of the Shiv Sena party founder Bal Keshav Thackeray on November 18, 2012, the atmosphere back home was remarkably distinct.

While my mother was glad that childhood fears of witnessing “Bombay burn if Thackeray dies” had not come true, my 86-year-old grandfather KK Ganapathy bore a perceptibly anxious look. As he watched Thackeray’s funeral procession inch towards the Shivaji Park ground live on the television set, my grandfather’s memories of pain, fear and uncertainty – experienced more than five decades ago – made a swift reappearance.

¹ Translated from Marathi to English by Vaibhav Purandare in ‘Bal Thackeray & The Rise of The Shiv Sena’ (2012: 5-6)

Recounting the horror of being accosted and abused by “hooligans” outside Dadar station in the early 1960s, and later, forcefully stripped in public in the latter half of the decade, my grandfather – who had shifted to Bombay from Palakkad, Kerala in 1953, rued about how such instances had become a part of the everyday for him. “The first time I was attacked, I was afraid and was taken aback by the strong words of disgust hurled at me by the hooligans, who called themselves the ‘locals’. I was very hurt, but chose to remain silent,” said Ganapathy. “However, when I was stripped in public the second time, I was extremely angry. When the hooligans abused and mocked me by asking me to ‘Get Out!’ I retorted by telling them that they could remove my *dhotti*², but would never be able to take me out of the city”.

The Bombay of 1960s was a city frustrated with an unimpeded inflow of workers from other states, especially in the south. In 1961, Maharashtrians, who later came to be known as the ‘Sons of the Soil’, formed just 43% of Bombay’s population (Purandare 2012). Though no single non-Maharashtrian community gained majority in terms of number, together they were larger than that of the Maharashtrians. Thus, like my grandfather, several hundreds of South Indian families, who had moved in to Bombay in search of better lives and livelihoods, were suddenly grappling under the shadows of their own identities in the 1960s.

The garments they wore – questioned.

The vermilion on their forehead – mocked.

The language they spoke – scorned.

The money they earned – plundered.

The mood created as a result of the excessive competition for jobs and housing was what fed into the ideology of the Shiv Sena at its inception. What initially began as sporadic events of anger and violence soon led to a full-blown, collective clash with the South Indians as a part of the ‘*Bajao Pungi, Hatao Lungi*’ campaign. Beyond the rhyme, the campaign slogan was carefully designed to insult the ‘outsider’ in the city. *Pungi*, a wind instrument used by snake charmers, is a reference to street art in Maharashtra³, where in *Garudi*, a snake charmer blows the *pungi* in

² *Dhoti*, also referred to as *Veshti* in Tamil, is a four-yard-long garment worn by men to cover the regions below the waist particularly in the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Andhra Pradesh. It is draped in different styles, and is called differently in each of these states. Made of silk or cotton, it is usually worn by privileged, upper-caste men.

³ Author Anne Feldhaus describes the ‘*pungi*’ in the footnotes for her chapter, ‘Mountains, Rivers and Shiva: Continuity Among Religious Media in Maharashtra’ published in ‘Intersections: Socio-cultural trends in Maharashtra’, a compilation of essays edited by Meera Kosambi.

order to make the snake dance to his tunes. The *Lungi* refers to the four-yard-long garment, usually printed, traditionally worn by men from south India to cover the regions below the waist. Unlike the *dhobi*, which was worn by upper caste men such as priests and scholars, the *lungi* lacked social respectability. Considering the fact that the Sena itself was anchored in its Brahminical roots with most of its founding leaders belonging to the upper caste (Interview with Purandare; 2013), the campaign slogan was basically referring to the *Lungi*-wearers, the South Indians, as snakes who needed to be thrown out by the locals. Literally translated, the slogan meant ‘Blow the Pungi, Throw out the South Indian’.

This paper is an attempt to document those insecurities and fears of living as an “outsider” in a city that had been synonymous with “home”. It is also an attempt to trace the early beginnings of one of India’s largest regional parties, the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, that has sought refuge in divisive politics ever since, nourished by issues of increasing migration, communal violence, poor civic amenities and lack of jobs for local people.

A Tale of Deliverance

This violent form of politicised Marathi regionalism was commanded by Bal Keshav Thackeray, a political cartoonist, who formally instituted the Shiv Sena on 19th June, 1966. The Sena arose directly from urban unemployment. It responded to a real demand, for the organisation gained immediate popularity among the working class Marathi-speaking population.

It started as an ‘interest group’ to articulate what was considered to be the legitimate demands of the Marathi-speaking people in Bombay. Maharashtra was constructed as the homeland of Marathi speakers and South Indians, who made up for 8.4% of the population in Bombay in 1961, were cast as ‘outsiders’, enjoying economic prosperity at the expense of the ‘native’ Maharashtrian (Banerji 1998).

With a target audience – the Maharashtrians – that was spread out across the sprawling city, it became important for Thackeray to find a powerful medium to create the collective. Thus was born ‘*Marmik*’; Thackeray’s weekly publication that he used as a propaganda tool. Short, funny censures were made using humorous sketches and accounts of current events in Marathi that appealed to ordinary people. From 1963 onwards, the publication began to be known as much for its regular reproduction of the listings of Nairs, Menons, Shahs and Patels from Bombay’s telephone directory as it was for its satire. In fact, according to author and journalist Vaibhav

Purandare, *Marmik* was so effective in highlighting alleged discriminations that its circulation nearly doubled in 1966: from 20,000 in the previous year, it leapt to 40,000 (Purandare; 2012: 4).



Image 1: Bal Thackeray addressing Maharashtrians in the 1960s, viciously targeting the South Indians even before the Shiv Sena was formally instituted.

Photo courtesy: Bal Keshav Thackeray, Photobiography, Chinara Publishers, 2005

The original project evolved by 'Dictator Thackeray', as he has called himself, was fundamentally chauvinistic, but not primarily religious (Heuze 1992). South Indians, the usual explanation ran, had been migrating to Bombay and had begun to monopolize the office jobs in the city. As a result, the Maharashtrians were side-lined and were unable to compete with them. The reasons ranged from the fact that South Indians were more fluent in English, educated, and, in most cases, South Indians heading offices recruited only their own community members. Katsenstein (1973) in her paper, 'Origins of Nativism: The Emergence of Shiv Sena in Bombay', asserts how

it was backed by the notion of threat posed by ‘outsiders’, Shiv Sena won the support of the Bombay Maharashtrian community.

Through provocative speeches and tongue-in-cheek cartoons and articles published in *Marmik*, the ideology of ‘Maharashtra for Maharashtrians’ was voiced. For example, between April and September 1967, lists of officers of businesses and institutions were printed showing Maharashtrians to be in a distinct minority, only 75 out of 1500 executives, vis-à-vis South Indians who occupied 70% jobs (Purandare 2012: 19).

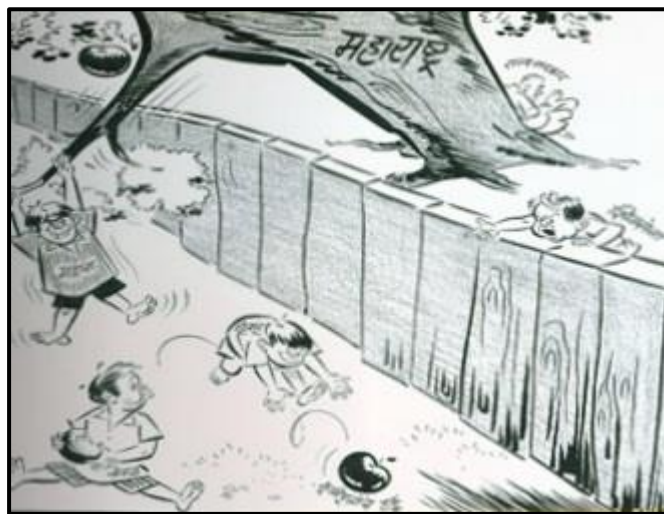


Image 2: A cartoon from Thackeray's weekly magazine, 'Marmik', portraying the impact of the influx of 'outsiders' in Maharashtra.

Photo courtesy: www.shivsena.org (Accessed: 30th March, 2017)

The Sena, thus, became a topic of heated debate. Its activities, some outside the ambit of the law, continued to grow. One such action, which invited controversy, was an attack on a South Indian hotel in Kala Chowki in central Bombay in February 1967. Thirty-two persons were injured in the stone-throwing by Shiv Sainiks, and four Sena activists were arrested. Bal Thackeray, however, showered praise on the Sainiks involved in the attack (Purandare 2012). Though they did not carry lethal weapons, violence was their creed and integral to their demonstrations.

The public outcry against South Indians continued to be generated, backed by the use of strong headlines and cartoons. For instance, one of the headlines read: '*Kaalcha Madrashi, thodyach divsat tupashi*', which meant that the Madrasi, who came recently, has become rich soon. On June 5, 1966, before the official launch of the party, Thackeray published a box in *Marmik* and

announced: “We will launch Shiv Sena soon to respond to the attacks of yandugundus [South Indians]. Have a look at next edition of *Marmik*” (Tare 2012).

In the weeks, months and years that followed, the streets of Bombay, which had earlier been calm, peaceful and united, had been divided into two – a city of the ‘locals’ and a city of the ‘outsiders’.



Image 3: Nearly four lakh people gathered on the Shivaji Park ground for the Shiv Sena’s first Dusshera rally organised on October 30, 1966.

Photo courtesy: Bal Keshav Thackeray, Photobiography, Chinara Publishers, 2005

A Tale of the Ambiguous Local

In the mid-1930s, Advocate CD Seshadri’s father – a native of Kerala – moved to Bombay and set up a South Indian restaurant in the midst of a Maharashtrian-dominated area of south Bombay. The family-run restaurant, which was popular for its paper dosas and steamed idlis, was swarmed by huge crowds including many Maharashtrian families, through the week. Seshadri, who was born and bred in this area, spent most of his growing up years, interacting with his Maharashtrian neighbours, classmates and friends. He spoke fluently in Marathi, celebrated festivals such as Ganesh Chaturthi and Gudi Padwa with great fervour and spent several evenings devouring food in his own father’s restaurant with his Maharashtrian friends.

However, with the advent of Thackeray's discourse against the 'yandugundus' – a jibe at the Tamil language – most South Indian-run restaurants became the easy targets of the vandals. Sena's strategy to collect funds included forcible extraction under threat from South Indians, shopkeepers and hoteliers as *protection money*. (Gupta 1980) In fact, after Thackeray's speech in October 1966, the crowd that had shown up for the rally on the Shivaji Park ground began vandalising Udupi restaurants as it dispersed, almost instantaneously marrying the new organisation's image with its mascot – a growling tiger.

Seshadri's family-run restaurant also met with a similar fate. The last nail on the coffin was the fact that the attack was carried out by vandals, which also included his "friends".

I had previously been warned by a group of close Maharashtrian friends that our restaurant was on the hitlist of the Sena workers. Thus, a day in advance, we had moved the money from our cash box to lockers in our residence. On the day of the attack, I told my father to attend to our automobile business shop, while I stayed back in the restaurant. Since business was usual and there was no smell of threat, I decided to go to the automobile shop for a while. By the time I settled there, I received a phone call from my restaurant staff, informing me that a large group of Sainiks had barged into our restaurant, damaged property and were trying to escape with the cash box. I rushed to the restaurant, only to find property severely damaged and the cash box thrown on the ground outside. Since I had been informed earlier, there was only six rupees in the cashbox, which probably, infuriated the Sainiks further,

recounted Seshadri. In the following months, the family was compelled to shut down the restaurant after receiving incessant threats.

The incident took the family by storm. Barring the damages that were incurred, it was the underlying current of an 'identity of the local', which continues to hurt Seshadri even today. In his own words

After the incident, even the local cops took more than two hours to come to our rescue. I kept questioning the reasons for being compelled to shut down the restaurant and live under the blanket of extreme fear. For someone, who spoke and lived with Maharashtrians, it hurt me deeply to be targeted by people whom I considered my own. Despite being able to speak in fluent Marathi, I reckon I was targeted only because it was not my mother tongue.

So, who was the 'local' that the Shiv Sena was fighting for?

According to Purandare (2012), exactly a month after the Sena's inception, directive principles were laid down for those desirous of joining it. Anyone wanting to be a Sainik had to take an oath in which the following principles are enshrined:

- 1. The Marathi people should help each other, and see that the Marathi mannos takes the path to prosperity.*
- 2. Maharashtrians shouldn't sell their property to outsiders, and if any local is found doing so, the nearest shakha should be immediately informed.*
- 3. As far as possible, Marathi shopkeepers should buy their goods only from Marathi wholesale traders and treat customers with decorum.*
- 4. Maharashtrians who have their own establishments should only employ sons of the soil.*
- 5. Young Marathi-speaking boys should develop excellent communication skills in the English language, and learn English typing as well.*
- 6. Casting away laziness, the Marathi people should form their own cooperative housing societies, and they should show willingness to go to any place for a job.*
- 7. Celebrate Marathi festivals and functions with Marathi brothers and sisters by participating eagerly in huge numbers.*
- 8. Locals should involve themselves in the activities of institutions, schools, ashrams, etc. belonging to Maharashtrians and donate generously for their cause.*
- 9. Boycott all Udipi hotels and do not buy anything from shops of non-Maharashtrians.*
- 10. Don't discourage the Marathi-speaking people involved in business and other professions, and keep them from losing heart;*
Instead, extend as much help as you can.
- 11. Do not behave arrogantly and crudely with your own Marathi brethren, and in case any of them faces any difficulty, others should collectively support him. (Purandare 2012: 22-23)*

However, the Shiv Sena that was organized originally to protect the interests of the 'local people', a term that had a range of meanings – one whose mother tongue is Marathi; one who has lived in Maharashtra or Bombay for ten or fifteen years; one who identifies with the 'joys and

sorrows' of Maharashtra – conveniently varied in usage with the Shiv Sena's changing perceptions of political feasibility.



Image 4: Through 'Marmik', Thackeray attempted to incite the 'Marathi Manoos' to fight for his rights against the outsiders. In this cartoon, Thackeray talks about how the Maharashtrians were fighting their second freedom struggle. The first being the one fought by Lokmanya Tilak for Maharashtrian identity.

Picture courtesy: Fatkare (2012), Prabodhan Prakashan (originally published in Marmik, 1966)

Thus, despite speaking fluent Marathi, acknowledging and celebrating Marathi cultures, and living in the city for several decades, Seshadri's family like several other South Indian families, were considered to be 'non-Maharashtrians', 'outsiders', and therefore, a threat.

A Tale of Sub-Nationalism

He spoke in a language that was distinct from Tamil, had neither lived in Tamil Nadu nor had any relatives staying even remotely close to it. Yet, Chakradhar Gundetty's family, which had moved in to Bombay from Nizamabad in Andhra Pradesh in 1945, were christened as 'Madrasis' and their language, 'Yandugundu'. "The Sena thought of all people hailing from South India as one group. Anyone who spoke in a language that was non-Marathi or had a perceptible accent was immediately called a *lungi*-wallah or a Madrasi," Gundetty said.



Image 5: Thackeray addressing the lakhs of people attending the first Shiv Sena public meeting on the Shivaji Park ground on October 30, 1966. The growling tiger in the background was the Sena's symbol. Photo courtesy: Bal Keshav Thackeray, Photobiography, Chinara Publishers, 2005

In reality, people hailing from the four states located in the south of India – Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka – had distinct identities, practiced diverse cultural rituals and were employed in varied occupations. While people from Kerala worked as coconut vendors, stenographers or as office boys, the Shetty clan and the other Kannadigas worked in the hotel industry. The Tamilians were mainly found working in banks or in enterprises holding clerical positions, while individuals from Andhra Pradesh were engaged in more labour-centric occupations such as construction work.

Journalist Kumar Ketkar (2012) who attended the Sena's first meeting along with "hundreds and thousands of other young boys", later wrote: "To him (Bal Thackeray) all southerners were Madrasis, and all northerners, Bhaiyyas... He thundered against Madrasis for snatching jobs that he thought belonged to the Marathi people. His philistinism was transparent as much as his political innocence."

Making peace with a fractured and misplaced identity was never an easy task for families like Gundetty's. First, they had to deal with the regional slurs that were directed at them for being 'non-Maharashtrian' despite making Bombay their home and accepting the city's culture. Second, they had to constantly tackle the misplaced identity imposed on them of being a Madrasi. Thus, it was a dual identity crisis – of being a Non-Maharashtrian and a Madrasi.

So, who exactly was this 'Madrasi' monster gobbling up the life and livelihood of the local 'Marathi Manoos'⁴? According to the party workers, anybody who came from any of the four southern states of the country – Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Kerala⁵ – was branded a Madrasi. It didn't matter whether they spoke even two words of Tamil or not. While referring to the coinage of the term in the context of Bombay Cinema⁶, Ravi Vasudevan (2012: 102) claims that the term 'Madrasi' dismissively collapses the entire southern region of India, and has been used in "stereotypical ways under an overarching North Indian, majoritarian Hindu identity". Often termed 'derogatory', the debate surrounding the usage of the term continues to remain relevant even today.⁷

⁴Literally translated as 'Marathi People', the term is often used in political contexts to refer to native residents of Maharashtra, for whom Marathi is their mother tongue.

⁵ These states made up part of the former Madras Presidency, an administrative subdivision of British India.

⁶ Thackeray maintained a long-standing influence over the Bombay film industry, which also was an outcome of the anti-South Indian movement.

⁷In 2014, four performers from a group called Stray Factory produced a video on YouTube called 'Not Madrasi, Just Padosi (neighbor)' to talk about the incorrect usage of the term.



Image 6: Instituted primarily on the basis of providing better employment opportunities to the ‘sons of the soil’, followers of the Sena often undertook rallies and protest marches in Bombay from the mid-1960s.

Photo courtesy: www.shivsena.org (Accessed: 4th April, 2017)

In its attempt to create a clear-cut hero and villain – the Marathi Manoos and the Madrasi respectively – the Sena failed to address crucial indicators such as caste. Thus, the ‘*lungi*’ and ‘*dhori*’ (or *veshti*), which have historically been a premise for caste-based exclusion in Tamil Nadu, were all pushed under the identity of the all-encompassing ‘Madrasi’. In fact, the term ‘Madrasi’ itself is a part of the vocabulary of discrimination. According to author Lloyd I Rudolph, (1961: 289) who has studied populist radicalism within the framework of Dravidian politics in Madras, the ‘true’ Madrasi is a ‘Tamil-speaking Dravidian’ whose race and culture are to be ‘sharply distinguished’ from the ‘Brahmin’s Indo-Aryan and Sanskritic’ racial and cultural roots. Thus, by adopting naïve and/or intentional universalisms of ‘Madrasis’, the campaign can be criticised for sweeping caste differentiations under the carpet. This omission of caste from its campaign discourse can also be linked to Sena’s political history: all the top Sena leaders belonged to the upper caste. The party thus, strategically maintained an avowed distance from class and caste politics (Interview with Purandare 2013). It drew its strength from Marathi migrants from the Konkan, who formed the party’s base.

The third crisis emerged from the very basis of the organisation’s ideology of counting unemployment in ethnic terms. In fact, politics, not economics or culture, was in command.

Thackeray referred to the injustices – real, exaggerated, or imagined – suffered by Marathi speakers in order to constitute them as the only legitimate people. According to Gundetty, his father along with several other uneducated natives of Andhra Pradesh moved in to Bombay to find jobs in mills or construction sites. Thus, the blanket claim that all South Indians were encroaching on white collar jobs meant for the Maharashtrians was an exaggeration.

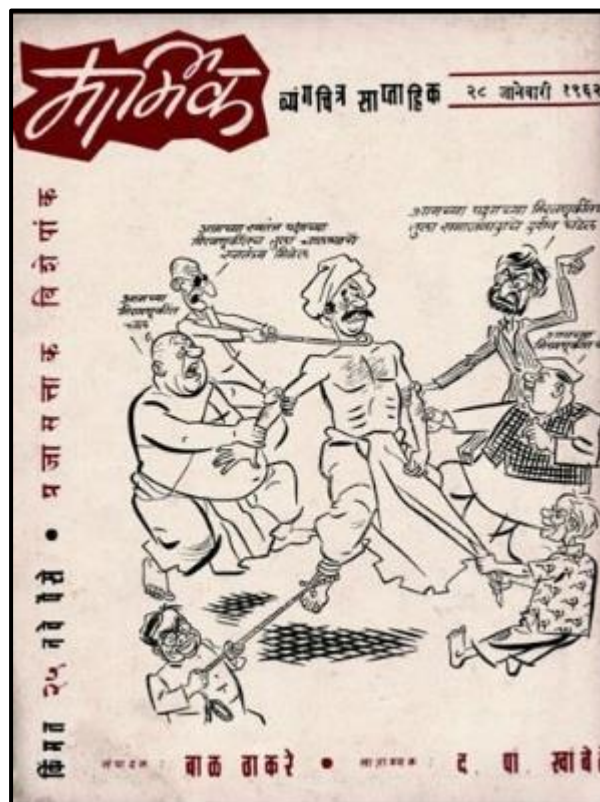


Image 7: Thackeray's 'Marmik' often talked about the poor economic conditions of the Marathi Manoos. In this cartoon, published in January 1965, Thackeray talks about how even as the year changed, the paltry conditions of the Maharashtrians stayed the same.

Photo courtesy: www.shivsena.org (Accessed: 4th April, 2017) (First published in Markmik, 1962)

However, this form of sub-nationalist politics was not restricted to the Shiv Sena alone. The mid-sixties saw the rise of many local and regional leaders, and political outfits. In Tamil Nadu, the DMK came to power, overthrowing the Congress for good. In Punjab, the Akali Dal established its roots. In West Bengal, the Communists became more influential. The Naxalite movement too came on the national scene in 1969-70. In Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, new opposition fronts were born in the 1967 elections. Though the Shiv Sena could not become a regional party in the classical sense, Thackeray roared just when this mood of rebellion and anarchy had begun to spread. According to political journalist Kumar Ketkar (as quoted in

Purandare; 2012: 26), many a commentator saw in the rise of the Shiv Sena, “a new militant Maharashtra”.

Thackeray’s campaign against the South Indians, received a fillip early in 1968. Following the 1965 riots in Tamil Nadu regarding the imposition of Hindi in the state, cinema houses in Madras had taken a decision not to screen Hindi films. Piggybacking on this decision to promote his own agenda, the Sena chief, in Bombay, set out to squash the outburst of nativist sentiments in southern India. He appealed to owners of Bombay theatres to stop screening films made in the south.

When the appeal did not work, coercive action was taken. In February, 1968, Sena activists attacked Ganesh Talkies in Lalbaug and stopped the screening of the film, ‘Aadmi’. Thackeray’s argument was that South Indian filmmakers earned money in Bombay and took it down south. Eventually, a ‘total ban’ on films made in South India became operative on March 16.

The Times of India (March, 1968) carried stories on its first page during the entire controversy along with side stories in its inside pages. It came down heavily on the Sena by interviewing members of workers’ associations. For instance, in a news report carried on March 10, 1968, SV Gole, general secretary of Bombay Workers’ Films Association has been quoted as saying, “No one would object to a Marathi picture, produced in Maharashtra, being screened in Madras. This being so, the Shiv Sena should not import provincial considerations into the matter...Workers are workers, whether in Madras or in Maharashtra” (The Times of India March, 1968).

However, *Marmik* reported otherwise. Welcoming the Sena stand, a section of the Bombay film fraternity felicitated Thackeray in the same month. *Marmik* reported: “To see that the ban was properly implemented, Sainiks visited quite a few cinema houses...the theatre owners said they had themselves stopped showing films from South India.” (Cited in Purandare; 2012: 54) Thus, Thackeray’s long-standing influence in the Bombay film industry also began on the anti-South Indian stand.

The reasons for this form of ethnicity-driven, regional politics practiced by the Sena, however, can be traced back to the dissolution of the Samyukta Maharashtra Samiti after the creation of Maharashtra in 1960. At that time, with the Indian economy suffering from a financial slowdown, the unemployment rates including among the middle-class Maharashtrians was high. It was for the first time, Maharashtrians were developing political will, which encouraged them to find jobs and understand the reasons for their poverty.

Thus, when Thackeray shouted from the rooftop, voicing the inner concerns of the ‘sons of the soil’ and telling them that it was the South Indians who had stolen their livelihoods, their enemy now had a well-defined identity: A *lungi*-clad Madrasi speaking ‘yandugundu’.

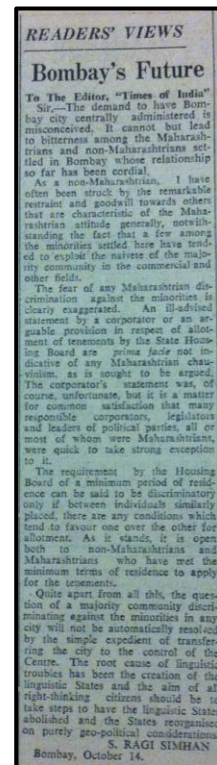
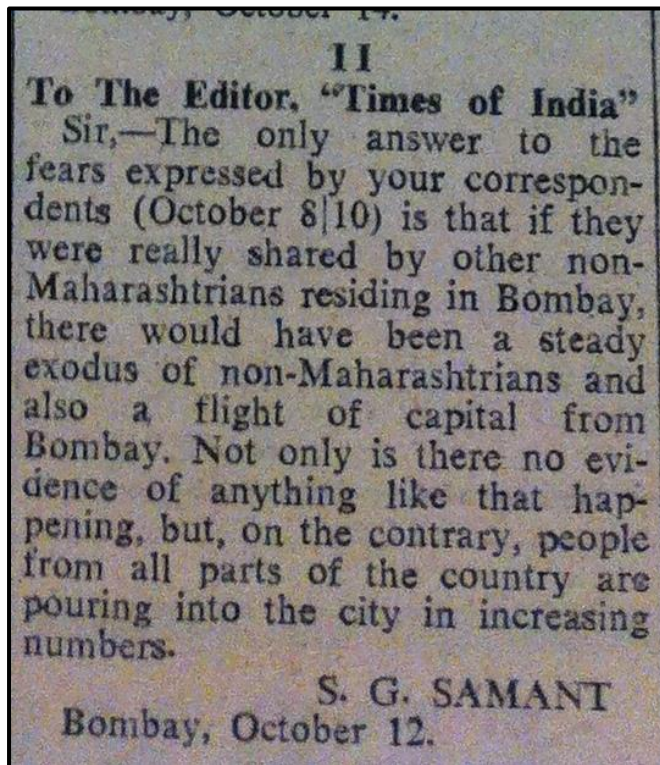


Image 8a and 8b: Clippings of 'Letters to the Editor' section of The Times of India written by non-Maharashtrians. (Published in October, 1966)
(Retrieved from the Archives of the Asiatic Society of Mumbai in August 2013)

A Tale of Negotiation

Living amidst the echoes of the '*Bajao Pungi, Hatao Lungi*' slogan, the fears of being cornered, mocked and beaten up in public, and the trauma of being called an 'outsider' or 'threat' in your own country was an ordeal for the South Indians in Bombay at several levels.

Parents refused to send their children to schools, the men usually moved around in groups, and families settled down in 'safe areas', which housed families that spoke the same language, hailed from the same regions and experienced the same fears. For instance, the Telugu-speaking population, moved in to areas in Kamathipura and Worli's BDD Chawls and the Tamil-speakers resided in Matunga, Sion and parts of Worli. There were conscious choices made to stay away

from Marathi-dominated regions such as Parel, parts of Dadar and Girgaum. Thus, it was inevitable for the South Indians to bring about modifications in their lives and lifestyles-economic, social, political and cultural.

In the case of Vimala Parameshwaran, who had been residing in Thackeray's neighbourhood even before the campaign had been launched, instances of *thod phod* (vandalism) were common. "As a neighbour, Thackeray had always been soft-spoken. When he started gaining power, our interactions had become limited. However, there was no fear from him, and in fact, it was only his followers who would indulge in anti-social activities." Parameshwaran (Interview in 2013) said.

However, it was for fear of being caught unawares by the Sainiks that the family decided to do away with the 'Iyer' surname, which was so far, a clear indication of their 'Madras' identity. For others, such as Ganapathy, who had personally been a victim of the Sena's antics two times in the past, it was a fresh attack on his musician friend, which brought him to boil. A renowned musician from Madras had come to Bombay for a concert, and was residing in Ganapathy's house. One evening, when the musician who wore a white *dhobi* and had applied sacred ash on his forehead, was walking down the streets of Shivaji Park, a few local boys cornered him and made fun of him. Shocked, unaware and extremely afraid, the musician could not retaliate because he did not speak the language. While he was trying to explain to them that he was in the city only for a concert and did not reside here, the locals pulled down his *dhobi*, laughed, and ran away. The musician, who was completely numb by this point, began to run helter-skelter hoping to seek refuge. A few good Samaritans, who noticed him on the street came to his help, took him to a nearby shop and purchased a pair of pyjamas for him. By the time he reached home, he was clearly disillusioned beyond belief.

It was at this moment that Ganapathy wrote a letter to Thackeray, questioning the rationale behind insulting fellow-Indians:

Instead of insulting the South Indians, why can't you instead, focus your energy on educating the Maharashtrians and make them competitive enough for the jobs? We are living in Bombay as legal residents, paying taxes and even accepting the local cultures. Why are you threatening us?

Though Ganapathy never received a response from the former Sena supremo, the situation soon began to change for the South Indians. There was anger and sense of deep frustration that had begun to emerge among them as they felt that they were being incongruously targeted. With the

police (fearing the Sainiks themselves) not coming to their timely rescue, the South Indians negotiated their spaces by countering the attacks in groups.

For instance, Gundetty recounted an incident inside an Udipi restaurant located near Century Mills, which was attacked by the Sainiks. A group of Sainiks barged into the restaurant with the intention of terrorising and looting the owners. The restaurant waiters managed to pull down the shutters, while the cooks in the kitchen used their presence of mind and boiled the oil. The restaurant owners then threatened the Sainiks that they would hurl the oil at them if they did not leave from the restaurant. This threat was enough for the Sainiks to flee.



Image 9: Women endorsed the Shiv Sena's ideologies and attended the rallies in big numbers.
Photo courtesy: Bal Keshav Thackeray, Photobiography, Chinara Publishers, 2005

However, even though there were innumerable instances of such violent outbreaks, Heuze (1992) in the article titled 'Shiv Sena and National Hinduism' states that the women and members of the lower castes were out of the Sena scanner. There were no instances of sexual harassment or caste-based attacks. In fact, during the course of interviews, it was brought to light that the women felt safe during that period and even attended the Sena rallies in big numbers.

The victims, thus, were mainly employed, South Indian men.

The reasons, in my opinion, for this ideological-cum-political decision could be summarised as follows:

1. The Sena's politics emerged from the 'Dada politics', which stated that the men were the *protectors* of women and hence, their dignity had to be upheld.
2. Politically, differentiating the lower-castes from the larger community would have narrowed down the Sena's reach. Hence, they decided to focus on the larger group of 'Madrasis' – which was also a relatively small section of the larger Indian community.



Image 10: Since 1960, Thackeray used the weekly, 'Marmik' to propagate his campaign and also make party announcements.

Images courtesy: www.shivsena.org (Accessed: 30th March, 2017) (First published in Markmik)

A Tale of Changing Tides

By the mid-1970s, Thackeray realised that the only way to enter national politics, would be by extending his reach. The organisation was formulated in a way to reach out a larger section of the population and also, consolidate itself (Gupta 1980). Thus, Sena's definition of the *outsiders* slowly began to change and other issues were brought to the fore. The Sena, according to Katzenstein (1973), became a fierce critic of 'anti-nationalism'.

In 1972, Thackeray set up his Sthaniya Lok Adhikar Samitis (local people's rights committees) in banks and government offices, and began ensuring jobs for Marathi-speaking youth (Punwani 2012). The fear of violence and his own clout forced the ruling Congress government to issue a directive to all employers in 1973 that 60% of managerial jobs and 90% of other lower category jobs in Bombay be given to those domiciled in Maharashtra for 15 years. Thus, Madrasis, who were so far considered a 'threat', were set free.

There were new enemies: Communists and Muslims.

Shiv Sainiks attacked the Communist Party of India's (CPI) office in the working-class area of Parel, and violently engineered splits in CPI unions. For Thackeray, leftists were anti-national. In fact, when Sena's Wamanrao Mahadik won the by-election in 1970 to become the party's first MLA, Thackeray while addressing the party's victory rally said, "This is our dharmyudh. It is the Shiv Sena's aim to destroy all those who are not loyal to the nation...Our victory is the victory of Hindutva." (Purandare 2012: 61)



Image 11: Armed with ink in hand, Thackeray voiced the injustices- real, exaggerated or imagined- suffered by the Marathi Manoos in 'Marmik'.

Photo courtesy: Bal Keshav Thackeray, Photobiography, Chinara Publishers, 2005

Meanwhile, unlike the South Indians, Muslims remained Thackeray's target till the very end. The party engaged in large-scale looting and street violence during the 1992-1993 riots in Bombay during the Babri Masjid demolition (Punwani 2012). Thus, with the emergence of a common enemy, the Sena also defined a common identity for the Marathi Manoos and the Madrasi: 'Hindu Nationals'.

In its political ploy to create exclusions, the Shiv Sena often switched tracks. Taking a 180 degree turn from its violent protests against the Madrasis, the party began to rope in South Indians as party members. In 2008, for instance, the party floated the Shiv Sena Kerala Mandal in Thane to

garner votes from Malayalam speakers (Mumbai Mirror 2012). This also came at a time when the Sena was heralding its anti-Bhaiyya campaign against the North Indians. Moreover, in 2014, ‘Captain’ Tamil Selvam, a Bharatiya Janata Party candidate, became the first Tamil-speaking Member of the Legislative Assembly in Mumbai (Nadar 2014) representing the Sion-Koliwada constituency.

Four decades ago, one could have never imagined that the *lungi*-wearing, yandugundu-speaking, job-snatching Madras, would ever be able to walk carefree on the street, let alone be elected to the Maharashtra State Government.



Several theatres in Bombay suspended the screening of Madras-made Hindi films on Monday following threats by the Shiv Sena. Picture shows the billboards at two theatres covered by a canvas sheet.

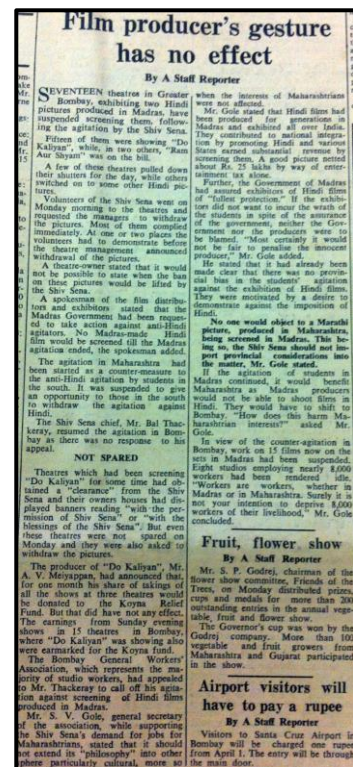


Image 12a and 12b: News clippings of The Times of India on the attacks on theatres by Shiv Sena activists to stop the screening of the film, 'Aadmi'. (Published in March 1968)
Archives courtesy: Asiatic Society of Mumbai (Retrieved in August 2013)

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Examining the Virtual Publics: The Case of Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy

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Abstract

The digital platform has emerged to be a complex sphere of contestations. In the Indian context, the ubiquitous practice of building personality cults and the gathering of followers or *bhakt*s allowed public figures to easily transition to the social media format to push their agendas. Self-professed gurus and government officials exploited the platform, generating click-bait posts that often displayed a total disregard for constitutional rights and fact-checking. Faced with an ever-increasing spread of misinformation, satire became one of the central ways for concerned citizens to express dissent. Several satirical narratives sprung up to expose the hegemonic narratives. These counter narratives fought the initial attempts to quell them through tactics of anonymity and subversion of the system and went on to become cult figures in their own right. The format of the digital media allowed for them to garner quick following and the digital sphere is now a battle ground between these contending narratives. In this context, the current paper attempts to understand the digital public sphere and the role of satire through the case of the Facebook fan-page called

Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy. This case presents an interesting instance to study the nature of the public sphere allowed for by the format of social media.

Keywords: Social Media, Subversion, Digital Publics

Introduction:

Social media sites have brought an unprecedented sense of connectivity and provided a shared public space for documenting each individual's life events, crafting their social persona and sharing their opinions on current events. The techno-optimists posit that in providing avenues for personal expression, new media technologies are professed to increase political participation (Papacharissi 2002). Some of the optimism is well placed, as there has been an increasing influx of the non-mainstream content and availability of several alternative spaces to express one's opinion. But several scholars (Boeder 2005; Dahlberg 2001; Deuze 2006) have cautioned against such a simplistic formulation. The virtual space is a contentious ground between several competing agendas and the emergent public sphere is also a product of the contending ideologies.

Social media's democratizing potential was pegged on it being a broadcasting tool which allows anybody with a certain amount of technical and educational capability to have a voice. But a careful examination would expose the convolutions of such a claim. Like any other mainstream media, including digital media, those without access are rendered silent. There are also questions regarding the veracity and verifiability of the content generated. The lack of gate-keeping, however, also makes it prone to spreading misinformation and polarising the spread of content through the circulation of personal agendas. With the careful monitoring of content by the state and increasing control of the digital platforms by the corporate media houses, undermines this characteristic lack of gate-keeping.

An important aspect of the social media practices is the production of personality cults. The production of personality cults itself is not new, but it is important to examine how cults are produced in the new virtual sphere. With the ease of production of content and particularly the ease of dissemination, i.e. anybody with access to technology can now disseminate messages without any financial costs, the business of producing personality cults has grown manyfold. There

are specific mechanisms of reaping benefits through the production of personality cults on digital media. A person with a considerable amount of following on social media is a commodity in demand; the benefits could be reaped in monetary terms through endorsing consumer products or in political terms by furthering one's agenda and wielding power over the followers. The social media platforms that have become sites of contestations of different ideologies can be analysed using the Habermasian concept of the public sphere. Though the concept itself has been criticised by scholars like Nancy Fraser (1990) for its limited applicability, it remains a useful analytical tool.

This paper attempts to understand the nature of the discourse constituted by the social media sphere and the role of satire in countering the hegemonic narratives through the case of *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* Facebook page.

Digital Public Sphere:

Fraser (1990) defines the Habermasian public sphere as a discursive space in which citizens deliberate about their common affairs, a theatre in modern societies where political participation is enacted through the medium of talk. This theatre of deliberation in the post-modern society has shifted to the virtual space. Digital media and particularly social media provide a discursive space for a large community of people. While physical communities were linked, and sometimes limited by, geographical and cultural connections, the virtual sphere stretches these limitations. Deliberations range from practical themes to ideological ones. Fraser (1990) argues that the Habermasian conception of public sphere is utopian and bourgeois, and has several exclusions, gender being the most significant. The social media space is in principle egalitarian and provides an equal voice to all the users, but an important question to ask is: does having a voice ensure being heard? Jankowski and Van Selm (2000) point out that the virtual sphere much like the real one is dominated by the elites. They argue that it provides public space but does not constitute a public sphere. Papacharissi (2010) argues that virtual public sphere is by nature exclusionary to those who do not have access to it. Further having information does not ensure an enlightened public sphere. Fraser (1990:62) also notes that “the official public sphere is the prime institutional site for the construction of the consent that defines the new, hegemonic mode of domination”.

There is a growing body of research examining the digital public sphere. Robertson, Vatrappu and Medina (2010) examine the political discourse generated on Facebook during the US presidential election, they use the Habermasian concept of public sphere to understand the exercise of deliberative democracy. They analyse the Facebook posts based on the frequency of the posts by

an individual and their commitment to the dialogue. Conover et al. (2011) analyse the political polarization on twitter during the U.S congressional midterm elections. They examine the interaction between the individuals sharing the same ideology and those with opposing ideologies. Halpern and Gibbs (2012) do a comparative analysis of Facebook and Youtube as platforms for political expression; they note that YouTube tends to score low on politeness due to deindividuation¹, whereas Facebook as a result of being connected to the individual identity begets higher politeness. Wojcieszak and Mutz (2009) examine online groups as spaces which hold potential to expose the individuals to different political views. Most of these studies use quantitative methods to understand the behaviour of social media users and, in turn, examine the nature of the political discourse that is generated. A large amount of research on social media has also studied its role in political activism and the role of social media in the Arab Spring, which was dubbed the twitter revolution (Howard et al. 2011; Gerbaudo 2012; Khondker 2011; Bhuiyan 2011). Wolfsfeld, Segev and Sheafer (2013) locate the role of social media in the protests; they emphasise the importance of taking the local context in analysing the social media behaviour and argue that the social media acted to complement the on-the-ground political activity. Tufekci and Wilson (2012) examine the role of Facebook in disseminating the information of protests, sharing news and coordination of logistics of protest. Khamis, Gold and Vaughn (2012) argue that the role of social media in a particular movement has to be contextualised within the broader political and social structure of each country and note that each instance has unique complexities.

There is very little research that has looked at social media in the Indian context. This paper attempts to study the case of a particular social media page by integrating it with the prevailing socio-political context in India. It tries to examine the nature of the public sphere realised on social media through the study of specific case of the Facebook page of *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy*. Peter Dahlgreen (2005) conceptualizes the public sphere as set of communicative spaces that facilitate exchange of ideas and formation of political opinion. He argues that the three dimensions, namely the structural, the representational, and the interactional, are useful in analysing the public sphere. He defines the structural as that which relates to institutional features; media ownership, control, regulation, issues of financing etc. In the case of the Internet this refers to the ways in which digital spaces are configured, accessed, and used. The content generated by mass media and the questions of accuracy, fairness, pluralism, and agenda setting are included in the representational dimension. The citizens' engagement with the media and how they make sense of

¹ Deindividuation theory argues that individual behaviour becomes socially deregulated in conditions of anonymity and group immersion, due to the reduction in self awareness (as cited in Halpern & Gibbs (2013:1160)

it is considered in the interactional dimension. This helps us understand the kind of exchanges that take place between different individuals on these platforms. This framework has been used to analyse the discursive universe in the case of *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* Facebook page.

The case:

Dr. Subramanian Swamy is an economics professor and an ex-cabinet minister who has been a prominent spokesperson for the *Hindutva* ideology. His public statements get a lot of attention and he is considered to be an opinion leader, his Harvard degree contributing to his image as a public intellectual. He is also very active on Twitter and has a following of more than a million people, whom he refers to as his 'Patriotic Tweeples' (Twitter Peoples) or 'PTs'. A global fan group called *Shankhnaad*, managed his Facebook page and with his consent, posted content based on the manipulation of facts and vilification of history. For example, in one twitter post he links Kashyapasa Gotra to Kashmiris (explained in detail later). In 2014, an anonymous self-proclaimed software professional parodied this page with another Facebook page called *Subramaniam Swamy*, with subtle name difference of Subramaniam instead of Subramanian. The intent of this page was to counter the propaganda of the fan managed page through satirical posts. Since this fake account used Dr. Swamy's picture on its profile and closely parodied the style of the original Twitter posts and *Shankhnaad's* Facebook posts, many ardent followers of the politician were hoodwinked into following the page and sharing its satirical content. When it was brought to his notice, Dr. Subramanian Swamy demanded that Facebook takedown the 'fake' page. Unable to distinguish between the fan page and the parody page, Facebook issued notices to both the pages to add 'Unofficial' to their profile names, as both of them did not belong to the real person. While the parody page obliged, the fan managed page didn't and hence it was taken down. The case garnered considerable media attention and has also been subject of several internet jokes and memes. The parody page, now called *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy*, continues to make satirical commentary on the statements of Dr. Subramanian Swamy and other *Hindutva* propagandists. Today, it is an active page with about 4,72,466 followers².

² From the time this paper was first presented in February 2016 to February 2017 the page has moved from 90,000 followers to about 4,72,000 followers.

Digital media and the branded self:

Since the digital sphere doesn't have gatekeepers, it is prone to attempts by individuals and organizations to use it as a propaganda machine. Building a following in the digital sphere is relatively easy and potentially doable by anyone. The principles of marketing and branding goods are now applied to people. Coupland (1996) argues that personal branding is hardly a new thing; it is as old as advertising. Individuals have benefitted from projecting themselves in the public sphere in several ways. One can see it as an extension of the celebrity from the culture industry to the larger society. Politics and cinema have always garnered mass following. While this was limited to a few film stars and some prominent politicians, social media has made it possible for ordinary people to acquire a large following.

Alison Hearn (2008) argues that the goal of the branded self is to produce profit. Here the self is seen as a commodity for sale in the labour market which must generate its own packaging, positioning and promotion (Hearn 2008). The branded self can be thought to produce surplus³ which can either be monetary or in the form of public influence. Branding produces symbolic values which are used repeatedly to create a standardized image of the person. Social media becomes an ideal site for such a project and helps build one's brand through short advertising messages (status on Facebook, 140 character tweets on twitter) and images (profile pictures). A personal brand is highly valued by the market. Different websites like Forbes.com, Zimbio.com, ranker.com, etc. release the list of most popular celebrities on social media from time to time, which serve as indicators of the market value of that individual brand. The value need not be in terms of financial returns but also could be in terms of social power.

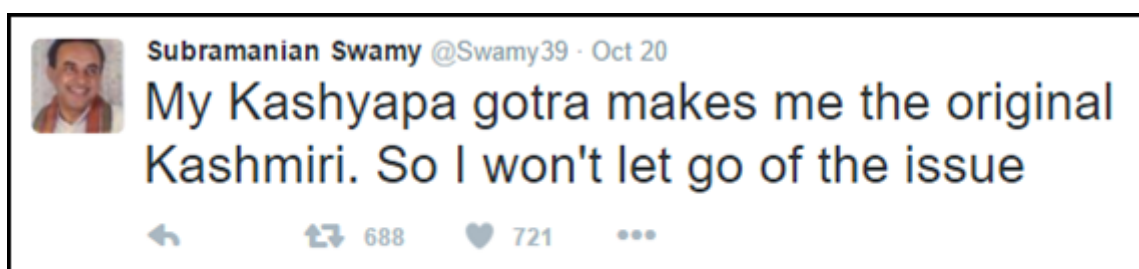


Figure 1: Dr. Subranian Swamy manufactures a connection between his gotra and being a Kashmiri thereby garnering support to the Hindutva idea of settling Hindus in Kashmir.

³ Speaking with regard to South Indian film stars, Madhav Prasad (2013) talks of two kinds of surplus amassed by a star; economic and political.

The Twitter activity of Dr. Subramanian Swamy can be looked at as a part of an attempt to create a personal brand. Though his political career spans several decades, social media has amplified his popularity. A very active tweeter since 2009, Swamy has built up his social media persona as a public intellectual and a fearless proponent of *Hindutva* ideology (The Huffington Post, India 2015). He follows an acerbic style on twitter with a frequent use of portmanteau to refer to opponents. For example: ‘Sickulars’ for secular opponents to his *Hindutva* propaganda and ‘Aaptards’ to refer to supporters of the political party AAP etc. He also gives sarcastic nick names to his opponents. For example: Robber to refer to Robert Vadra, Shree 420 to refer to Arvind Kejriwal, etc. He has garnered about 3.72 million⁴ followers on twitter and a lot of the terminology coined by him has been adopted by his followers.

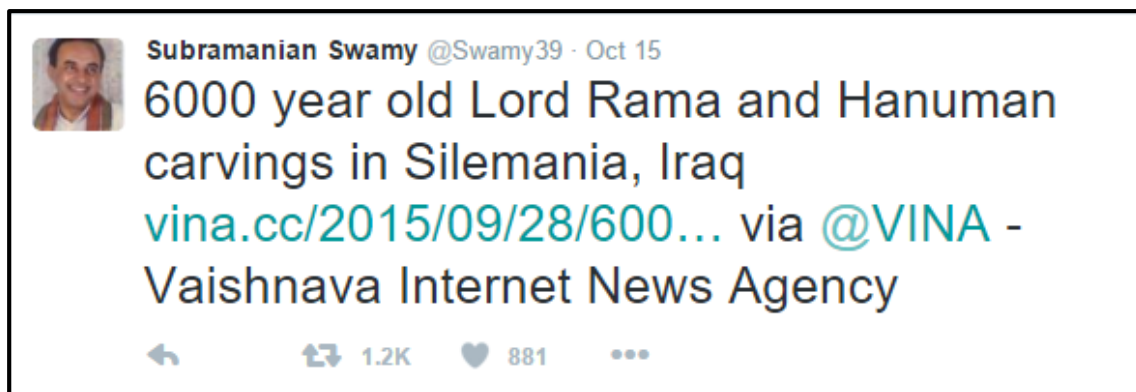


Figure 2: Dr. Subramanian Swamy posts about Hindu carvings in Iraq quoting nondescript sources like Vaishnava news agency.

Figure 1 shows one of his tweets where he manufactures a connection between his *gotra*⁵ and being a Kashmiri thereby garnering support for the *Hindutva* idea of settling Hindus in Kashmir. By this logic, his ‘gotra roots’ direct that he is the ‘original’ Kashmiri, so the occupation now gets justified as his right. The ultimate goal is to turn Hindus into a majority everywhere and quell the power of the minorities. Figure 2 shows his attempt to present ancient Hindu roots in Iran through some manufactured sources like Vaishnava news agency. Dr. Swamy repeatedly invokes the ideal of an

⁴ This is the figure as on 11 February 2017

⁵ Gotra is the clan name in Hindu religion.

‘Akhand Bharat’ or an undivided nation of Hindus that will be established across the world. Through the use of his signature terminology his attempts can be seen as a way of promoting himself as a brand ambassador for *Hindutva* ideology on social media. The characteristics of his personal brand can be identified as unabashed proponent of *Hindutva*, who doesn’t present a garb of secularism (like ‘Sickulars’) and speaks for Hindu domination. These posts are aimed at making a social media spectacle and thus garner a large following that holds the potential to translate into greater political negotiation power.

The Facebook fan page of Dr. Swamy was managed by a *Hindutva* group called Shankhnaad which posted similar unsubstantiated content with the sole aim of propagating the *Hindutva* ideology.

Dr. Subramanian Swamy and *the unofficial Subramaniam Swamy*.

In the following paragraphs we will analyse the Shankhnaad fan page by adopting Dahlgreen’s (2005) framework that considers the structural, the representational and the interactional dimensions of the public sphere.

The structural dimension: As argued earlier, both the fan page and the fake page are hosted on Facebook and operate by the rules set by it. Facebook has the capacity to monitor and control the flow of communication on it. At the level of the individual pages, Dr. Swamy’s page is managed by a specialized agency which is adept at spin doctoring (the Shankhnaad.net page presents the team which works on different projects); Dr. Swamy himself being a well-known politician has the financial and political agency to have a voice in the social media space. The professionally managed page with considerable financial backing has the ability to employ techniques to garner views and followers.

The Representational dimension: The media output of the Shankhnaad fan page is the ideology of Hindu right and in terms of interaction, all the engagement is driven towards silencing any alternative opinions and to ‘market’ *Hindutva* to the digital citizens. This continual production of content to propagate the *Hindutva* ideology produces a hegemonic discourse on social media.

The interaction dimension: The Facebook page of Dr. Subramanian Swamy has a clear agenda to promote the *Hindutva* ideology and hence encourages interaction aimed at showing the supremacy of the *Hindutva* ideology; all comments and interactions are aimed at furthering this agenda. The engagement is among like-minded *Hindutva* ideologues and there is little or no engagement with alternative views.

Here the platform of Facebook must also be discussed; the act of liking or following a particular ideological page on Facebook becomes the act of affirming one's affiliation to a particular person or idea. By liking a page an individual is a) showing consent to receive information about the page b) pledging allegiance to the idea that the page represents c) announcing this allegiance to the world. Thus, an individual who likes Dr. Subramanian Swamy's page would most probably have been a follower of his rhetoric or the proponent of the *Hindutva* ideology. As the act of 'sociality' in social media i.e., the act of announcing one's 'likes' to the world is a public act, there is very little chance for people who do not agree to the *Hindutva* ideology to like or follow the page. There is also a possibility of individuals who want to counter the *Hindutva* discourse to like the page and counter the propaganda of the page. But this is very rare as the strength of the followers overpowers any possibility of alternative views. Thus, the format of the platform itself limits the kind of engagement that can happen on the people specific or idea specific pages.

To this hegemonic narrative, the Facebook page *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* can be seen as a counter narrative. Although Dr. Swamy has been active on Twitter since 2009, and the *Shankbnaad* fan page is operational since 2012, it was only in 2014 that the creator of the *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* Facebook page felt the need to present a satirical counter narrative to the dominant *Hindutva* campaign. In an interview to rediff.com, the anonymous person who created the page says,

Of late -- from one year -- I have been seeing Subramanian Swamy's page -- managed by Shankbnaad -- with lots of misinformation against Christians, Muslims, Hindus. And they try to prove it with Photoshopped pics. It was very disturbing seeing the educated lot sharing such info without thinking. That's when this idea struck me. I also follow Swamy on Twitter, and was aware of his tweeting style. So I created this page to show funny things and claim everything belongs to our ancestors. I didn't know it would click and grow so fast. (Rediff.com 2014)

Satire as counter hegemonic narrative:

The *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* Facebook page began with a series of posts wherein international figures were claimed as having Indian roots. This content not only countered Dr. Swamy's rhetoric but also gained a lot of media attention and followers (Figures 3 and 4). By 'photoshopping' original pictures and giving captions to old photographs out of context the page mimicked Dr. Swamy and his *bhakt's* frequent distortion of historical facts to suit their own agenda. To add insult

to injury, the posts also parodied *Shankbnaad*'s logo and called it 'ShankhPaad'⁶ instead. Counter narratives are particularly attractive tools for the out-group; they create bonds, shared understanding and social cohesion which subvert the master narrative providing alternative versions of reality (Delgado 1989). The outlandish narratives that 'proved' how Michael Jackson and Shakespeare were originally Hindu Brahmins brought to light similar bizarre 'revised' versions of Indian history concocted by Dr. Swamy and his ilk. In this way, the unofficial page's satirical posts provided a counter narrative to Dr. Swamy's own alternative narratives that traced everything to a fabricated *Hindutva* past.



Figure 3: This post by Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy (the word unofficial was not yet added then) presents an outlandish narrative of how Michael Jackson's Indian roots.

⁶ 'Paad' is slang for flatulence.

Satire is the key element in the success of the *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* Facebook page. The centrality of satire is to be understood at two levels: in calling the bluff of the hegemonic narrative and to present a safe ground for the counter narrative. Jones and Thompson (2009:6) note that political satire has “the unique ability... to speak truth to power”. While Dr. Swamy uses his influence to propagate content that often shows a complete disregard for facts, the unofficial page parodies that same content to unmask his true motive. The genre of parody counters the hegemonic narrative using humour, which has two kinds of effects. The humour dethrones the high moral stance taken by the *Hindutva* hegemonic narratives and makes it look absurd; by doing so it brings it to the table for discussion. But the same humour also runs the risk of being considered cynical and hence not taken seriously. Boeder (2005) argues that the discourse on virtual public sphere loses its political character and takes on the flavour of entertainment.

Speaking in the context of the satirical news shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*, Jones and Baym (2010) point out that cynicism is not the modern notion of lack of commitment and detachment but a proactive protest against hypocrisy, corruption, insincerity, and extravagance. In fact, the act of producing satire itself proves that the creator believes it will make a difference in exposing the falsehoods that it is opposing. According to Peter Sloterdijk (cited in Jones and Baym 2010), satirists use their craft for their belief in truth. Without this conviction in the power of an equal debate, satirists would lack the motivation to continuously participate in the political discourse.

Satire also reconstitutes the binary of fake and real. Here, the page that was managed by the *bhaktis*, the real fan page, was taken down as it was posting false unsupported content and the ‘fake’, i.e. the parody account, continues to exist by declaring itself fake, i.e. adding the word ‘unofficial’ to its title. In the context of ‘fake news’, Jones and Baym (2010) argue that the performances of the satirists is ‘real’ in the sense that they happen with a straight face, following public conventions, but there might be no truth in the performance; yet it is aimed at unearthing the falsehood behind the projected truth. The satirical performance deconstructs the public fakery and offers access to the real by the act of unmasking it. Jones and Baym (2010) employ Harry Frankfurt’s (Cited in Jones and Baym 2010) concept of Bullshit which is akin to Habermas’ idea of ‘strategic speech’, which is meant to manipulate the listener. Satire attempts to uncover the intentions behind this strategic speech to the people.

The satirical page posts content with slight distortion as posted by Dr. Swamy’s real page, in so doing it constantly pits itself against Dr. Swamy. It also presents quirky comments on

contemporary events. The ambiguity between the real and fake not only aids the satire but also serves to maintain the anonymity of the person behind the satirical page.

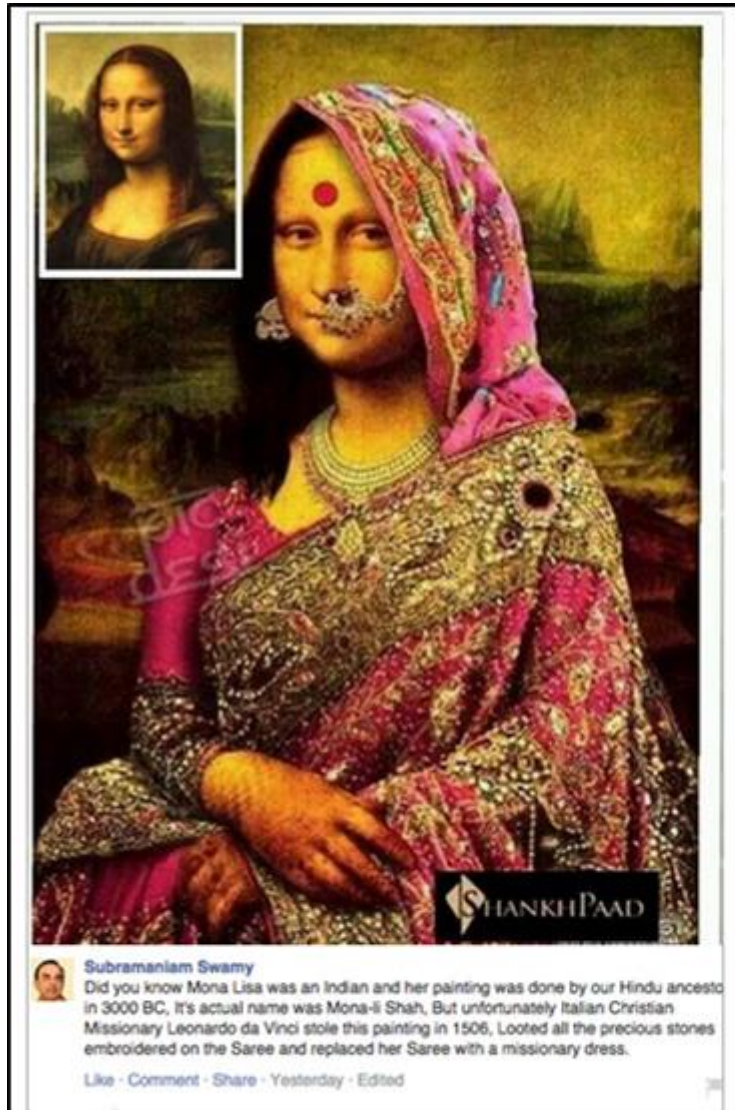


Figure 4: The post by Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy (the word unofficial was not yet added then) presents the Indian version of Monalisa under the name Shankhpaad (a parody of Shankhnaad)

The need for anonymity has to be understood in the context of the increasing judicial and extra-judicial control in the virtual sphere. The Aseem Trivedi case⁷, the arrest of two girls in Mumbai

⁷ Cartoonist Aseem Trivedi was arrested for his cartoons exposing the corruption of the political elite of India. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/10/indian-cartoonist-jailed-sedition>

for Facebook posts⁸, arrests in Goa⁹ and West Bengal¹⁰ for satirical cartoons present instances of the state's attempts to monitor and control digital content. The, recently struck down, Article 66A of the IT act 2008, could attract a maximum sentence of three years and a fine for sending offensive messages through a computer or communication device like mobile phone or a tablet.¹¹ The Indian government had asked Google and Facebook to pre-censor user content to remove inflammatory, disparaging and defamatory content in the past¹². The proposal didn't get through due to protests from the citizens and civil society organizations but there have been several attacks and arrests of people based on the content on social media. Social media has also been cited as reason for violence against minorities: A Hindu mob went on a rampage in the city of Pune in 2014 over some morphed images of Hindu gods, Shivaji and Bal Thackeray. A Muslim IT professional, who was in no way connected to this was attacked and killed by the mob¹³.

These examples are only indicative of the growing intolerance even in the virtual sphere and the extension of the virtual sphere for wielding control over the citizens through the law and violence. In such an intolerant environment production of counter hegemonic narratives like that of *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* Facebook page is a courageous act.

Dr. Subramanian Swamy had threatened Facebook with legal action if they did not shutdown the page (see Figure 5). There have been several instances of discussions on the need to shut down the Facebook page (see Figures 6, 7, 8 and 9). Interestingly the *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* page uses the threats received by him as posts to expose the Hindutva agenda. These threats are testimony to the close control exerted over the virtual sphere. In such an environment anonymity is not just a strategy of satire but a necessity. The act of satire is complete only when it evokes the

⁸ Two young women were arrested and detained by the police under section 505(2) on charges of promoting enmity, hatred or ill will between classes for questioning the shutdown of the city of Mumbai on death of Shiv Sena supremo Bal Thackeray. See: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/2-mumbai-girls-in-jail-for-tweet-against-bal-thackeray/1/229846.html>

⁹ A small-scale industrialist from Pondicherry was arrested under Article 66A for posting status about the corruption of the then finance minister's son

¹⁰ A professor was arrested in West Bengal for posting cartoons about the chief minister on social media. See: <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/West-Bengal-professor-neighbour-arrested-over-anti-Mamata-cartoons/articleshow/12650766.cms>

¹¹ This act was struck-down by the Supreme Court in response of a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by a law student Shreya Singhal. The Supreme Court opined that the section invaded that right to free speech and upset the balance between the right and the reasonable restrictions that could be imposed on such a right.

¹² The New York Times report on the Indian Government's request for pre-censorship can be read at https://india.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/05/india-asks-google-facebook-others-to-screen-user-content/?_r=0

¹³ See: <http://www.firstpost.com/india/pune-muslim-techie-killed-by-rightwing-mob-over-morphed-fb-posts-1555709.html>

expected response. Booth (cited in Gring-Pemle and Watson 2003) points out the necessary conditions for participation in irony; the individual has to first reject the literal meaning, next they should find out the alternative meanings and third the reader or listener must decide about the author's knowledge or beliefs. The audience must determine whether the statement expects concurrence or reject it. There must be a tacit understanding among the producer of the satire and the audience for the satire to work. In the digital sphere, the success of satire can be gauged by its popularity; successful satire most often becomes a meme.

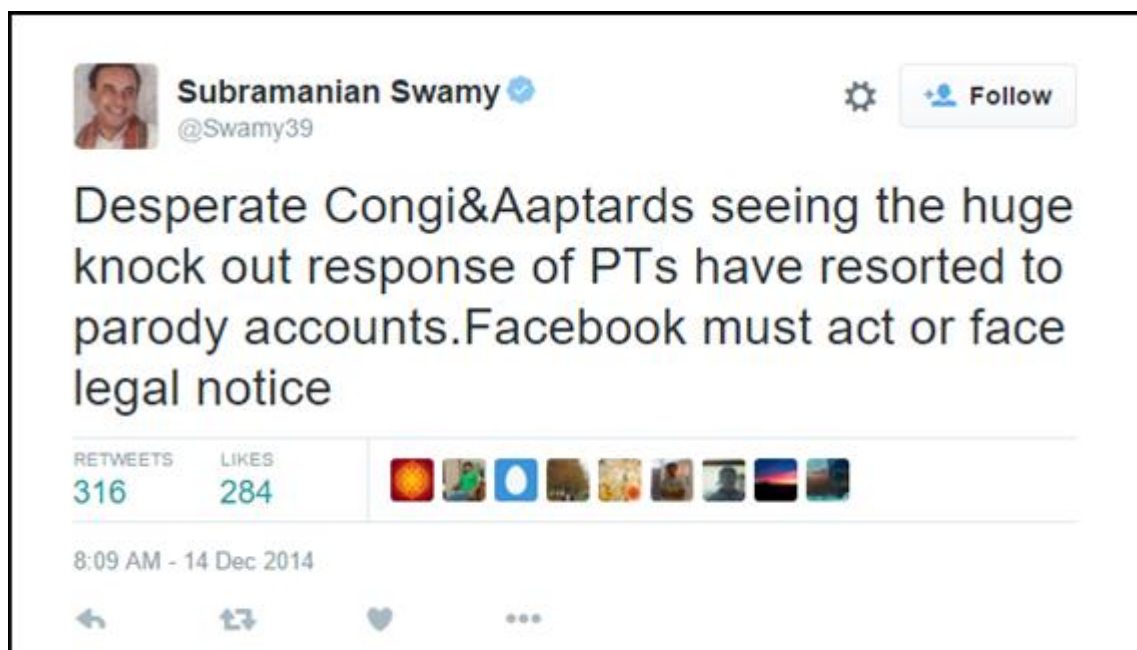


Figure 5: This was a tweet by Dr. Swamy threatening Facebook to act against the parody page.

This intersection of anonymity, satire, and replicability through memes on the digital platform has interesting implications to the political communication done through the Facebook pages. As argued earlier anonymity in case of *unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* is both a strategy and a necessity. It has implications for the perception of the content and the reception of the content. Anonymity allows for the counter narrative to have a wider reach as an idea rather than an idea originating from an identifiable person. While the branded self accrues discernible benefits from the social media activity, the anonymity of the parody page by limiting the possibility of deriving profit from it makes it an honest counter narrative. It makes a statement that it does not intend to leverage the counter narrative for any individual gains but rather for the common good.

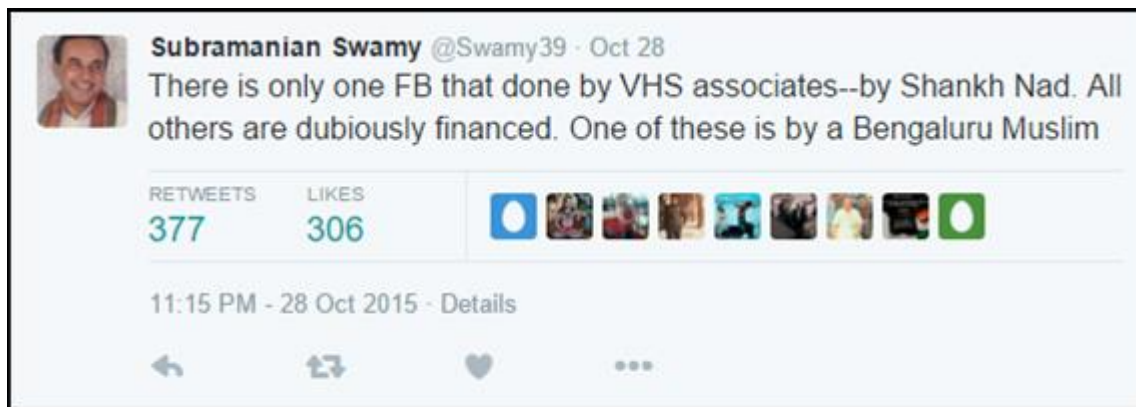


Figure 6: A tweet by Dr. Swamy clarifying that the Facebook page is fake and blaming a 'Bengaluru Muslim' for the fake page.

The second aspect to be examined is the conversion of the content into memes and the implications of this. Richard Dawkin (1976) draws an analogy between memes and genes to explain the spreading of rumours, melodies, catch-phrases, trends etc. As genes replicate certain physical characteristics, memes are used to explain the spreading of certain cultural information. An internet meme refers to content that has been widely shared over the internet in a short period of time. Memes are immediately 'consumable' packets of content whose realization is in quick engagement and sharing. Much of the counter hegemonic satire gets its audience through mass sharing and become memes.

What happens to the satirical counter narrative in memetic form is an important question in the *unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* page. In memetic form satire reaches a wide audience; but does the reach itself warrant the spread of counter narrative? This question calls for further examination of the audience of the page and their interaction on it.

Virtual Publics:

Stephen Coleman (2005) argues that digital media presents challenges to traditional 'indirect' forms of representation in democratic societies. Jones and Baym (2010) propose a performance model of citizenship, as contrasted with citizen as something to become here citizenship is a performance which is to be performed at numerous institutions and a variety of contexts. It is a not a passive category but an active process. They argue that satire (in this case TV shows) is an open text that

requires participation, and that participation in the satire can be thought of as performing citizenship. Extending this argument to the social media sphere, can participation in satire in the virtual public sphere be considered as a new virtual citizenship? Does liking and sharing satirical counter hegemonic content itself count as ‘participation’?

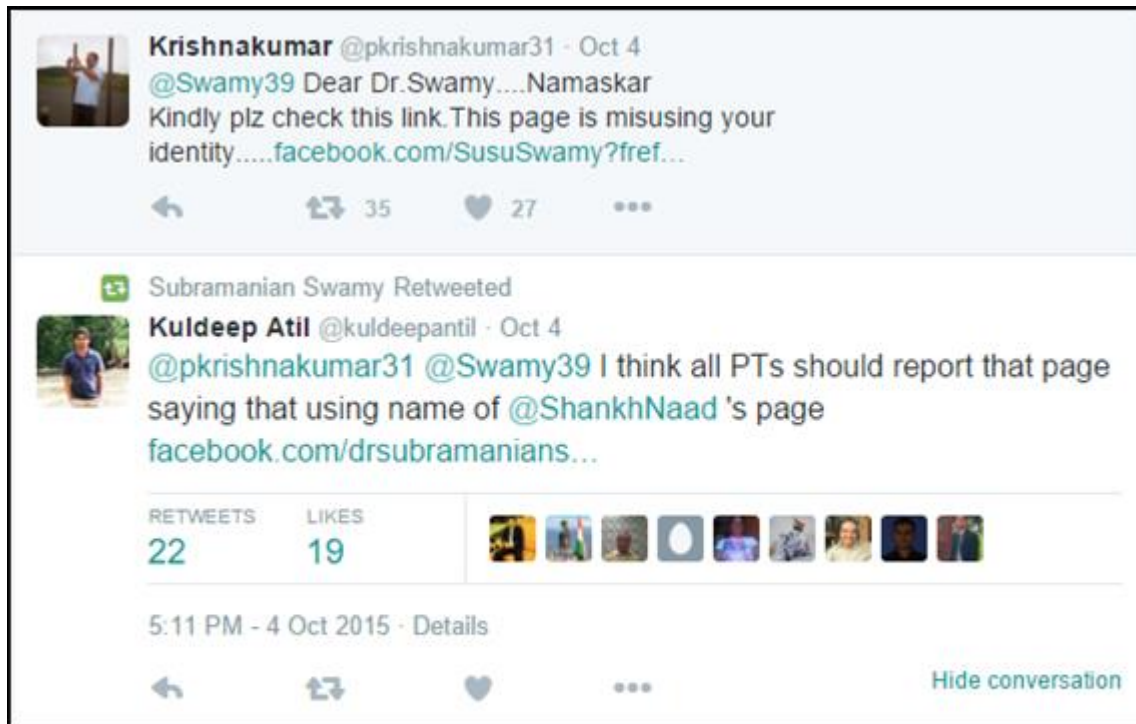


Figure 7: These are tweets from the bhakts of Dr. Swamy informing him of the parody page and asking him to take action against it.

Fernback and Thompson (cited in Boeder 2005) argue that the virtual space gives an illusion of participation, it serves a cathartic role and makes the public ‘feel’ involved rather than actually being involved. Memes, while easy to share, are often not taken seriously, and due to the lack of accountability, remain fashionably political rather than trying to engage in any constructive counter narrative. Satire in memetic form increasingly serves merely as entertainment (Boeder, 2005). The research on the Arab spring (Gadi Wolfsfeld, Elad Segev and Tamir Sheafer 2013) has argued the importance of on-the-ground activity, along with social media, in the revolution; the social media activity in isolation slips into a cathartic activity and often only constitutes a cursory counter narrative which might not be taken seriously.



Figure 8: A tweet by Dr. Swamy threatening the page with prosecution

Rheingold (cited in Boeder 2005) emphasises on the commercial interests behind the technology. The platform of social media is a commercial structure and successful activity on it earns it millions in advertising revenue. The revenue itself is dependent on the number of followers garnered by the pages (both the hegemonic and counter hegemonic), so the apparatus of Facebook would consciously encourage these pages to increase their following i.e., would work towards making them cults. The interest of the for-profit social media sphere is in making a spectacle rather than creating a vibrant public sphere. The quickly consumable content that intends to constitute a counter narrative often only serves the interests and advertising revenues of social media companies.

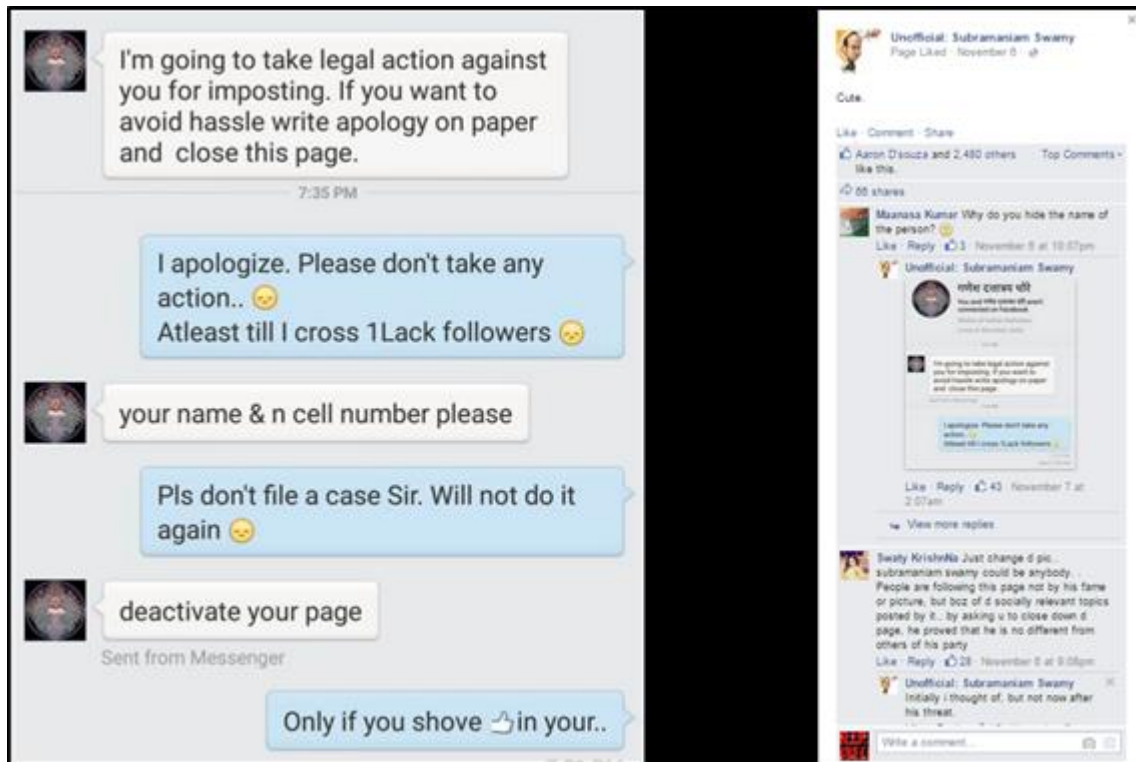


Figure 9: A post published by the Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy page on the threats received by him.

Conclusion:

Through tracing the journey of the Facebook page *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* this paper has attempted to characterise the nature of the virtual public sphere and the role of satire in constituting a counter narrative to the hegemonic narrative. The conclusions can be characterised into production of the satirical counter narrative and engagement with the counter narrative in virtual sphere.

Production of the satirical counter narrative: In this particular case, the satirical page emerges with a clear intention to constitute a counter narrative to the hegemonic narrative. In the increasingly monitored digital space, satire emerges as a safe zone to be critical of the hegemonic narrative. The anonymity of the page, by not conforming to the accrual of profits, counters the branded self of the hegemonic narrative, which derives clear benefits from its ideology.

Engagement with the counter narrative in virtual sphere: The virtual public sphere on a private platform like Facebook which has specific mechanisms to derive profits encourages creation and spread of memetic content, which is quickly consumable. The counter narrative has to play by the rules set by the platform which limits the scope of the alternative it offers. The individuals engaging on these platforms often ‘consume’ and share the content as per the framework set by the platform. This highly individualistic participation performs a cathartic function and might not necessarily contribute towards strengthening the counter narrative itself.

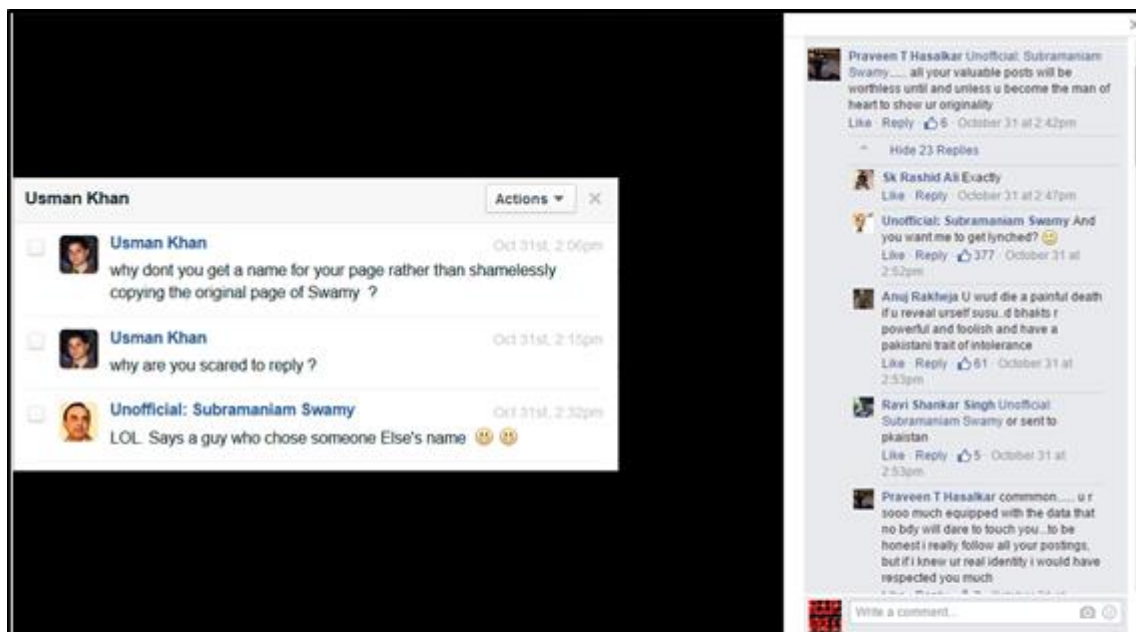


Figure 10: The post published by *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy* on the threats received by him. In the comment section, on being asked to reveal his name the owner of the page responds ‘And you want me to get lynched?’ Other followers affirm that she/he would die a painful death in the hands of the *bhakts* and that she/he should never reveal her/his identity.

Acknowledgements:

The tweets have been taken from Twitter handle of Dr. Subramaniam Swamy and the Facebook posts have been taken from the page *Unofficial Subramaniam Swamy*.

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The Crowd and the DIY filmmaker: A Study of the DIY funding circuits of the dilettante

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Abstract

The paper aims at relocating the vernacular practice of *chanda* (funds) collection for creative projects with the intervention of new media and corporatised model of crowd funding and crowdsourcing in the support of the dilettante filmmaker. Web 2.0 has unfolded the dynamism of crowd participation onto the online forum through the dynamism of entrepreneurial ventures into the field of crowd funding. The ease of funding entry level and low-scale dilettante projects has taken the democratisation of filmmaking further ahead, making the marginal filmmaker mainstream in some ways. The evolved nature of marginalised efforts to create viability for creative projects has empowered the dilettante or do-it-yourself (DIY) voices in India.¹ Because of this, there are an increasing number of amateurs experimenting with the prosumer devices like mobile phones. Modulation of the conventional Kickstarter and Indiegogo model has brought out novel indigenous narratives of creating increased monetary access for the figure of the dilettante. On the one hand there is an entrepreneurial boost in form of organisations like Wishberry, Catapooolt, and Start51 supporting the reward based model of collecting funds from the crowds, on the other hand there are stories of crowd funding campaign failures. For example, *Sundar* (2014) was a popular Wishberry campaign, however it failed in collecting

¹ The paper uses the lens of the Web 2.0 moment, wherein the introduction of YouTube and other websites of the like led to creation and proliferation of user generated content, that has been stated as Do-it-yourself culture. This culture foregrounds the figure of user who is both the consumer and the producer of the content, therefore, she is referred to as a prosumer figure utilising the Internet for creating media and learning skills to make the media.

the required funds for finishing its production. Since there were many films of a similar subject being made at the time of the campaign, the film did not meet its target amount. *The* challenge lies in the information excess that has saturated the crowd's psyche and, as an outcome of this, there is an increasing need for product-differentiation. The campaigns harness the art activism caveat to touch a nerve with the crowd and gather funds. However, if art activism is used repeatedly, it does not reap beneficial for the crowdfunding campaign. Thus, in some ways the do-it-yourself or DIY funding circuit is ironically both accessible and contingent, in terms of the outcome it caters, to the dilettante for providing a distribution circuit and recognition in the independent filmmaking scene.

Keywords: Crowdfunding, *chanda* (funds)collection, Web 2.0 and crowds, Do-it-Yourself (DIY) culture, DIY funding, DIY filmmakers, short film, online film culture, online short film, crowdfunding campaigns, independent filmmaking, YouTube, mainstream versus dilettante filmmakers, prosumers and the Internet, funding films, user generated content, Cinema 2.0, crowds, participatory culture, DIY media creation, Wishberry.

Introduction

Web 2.0 has defined an era of publics entering the virtual space to contribute in their own unique ways to the content. This content is commonly defined as user generated content or UGC. With new media channels providing resources for making, distributing and funding films, both the amateur figure and professional figure cohabit the space thus created by the Internet. Professionals may still have a greater stake in claiming this space, but amateurs too have an equal opportunity to be a part of this arena. The short film distributed on the web is popular among both the categories discussed here. This further paves the way for alternate forms of filmmaking acquiring a professional status and professional practices deriving novel methods of making films from the amateur filmmakers. With virtual platforms like YouTube the categories of mainstream and independent also lose their commonly understood definitions. When the online channels of video distribution like YouTube began, there was a common tendency to look at it as an alternative space of distribution and exhibition, but over the years, user generated content has acquired mainstream presence with an increasing number of audiences and discourses around the same. Moreover, the

Internet has surged shadow economies of cinema wherein the informal and formal circuits supporting filmmaking and film distribution are at a constant interaction with each other (Lobato, 2012:96).

Crowds – Where it all begins

To begin the study on crowdfunding circuits in India, I will first locate the basic concept of crowds in this study. As one would notice in the paper, how a critical engagement with crowds within the context of crowdfunding is of utmost importance to further look at the role of crowdfunding. One of the most seminal works on the study of crowds, comes from Gustav Le Bon, who wrote his thesis in an era defined by upheavals in the European region. He states, “The age we are about to enter will in truth be the ERA OF CROWDS”.² (Gustave le Bon 2002)

In his analysis of the era of crowds, Bon outlines the key role of the power of crowds in mobilizing inaction to action through mass intervention. However, for the current study, since the primary lens is Web 2.0, I would like to shift away from Canetti’s definition of the crowds to an inclusive definition of multitude as defined by Hardt and Negri in their thesis. They theorise groups of people as,

The people has traditionally been a unitary conception. The population, of course, is characterized by all kinds of differences, but the people reduces that diversity to a unity and makes of the population a single identity: “the people” is one. The multitude, in contrast, is many. The multitude is composed of innumerable internal differences that can never be reduced to a unity or a single identity—different cultures, races, ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations; different forms of labour; different ways of living; different views of the world; and different desires. The multitude is a multiplicity of all these singular differences. (Hardt and Negri, 2004:15).

In their thesis on the multitude, Hardt and Negri describe the Internet as a classic example of the multitude – wherein people interact in open space whilst retaining their many differences. Therefore, a multitude is a group of people together in a common space irrespective of their biases. For a crowdfunding campaign run using online platforms, the DIY filmmaker needs to reach out to this multitude and mobilise it for supporting his film’s production. To connect the people in a

² Le Bon in his analysis on crowds and their psychology, envisions that the era in which we are living and have lived before, has been defined by the way in which crowds can influence an event or a situation. In this reference, Le Bon celebrates the resilience of the power of crowds in shaping the society and influencing history. Emphasis added by author.

singularity, the multitude must be addressed using an emotional thread, that can bring together people in a crowd that supports a project. In a crowdfunding campaign, the "emotional contagion" is what pivots the people into the mode of activism. The phenomenon has been studied by Adam Kramer who describes it as follows:

Emotional states can be transferred to others via emotional contagion, leading them to experience the same emotions as those around them. Emotional contagion is well established in laboratory experiments, in which people transfer positive and negative moods and emotions to others. Similarly, data from a large, real-world social network collected over a 20-year period suggests that longer-lasting moods (e.g., depression, happiness) can be transferred through networks as well (sic) (Kramer 2014).

Filmmakers and crowdfunding agencies capitalise on the emotional contagion to a certain extent and philanthropic engagement as well, to garner funds for their film projects. Filmmaking as a process, demands team dedication. From the crew that shoots and edits to create the film, to the audience that experiences the same film in a pitch-black theatre or on its smartphones, the crowd is key to filmmaking. The man with the movie camera has transformed to men with smartphone cameras; the mobile panopticons that are constantly keeping an eye on us. Simultaneously, an increasing number of our activities have found a virtual manifestation including filmmaking, distributing and funding films – using online platforms.

The distinction between work and leisure has increasingly faded in the digital era, wherein, the user is both a consumer and a producer of the digital commodity. Real world communities have transformed into virtual ones. Internet users along with a primary reliance on online networks, rely heavily on offline or on ground networking too. Specifically, in case of crowdsourcing and crowdfunding, social networking sites function only as an online tool for connecting with interest groups, however, on ground networking is still needed in order to strengthen the crowd participation in a crowdfunding campaign. The idea is to harness the potential of networks for creating your own project that serves as a "new" intervention in any chosen field. Keeping this dynamic space in mind, Catapoolt's banner on its webpage reads, "We will help you do the new".³ Crowdfunding agencies across the board emphasize on leveraging the creative and novel inventions in any field. The campaign serves not just the purpose of funding for the project but also analyse the unique selling point and differentiation factor of the project. In a world of multiple copies of original, crowdfunding intervenes to package the novelty (in this study the film/video) with that differentiation factor. For the purpose of this study I interviewed the prominent

³ See: <http://www.catapoolt.com/> [Accessed on 15th January, 2015]

crowdfunding organisations in the Indian context along with the other filmmakers whose case studies have been discussed below. These interactions have been theoretically nuanced to lay out the discourse on crowdfunding and crowdsourcing in India.

Crowdsourcing and Crowdfunding – A brief history and the Indian context

Jeff Howe coined the term “crowdsourcing” to define a new media based phenomenon of crowd participation and outsourcing talent (Howe 2006). Crowdfunding on the other hand dates back to the age-old practice of *chanda* collection. The accounted record of crowdfunding practices globally dates back to the eighteenth century, when Irish loan funds were offered to low income families. According to fundable.com⁴, this practice was founded by author Jonathan Swift. Whereas a recent study on the history of crowdfunding quotes the erection of Statue of Liberty in 1886 as an outcome of crowdfunding using emotional appeals to the crowd, spearheaded by Joseph Pulitzer (Freedman and Nutting 2015:3). However, the recent avatar of online crowdfunding emerged in 1990s after the Internet became the playground for bloggers and artists as a medium to share their work with the world. The first website that emerged with an online crowdfunding model was artist share, founded by Boston based music composer and computer programmer Brian Camelio. The model was in close alignment with the present-day Indiegogo (founded in 2008) and Kickstarter (founded in 2009) rewards based model (*ibid*). Crowdsourcing and Crowd-funding are the prime models used by indie filmmakers. Although the terms have been used interchangeably in most places, there is a difference between the two; Crowdsourcing is common to filmmaking in a generic sense, wherein most of the crew and funds are acquired by collaborating with the people. Crowdfunding in the context of independent filmmaking differs from crowdsourcing as the agenda of participation from the crowd is solely directed towards garnering funds for at least one of the three steps of film production – pre-production (scripting and planning), production (shooting the film) and post-production.

The advent of filmmaking in India with Dadasaheb Phalke’s pioneering works was aided by conventional *chanda* or funds collection. Following the funds collection model, Shyam Benegal, Satyajit Ray and John Abraham too had employed crowdfunding to garner financial support for their independent film projects. The Odessa Collective⁵, was the first of its kind to ask for

⁴ See: <https://www.fundable.com/crowdfunding101/history-of-crowdfunding> [Accessed on 30th September 2016]

⁵ Named after Eisenstein’s famous Odessa Steps sequence in Battleship Potemkin (1925)

monetary contributions from a minimum of one rupee to a maximum of five hundred. As an outcome of this collective, veteran filmmaker John Abraham garnered funds for *Amma Ariyan* (What I want my mother to know) (1986). The collective was one of the first movements in India to bring together film enthusiasts and radically transform film funding and distribution methods. As a result of such concerted efforts *Amma Ariyan* was screened in non-commercial and non-theatrical format throughout Kerala (Kasbekar 2006:238).⁶ A similar campaign for funding and supporting independent filmmaking in Kolkata was led by Anamitra Roy and Striparna Dey called the *One Rupee Film Project* discussed later in this paper.

According to the SEBI (Security and Exchanges Board of India) report (compiled by IOSCO – International Organisation of Securities Commission) on crowdfunding, published in June 2014, the crowdfunding model of Indian markets has been broadly classified under the Community based and Financial Return based categories. The Community based model of crowdfunding operates through a system of donations and rewards whereas the Financial returns model operates through a system of peer-to-peer lending and equity. The donation-based model has been employed by Ketto, a crowdfunding organisation backed by some known names of the Hindi film industry like Kunal Kapoor.⁷ There are other examples like Hot Start⁸ and many other start-ups that have burgeoned alongside the introduction of new SEBI rules on crowdfunding on June 17, 2014. The model works because the investor gets a reward in the form of tax rebate for the donation made to the charitable cause supported by the crowdfunding organisation. While the lending based model also supports charitable causes and campaigns for the betterment of society through funding environmental awareness drives, education and other causes, the borrowed money is returned to the creditor over a period of time. This model has been adopted by Milaap in India and supports the education of backward and oppressed segments of the society.⁹ The equity based crowdfunding model is corporatized to a greater extent than the lending based model in terms of how the investments are dealt with. Wishberry was set up in 2012 in Mumbai in order to support not just

⁶ After veteran filmmaker John Abraham's demise, a follower of his named Sathyan, who had appeared in one of the scenes in *Amma Ariyan* (1986), carried forward the Odessa Collective. A leading English daily, The Hindu, commemorated Odessa Sathyan, in a story about the activist who carried forward the Odessa Collective post Abraham's demise on August 20, 2014. See: <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kozhikode/odessa-sathyan-was-committed-to-society/article6333825.ece> [Accessed on 4th October 2016]

⁷ See: <https://www.ketto.org/>, [Accessed on 25th August 2015]

⁸ See: <https://www.thehotstart.com/>, [Accessed on 25th August 2015]

⁹ See: <https://milaap.org/>, [Accessed on 9th June 2017]

creative ventures like DIY filmmaking but also charitable causes.¹⁰ The idea behind the project was to promote entrepreneurial ventures that could make an impact for large groups of people. The funding procedure of these organisations, therefore allowed the first-time investors and creators to pool their assets for the creation of something relevant for the public and to create a niche that avoids any freeloaders that may create risk conditions of losses of the money collected as a result of crowdfunding. Risk management for investors has been reworked in the new set of regulations introduced by SEBI. For the crowd to believe in the organisation, Dubey and Kataria relied on their personal networks and word of mouth alongside the online channel to spread knowledge about the open resource for private projects, marginalised creators and non-mainstream/amateur practitioners along with charity associations. By the end of 2012 Dubey's organisation focused the campaigns on the creative ventures solely as through market research there was a need for an agency like Kickstarter or Indiegogo to support the Indian artists and creators. Dubey further illuminates the fact that such projects have specific outcomes and therefore, the support has been extended towards creative ventures categorically. The fact that the project in itself must have a USP and market potential is what is analysed at the pitch stage. Once the screening of pitch is over, a team of board members inclusive of the creative advisors (including some producers as well from mainstream Hindi film industry) and financial advisors (including SEBI analysts many a times) chart out a marketing strategy for the project. This process fixes the target for collection of resources and further its distribution to wider scales of viewership. In alliance with the PR advisors, the projects are publicised then using print and social media for a better response for fund collections.

Crowdsourcing is what ideally connects the creator working on their independent project and gets them a team to support and enhance the film. From low budget filmmaking, the DIY filmmaking stands at the precipice with no budget and available resources. This is the reason why most DIY films never receive any recognition. The preferred funding circuit for such marginal filmmakers is crowdfunding, as it allows first-time creators to get connected to the funders as well as a pool of other people with their respective expertise to weigh in on the project and create something new for the world to see. Participation takes place through website-based advertising and by offline process through workshops and film festival programmes. Satish Kataria, founder of Catapooolt describes the methodical way in which the crowd is motivated to make an investment (both fund-based and skill-based) in a film project. Thus, the first step in the process of crowdfunding is to motivate the crowd.

¹⁰ See: <https://yourstory.com/2016/04/wishberry/>, [Accessed on 30th May 2016] and <https://www.wishberry.in/about/#/about> [Accessed on 31st March 2014]

Kataria initiated Catapooolt in 2010 in an attempt to introduce the idea of crowdfunding to the Indian market scenario. Having worked as a SEBI (Security and Exchanges Board of India) analyst alongside Hindi film industry producers, he had the acumen for understanding the financial channels and recognised the dire need of funding channels for amateur practitioners (ibid). Before starting Catapooolt, Kataria was a part of entrepreneurial and start up projects and after having been associated with international collaborators from UK called ProVC (an equity based crowdfunding start-up), he began his own crowdfunding organisations to democratise funding for start-up ecosystems. Catapooolt was his second attempt at providing a novel system for novice practitioners from filmmakers to entrepreneurs. His first venture was ProVC India. He was finally able to launch the Catapooolt system of reward-based crowdfunding in its fully functional form in July 2013. As of now it has funded a small number of films including the Kannada indie film *Lucia* (2013), and Sarthak Dasgupta's *Cut Throat* (2013) among many others. His focus remains exclusively on creative ventures, believing that people associate with the ideas easily and are motivated to pool in money as funding collaborators for a project. At the time of its launch, Kataria mentions in a personal interview, Catapooolt was the only crowdfunding organisation in the world following a reward-based model. The rewards model for crowdfunding was further employed by other competitors in the crowdfunding arena like Wishberry and start51.com. The model so far has worked for a developing economy where the people have a spending capacity lower than most other circuits targeted by Kickstarter and Indiegogo – the primary crowdsourcers for the developed economies. Unlike the US where passion alone motivates the funder, India needed a crowdfunding model that could cater to the need of the crowd as well. The need of the crowd being a reward in return to the investment made in the project. The rewards allocated by Catapooolt include not just gift vouchers for fast food chains but also loyalty points for the regular investors who are given special mention in the credits of the film.

Canetti in his analysis of crowds describes two types of crowds, namely open and closed (Canetti, 1962:16). The open crowds grow incessantly whereas the closed crowds have limits to growth. These limits are what determine the crowd-size and its potential as a group. Thus, closed crowds have a determinate number of individuals and a determinate/quantitative target. Crowdfunding models working on a reward-based format allow for closed crowd formations, to which the entry fee or boundary is the investment that the individual makes towards the target-funding amount of the film. Rewards in the form of being credited as executive producer and producer at the crew, invitations to private screenings, and pre-release download link for the film provided as rewards for the investment made. The hierarchy of rewards is decided on the basis of the amount invested for the target to be achieved. The rewards too are devised in order to garner more and more funds.

More often than not a great deal of marketing strategy goes into shaping the reward system of a carefully planned crowdfunding campaign.

Furthering the analysis on crowds, Canetti defines “crowd crystals” as small groups with a limited strength assigned to perform a specific function (1962:19). These crystals have their limitations and therefore their growth gets replicated only at the onset of very specific conditions. Drawing an analogy between the crowdfunding scene in the Indian context and Canetti’s framework of crowds; the investors in a crowdfunding campaign form a closed crowd with the boundary of the investment money that they pay in order to become a part of that crowd. The crowdfunding campaigns are managed by the employees of a corporatised start-up focusing on the function of managing fund collection and public outreach. These determinate groups of people who manage the campaign thus, form the crowd crystals. The crystals may or may not be a part of the closed crowd of the investors of the crowdfunding campaign. These crystals are what decide the model of crowdfunding adopted in a certain campaign as well as for the organisation in general.

With the intervention of Web 2.0, the process of funding acquires a DIY characteristic. The new media channels are what serve as the forums where the crowdfunding campaigns are presented to a wider audience (Gauntlett 2011). The care that the investors show in the form of the money invested in the project is what constitutes the affective labour – an important aspect of the post fordist work culture.¹¹ For any online project to be successful, it is the labour of the intended funders that materialises into the capital collected for creating films. Of the large part of the non-sleeping hours of the day, most part of those hours are now bracketed by the online advertisers — that flash the targeted information on the screens of the users working on their computer systems. The idea is to materialise the labour of the act of browsing through the internet. In addition, the idea is to grab the attention through a resonating keyword that holds the user to that page. When the ICT4D (Information and Communication technologies for development) developments have allowed for a deeper penetration of new media into everyday lives of people, the corporates have honed this opportunity to harness the potential of e-commerce. As a result, many novel products like smartphones and digital cameras have found commonplace usage. Crowdfunding forms a very intrinsic part of this channel. The purpose of crowdfunding has been

¹¹ Morini and Fumagalli define the framework of affective labour in his study entitled *Life Put to Work: Towards a Life Theory of Value* published in the *Ephemera* journal. They define the contemporary labour theory as opposed to the Marxist labour theory of value. The fact that in today’s life, labour constitutes every function we perform during the non-sleeping hours of the day makes the economy governed by biocapitalism. The idea is to conceptualise the labour framework not from the binaries of labour time and leisure time but to realise the dissolution of this dichotomy in the contemporary scenario. (Morini, Fumagalli and trans. Leonardi, 2010: 241)

to create a novel product that is useful for the masses. From Satyajit Ray to Shyam Benegal, crowdfunding has been a tool for garnering funds for filmmaking since the inception of cinema in the Indian context by Phalke. The intervention of Web 2.0 has dynamically transformed the process of crowdfunding and made it a DIY manifestation of the same. The ability of users to reach out to an audience has aggregated a novel narrative of crowdfunding in India. The creative industries paradigm as proposed by John Hartley (2005), defines the Web 2.0 space as a playground that can be manipulated to serve according to the user's need; which for crowdfunding campaigns is primarily to create a novelty and then to reach out to a wide audience. Though crowdfunding campaigns for DIY films are themselves a novelty they need to define themselves in a way that distinguishes them from the multiple others. This begins with the first and quintessential step of the pitch where filmmakers carefully translate their ideas into words and create an accessible document that can be circulated widely for garnering crew and funds for the process of filmmaking to begin. A pitch video is the first ideation step in the process of the crowdfunding campaign. Before approaching the crowdfunding organisation, the filmmaker must have a lucid video enunciating the ideas that form the project, in this case the film's narrative, and the essence of the idea; why it is important for the film to be made in the first place. A good pitch video attracts the attention of the crowd who is further motivated into participation. Wishberry's Anshulika Dubey emphasises, in a telephonic interview that the pitch video forms the core of any crowd-funding process. For a crowd to be interested in the film, it is of utmost importance that the filmmaker is clear about her own project and conveys it in the same fashion. The pitch video incorporates a performative activity in order to bring out the key USP (unique selling point) of the DIY film. Like the promotional events slotted around the release of any mainstream film, a DIY film banks upon the pitch and the website and offline networks in order to influence a viewership or a tentative audience. As with any promotional event that offers attendees a reward for their participation in the event, a crowdfunding campaign works on a reward system in order to reach out to an audience. Crowdfunding as a method of funds collection works as the initial group of funders decide the drift of the crowdfunding campaign. If a campaign is able to reach a certain percentage (above 20 to 30 per cent) of its target amount within the first week, the likelihood of the success of the campaign will be higher. However, the campaigns that rely solely on online channels for funding their projects can face failure. A disconnect between filmmakers and intended funders is due to a lack of offline outreach using door to door and event based drive for funds collection. Thus, more often than not the crowdfunding campaigns result in a failure. However, there can be other reasons for failure of a crowdfunding campaign.

As per the emotional contagion theory, a contagion would not be effective in a time span within the range when a similar contagion has been effectively introduced within the audiences (Kramer 2014). *Sundar*'s crowdfunding campaign came at a time when Wishberry had successfully prevented the demise of Kashish queer film festival in Mumbai. The same emotional contagion thread was picked in case of *Sundar* (2014)– with a sole USP (unique selling point) of the cross dressing queer protagonist. For *Sundar* (2014), lack of a marketing approach to package the film as different from others of a similar genre led to the failure of the crowdfunding campaign. There are other examples in DIY funding and crowdfunding like the One Rupee Film Project that found success in the first round of funds collection, but failed in the long run as the funds collected were inadequate to finish the project.

One Rupee Film Project – A case study of DIY filmmakers and Crowdfunding

Combining the strength of crowdfunding with on-ground DIY funds collection, Anamitra Roy's *One Rupee Film Project* for funding his debut venture *Aashmani Jawaharat* (Like diamonds in the Sky) is a novel narrative. (Mishra 2014) Anamitra Roy and Suparna Dey began collecting funds through word of mouth pitches made to their friends and family. The result was a collective of a few people, just over a hundred, who managed to pool together enough for their production *Aashmani Jawaharat* (Diamonds in the Sky). The production was a collaboration of the Roy and Dey who took the pitch to IFFI film bazaar and Mumbai Film Mart in 2013. The ingenuity of the funding model was to ask people for a contribution of at least Re.1 and in return become the producer of the film. Roy and Dey started their journey of the one-rupee project by collaborating with an immediately accessible group of friends and family. As the plan panned out on ground, Roy and Dey managed to build a hefty sum of 2.95 lakh rupees with a target set at 3 lakhs. On ground the one-rupee project was carried out by Roy and Dey's friends in Jadavpur University and outside, and family. From neighbourhood funders to collaborators who provided Roy and Dey's *Aashmani Jawaharat* technical support, the project turned out to a satirical narrative about indie filmmakers.¹² Collection of one-rupee coins was in itself the satire on the process of independent filmmakers and their marginalised state for the audiences. Roy was adamant to create a revolutionary narrative by a method through which it was clear to the select group of funders that the film was an outburst against the capitalist regime of the mainstream cinemas of India. The film, as a result, turned out

¹² In an email interaction with the author Anamitra Roy and Sriparna Dey described the One Rupee Film Project as a DIY funding project that they pursued right after they became college graduates from Jadavpur University.

in different manifestations of clippings released on YouTube and Vimeo to diary records that were later compiled into books and sold at Amazon. Collaborating with Wishberry and Funduzz.com, alongside the One Rupee Film Project, Roy managed to pull the production with sound and color correction remnant as a part of post-production. In an email interaction, he vehemently declares that there is nothing as DIY filmmaking within the Indian scenario, but there are many independent voices. The voices he says make a claim for recognition in mainstream indie circuits. Setting himself as an anti-establishment auteur, Roy laments that there is a lack of sincere cinema audience within India, and as a result, there is little or no support to DIY filmmaking both in terms of technical expertise and in terms of theoretical acumen. The One Rupee Film Project he comments was an outcome of repeated failures at gathering funds for making the film possible. The film remains to become a finished screening-worthy product as of now and though the project has thousands of followers, Roy claims that the DIY circuit is still to make a recognisable impression in the independent filmmaking scene within India. He concludes, that he may have started a wave that could create ripples, but to create the ripple effect he needs the stone – that is the required money to edit the film. To garner more funds for his film, Roy has even published two volumes of his One Rupee Project diary accounts, called *A theory of being*. He plans to publish more volumes in this series and make enough money, through online sales, for the postproduction of the film *Aashmani Jawaharat*. The collections saw a surge once Roy found collaborators from the celebrity circuits, but the negotiations were doomed and the film still needs sound edits for a mainstream release. Roy himself as a filmmaker established that in the Indian scenario independent filmmakers are misunderstood for multiple reasons. Many saw Roy and Dey as money launderers and free loaders, and hence the film connected only to a select group of audiences who backed it until the juncture that they could. Only a select few in the crowd had the nerve to support a project that claimed the marginalised DIY filmmakers of the marginal indie scene. Roy comments that the idea in itself has the potential to transform the norms that be in mainstream industry, but the only concern is that the backers have abandoned the project midway and at this juncture when the film requires only sound edits, there are only a handful with a coin or two for contribution. The self-deprecatory pittance is what had made *Aashmani Jawaharat*, and it is this very attribute that has led to its current deadlock stage. However, with the YouTube collaboration, Roy and Dey had a copyleft¹³ supported release of the film in August 2015. In a recent series of articles compiled by Focal Press at Masteringfilm.com, Roy's interview appears in the segment entitled Big Brains –

¹³ A website on free software sharing systems called GNU.org describes a copyleft agreement as follows: Copyleft is a general method for making a program (or other work) free, and requiring all modified and extended versions of the program to be free as well. See: <http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/copyleft.en.html> [Accessed on 12th July 2015]

Small Budgets edited by Andy Siegfried gives a comprehensive first person account of the One Rupee Film Project and how the journey has been for Dey and Roy to create *Aashmani Jawaharat* (Diamonds in the Sky).

Success Stories – From Dilettante status to Professional

Crowdfunding has allowed the liquidation of the categories of amateur and professional in some senses. In contrast to Roy and Dey's campaign, Pawan Kumar's *Lucia* (2012) was a phenomenal success at collecting funds through crowdfunding. An amateur filmmaker, Kumar started his journey into filmmaking by learning the use of prosumer devices to create short films. Crowdfunding paid off his efforts by making it available to transnational Kannada speaking audiences across the globe. The online distribution channels aided in the DIY consumption of his work for audiences spread throughout the world. What is central to any first-time filmmaker's outreach planning is to understand and connect with an audience that could improve in strength over a period. Pawan Kumar ideated the Home talkies website in order to revive the Kannada film industry and in doing so improve the standing of the Kannada indie scene.¹⁴ Interactive and personal aspects of the crowd is what constitutes the participation that functions through online and offline networks. The need to become a part of the venture allows the crowd to experiment with a novel idea and further distribute it to a wider audience. The filmmaking experience and film viewing experience has been influenced in great measure by the collaborative participation on both online and offline platforms. For his current project, the campaign has NEFT funds transfer circuit, transnational support to his film. A minimum contribution of one dollar has been requested for his next film venture. This is on the same lines as the One Rupee Film Project led by Roy, yet the product differentiation strategy has worked for Kumar not only to transition from an amateur to a mainstream figure but also to catalyse the DIY circuits of filmmaking through workshops, DIY film viewing through online distribution and DIY funding through crowdfunding networks.

Conclusion

The promise of crowdfunding is that it empowers small time entrepreneurs, artists and makers to create new products that would never gain backing from traditional investors. But failures, along

¹⁴ His first film *Lifeu Ishtene* (2011) was a major box office success despite being an alternative film shot in an experimental format. Kumar's Home Talkies is an outcome of the extensive audience research.

with the relentless number of new campaigns launched each day, threatens to scare away would-be customers from crowdfunding altogether (Finley 2015).

Finley's (2015) observation on crowdfunding stands true for the Indian context owing to the initial phases of development in the crowdfunding models and their acceptance by all and sundry. While the philanthropic angle to the system is historicised in the *chanda* collection system and Indian filmmaking is not new to the phenomenon, the corporatisation of the models has created a much elaborate and complex garb within which crowdfunding functions for the amateurs and professionals alike. From the perspective of do it yourself methodology of making films, both crowdfunding and no budget filmmaking have relevance in the Indian context, as the short film format serves as fertile ground that functions as a launch pad for the entry level filmmaker and the DIY filmmaker. While there have been mainstream projects made and backed by DIY funding or crowdfunding, the success ratio of this segment is catching up with the increasing number of filmmakers – amateur and professional alike.

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Shifting codes: Locating the Intersections of the Real and the Virtual Cultures of Photography

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Abstract

Software and digital photographs induce the ideas of spectacle as they produce control. Irrespective of class locations all individuals are interacting with the above. There is certain reconfiguration in the nature of producing, seeing, and sharing photographs due to the intervention of software. The convergence of camera into a smartphone has defined 'sharing' as the default function of a photograph. This convergence is on one hand the progress in technology, on the other its nature has been determined as a consequence of neo-liberal measures that have come into place in the last two decades. Behind 'sharing' there are several algorithmic discourses (in turn defined by hegemonic discourses in the society) which govern our relationship with photographs and the new ways of the communication.

This study attempts to understand the relationship between users and digital photographs in a communication system based on the calculation (and transformation) of information, by looking at the process of producing photography software. It argues that the decisions defined in a camera software is driven by the hegemonic discourses

and institutions of the society, rendering digital images more than just a remembering tool.

Keywords: digital photography, software, algorithms, algorithmic discourses, hegemonic discourses, virtual cultures

Among the several neo-liberal changes we have experienced in India over the past 15 years, the way we look at things around us using electronic devices is significantly on top of the order. We are constantly using electronic screens in one form or the other, we are capturing images with small handheld devices or images of us are being captured by several CCTV cameras. We are now accustomed to experiences mediated through electronic devices operated by software. We live in an age where cameras, software and digital networks are ubiquitous. Many of these changes have come to existence after the political and economic changes across the world in the past three decades.

Photography has evolved over the years from an enterprise of science to an apparatus of science, it serves as an instrument in scientific experiments unlike the time photography itself was being discovered through science. It is also an instrument of art (Winston 1993), a surveillance/control mechanism, a producer of incontrovertible proof of things that occurred, and a social rite (Sontag 2008). In spite of a shift from a photo-chemical process to a photo-electronic process, photography retains its prime function of repeating mechanically “what could never be repeated existentially” (Barthes 1993:4). Enabled by software, these functions converge seamlessly in digital photography, transforming both the nature and the future of the form itself.

Digital photography as a ‘way of seeing’ has transformed how we understand the term ‘image’. Mark Hansen (2001:58) defines the digital image as being beyond the “position of an observer in a ‘real’, optically perceived world”. Discussing the digital image Crary (Crary 1990 cited in Hansen 2001: 58) notes, “If these images can be said to refer to anything, it is to millions of bits of electronic mathematical data”. Digital camera in Winston’s (1993) words is an ‘instrument of inscription’ which produces data for modern science. With the convenience to disseminate the

electronic data easily, digital photographs can be effectively used for the function of surveillance, power, social rite, etc.

Today, a smartphone camera can not only capture the light, it can also capture and transmit other metadata about the user and her/his location along with the image. Therefore, photographs in the age of digital imaging are not just ‘experience captured’ as Sontag (2008) opines. While experience is one aspect in the digital camera, other appropriations can be derived from the bits of electronic data in the photograph. Digital photograph allows appropriation of aspects lost to the optics of the camera allowing a larger degree of power to the possessor of information. While Sontag’s (2008:5) description of photography as “a social rite, a defence against anxiety, and a tool of power”, applies to digital photography, another aspect of power namely the control over data becomes significant. I would like to argue that a digital photograph can therefore be referred to as an assemblage, with multiplicities which “has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature” (Deleuze and Guattari 2013:7). This assemblage in a digital photograph allows it to be used as forms of control much as Sontag (2008:) points, “Photographs were enrolled in the service of important institutions of control, notably the family and the police, as symbolic objects and as pieces of information”. Consumers of digital photography apparatuses are producers of information that is consumed by software elsewhere for purposes they are oblivious of.

Software

In the above discussion, there was a constant reference to the entity that enables images to be digital, i.e. the software. Electronic devices/cameras enabled by software are now ubiquitous. We inevitably interact with software in some form or the other. Chun (2011) elaborates how the hardware of a computer will only be useful when it has been programmed to work according to the instructions of its user. Software is necessary to make the machine work for our needs. As Chun (2011:19) puts it, “Software emerged as a thing — as an iterable textual program — through a process of commercialization and commodification that has made code ‘*logos*’, code as source, code as true representation of action, indeed, code as conflated with, and substituting for, action”. Thus, software is placed in a position of power. The knowledge-power structure can be considered as the core of the software.

‘Software’ as we refer to it here, is an assemblage of several coding languages, compilers and an executable code that allows users to run a series of instructions. Users of proprietary software can experience and consume the software, yet they can neither understand nor transform this assemblage completely. The ability to access and modify this software assemblage is restricted to a few people across the world, whilst the ‘end products’ reach a large more number of people. Software developers hence acquire positions of power in society. The hierarchy/control is subtle and accepted unquestioned.

Thus, the digital ‘way of seeing’ can be argued as seeing through the software or experiencing imaging through software rather than experiencing the images as they are, i.e. without applying any manipulation when the image is created (in a film camera the photographer had to decide the parameters to compose an image as compared to digital where the algorithm predefines the parameters). This way of seeing is internalized by the software developers by determining the ways of composing photographs using the camera software embedded in the electronic device, what I would like to refer to as digital camera assemblage. In this assemblage, I would like to argue, supplementary to the combination of optical components, electronic hardware and software, several social and cultural practices are algorithmically embedded. The intervention of software reconfigures the process of producing, seeing, and sharing photographs. This study attempts to explore the intervention and reconfiguration we experience in our interaction and communication with digital cameras.

Rationale

There are several studies that explore the relationship of software and photography, influences of software on photography or the life of a digital photograph; they do not make sufficient connections between the individuals or corporations who create the software and the individuals who consume them. Thus, it is necessary to study the nature of software development and factors that drive the consumption in digital photography, given that both software and photography are being driven across the world by few technology giants.

Stuart Hall (Hall 1997 cited in Rose 2007: 2) notes, “Primarily culture is concerned with production and exchange of meanings”. “The algorithmically enabled interplay between the viewer’s position in the physical world and this virtual information layer is transformative, creating sites of meaning and enabling action” (Uricchio 2011:33). These sites of meanings are governed by corporations and hegemonic forces through algorithms. Meanings are being

determined objectively, hence influencing our cultural practices, which are otherwise construed from our subjective experiences. It is therefore necessary to understand the role of algorithms in digital communication and their influences on our discourses or cultural practices.

Research Method

As a software developer and a photographer, I could locate myself in a space where I could draw connections between the two practices. Here I perceive software as an intervention rather than a tool of convenience because, my actions and experiences in photography were often determined by functions embedded into the camera. This study is based on semi structured interviews with two software engineers working on developing software for smart phone cameras. Bound by non-disclosure agreements these engineers have provided generic information about the steps involved in developing camera software. In addition, I analysed a basic OpenCV¹ Algorithm to understand the functioning of the algorithm in camera software.

Developing an Eye

Though the first computer was invented in the 1830s, around the same time as photography came into existence, it did not gain popularity like the latter since, computer unlike a camera did not reproduce reality yet, nor did it have utilities or purposes in human life yet. After over 150 years, computers could perform as a camera by capturing, processing light, and storing it as information. Photographs are created by capturing the light incident on a semiconductor sensor and storing them onto a storage device. Photographs as media became programmable since an image could be described as a mathematical function and could be subjected to algorithmic manipulation (Manovich 2001). This convergence of camera and computer has got us to a point where the photography device is almost invisible. Photographs can be captured by devices that are almost invisible to human eyes and at unimaginable speeds.

¹The OpenCV library has more than 2500 optimized algorithms, which includes a comprehensive set of both classic and state-of-the-art computer vision and machine learning algorithms. Along with well-established companies like Google, Yahoo, Microsoft, Intel, IBM, Sony, Honda, Toyota that employ the library, there are many startups such as Applied Minds, VideoSurf, and Zeitera, that make extensive use of OpenCV' ("ABOUT | OpenCV," n.d.).

Digital Camera Assemblage

Most electronic devices that are popularly used today such as digital cameras and smartphones are loaded with software that cannot be easily deconstructed and understood. Unlike early photographic technologies like Daguerre's device², digital cameras are much smaller and faster; thus, obscuring from human vision the process of capturing light. The assemblage in digital cameras (referring to both digital cameras and smartphones) allows us to communicate with the electronic hardware using human senses of vision, speech, listening and touch. Often an electronic device is practically of no utility if there is no software to make the components work³. Similarly, digital cameras in all forms today are assemblages of different kinds of hardware and software. With increasing magnitude and dimensions of hardware capabilities, complimented by software that can perform instructions at higher speeds the camera is able to achieve vision that can match the principle of accommodation of human eyes⁴.

Keeping aside the hardware section of the camera if we are to look at the software alone, the structure of the software in itself is an assemblage of several languages, encoders, and compilers. The software that runs on a device is a compiled version of a program written using language such as C, C++ which can be interpreted in English. This is possible due to comments that are embedded in the source code, and also due to English-based commands and programming styles designed for comprehensibility (Chun 2011). These programs are a set of instructions which are to be executed by the device. However, the program in its original form cannot be interpreted by the electronic hardware, hence the C or C++ program is compiled in order to translate it into an intermediate assembly language and then into machine language. The final compiled program is the software that is embedded into the device, allowing the functioning of the device. Given the competition among camera companies, the final software product is encrypted so that the algorithms and functions cannot be deconstructed. Additionally, this encryption can conceal from the users the functions of surveillance and control embedded into the camera. Thus, the digital camera that we use to see the world is, paradoxically, itself a 'black box'; its functioning is hidden from view.

² The device was bulkier and involved chemical coated plates. Image was captured by the chemical process which took considerable time.

³ Unless a sequence of steps can be programmed in the hardware using electronic components, it is unlikely to build functions of a camera using hardware programming alone

⁴ The iris and the muscles of human eye adjusts itself to adapt to any given light situation to be able to see the surroundings.

We have arrived here due to the contribution of hundreds electronic scientists /engineers, thousands of software developers and millions of workers making components for these cameras. Studying the entire cycle, from the conception of a camera, to manufacturing of components, development of software and the eventual release and use of the product, could give a deeper insight into the influences of technology on the transformation of visual cultural practices. This paper will focus specifically on understanding the process of developing camera software since it seemingly has a significant influence on the visual cultural practices today. Dijck (2008:58) notes,

Recent research by anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists seems to suggest that the increased deployment of digital cameras – including cameras integrated in other communication devices – favours the functions of communication and identity formation at the expense of photography's use as a tool for remembering.

Berry's (Berry 2008 cited in McCosker and Milne 2014:6) concept of code "as a literature, a mechanism, a spatial form (organisation), and as a repository of social norms, values, patterns and processes," could allow in understanding its implications on cultural practices.

Software Development

Given the challenges discussed earlier, gathering information from engineers was a difficult task. I was able to contact two engineers working on two different aspects of camera software. Engineer1 was part of a team that developed application which can be used to preview and click photographs remotely. Engineer2 was part of the testing team where camera software was tested before it was embedded into the smart phone.

Engineer1 is part of a team which had earlier developed a camera trigger⁵ app⁶, to remotely control a camera using a smartphone. He is continuously involved in developing applications around the camera component for smartphones which can be downloaded and installed by users themselves. There are several stages of development, each of them handled by different teams. Broadly the development begins with the research and requirements gathering team, they define

⁵ Trigger here refers to remotely releasing the camera shutter. Earlier the triggers were wires attached to camera or wireless radio frequency remote control. In digital photography, a trigger is a software in which the photograph can be previewed

⁶ The software applications that are running on the portable devices are being referred to as app.

the work to be done. It is then passed onto the development team who develop the software. The developed software is then tested by a testing team, who test for the accuracy of the functions. The software could have multiple iterations of development and testing before it is finally given to the marketing team for dissemination.

Engineer1 was able to describe the entire cycle of development since he was also overlooking the execution of the complete workflow. Before any new app is developed the research team would identify the potential features or functions that could be built into software which is not already present. Their research includes an in-depth analysis of apps already available in market and information gathered from the Internet regarding the same. The method employed by this team was not exhaustive; they were only looking to develop features that would be new and could be extensively used. The larger goal of the requirements team is to develop a software product that would profit the organization, without much consideration of its social or cultural implications.

Based on the requirements, developers check the feasibility of building the final software. Factors such as hardware abilities, firmware versions, available APIs (hardware and camera manufacturers often offer software to configure the hardware), primarily determine the feasibility of developing the software, apart from the cost and labour considerations. If the project is considered feasible, the development process begins. Most of the development is being done using Object Oriented C or C ++ languages. In some cases, the SDK⁷ (software development kit) is provided by the hardware firm. In the process of development, the engineers develop use cases (potential user profile), develop flowchart and information architecture before these artefacts are coded in the necessary programming language⁸. Once developed, the program is compiled into an executable format and tested in a local environment⁹ for errors. The primary objective of the development team is to develop a program that can carry out the specified number of functions defined by the requirements team.

Once the development is finalized, the program is given to the testing team to test the features and check its compliance to the requirements determined in the initial phase. The first phase of

⁷ Software Development Kit (SDK) is a collection of software used to develop applications for a specific device or an operating system.

⁸ The software backend that executes crucial functions are developed with C or C++. A frontend interface to access these functions is developed using programming languages like Java, HTML, CSS etc.

⁹ The programming is done using a programming interface in which code can be written in a particular language, compiled and tested to see if the program runs as expected. Small units are coded first and tested independently to check if they give appropriate output, only then it is integrated with other modules.

testing is conducted in a simulated environment, where a computer program behaves like the camera hardware¹⁰. The software is then tested on the final hardware where it is supposed to be used. The testing team also checks if the software products carries out the specified functions as required or not. A visual expert is consulted once during the testing to get a final approval with regard to the quality of the output. Throughout the process this software is perceived as a product rather than a visual tool. The development is done to build functions that will be used as visual tools in photography. The software product is tested to check if it performs within the stipulated time to produce machine vision that resembles human vision.

Two significant components of the process were, developing image manipulation features and social media integration. Basic image manipulation functions were built into the software by using ready to use modules. And as a default, features such as Facebook and Twitter buttons were integrated into the app. thus providing the convenience to click, edit, and share the photograph on social networking platforms. This enhances interactivity since, in a networked environment, users not only interact with the media but also with other users using the media. As Engineer1 says, “it is one of the essential elements a camera app is expected to have”.

Engineer2 was a testing engineer who was concerned only with testing the modules he was assigned. He worked primarily with camera software on smartphones, thus limiting the scope of the development to the specified hardware. He would be given the specifications of the software and the expected performance. All the expectations of the software are quantitatively defined. Several parameters such as camera on time, shutter snap time and colour levels are all precisely measured. Only when all the parameters meet the required levels, the software is considered ready for launch. Throughout this process the camera is never physically used. The camera hardware is determined based on the design and requirements identified in the earlier stage. The software development does not wait for the hardware to be ready; software is developed in parallel to the hardware development. As Engineer2 says'

Developing app is the last task we do. We begin with hardware abstraction. We are more concerned with the APIs and function calls. We are also dependent on the Software Development Kit (SDK). Depending on the requirements and hardware specifications we need to determine what function call corresponds to capture photograph or record video or stop the recording.

¹⁰ Electronic devices that are themselves computers with powerful CPU (central processing unit), RAM (random access memory), storage and display, can be simulated on other computers with similar or better specifications. One computer can, therefore, be used to simulate several camera models.

Based on hardware specifications a camera is simulated on a computer which would behave as the final camera is expected to. The software can work independent of the optical components of the camera. This substantiates the earlier argument that photography is now an electronic process. Once the software is considered to be good enough, it is loaded onto the hardware and tested to check the actual performance. It is then tested by photographers or experts on design, before the smart phone is launched into the market. While Engineer2 was only concerned with the testing of the camera component, the device goes through a series of developments and tests that define the other functions of the smartphone. This device could deceptively become a mechanism of control. Software can thus encapsulate our actions and experiences as metaphors, thereby proliferating mediation.

Two ends: Engineers and Photographers

Both the developers called themselves 'casual' photographers who often took photographs with smartphone camera. Talking about hacking camera software, Engineer2 states, “perhaps only a few curious engineers would work on hacking the camera software to try new things. I am not so keen about photography, so I do not think so much in terms of hacking the software”.

Both engineers were confined to a standardized process, and their task was to develop standardized products. Though these products which contribute to visual cultural practices, in this standardized environment engineers carry out tasks as they are expected to, without reflecting on the broader functions of the software. In the case of both engineers very little consideration given to visual cultural practices while the software was developed. Though contemporary visual practices induced by technology feedback into the system for developing newer software products, it is however largely within standardized framework defined by profit oriented technology or industry.

Given this nature of software development, definition of variables is restricted to the individuals who define the requirements to the developers. The variables defined by them are largely influenced by their cultural location which is propagated to many other individuals who use the software. The sense of freedom or choice is much limited; perhaps it imbibes values into users as defined in the software.

There are attempts in the free software movement¹¹ to develop software not driven by profit. Though the free software movement attempts to gain political importance, they cannot match the hardware production or integration as done by big corporations. With the availability of low cost labour (Fuchs 2014) in countries like India, software firms are growing at much higher rate as compared to the growth of the free software movement through a collaborative network.

Reuse: Programs and Programmers

It is interesting to note that a software code is rarely written from scratch. Many re-useable programs and modules are assembled together to build the desired product. Object oriented languages are now widely used since the language allows us to write several modules independently, each of which can perform different functions depending on the context in which it is invoked. Additionally, there are several modules to perform some standard operations built into the library¹² (basic functions of mathematics, graphics etc.).

In the context of reuse, coding includes knowing what exists in the library that can be used to achieve the new functionalities. One such library called OpenCV (Open Computer Vision), that was developed by Intel Corporation and made available in the public domain, contains several programs and algorithms for the functioning of a camera., a major technology multinational developed and shared OpenCV (Open Computer Vision) code in public domain. It had several programs and algorithms for the functioning of camera. Engineer1 mentioned that OpenCV is one of the libraries they refer to while developing the software. With modular programming practice small functions can be developed and tested independently and these smaller modules can be integrated into one large program by joining them like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Often, for software developers the social functions of the software¹³ or its larger consequences are not primary concerns. They simply follow instructions given from a superior. An independent developer or smaller firms have the freedom to think about broader perspectives or larger consequences of their software. Here I would like to argue that developers can themselves be treated as re-useable modules that can be invoked or replaced as per the needs of the product or

¹¹ Free software movement is a social movement started by Richard Stallman to develop and disseminate software that ensure user's freedom.

¹² A predefined program/s or piece of software code that performs a defined set of functions and available for reuse.

¹³ Individuals interact with software in many ways directly or indirectly, like billing systems, Kiosks, Smart phones, Government systems.

business¹⁴. Engineer1 or Engineer2 are trained such that they have certain competences to perform specified tasks. They are one among the many who can code the program as needed for the software product. One can be replaced by the other conveniently to keep the development process going or keep the product functioning over its lifetime. There is a certain level of abstraction with respect to the labour aspect of software development. In fact, technology can be rendered so efficient that a significant part of the development or testing process can be automated, eliminating the need for engineers to intervene. In contemporary coding practices, use of graphical user interface to write a code¹⁵ reduces the effort required for coding, subsequently reducing the overall cost of software development. These abstractions are “compatible with the overall trajectory which governs computers development and use: automation” (Manovich 2001); the nature of automation is governed by the hegemonic structure persisting in the society. In the Indian context, I believe the functions of software and the process of automation would be defined by the upper class and upper caste section of society. Their political and economic privilege empowers them to define the functions of technology and the patterns of consumption. Though individuals from all classes are influenced by software directly or indirectly, only the higher classes/castes are reaping the benefits of technology. There are fewer avenues for a large section of lower class/caste individuals to indulge in software development. I believe even if a small number of software developers from lower class and lower caste manage to be part of the system, they have to adhere to the framework defined by the upper class/caste individuals. Also, they retain attributes of the former only to strengthen the hegemonic structure. In an Indian context, the “disciplining of programmers” (Chun 2011:35) disempowers the developer from using technology to address social issues or inequalities, whilst strengthening corporations and hegemonic frameworks. Though I would like to argue about the presence of caste hierarchy in the software industry, I cannot prove the same empirically in this study. A dedicated study introspecting the caste and class economy of software developers could substantiate this argument or bring forth new findings.

¹⁴ ‘In US crisis management and crisis communication literature and research, the connection between crisis and risk is framed not as how to protect people from organisational disasters—the catastrophic events that harm environments and people—but rather how to protect capital or the organisation, its managers and their reputation from the disdain, anger and rage of those who have been wronged or even hurt, within or outside the organisation. In this way organisational crisis management moves quickly through crisis communication to seek recovery and resolution, the restoration of its image and profitability’ (McCosker and Milne *ibid.*)

¹⁵ For Example: Android's Intelligent Code Editor is described thus: ‘At the core of Android Studio is an intelligent code editor capable of advanced code completion, refactoring, and code analysis. The powerful code editor helps you be a more productive Android app developer. There are several other coding platforms for other coding languages as well’ (“Download Android Studio and SDK Tools | Android Developers,” n.d.).

Though technology gives individuals the freedom to develop their own solutions, popular software products/services determine the patterns or features¹⁶ that are being developed. Hence camera software developed by companies like Canon, Nikon, Apple, Samsung, Microsoft etc. hegemonize the industry. They are constantly working to converge the single purpose digital camera into a smart phone¹⁷. Therefore, I would argue that these global camera and software manufacturers influence the way visual cultural practices are being shaped across the world. Unlike a film photograph, digital photographs from a certain model of camera would have certain sameness. A photograph developed on film with same model of camera would not have the sameness since, the chemicals used to develop and paper used to print the photographs would vary from one place to another. With a given model of the camera the film being used varies. Similarly, when a film is being developed the nature of chemicals also varies. And later when the film is developed into a print the kind of paper and ink will differ. It is almost as if each photograph on a film or print is unique. However, certain camera/camera phone model, will always produce same result each time. If two identical digital cameras are used side by side the results produced will be same. This sameness in a digital photograph, I would argue is a result of the algorithmic discourse that persists in the system. I would define algorithmic discourse as a series of events that attempts to achieve the same result for a given set of conditions, by repeating a finite number of steps with precision. Though developing a film also involves repeating the same number of steps the external conditions or the precisions cannot be repeated every time, it does not behave algorithmically. Therefore, I believe algorithmic discourse can be considered as blinkers that restricts our visions.

Blinkering Vision

In digital photography unlike the chemical reaction on incidence of light, light incident on a sensor (a semiconductor device) is captured and translated into zeros and ones (rather, the light is captured as an electronic signal which is represented with these arbitrary values). As Hansen (2001:60) notes, “The digital image has only an ‘electronic underside’ which ‘cannot be rendered

¹⁶ Most photography apps today come with readymade filters and standard editing functions. Camera controls are seldom manual on smartphones nowadays. Easy to use/one touch features are introduced by global leaders in phone manufacturing such as Apple, Samsung etc.

¹⁷ Samsung’s Galaxy camera is a suitable example. It runs on Android (software running on smartphone) it promises faster connectivity and easy sharing (“Samsung Galaxy Camera Price India, Galaxy Camera Features, Specifications,” n.d.),

visible' precisely because it is entirely without correlation to any perceptual recoding that might involve human vision".

The electronic/binary data has to be recoded back into a representation that is recognizable to human vision. Computer vision achieves this by passing the binary information through a series of steps so that the binary information can be transformed back to seem like a natural scene on the display. Perception is disembodied into a device (Hansen 2001) through the automated vision achieved in digital camera assemblage (receiving light at the sensor and displaying on a screen), whilst producing 'an acceptance semblance of reality'¹⁸ (Goldsmith 1979 cited in Manovich 2001:171).

In automated vision, the sensor is made up of units called pixels. Light incident on each pixel is saved as binary information into a storage unit designated as a pixel. Information for each pixel is processed through a series of algorithms before they are represented on a screen constituted of pixels. The algorithmic process is crucial since the light captured on the sensor has to be transformed into a form that can be emitted through the screen. "Algorithms take many forms, and no digital camera or computer-based viewing system would be complete without them" (Uricchio 2011: 31). Algorithms are a sequence of steps where the pixel is subject to a mathematical function and a numerical value is assigned to it. The pixel is processed by several algorithms. The decisions of photographic parameters are mapped mathematically in the form of algorithms, and are applied to all the pixels. The decision-making mechanisms are embedded into the device. If one is using a camera in automatic mode, the camera determines all the parameters for the user. In manual mode, the device adapts to the exposure, white balance, metering determined by the user, nonetheless algorithms function here as well. While algorithms that control exposure can be experienced through the interface, there are several other algorithms that run behind the scene to enable the computer vision. Therefore, it is almost as if an algorithmic discourse determines what we can see and capture through the screen of a digital camera.

Edge Detection Algorithm

One of the essential algorithms in a digital camera would be the edge detection algorithm. Since, "if the edges in an image can be identified accurately, all the objects can be located, and basic

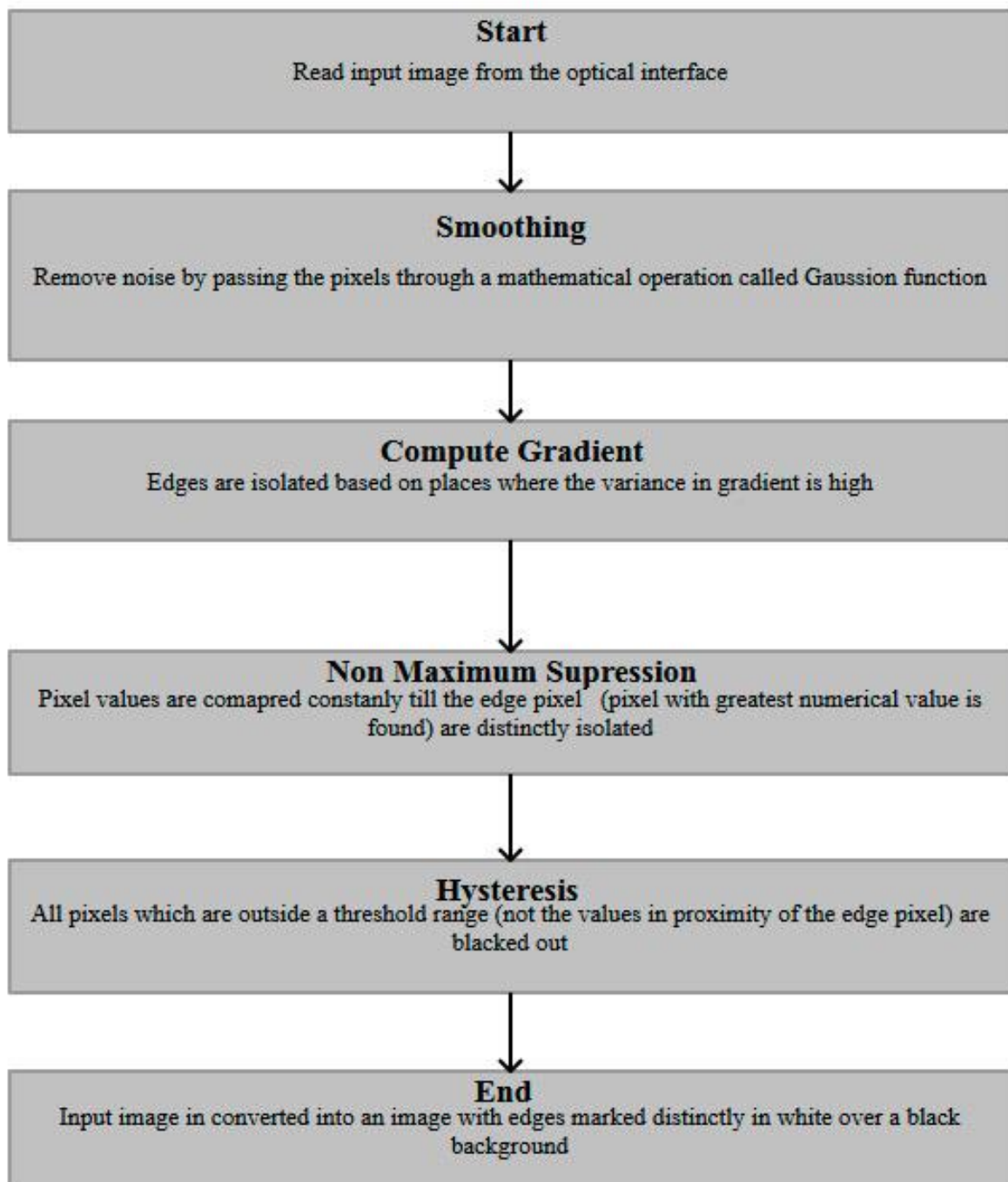
¹⁸ Manovich draws from Goldsmith's initial discussion of the term is in relation to film industry.

properties such as area, perimeter, and shape can be measured. Since computer vision involves the identification and classification of objects in an image, edge detection is an essential tool” (Parker 2010:21). Detecting edges is one of the initial mediated steps in the process of seeing in the digital camera. Given this importance of detection of edges, there are several edge detection algorithms. Each of them involve defining the edge (the output/result to be achieved), defining different variables that are necessary to prepare and solve the equations, eventually to be able to detect edges. Developing an algorithm is purely a mathematical process. Digital camera algorithms create the possibility of seeing, through a mathematical process. The objective of these algorithms is to make a computer capable of reproducing the experience of perception by human beings and to match computer vision with human vision to the extent possible. Only then the photographs could perhaps come close to ‘real’ and attain its functions. One would always prefer a sharp photo over a pixelated phot. An edge detection algorithm is therefore important for mapping the edges appropriately.

Among several edge detection algorithms Canny edge detection algorithm is known to perform optimally and it is widely discussed (Parker 2010). By analysing the flow chart and the code for Canny edge detection algorithm, I attempt understand partly the algorithmic discourse that is embedded into the device.

The edge detection algorithm detects the edges by estimating the pixel density and narrowing down the edges based on the gradient. Canny edge detection algorithm addresses three issues that persisted in the earlier algorithms in order to optimise the performance in detecting edges. It ensures all edges are detected without missing one. There is little deviation between the edges detected from the actual edges. And multiple edge pixels should not be detected in place of single pixel edges.

The flowchart in Fig. 1 shows the broad sequence of steps a photograph or information passes through. Every scene we see on a digital camera display is a photograph in itself, but it is never saved until we press the shutter release. The continuous scene we see through a screen is constantly being processed within the device to produce images that appear real. In the first step of the flow chart the excess information, called noise is reduced so that the processor can easily isolate the pixels at edges in scene.

*Fig. 1*

This is done by passing all the pixel information of the photograph through a mathematical function that appropriates the numerical values of pixel, so that it assigns a higher number to the

edge pixel as compared to other pixels that do not form an edge. This noise reduction process is repeated again in the following step of the algorithm to further reduce undesirable elements.

Once unwanted (as perceived by the computer based on pre-set values) light information is reduced, in the next step the edges are isolated further and non-edge pixels are blackened. An edge is identified by recognizing a pattern in the scene. When light is incident on an edge it forms a solid line of a certain colour. The adjacent pixels get lighter as we move away from the edge. An edge pixel would have a greater numerical value as compared to the others. Each pixel in the photograph is passed through a mathematical function that compares the numerical value of all neighbouring pixels and continues processing in the direction of pixel with a greater numerical value. This is repeatedly done until pixels with maximum value is encountered, which is marked as an edge pixel (changed to colour white, since white has the largest value on RGB¹⁹ scale). While the process keeps searching for the pixels with maximum numerical value, other pixels with lesser value are set to black. Thus, pixels on the edge are isolated as white lines on black background.

In the final step of Hysteresis the photograph (edges marked in white) is passed through a clean-up process. Two threshold values are defined; one, higher threshold, all pixels with value greater than the higher threshold are edge pixels. Two lower thresholds, all pixels above the low threshold are also associated to the edge pixel. Any pixel which has a numerical value less than this range is set to black. This process is repeated multiple times in a loop, till perhaps the difference between high and low threshold is minimum or till the scene changes. The final output photograph contains edges sharply distinguished in white over a black background. This output photograph can then be sent across to other algorithms depending on the flow determined. For example, a face detection or pattern detection function can use the edge details to determine the face or patterns within a photograph.

The algorithm when implemented on a C program works using a 'for' loop. For each pixel, the functions are applied to determine the edge pixel. The whole function could run within fraction of a second. The function based on comparison attempts to isolate the edge pixel by running in a loop till certain conditions are met. Often the conditions for the 'for' loop is determined

¹⁹ RGB: Red Green Blue, the primary colours. In computers, each is represented by a number in the range 0-255 (2^8 , 8 bit processing). The lowest colour in the range is black (0,0,0) and the highest colour is white (255,255,255).

dynamically based on the photograph in question. If the conditions are not determined correctly the algorithm would not function fully.

Examples

The descriptions of the steps involved in the Canny edge detection algorithm gives a sense of its function, but it can be better understood by seeing the results of the algorithm on a screen. OpenCVd2²⁰, an application on android phone displays results of several OpenCV algorithms. Using this tool, I have explained the working of the Canny edge detection algorithm

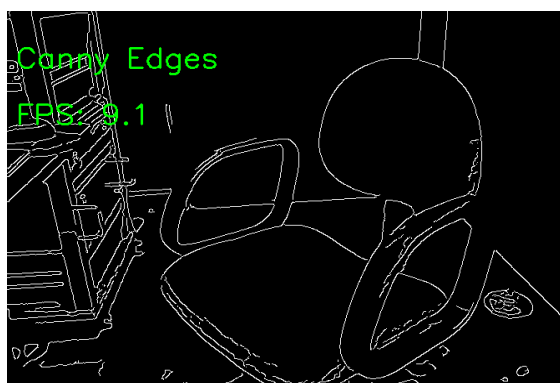


Fig 2.a

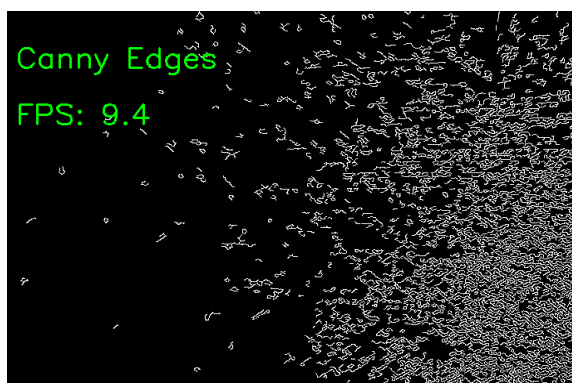


Fig 2.b

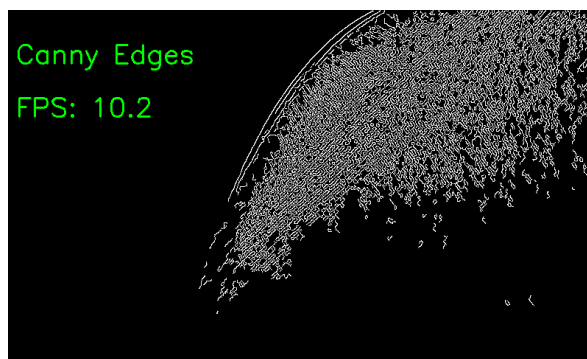


Fig 2.c

Here, Fig 2.a is a wide-angle photograph of a studio chair. The edges are more or less accurately marked. However, in a narrow shot of the chair the fabric seems to have much finer edges as seen in Fig 3.b. The fine edges are visible to the human eyes from the same distance where wide photograph was taken, but the algorithm cannot isolate them from that distance. Only when the

²⁰ Developed by Barry Thomas the app is available for free download, it 'takes the video feed frame by frame, processes the data and overlays the results onto the frame before displaying it on the screen' ("Machine Vision," n.d.).

camera is closer to the subject, the edges of the fabric are determined. Basically, the algorithm does not work to match the principle of accommodation of human vision. In case of a single input in Fig 2.b, the scene is constantly processed till all edges are identified. For instance, in Fig 2.b the edges of the threads have partially appeared. If the camera was held for a longer time, other threads would also emerge slowly. Fig 2.c is taken by holding the camera close to the chair and including the edge of the chair, the threads are clearer here. The input is repurposed constantly till a satisfactory result is achieved, the algorithm can never give an absolute result either i.e. computer vision cannot match human vision yet in form and function. The mediation is limited to definitions and capabilities of the device. This limitation of the algorithm results in an image that lacks an output recognizable by our vision.

Further, social networking platforms such as Flickr are developing new algorithms to identify the content of a photograph beyond the metadata. The new product running on Hadoop²¹ can recognize the shapes or objects with in a photograph, this helps in tagging the photographs with appropriate tags so that the photographs have better search visibility. To train the system to recognise the shapes/objects correctly a sample set of valid cases are created and another larger set of invalid cases are prepared. The algorithm runs through both the sets and produces a set of features to validate certain shapes/objects. For example, to train the system to recognize flowers 10,000 valid examples are processed and 100,000 invalid examples are processed. Based on the calculation a set of features (shape, dimension, texture etc.) are listed down and saved to the database. Every time someone uploads a photograph of flower, the features of that photograph are mapped onto the list of features in the database and it is tagged as a flower automatically if certain predefined features match. The algorithm is perfected by processing many invalid examples to train the system to recognise what is not a flower. The scales of both the sets of examples are huge, hence letting the algorithm develop a comprehensive set of features.

A Conditional Realm

Manovich (2001: 60) defines algorithm as a “sequence of steps to be performed on any data...which potentially can be applied to any set of media objects”. It is also a sequence of decisions that is applied to the data depending on the conditions that are met. Algorithms can thus be defined as a set of rules that is applied on data, rules that interpret the binary information

²¹ ‘The Apache™ Hadoop® project develops open-source software for reliable, scalable, distributed computing’ (“Welcome to Apache™ Hadoop®!,” n.d.).

and present them to us in forms we can recognize. A past moment in time can be captured as a digital photograph, giving that moment a material existence, whose form is determined by the algorithms that are embedded into the camera. Algorithms enable the processing of light information to be interpreted as a moment in time, thus making software a metaphor “for the mind, for culture, for ideology, for biology, and for the economy” (Chun 2011:55). Depending on the decisions that a data passes through it could attain a different meaning. It can be perceived as a different metaphor.

Relatively our lives are highly conditional, where all events are consequences of a series of factors or other events. Unlike algorithms, there are no concrete definitions of the conditions we come across. Therefore, by using devices with algorithms embedded in them, our experiences are being mediated based on a finite set of conditions defined in the algorithm. The number of possible outputs (metaphors) is also finite. By separating the interface from the algorithm software becomes unknowable, making it a metaphor for a metaphor as Chun (2011) argues. In contrast, I would like to argue that by obscuring the algorithms (conditions, decisions, and sequence of steps) software is made unknowable. Since the algorithm (mathematical equations and programming language) cannot be accessed and interpreted by everyone. It is not perceived as new media object like a digital photograph (light information captured, stored and appropriated). Algorithms cannot be consumed like a new media objects, nonetheless our actions and consumption patterns are constantly being guided by them. A knowledge practice that makes the algorithm visible is built out of the present practice of digital photography. To give an example, as a user to compose a digital image I would consider a limited number. Starting with turning on the camera, composing the frame through the digital display or eye piece, click a button and preview the end image. Within this process, the camera software would calculate the light and colours, and adjust the settings to the given light. There are several decisions the camera could manage. Additionally, more recent cameras can capture location details, the smart phone cameras could capture the user's details/login. This information allows easy sharing across several social media platforms. Though this is a convenience for the end users, it also means allowing the machine to take several decisions on the users' behalf. Further, this makes users vulnerable to systems and mechanisms of control.

The digital camera is an assemblage of algorithms, since algorithms are evolving to map human experiences mathematically. Moreover, the increase in the number of algorithms used in programming has drastically transformed human computer interaction. If we look at the stakeholders in the process of developing camera software, multiple individuals involved in the

process are not likely to have the nuanced eye that experts would possess with respect to light, colour or dynamic range. With an algorithmic discourse, the visual culture practice is reconfigured depending on the stakeholders or hegemonic forces that define the algorithms or rules of perceiving through a digital camera.

Entrusting the decisions making apparatus algorithmically to a system, makes it convenient for an institutional hegemony rather than allowing to “democratize all experiences by translating them into images” as Sontag (2008) writes. Especially, entrusting the functions of seeing and remembering in algorithms has made possible for the growth of several social networking platforms and Internet services, which is now hegemonized by technology giants like Facebook, Google, Yahoo etc. Only a tiny section of the population have a stake in these large organisations, whilst a larger section of the population are users of such technologies.

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