FORUM

Shadow Politics: Front Stage and the Veneer of Volunteerism

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This article proposes the metaphor of "shadow" to examine two interrelated aspects of digital politics in India: online surveillance of politically inclined actors and datafied shadow texts aimed at managing front stage politics. The specificity of "shadow politics" emerges from ongoing transformations that are deeply interwoven with the digital, first with the data driven confidence around the "total certainty" of tracking and calibrating voter sentiments, and second, with the ideology of digital participation and related claims that data machines are merely tapping into people's sovereign expressions online.

While carrying out ethnographic explorations of online political cultures in India, I met a young man in Mumbai in 2013—smartly dressed, tech savvy and who called himself a "proud right-winger." He was one among the growing group of "Internet Hindus" (Hindu nationalist volunteers) who were engaged in online discursive constructions of Hindu India by declaring, among other things, that the "pseudoseculars" who hide their elitism behind the egalitarian promise of secularism had no place in an India they were about to decisively shape in the years to come. One of his key activities was to follow prominent journalists online, especially female journalists who worked for the English language media, and "expose" their hypocrisy by publishing their "biased" reports or "incorrect" representation of "facts." In 2019, I met several more enthusiastic Hindu nationalists, among whom it had become a routine practice to follow "pseudosecular" journalists and public figures—a form of banal surveillance facilitated by digital affordances, the digitally native culture of offering real time, if often aggressive, "counters" (Udupa, 2017), and "anti-media populism" of the right-wing (Bhat & Chadha, 2020).

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Set in a different ideological context, similar practices are seen among the South Asian diaspora in the U.K., evidenced by banal surveillance practices that the *hijabi* fashionistas active on social media encounter. Aside from the racist attacks of domestic right-wing vigilantes, diasporic Indian Muslim women in the U.K. find themselves responding to "Dawah men" [male proselytizers] or "Insta-Sheikhs" who keep an eye on and seek to "correct" online self-presentations of immigrant Muslim women influencers, with a desire to align their online behaviors to the moral codes sanctioned by religion. Common tactics are to shame these influencers online, with such shaming tactics parasitically gaining traction through "reaction videos" of trending posts. One of the most prominent among them in the U.K. is Ali Dawah whose most watched YouTube videos are online denunciations and warnings to Muslim "sisters" online, often made in collaboration with other male "experts."

In India, one of the key targets for online surveillance in India are online users who stand in favor of Muslim minorities. Activists and journalists actively involved in community development work for local Muslims complain that they encounter issues such as flagging on Facebook for alleged violations of the platform's community standards, although, in their assessment, such disciplinary actions selectively target commentators who take the side of the Muslims while overlooking violations among groups that advocate Hindu majoritarian nationalism. During ethnographic conversations, online Muslim activists frequently expressed the fear of being surveilled and punished because of the network effects of being "exposed."

Across these ethnographic vignettes,[1] the everyday banality of watching over ideological "rivals" and those who "stray" from religious moral codes is characterized by a conjunction of seemingly voluntary online activities, peer driven amplifications and networked effects, which stands in contrast to conventional top-down enforcement of organized political control and surveillance. This conjunction of seemingly grassroots tactics might be defined as "shadowing" political actors online—a practice enabled by a shared sense that online resources available to ordinary users are sufficient conditions for engaging in such shadowing. This sense of "volunteerism," however, is embedded within the logics of computational capital that draws and impels users to "manage their assets [as attention] in a semio-economic zone" shaped by social media companies, and increasingly courted by political actors (Beller, 2017; Udupa, 2019).

Fifty ways of microtargeting

We might then cut here to another scenario. In 2019, before the COVID-19 restrictions came into force in India, an influential election strategist for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP; the ruling political party) who met me for an ethnographic conversation, described the art of what he called "50 ways of microtargeting voters," which was evocative, in my mind at least, of the Hollywood blockbuster, *50 Shades of Grey.* For digital consultants, like our interlocutor, who are active in tailoring

solutions to political clients, a key working principle is to ensure that their campaign plans are "data tested." Often, the word "data" itself is weighted with the symbolic load of scientific certainty. It evinces an ambition of what Sushona Zuboff (2019) describes as "total certainty" powered by "data" as a means to gain voter loyalties by eliciting, mining, slotting and recalibrating voter opinions both via offline and online means of engagement.

Data testing in the emerging electoral campaign ecosystems in India is an elaborate process involving several steps of iteration and modulation. Ambitious and well-funded efforts, such as those of the ruling party, involve "heavy focus group discussions." Outlining the ambitious scope of this exercise, a digital campaign strategist claimed that these discussions covered "all age groups from rural, urban, women and they bracket them in 5 years, and not 10 years." Such focus group discussions are coupled with what our interlocutor described as "ethnographic studies" aimed at "understanding behavior." The next steps are to converge at an online discussion forum or a physical meeting to understand common issues and develop an "issue board." Gleaning the common themes from the issue board, the teams would then roll out a "large quantitative study" with meticulously calculated "grids" sliced across lived categories of age, class, location, gender and so on, to confirm whether they are "hearing the right things from the ground or if it is an exaggerated version in an intense focus group." Other interlocutors added that they recruit marketing agencies to organize "panels" comprising a spectrum of voters inclined to support different political parties to further locate, calibrate and recalibrate "voter sentiments." Often, people who participate in these panels are left with little to no information about the intentions behind eliciting their responses, even as material incentives such as monetary compensation or discounts in local services help to ensure that panel participants do not interrupt the arrangement with "unneeded" curiosity about the purpose or provenance of such information gathering measures. Phrases, patterns and concerns gathered through these efforts are pumped into social media to test their validity and traction, as social media, in the words of a strategist, "becomes a tool to measure the success" of what they are doing. A combination of all these steps in looped iterations confers on the process the status of being "data-tested."

"There are times when it will go flat," one interlocutor admitted:

> Nobody will have noticed that we said something of that sort because it was not an issue. But eight out of ten times, what we are trying to say hits the bull's eye (...) when you start seeing the reactions on social media exactly on sentences that you wanted them to make an attempt on.

He offered several recent successful campaign stories during the national and regional elections in India as evidence for this optimistic appraisal.

Without doubt, these efforts attest to the global trends of datafied electoral combats powered by algorithmic and computational affordances (Howard & Kollanyi, 2016). However, similar to other emerging political influencer ecosystems

documented by recent scholarship (see Ong, 2021), the striking feature in the Indian scenario is the complex combination of "official IT [information technology] cell" and the vast networks of dispersed influencers who are drawn into precarious, informal labor arrangements by ambitious mediators who promise a diverse array of amplification and digital consultancy services, including data analytics, clickbait tactics and online citations. A significant part of these arrangements is directly anchored to the "unofficial" line of control and supervision that variously attaches to the party leadership through "third party pages" and layered recruitment. Among other things, this "unofficial" space "innovates" on campaign design both in terms of extreme speech forms and disinformation. The official and unofficial streams coordinate—in the words of an interlocutor, "a kind of sync is achieved"—but not formally or in full view of the public eye. In other words, the informal substratum is a shadow of the official wing—a shadow that follows but does not have the status of the body.

Shadow politics

The metaphor of "shadow," I suggest, captures two significant strands that are emerging in the domain of digital politics: banal surveillance practices and unofficial campaign networks. While the latter might also be described as "informal" or "grey zone," which they certainly are, the metaphor of shadow perhaps signals the dynamic interconnection more pointedly since it follows the official unit and is inseparable from it. At the same time, shadowing as a verb suggests a type of persistent following that involves banal forms of intimidation through parasitic traction of popular online posts. "Shadow politics" is distinct from extra-legal claims making, which is particular to what Partha Chatterjee (2011) calls "political society." It also diverges from the political culture of what Lisa Mitchell (2018) describes as "hailing the state" that enunciates a politics of recognition through appeals to be heard and included rather than by opposing or protesting against the state. The concept of shadow politics builds on what Madhava Prasad (2009) recognizes as dispersed sovereignties in Indian political cultures. In Prasad's formulation, dispersed sovereignty could refer to cinema celebrities enjoying an extra-parliamentary authority as legitimate leaders of "the people," but what I suggest here is that the shadow is a systematic channel that runs parallel and remains parasitic to the political frontstage of party politics. Moreover, its specificity emerges from political mediations and ongoing transformations that are deeply interwoven with the digital, first with the data driven confidence around the "total certainty" of tracking and calibrating voter sentiments, and second, with the ideology of digital participation and related claims that data machines are merely tapping into people's sovereign expressions online.

Although the ruling party has pioneered some of these practices, ambitions to achieve "total certainty" through a combined troop of research teams, social media units, analytics teams, ground activation teams, political intelligence units and media monitoring teams have spurred several other political parties—from the Indian

National Congress party to regional parties such as the Dravida Munnetra Kalagam (DMK) in Tamil Nadu or Samajwadi Party in Uttar Pradesh—to rush into the marketplace of data-driven influence management. Such data-based mobilization practices are funneled through various axes of social differentiation as a means to generate voter loyalties.

As Jonathan Beller (2017) forcefully states, "Computational capital has not dismantled racial capitalism's vectors of oppression, operational along the exacerbated fracture lines of social difference that include race, gender, sexuality, religion, nation, and class; it has built itself and its machines out of those *capitalized and technologized* social differentiations."[2] The Indian case portends a situation where political consequences could be dire when the logics of computational capital intersect with postcolonial fault lines, riding on the promise of participation and the insidious operations of the "shadow."

Notes

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2. Original emphasis.

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