Contagious memes, viral videos and subversive parody: The grammar of contention on the Indian web

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Abstract
This essay presents the viral culture of videos, memes, and websites deploying the tropes of parody and satire as a newly emerging discourse of social and cultural critique on the Indian web. It situates this cultural phenomenon at the intersection of a prior tradition of heterodoxy in India as well as the globally proliferating memetic culture. The essay argues that the speech is distinguished by a logic of repetition with difference both in its parodic/satiric text as well as through its medium that allows the text to repeat at new sites creating new meanings.

Keywords
Contagion, Indian web, memes, parody, public sphere, satire, virality

Introduction
The specific ways in which networked culture is transforming political deliberation within national public spheres globally is only just being understood by scholars. In this essay, I present the discourse of contention on the Indian web as an emerging modality of argumentation within India’s public sphere. Through analyzing how a prior culture of heterodoxy (Chakrabarty, 1999; Sen, 2006) converges with the web’s participatory ethos to create subversive speech in India, the essay invites a reconsideration within traditional notions of deliberation to include how networked media can bring together tropes of parody, satire, and mashup for potent social and political critique. The essay showcases how the logic of infinite digital replication through the appropriation and circulation of cultural texts, such

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as viral videos, spreadable memes, and parodic websites, creates a structure of participation among new audiences with a persuasive force of its own.

This subversive speech is marked by the syntax of “repetition with difference” (Hutcheon, 1985) that works at two separate levels demonstrated through this essay’s analysis. First, it operates at the level of content wherein the comedic genres of parody, satire, and mashup trouble the juxtaposition of form and content to dismantle a text or an argument from within. Second, it functions at the level of the medium wherein the web’s networked technology allows the content to replicate virally through a memetic culture to create new meanings at new sites and through new users. Together, the convergence of these dual modes of reproduction creates a new grammar of critique that pushes beyond the limits of the dominant style of rational critical debate as the ideal mode of communication and argumentation (Habermas, 1991) in the public sphere. Instead of a head on and direct negation of its opposition using argumentative norms of facts and reason, this critique is immanent and restores the symmetry within the discursive sphere, through a logic of virality (Gray et al., 2009; Harder, 2013).

To demonstrate the operation of the dual component of its style, I position this contentious speech at the conjuncture of two cultural phenomena that are distinct but cohere in it. The first is its location as a moment within a long history of what Amartya Sen (2006) has called an “argumentative culture” in India that has historically deployed tropes of parody and satire (Harder, 2013; Siegel, 1989; Thomas, 1969) to contest both religious and secular power. The second is the widespread global cultural phenomenon comprising the creation and circulation of memetic digital texts enabled by the web’s architecture (Jenkins et al., 2013; Parikka, 2007; Shifman, 2012). The intersection of these separate phenomena appropriates the social web’s default settings to create a counter discourse in India showcasing the distinct trajectories along which national webs unfold. It allows us to ground the web through the “revenge of geography” (Rogers, 2013) and distinguish online cultural milieux (such as national webs) by language, history, and local events that may not globalize as easily. A case in point is the famous Pink Chaddi (pink underwear) campaign mobilized through social networks in India (2009). The movement was universal in its critique of patriarchy but was sparked by an attack on women inside a pub by right wing groups in the city of Mangalore (Chattopadhyay, 2011).

The Indian Internet’s complex plurality necessitates analysis of its various dimensions that include the preponderance of religious fundamentalism and hate speech (Therwath, 2012), the increasing state surveillance of user activity and the ways in which it symbolizes a new form of global network power. The abysmal access to the Internet (a mere 17.4% of the Indian population; PTI, 5/6/2014) also limits it to a selective and elite user base. This essay’s focus on dissenting speech is therefore only one among the different aspects of digital culture in India. The critical discourse on the Indian web also operates within an environment of risk since the same digital architecture that enables it is used by the state to stifle online dissent by tracking and identifying speech that would have otherwise remained
within the unobserved domain of private conversation (Andrejevic, 2013). Subversive viral culture must also appropriate the same default features (e.g., share, retweet, like, hashtags) of the social web that are designed to monetize interactivity for purely pecuniary purposes, thus impeding the web’s egalitarian founding ideals (Grewal, 2008; Hillis et al., 2013; Van Dijck, 2013). Far from being celebratory, this essay’s analysis is informed instead by this dialectic of publicity and risk evident in social media’s role in recent political and social movements globally (Castells, 2012; Morozov, 2012). This essay moderates the contradictory possibilities of the Indian web by juxtaposing the examples of social political critique with state’s attempts to suppress critical online speech.

Contagion: Towards a theory of memetic culture

The metaphor of contagion is more apt than ever before in considering the nature of global cultural flows given that they increasingly comprise the transmission and recirculation of cultural ideas called memes (Dawkins, 2006; Gleick, 2011). The Internet’s distributed and multi-nodal structure enables the easy proliferation of copied and mirrored content that is enabling an exponential rate of global retransmission and replication of ideas today. This global interconnectivity can be understood using the metaphor of a contagious virus (Brodie, 2009; Johnson, 2006) spreading in densely populated areas through a vector (air, contact, carrier) with the difference that the global web’s always-on network obviates the role of a vector, making access and connectivity the primary criteria for a digital meme’s spread.

In defining memes as “a unit of cultural transmission or a unit of imitation,” Dawkins (2006: 544) could not have envisaged their post millennial digital avatar. Digital memes today encapsulate the latest instance of cultural texts traveling unencumbered by material, legal, and cultural constraints (Börzsei, 2013; Shifman, 2012)—a phenomenon that theories of cultural globalization have historically sought to understand (Jameson, 1998). If globalization is the “...age of universal contagion” (Hardt and Negri, 2000: 136) then viral texts (videos, hashtags, pictorial memes) exemplify this “logic of contagion and repetition” (Parikka, 2007: 288) in “ideoscapes” and “mediascapes” that Arjun Appadurai (1990) articulated as the scalar dynamic of cultural globalization. Memes coalesce and globalize threads of culture, conversations, and ideas that would otherwise remain grounded and locally contained.

Since replication is also mutation and the iteration cannot share the presence in time and space of the original, memetic repetition in new sites, through new bodies and in new contexts both disturbs the original and displaces it by being “almost the same but not quite” (Bhabha, 2004: 86). Globally replicating digital memes are the latest instance of media technologies of reproduction, ranging from lithography, printing, photography, phonograph, to cinema (Benjamin, 1968) particularly because the seemingly immaterial coded digital memes traveling through the sinews of the global network have a material substrate and are parasitic upon the physical architecture of the web medium (Berry, 2011). And if the “theorist...
of repetition” (Parikka, 2007: 296) Walter Benjamin showed us that evolving media
technologies of reproduction transform human sense perceptions and social struc-
tures through desacralizing but also democratizing art by destroying its aura,
digital memes democratize cultural ideas by making their production and recircu-
lation a participatory process.

The current scholarship on memes is the latest among historical attempts to
understand the reasons for the germination and circulation of ideas within scholar-
ship on media and communication (Katz and Lazarsfeld, 1970; Rogers, 2003).
Predictably, the consumer-advertising industry leads efforts to understand and
create viral digital culture in order to profit from the frictionless meshing of par-
ticipatory culture and consumer activity. Scholarly research, however, concludes
that an affective “arousal hierarchy” (Guadagno et al., 2013) led by humor and
positive affects (Shifman, 2012) and followed closely by the evocation of anger or
anxiety are key explanations for the spread of memes on the Internet. Additionally,
factors such as embeddedness within communities (Bauckhage, 2011; Weng et al.,
2014), the ease and simplicity of their creation (Börzsei, 2013), the role of media
technologies (Gleick, 2011), or the desire for participation (Shifman, 2012) emerge
as crucial factors. The role of the default settings of global social media (Van Dijck,
2013) that emphasize sociality through affordances such as like, share, and retweet
features that were designed to incentivize and monitor user interactivity
(Andrejevic, 2013; Turow, 2011) has played no small a part in creating this
global memetic culture.

The politically subversive effect of replicating and circulating memes has been
visible in recent social movements globally. Twitter hashtags have helped tie
common conversations within the glut of data, enabling coordination and mobil-
ization during periods of repressive constraints on media channels. Viral videos
such as of an innocent bystander Neda shot during the summer protests against
Iranian election results in 2009 have recirculated back locally bypassing restrictions
to provide a new rallying cry and sustenance for movements (Fathi, 2009;
Mortensen, 2011). Viral texts subvert dominant state narratives of an event by
introducing diverging and dissenting views that impede the nation state’s ability
to completely define its meaning. Not surprisingly, in India, as elsewhere
(Morozov, 2012), creators of digital subversive texts operate in an environment
of frequent censorious reprisals and the resort to the tropes of parody and satire,
genres with a long history within India, allows the memetic culture to bypass legal
constraints by inhabiting the ambivalent space between serious and seemingly
harmless discourse.

The pre-history of parody and satire in India

While history is never the singular determining factor in shaping cultural practices
in societies, it allows us to investigate continuities and prior iterations of those
practices. The culture of dissent on the Indian web must be contextualized within a
historical tradition of heterodoxy and iconoclasm that has been a dominant thread
within the public and intellectual discourse in India. This tradition has not ameliorated the material inequities or demolished social hierarchies (such as caste and gender) that have continued to remain deeply entrenched in Indian society. But the simultaneous existence of a sanction for the denigration of certain sections of society (e.g., of women and certain castes in The Code of Manu) alongside a plurality of different opinions and a systematized methodology for argumentation, critique, and the resolution of epistemological questions is a contradiction within the ancient texts of India. Through an exegesis of ancient Indian scholarly texts, Nobel laureate Amartya Sen’s The Argumentative Indian argues that prominent voices in these texts belong to women and marginalized groups whose inspiration for subsequent resistance and reform (e.g., the anti-caste reform movements) can be traced to this ethos of dissent and debate. Sen claims that this rich tradition of argument:

has helped to make heterodoxy the natural state of affairs in India… persistent arguments are an important part of our public life. It deeply influences Indian politics, and is particularly relevant, I would argue, to the development of democracy in India and the emergence of its secular priorities. (Sen, 2006: 40)

Within this broad tradition of heterodoxy, humorous genres such as parody and satire have had a particularly important role to play. Laughter has been a key obsession for thinkers, writers, social reformers in ancient India, and its elaboration as one of the eight genres (Schwartz, 2004) in the ancient Indian treatise on theories of drama the Natyashastra (Bharata, 400 A.D.; Vatsyayan, 2001), establishes its importance within the literary and theater traditions.

The contribution of the Natyashastra aside, social, and political critique generally and the use of comedic genres in particular are dominant threads within Indian literature starting from Sanskrit to modern Indian languages such as Hindi, Bengali, and Urdu (Hasan, 2007; Haustmann and Pauwels, 2012; Montaut, 2012; Siegel, 1989; Thomas, 1969). Paul Thomas’s 1969 collection (Humour Wit and Satire from Indian Classics) presents innumerable satiric and parodic excerpts and anecdotes from ancient texts within Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism as well as political treatises (e.g., Niti Shastras on law). Similarly, Lee Siegel’s erudite survey of more than 150 Sanskrit texts (Laughing Matters, 1987) enumerates countless examples where comedic juxtapositions such as idealization/righteousness with degradation-corruption, religious piety with hypocrisy, and the yogi’s chastity with sexual temptations were deployed for trenchant critiques of seemingly proscribed objects such as religious texts, the priestly class as well as the secular royal warriors (kshatriyas). The unapologetic irreverence of these critical traditions continues vigorously in languages of the post-Sanskrit era and particularly thrives through the colonial period in India, which witnessed a “veritable boom of satirical production” (Harder, 2013: 166).

The period of first modernity (mid 15th to mid 18th century) and that of colonial rule are germane pre-histories for the current tradition of satire and parody on the
Indian web as these periods witnessed the convergence of the pre-existing traditions of satire and parody with widespread discontent against social inequities and British colonial rule, respectively. Leaders of prominent social movements in India during the middle centuries (e.g., the Sufi saint Kabir and the Bhakti movement that attacked caste hierarchies) critiqued the difference between high ideals espoused by religion and its distortion in practice through satiric prose and poems. The vernacular literature in the same period also shows bold irreverence towards Hindu Gods such as Shiva’s chastity (Bhattacharya, 2012) and Krishna’s playfulness (Pauwels, 2012) and religious hypocrisy in general (Horstmann, 2012a,b).

Perhaps the most remarkable and surprisingly understudied phenomenon of political humor in the colonial period is the countless Indian iterations of the London satirical magazine Punch (Mitter, 2013). One of the earliest instances of a globalizing text, these Indian versions of Punch showcased (almost a century before theories of globalization argued thus) the agency inherent in appropriating a hegemonic global artifact. The Indian versions substituted the British Punch’s frequent derision of India’s social customs and their support for colonial rule with an inverted critical gaze that questioned colonialism with the same satirical tone and attitude (Khanduri, 2013). These regional Indian versions of Punch interacted with the prior “existing literary and oral traditions of satire” (Kumar, 2013: 94) to “became integral to political critique in the public sphere” (Khanduri, 2013: 179).

Colonial rule and the social reform movements pre-dating it influenced the growth of a print culture across India that sprouted numerous other magazines pre-dating and entirely disconnected from Punch. Examples include the Delhi Sketch Book in English (Khanduri, 2013), Matvala & Kavivachan Sudha in Hindi (Kumar, 2013), India in Tamil (Venkatacalapati, 2006), Tahzibul Akhlaq in Urdu (Hasan, 2007), and Basantak and Bidushak in Bengali (Basu, 2013). Predictably, the colonial government kept close tabs on them through its “Native Newspaper Reports” prepared by the Criminal Intelligence Department (Venkatacalapati, 2006). Colonial satire functioned to “re-establish a kind of symmetry” (Harder, 2012: 180) within the inherent asymmetricality of colonial rule that was premised on a conflict between duality of cultural codes, value systems, and frames of reference—the “superior” metropole against the “inferior” colonial one. An explosion in political satire during colonial rule reflects its tendency to flourish during increased censorship and totalitarianism as a means to bypass regulatory measures by inhabiting an ambiguous and grey zone (Baym, 2005; Gray et al., 2009; Harder, 2012).

In post-independence India (1947–), the tradition of political comedy has flourished with renewed vigor making political cartoonists such as R. K. Laxman, Abu Abraham, Sudhir Dar, and Unny popular figures within the national media space. The launch of the political satire journal Shankar’s Weekly in 1948 (a year after India’s independence) and the widely published political caricatures during the suspension of democratic process with the imposition of “emergency” (1975–1977) are crucial milestones (Freedman, 2009).
Political parody and satire on the Indian web today are embedded within a larger media ecology of social satire and news parody shows on television such as *The Week That Wasn’t*, *2G*, *Gustakhi Maaf*, *The Great Indian Tamasha* as well as stand up comedy shows such as *Comedy Nights with Kapil*, *The Great Indian Comedy Show*, *The Great Indian Laughter Challenge*. These shows have created a broader popular culture of satirical critique and professionalized the field of comedians opening up careers as solo artists (groups such as *The East India Comedy Club*). India’s memetic digital culture is better understood in this broader context of a culture of social and political humor both ancient and modern.

**Repetition with difference: Memetic parody on the Indian web**

The teeming multiplicity and variety of modes of political and social critique on the web necessitates their organization into three broad categories of viral videos, contagious memes, and news parody sites that this essay sequentially analyzes below to show their modality of operation. The three categories share the logic of “repetition with difference” both in their text in their physical medium. Their textual critique functions by deviating from a pre-existing form while their circulation within viral and networked medium allows their replication at new sites and in new contexts. Though only 17% of India’s population is online, the real number of Indian netizens (238 million in December 2013—PTI, 5/6/2014) is second only to China among the Asian countries providing a large user base for a participatory culture that thrives through the widespread use of mobile phones and other networked devices in India.

**Viral videos**

Viral videos that use satire and parody to critique dominant social and political narratives have recently emerged as a prominent cultural phenomenon on the Indian web. I focus on videos made by three recently formed groups that have had the most success in circulating and getting viewership for these texts. The groups, *All India Bakchod* (henceforth AIB), *The Viral Fever* (henceforth TVF), and *The East India Comedy Club* (henceforth EICC) can be termed upstarts because of their recent formation (the past 2–3 years), the relative young age of their members, and their untried and experimental mode of having a web only presence. Their oeuvre, comprising over 150 videos² (AIB 44 Videos, TVF 66 Videos, EICC 33) is marked by the use of parody, mashup, satire, and pastiche to defamiliarize and critique various aspects of life in India. I organize my analysis under three sequential categories of social, political, and cultural critique.

Social issues tackled by these videos include women’s safety, domestic servitude, arranged marriage, the debate about sex-education in schools, and the disturbingly manic fandom of cricketer Sachin Tendulkar. The most watched video among those being analyzed is called “Its Your Fault” (on last account having been viewed four million times) that deploys satire to launch a scathing attack on
India’s patriarchal discourse. Released in September 2013, 9 months after the infamous Delhi rape and murder incident of December 2012, the video (created by AIB) features actress Kalki Koechlin, who performs a monolog informing women that rape is entirely their fault. Wearing a smile, Koechlin narrates a list of reasons to blame women for their rape that includes their provocative clothes since “men have eyes,” their desire to work late into the night, remaining out late with boys, trying to be independent, and “seducing” juveniles into raping. Kalki’s words are belied by images of women in short dresses being interrogated by the police and being assaulted by men as well as her face that has a black eye and bruise marks by the end. The video’s dark humor functions through a double voice wherein its seemingly well-meaning advisory tone is continuously subverted by the sub-text of images to effectively counter the discourse that blames women for their own brutalization. The video allows those viewing, sharing, and commenting on the video to partake in what scholars of viral texts call an “emotional contagion” created by “the convergence of one’s emotional state” (Guadagno et al., 2013) with that of other viewers experiencing similar affects of anger and shame invoked by the video.

The issue of child labor often employed in Indian households is starkly lampooned by a video titled Indian iPod, a short skit designed to be an advertisement for a new product called “iPod Chotu” (viewed about 450,000 times). The video uses the moniker Chotu (little boy in Hindi), commonly used to address young boys working as domestic help or in other jobs, to describe a disheveled, poor-looking boy who follows orders to sing different genres of songs (singing them quite badly). The video’s scathing attack works through the strategy of parodic exaggeration (Highet, 1962) by dehumanizing the boy as a consumer product while boasting that the product works through AVR (Advanced Voice Recognition) and has been invented through “Unflagging Indian enterprise and cutting edge apathy” even as the “portable” boy is shown jogging alongside his master during a morning run. Another trenchant critique of the maniacal fan-worship of cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar is aptly titled Sachinocalypse depicting a doomsday scenario after Sachin’s retirement. It parodies a mafia don selling USB flash drives with videos of Tendulkar’s batting that is presented as a drug to feed the craving fans’ addiction. The video (viewed almost 400,000 times) ends with the desperate addicts pulling out guns at each other with the final survivor decided through a trivia quiz based on Sachin’s cricket career.

The critique in each of these videos functions through “doubleness and self-bifurcation” (Connery and Combe, 1995: 2) by juxtaposing an implicit voice that belies the explicit spoken one. Each is a repetition that deviates through an incipient second voice that defamiliarizes, ridicules, and critiques the said phenomenon. The incongruous juxtapositions of Koechlin’s bruised face with her smile, of Chotu’s promptness alongside his disheveled look and pitiable singing talents and of trigger-happy mafia Dons resolving their rivalries through a nerdy game of cricket quiz are potent arguments about each of those social practices and beliefs that are arguably just as effective as other more traditional modes of argumentation.
These strategies when used to critique the nation’s politics and cultural texts make for caustic commentary especially since their presence outside the radar of traditional media allows these videos to make more vicious attacks. A video called *Thank You Congress* (over 600,000 views) parodies a funeral elegy for the “deceased” Congress party that was voted out of power in May 2014 after 10 years in office. The speaker weeps at the dead body in the coffin calling it “a thief, a backstabber” while also thanking it “for being so easy to make fun of” as the camera moves to the sobbing audience. Released on the eve of India’s general elections in May 2014, the elegy laments the fearful future for comedians since the Congress was “a comedic motherlode/the punchline to every joke.” The song reminds listeners of every scandal during the congress rule but ends with a cautionary allusion to the opposition BJP’s leader Narendra Modi’s reputation as a demagogue and his much-publicized background as a tea-seller’s son when an aspiring joke-writer gives a Nazi salute with a glass of tea in the other hand. Another video called *Congress vs BJP* (with 1.3 million views) critiques the obsession with talking about politics by showing people committing egregious blunders at workplaces while they discuss politics animatedly. These videos about Indian politics satirize political corruption and the obsessive but vacuous discussions around politics in India by scripting deviations from the form of a funeral elegy and real workplace situations.

The third target of viral videos is other cultural texts that invariably function through the superimposition of the parody on the parodied text (Hutcheon, 1985). A video called *Suron Ka Sasur* (TVF) lampoons the widespread singing talent shows as three actors impersonating as judges use exaggerated affects of praise, criticism, and dejection to support and provoke contestants into dramatic responses. Similarly, *Gangs of Social Media* rebukes the fetishization of social media usage among India’s youth by superimposing new dialogs over a widely acclaimed movie *Gangs of Wasseypur* (based on actual gang rivalry in the coal-mining city Wasseypur) to transpose the film’s criminal rivalry into a competition between those with single versus committed statuses on social media. The two gangs in the parody compete for likes, friends, and women’s attention on social media sites such as facebook, twitter, linkedin, and youtube. The comment sections below each of these viral videos are key to the structure of participation created by them and despite the presence of occasional reactionary or rude comments, the majority debate the videos’ arguments, thus serving a key purpose of their production and circulation.

**Contagious memes**

If threads of ideas within the global cultural soup are intermingling and weaving together with more intensity than ever before, the phenomenon is largely driven by a “memetic culture” comprising of “infectious” viral memes. Given that they are far easier to create and share than other type of digital texts (such as videos or websites), memes (including twitter hashtags and photoshopped images and texts)
invite users to be playful and creative by linking conversations in a digital discursive chain through repetition and appropriation to advance an idea globally.

India’s memetic culture is driven by its staggering twitter population of 33 million that is second only to China’s 35.5 million globally (Lipman, 2013). This despite India lagging far behind in overall internet penetration and users (238,000,000) in comparison to China (538,000,000) and the United States (245,203,319). The limitation of 140 characters and its freewheeling town-hall style conversation mode (Van Dijck, 2013) perhaps aligns with the conversational aspect of India’s public sphere as elaborated by Sen (2007) and Chakraborty (1999). Recent top-trending hashtags in India have ranged from political events such #Israel (on 7/19/2014), #PrayForMH17 (on 7/18/2014), #Palestine & #GazaUnderAttack (on 7/12/2014) to social and political critique such as #AccordingToIndians and #BigMinisterSmallRape (8/22/2014). Besides the obvious news stories above, the hashtag #BigMinisterSmallRape was used for tweeting against a government minister’s lament about how “one small incident” (referring to the ghastly rape and mutilation of a woman in Delhi) had reduced tourist inflow into the city. The thread #AccordingToIndians, for instance was used to critique social and cultural practices ranging from Indian parents’ obsession with careers in math and science, the social denigration of women, and the custom of arranged marriage.

Twitter’s centrality to Indian politics and culture is emphasized in its use by political opponents and public intellectuals to attack, defend, and opine on key current issues. The days preceding the divisive general elections in May 2014 witnessed wide use of twitter hashtags to appropriate political campaign slogans such as “Abki Baar Modi Sarkar” (This time Modi government) and “Acche Din” (good days) with counter slogans such as “Acche Din, Bijli Bin” (good days without electricity), “Congress hi lootegi kya har baar? Abki Baar Modi Sarkar” (Will only Congress have the opportunity to loot? This time Modi government), and “Abki Baar, Antim Sanskar” (This time funeral rites). The last one led to the police detention of 24-year-old Syed Waqar when the meme (the image of a dead body with the above slogan), allegedly created by him, was circulated on the social media application whatsapp (Kumar, TOI, 5/27/2014). This followed other cases such as the police interrogation of an engineer Devu Chodankar for expressing imminent fear about the persecution of minorities if Modi was voted to power (Shetye, TOI June 3, 2014), and a police case filed against US based (PTI/DNA, 7/9/2014) Savio Almeida who shared a meme of a government minister wearing a bikini after the minister’s comment connecting crimes against women to their wearing bikinis in public places.

These and other similar police actions show the ease with which creators of these digital texts can be identified and traced. Even though the chief minister of Goa clarified the government’s noninvolvement in the case against the engineer, suggesting that such offenses did not require arrest (First Post, 5/26/2014), the fear of action, and threats of arrest, including one made explicitly by a minister in the previous Congress government (Joshi, The Hindu, 12/6/2014), represent instances
of attempts to stifle online speech. The justified critiques of hashtag activism and twitter’s own role in using its data for commercial purposes are key correctives to a singular emphasis on its democratizing potential (Van Dijck, 2013). And yet, by allowing common citizens to speak directly (tweet) to those in power, twitter has also undeniably functioned to erase distances, albeit in a confined and circumscribed digital domain, within India’s historically entrenched political and social structures. Responses to common tweeters from government ministers and officials, rare as they may be, mark a symbolic shift within political accountability in the country.

**News parody sites**

The third aspect of the online parodic culture I analyze comprise news parody websites that adopt the format of online newspapers while containing satirical stories about politics, social issues as well as other news and media organizations. Websites such as fakingnews.com, theindiasatire.com, newsthatmattersnot.com, mockingnow.com, and theunrealtimes.com signal a notable shift in popular perceptions about news organizations from their hallowed status (Kumar, 2014; Parameswaran, 2009) to fallible profit seeking institutions with clear biases. Given the centrality of news in making informed choices in a democracy, news parody intervenes directly within democratic processes by “encouraging critical viewing and a healthy cynicism about the mediation of politics.” (Gray et al., 2009: 18).

The news channel Times Now and its combative anchor Arnab Goswami (host of the show *Newshour*) make a frequent target of all parody websites. A story about Goswami, the most viewed anchor in India going by TRP ratings, titled “Meet the man who can solve all problems the country is facing” berates his domineering persona by satirizing him in the language of omnipotence:

He questions, he answers, he investigates, he prosecutes, he sentences, hereports, he debates, he plays the victim, he acts the accused, he shouts, he scolds, he interrupts, he erupts. He tries to do everything that he thinks the Nation wants him to do.

Yet another story describes Goswami suffering a “rare blackout” leading to a guest (named Arnab Comeswami) speaking uninterrupted for an unprecedented nine seconds (news that matters not) on his show. The story goes on to claim that the event had left the viewers “stunned and confused” leading to an apology and a promise from the channel that the anchor would “turn up his hostility and arrogance to the maximum level” in future shows. Other stories detail the fictive launch of Goswami’s book “The Nation Wants to Know,” alluding to the phrase repeatedly deployed during his aggressive questioning and about a drunken Goswami arguing with an electricity pole provoking it for a fistcuff while calling it names (news that matters not). Inter-textual news parody on the Internet can pose a more direct attack on other news institutions in comparison to parody shows in
mainstream media particularly television (Kumar, 2012), since they remain outside and independent of the mainstream news organizations.

Fake news reports on these sites also regularly intervene within debates on pressing social maladies such as gender discrimination and apathy towards India’s destitute. A story on theindiasatire.com mocks a politician’s comment (Uttar Pradesh Governor Aziz Quereshi) that God himself could not do more than what the government was doing to ensure women’s safety in the state. The fake news story satirizes his words by reporting God’s request seeking more time for “reassessing his role in stopping rapes in the state.” (God demands time..., theindiasatire.com). Quereshi’s comments caused a national furore forcing him to apologize but the satirical story counters it by taking his ridiculous comments literally and extending its absurdity to the logical end. India’s soul-crushing poverty and the elite’s apathy towards the pitiable condition of its farmers is ridiculed in a scathing “editorial” (news that matters not, May 4, 2014) that opines against the life and career “choices” made by the farmers of India. The editorial, derides the farmers’ skewed priorities (food instead of iPhones), their enviable ability to maintain a thin body (size zero) without effort, their misplaced request for rain (that inconveniences city dwellers) and their “selfish” act of committing suicides. The editorial’s stinging humor works through an interplay of the newspaper editorial form but in repeating the original with marked deviations it also “wounds the original” (Highet, 1962: 68) and shows its inadequacies. In doing so, it targets the skewed priorities of the media but also the delusion of India’s elite towards the heart piercing issue of farmer-suicides in India (Sainath, 2006).

Conclusion

This essay’s case for viral parody and satire as a new mode of deliberation within the Indian public sphere relies on its dual replicability at the level of the text and the medium within the memetic culture. The text’s parodic content deploys the power of repetition with difference to implode an argument or social practice from within. It masks itself as a joke and challenges hegemonic narratives by unraveling the mask to reveal its critique. This critical power is then amplified by its ability to replicate infinitely, as easily as with a single click, through a diffused network of creators and participants. The convergence of the inherently subversive power of mimesis and virality (Benjamin, 1968; Bhabha, 2004; Parikka, 2007) with the immanent critique of satire and parody give this language of contention its subversive force. This modality of argument thrives in an alternate space beyond that occupied by rational critical debate (Habermas, 1991) whose limits are visible in the shouting contests between ideologues on India’s prime time talk shows.

The web’s relative infancy in India gives it a period of “interpretive flexibility” (Van Dijck, 2013: 68) allowing its subversive content to function with greater latitude. While the emergence of this contentious discourse on the web is a global phenomenon, this essay has sought to show the unique ways in which it operates in India. National webs are not self-contained spheres but are formed through a dialectical interaction of global flows and tropes with the cultural/historical particularities of local contexts. In analyzing how a culture of heterodoxy and local
events interact with the universal elements of parody, satire, and networked media technologies, the essay’s goal has been to advance an understanding of the Indian web by showcasing its particularities. The deeply entrenched structures of exclusion and oppression along lines of gender, caste, and class in India have morbid material manifestations and while this contentious discourse cannot replace radical politics in the physical world, it can be a step towards dismantling the discursive mandates upon which material structures of power rest.

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Notes

1. Many of these Indian Punches have been documented in Asian Punches: A Transcultural Affair (Harder H and Mittler B, eds)
2. These numbers were taken at the time of the writing of the essay and are likely to have gone up since.
3. The trending hashtags for each day have been retrieved from www.trendinalia.com that compiles the top hashtags for all the major countries.
4. At least one of the news parody sites fakinews.com is owned by a mainstream news organization Network 18.

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