

## **Reconstructing the Indian public sphere: Newswork and social media in the Delhi gang rape case**

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# Reconstructing the Indian public sphere: Newswork and social media in the Delhi gang rape case

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## Abstract

In recent years, a growing literature in journalism studies has discussed the increasing importance of social media in European and American news production. Adding to this body of work, we explore how Indian and foreign correspondents reporting from India used social media during the coverage of the Delhi gang rape; how journalists represented the public sphere in their social media usage; and, what this representation says about the future of India's public sphere. Throughout our analysis, Manuel Castells' discussion of 'space of flows' informs our examination of journalists' social media uses. Our article reveals that while the coverage of the Delhi gang rape highlights an emerging, participatory nature of storytelling by journalists, this new-found inclusiveness remains exclusive to the urban, educated, connected middle and upper classes. We also find that today in India, social media usage is rearticulated around pre-existing journalistic practices and norms common to both Indian reporters working for English-language media houses and foreign correspondents stationed in India.

## Keywords

Social media, news production, India, Delhi gang rape case, space of flows, networked public sphere

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## Introduction

On 16 December 2012, after boarding a bus in South Delhi with a male friend, a 23-year-old female physiotherapy intern was brutally attacked and gang raped by six men, including the driver, while the victim's friend was beaten unconscious. The attackers threw the pair from the bus onto a roadside, where they were discovered and taken to hospital. On 29 December, after being flown to Singapore for further medical treatment, the young woman died from injuries that included severe internal bleeding, the loss of more than 90% of her intestines, and brain damage (Human Rights Watch, 2012; Mandhana and Trivedi, 2013). Although a large numbers of rapes occur in India every year — the National Crime Records Bureau registered 24,206 reported rape cases in 2011 (Human Rights Watch, 2012) — “the brutality of the attack and the scale of the protests brought international attention to India’s problem of violence against women” (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2013). Women’s and human rights groups, politicians of all stripes, and prominent figures inside and outside India condemned the attack (Gohain, 2013; The Economic Times, 2012).

In the days following the rape and the victim’s subsequent death, protesters staged large demonstrations in Delhi, at the India Gate and outside government buildings, protesting the government’s failure to provide security for women and pass robust anti-rape laws. These protests soon spread to other major cities of India (The Economic Times, 2013). Following the events, five out of the six men were accused of gang rape and tried in a fast-track court (Mukherjee, 2013). The sixth accused was tried before the Juvenile Justice Board (Mukherjee, 2013). On 11 March 2013, Ram Singh, the bus driver, died in the Tihar Jail, South Asia’s largest prison, located in west Delhi. Debate continues as to whether Singh died of murder or suicide (BBC, 2013; Pandey and Sikdar, 2013). As Daniel Drache and Jennifer Velagic point out in their empirical analysis of leading Indian English-language newspapers (*The Hindu*, *India Today*, *Indian Express* and *Tehelka*), the number of articles about rapes in India increased approximately 30% after the events (Drache and Velagic, 2013). During the protests, amid heightened news coverage of rape cases in India, activists and journalists used social media to follow and report events (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2013; Rao, 2013). Our research indicates that the principal social media platforms used by journalists included Twitter, which offered a helpful tool for journalists aggregating and disseminating content, and Facebook, which served as a venue for discussion groups on the topic. According to Google Trend search volume index, “Delhi Gang Rape”, “Rape in Delhi” and “gang-rape victim” were the top search phrases in India in December 2012 (Prasad and Nandakumar, 2012). These developments demonstrate how, in a time of national and international crisis, social media contributed to Indian news reporting (Belair-Gagnon and Agur, 2013; Belair-Gagnon et al., 2013).

In this article, we use the Delhi gang rape case to explore how social media have added to and altered debates in India’s public sphere. Our study builds on the literature on India’s changing public sphere and highlights the utility of Manuel Castells’ (2007) concept of the ‘space of flows’ in national case studies of journalism. Our research is based on in-depth interviews we conducted in early 2013. The article begins by conceptualizing India’s public sphere, developing Castells’ ‘spaces of flows’ discussion, presenting our research method, analyzing how journalists utilized social media during their coverage of the events, and discussing how social media contributes to today’s public

sphere in India. Throughout, we explore how Indian and foreign journalists used social media during coverage of the Delhi gang rape and protests, how journalists represented the public sphere in their social media usage, and what this representation says about the future of the Indian public sphere.

## **An Indian public sphere?**

In this section, we summarize the literature on the public sphere in India and describe how it helps us understand the relationship between current journalistic uses of social media and the long-term potential of social media to extend public debates to wider national audiences. The literature on the public sphere helps us understand changes in the Indian public sphere during and after the Delhi gang rape. We identify limitations in the literature and show how a discussion of social media updates and enriches the concept of a public sphere in India.

The concept of a public sphere offers a framework of analysis that, while traditionally put to use in Western European contexts, can also enrich our understanding of India. The public sphere offers us what Peter Hohendahl calls “a paradigm for analyzing historical change” and “a normative category for political critique” (Hohendahl, 1979: 92). We can highlight the rise of a public in terms of evolving boundaries of public and private, a changing relationship between government and citizens, and the rigor of rational-critical discourse fostered by the rituals of public debate. And shifting from historical analysis to the present, the public sphere may give us “an archaeology of the ideas and ideologies that inform current practices and policies of the mass media” (Peters, 1993: 542). Indian social theorists have remained lukewarm about the applicability of Habermas’ (1962) theory to India. Rajeev Bhargava (2005) concedes that a Habermasian public sphere helps us in a general sense, by offering an explanation of Indian public life. But he is skeptical that specific aspects of Western European public sphere formation, such as individuation and freedom, have the same importance in India. Instead of a public sphere formed by autonomous individuals, Bhargava sees a more complex set of relations based on social networks and historical forces. Amir Ali (2001) accepts the public sphere as a concept applicable to India and charts a historical trajectory that follows the country’s colonial and post-colonial history.

India’s colonial experience created a nascent public sphere with characteristics quite different from those described by Habermas. Much of this was the result of different modes of governance. Whereas the public spheres of Western Europe formed in relation to (and *in reaction to*) the crown, India’s early public sphere grew out of its unique role as an ‘empire-within-an-empire’ – a colony too diverse for Britain to govern as a unitary entity. To deal with the scale and diversity of India, the British established a particular type of colonial rule – Freitag calls it an intruding state – that relied on pre-existing ethnic, religious, linguistic, and geographical differences (Freitag, 1989). British officials were especially reticent about intruding on the private sphere after the 1857 uprising (Sarkar, 1993). The result was a nascent public sphere that reflected the divisions of the country, its colonial power structure and its complex social relations. With a population size and of diversity without parallel in Western European countries, India’s public sphere was inevitably shaped by compromises and competition among the country’s

different communities (Ali, 2001). As India's bourgeoisie gained confidence, it began to chip away British control of rational discourse (Bhattacharya, 2005). That new legitimacy was checked by Indians' different relationship with their government and by their different understanding of 'the state' than that of Western Europeans struggling under absolute monarchy.

In the decades since independence, national and international forces have supplanted the forces of community that had previously kept India's public sphere weak. On the surface this appears to foster national cohesion, it can also lead to a false sense of a national public sphere (Tamir, 1993). Instead of encouraging representation, these forces can produce a public sphere based on the cultural values and symbols of a dominant group, to the detriment of groups less able to take advantage of the new economic and technological context (Tamir, 1993; see also Ninan, 2007). Today, with a telecommunications revolution sweeping the country, India's public sphere offers new possibilities for national discourse at a distance; at the same time, it also faces the perennial challenges of inclusion, representation, and overcoming weak rule of law (Singh, 2009).

This public sphere literature helps us understand the contributions and limitations of social media in Indian journalism. Prasun Sonwalkar (2009) argues that in recent years, journalism has provided additional voices to civil society than was the case in the 1990s, with satellite television now an effective medium for journalists to transcend India's geography. Sonwalkar describes "the slow but sure rise of citizen participation in news production, despite the limited infrastructure to practice citizen journalism beyond the urban areas" (Sonwalkar, 2009: 12). Sevanti Ninan (2007; Robin, 2000) provides evidence of the interconnection between rising literacy, public participation, purchasing power and technological development in rural Northern India. Ninan argues that these changes are associated with the rise of Hindu nationalism and Dalit-focused parties as political forces. To understand changes in journalistic practices, we explore the news coverage of the Delhi gang rape, focusing on social media.

Manuel Castells' concept of the 'space of flows' informs our examination of journalists' uses of social media. Castells writes that "the diffusion of Internet, mobile communication, digital media, and a variety of tools of social software ... have prompted the development of horizontal networks of interactive communication that connect local and global in chosen time" (Castells, 2007: 246). The 'space of flows' thus refers to a reconceptualization of spatial arrangements in ways that allow distinct, synchronous, asynchronous, multimodal, and real-time information (Castells, 2007). Castells writes that, "a new round of power making in the communication space is taking place, as power holders have understood the need to enter the battle in the horizontal communication networks" (Castells, 2007: 259). This concept allows us to explore the shift from traditional institutions and hierarchy to a more horizontal communicative network in journalistic sourcing practices (Atton and Wickenden, 2005; Bowman and Willis, 2003; Bruns, 2008). Today, India's public sphere includes communicative aspects of the industrial society (mass broadcasting and distribution of print media) as well as nascent aspects of the network society (many-to-many communications via social media). News coverage of the Delhi gang rape offers a glimpse of a future conflict between forces of tradition and hierarchy in news production, and forces of modernity and horizontality in new journalistic discourses.

Focused on structural changes and on corresponding shifts in power dynamics, Castells' concept of the 'space of flows' allows us to examine how India's networked public sphere is evolving. This concept also allows us to understand the role of social media in the emerging contestations of that public sphere. For this reason we focus on the features of a 'networked public sphere' evident in contemporary sourcing practices. We ask: *How did journalists use social media during the Delhi gang rape case? What factors influenced their decisions regarding social media usage? Which groups were included or excluded from conversations held on social media? What do journalists' interactions with their sources* tells us about whether India's public sphere has expanded? And what does Castells' 'spaces of flows' concept add to the historical literature on India's public sphere?

## Methods

This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

**RQ1:** How did Indian and foreign journalists use social media during their coverage of the Delhi gang rape and protests?

**RQ2:** What does journalists' social media usage reveal about changes in India's public sphere?

To answer those research questions, we selected interviewees using the snowball method. Our aim was to get journalists from diverse backgrounds so that we could explore the ways in which journalists used social media during coverage of the rape and associated protests. We included Indian and foreign journalists in our sample since the Delhi gang rape received extensive coverage in Indian and international media. Including foreign correspondents and Indian journalists also gave us an opportunity to identify similarities and differences in their use of social media for coverage of the Delhi gang rape case. Another purpose for getting perspectives from a multiplicity of sources was to triangulate the data. While triangulation is often associated with multi-method research, Norman Denzin (1970; Bryman, 2004) extended the idea of triangulation to include other forms such as data, investigator, and theoretical triangulation apart from the commonly used methodological triangulation. In this study, we triangulated data by ensuring that our sample included a diverse set of journalists with a variety of experiences. We opted for investigator triangulation by involving three researchers in interviews and interpretation of data.

We began our study by soliciting interviews from Indian and foreign journalists who had written about the Delhi gang rape, and continued to solicit more interviews using word of mouth in Delhi's journalistic community. We gathered interview data until we had a broad and diverse set. Our sample included six Indian journalists, eight foreign correspondents working in India, and two freelance journalists who write for foreign and Indian media. All 16 journalists in our sample reported on the Delhi gang rape. In addition to these 16 journalists, we also interviewed another Indian journalist, Pierre Fitter, who used social media extensively to post updates on the Delhi gang rape. At the time of

our interview with Fritter, he worked as an assistant editor with the *India Today Group*. While selecting our purposive sample, we kept in mind the need to interview a diverse set of journalists with different backgrounds and experiences. Thus, we included journalists from different media, including several who worked in converged settings: nine print/online journalists (newspapers and magazines, including their online versions and blogs) and eight broadcast journalists (TV and radio). These journalists held a diverse array of job titles: our sample included reporters, senior reporters, correspondents, foreign correspondents, freelance journalists and a social media editor. While all the Indian journalists interviewed for this study worked for English-language media in India, our foreign correspondents wrote in Dutch, French, German and English. Due to constraints of language and scope, we did not include journalists from vernacular Indian media outlets. In total, we interviewed 11 male and six female journalists.

We conducted semi-structured interviews with these journalists between February and May 2013, with sessions lasting an average of 40 minutes. Most respondents were willing to speak on the record; for those who requested anonymity, we have protected their identity. We conducted the open-ended interviews by telephone and Skype. In some cases we interviewed journalists in several sessions as the case evolved. Telephone interviews present distinct advantages as they allow respondents to talk in a relaxed atmosphere that may help them disclose more information than they would in surveys or email communications (Novick, 2008). The journalists in our sample preferred telephone interviews due to the pressure of their work deadlines. In all interviews, our questions explored journalists' media platform, organization, usage of social media, motivations, influences, and perceptions of the opportunities and drawbacks of social media in reporting events. Questions guiding our interviews included: 'how did you use social media?' and 'where did you get information on social media?'

With our data set of interviews, our next task was to code the responses journalists gave us. As Thomas R. Lindlof writes, because qualitative analyses rely on researcher reflexivity, the goal of qualitative coding is to tag segments of interest in the data and categorize speech in order to simplify the evidence inductively (Lindlof, 1995). Therefore, once transcribed, we read the interviews several times. First we read the interviews beginning to end without coding. Then, as Juliet Corbin and Anselm Strauss (2007) suggest, we identified themes in relation to our object of interest. Following Lindlof's (1995) recommendation, we constantly reevaluated our categories in relation to our data. We looked for tag segments related to themes discussed in the literature section above. In this article we do not claim to answer all questions in our case study; instead we add to the literature by focusing on the emergence of social media in Indian journalism (Hannerz, 2003; Manchin, 2002).

## Emerging spaces in India's networked public sphere

Our empirical data shows that Indian and foreign journalists used Twitter as their primary social media platform during the Delhi gang rape coverage, more than other social media platforms such as Facebook, Pinterest, Storify or LinkedIn. We also found that journalists put to use new flows of communication on social media, and did so within pre-existing boundaries and expectations of their daily work. In that regard, our results

are consistent with the literature on news production in new media environments from the mid-2000s onward (Carlson, 2007; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Singer, 2005). In addition, our analysis shows that journalists utilized social media for background information and social discovery, as a Rolodex of potential sources, as an aggregator of updates on rapidly changing events, and as a tool to explore new beats. We found that journalists used social media primarily in ways that reflected the ideas and interests of the urban middle class, which includes members of city-based women's groups, activists, university students and intellectuals. This research provides further insights on how Indian and foreign reporters used social media in their coverage of the Delhi gang rape case and what kind of representation of the public sphere this coverage fosters. Our research also lays a foundation for future work mapping the use of social media by journalists through big data and network analysis.

### *Background information*

Many times, interviewees pointed to the importance of social media for finding background information. Among the journalists we interviewed, Twitter was the most popular source of background information, because the major events were city-based and involved middle-class professionals, university students and mobile users. We did not find significant differences between foreign and Indian journalists in our sample, possibly because the Indian journalists we interviewed worked for English-language media in the national capital of the country. Had our sample included journalists working in vernacular languages from rural areas in India where Internet penetration is marginal and literacy levels are much lower, differences in social media usage among Indian and foreign journalists would have been more likely. For example, Michael Edward, South Asia correspondent for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, told us:

Our coverage was more concentrated on Twitter than other stories because it was a city-based story and that it was in the hot of things for the middle class, university students, mobile professionals. Since December, we have continued to look at social media sources for any developments.

Casper Thomas, foreign correspondent and editor at *De Groene Amsterdamme*, stated that he used Twitter to find reports and other information on the social causes of rape cases in India. Similarly, Indian journalists discussed social media as a "story discovery tool" (Pierre Mario Fitter, Assistant Editor at the India Today Group). Journalists felt that Twitter offered easy and immediate access for background information. As Drache and Velagic write, "The attention granted by other sources such as newswire, independent journalists, social media, and civil society organizations also brings fresh perspective to bear on gender justice" (Drache and Velagic, 2013).

### *Sourcing information*

Interviewees mentioned that they used social media to find sources for stories. Foreign and Indian journalists alike used the term 'Rolodex' to describe the role social media had

come to play in their research and reporting. Speaking about Facebook, Fitter said: “it’s basically a list of people I met and a good way to keep in touch. I don’t use it for news-gathering. I do have a few things up on Storify but don’t use it much.” A number of interviewees said they had used social media to track down individuals relevant to a story. Some did this by following other journalists on Twitter. A journalist from *The Hindu* told us:

I look at tweets by our own editor, editors from other newspapers, well-known journalists such as Prithvi Nandy (Columnist with *The Times of India* and the Hindi newspaper Dainik Bhaskar), Abhijit Majumder (Editor, Delhi edition of the *Hindustan Times*), and Saikat Dutta (Delhi-based editor, *DNA* newspaper). I also look up tweets by television journalists such as Shiv Aroor (Deputy Editor, *Headlines Today*).

Interviewees told us how they looked for newswires, reputable journalists and civil society organizations on Twitter. Several also mentioned that social media has allowed would-be sources to initiate contact. Jaskirat Singh Bawa, correspondent with *NewsX*, said that people often contact him through Twitter and suggest stories and follow-ups.

Most Indian news organizations have limited digital features at present, and few have immediate plans to make social media a high priority for reporting or for news distribution in hard news (Belair-Gagnon and Agur, 2013). Many Indian journalists shared this sentiment. Rohini Mohan, a freelance journalist who has worked for *The Hindu*, CNN-IBN and *Tehelka*, said that although social media gives access to an emerging network of sources, it plays a small part in her reporting:

I watch the Twitter accounts of some politicians and others in power (many of their accounts – except those of Sushma Swaraj [Member of Parliament and Leader of the Opposition], Subramaniam Swamy [President, Janata Party] and Omar Abdullah [Chief Minister, Jammu & Kashmir] are updated by interns, so they’re useless). However, unless desperate, I don’t think I will ever use social media as a networking or contact-making tool. It has worked only rarely, and it has the danger of making me seem frivolous or lazy. It is only in the last 5–6 years that politicians even respond to email, and yes, some of the younger politicians and PAs do respond to personal Twitter/Facebook messages sometimes, but this is only with those I have already met first in person. The actual contacts are still made in the old way – calling incessantly, or grabbing their elbow at a press conference, or waiting weeks/months for a 10-minute interview where you get little information but ensure you make an impression.

Many interviewees expressed concerns similar to those raised by Mohan. Some worried that social media foster speed over accuracy and verification, and wanted to avoid becoming dependent on fast but ultimately unreliable information. Mohan spoke about the broad challenge of accuracy in social media:

While social media in India helps reporters access people in diverse corners of the country and be aware of their concerns and moods while sitting at our desks, journalists need to apply the caution and professionalism they do offline.

A significant limitation of social media in India's public sphere is in inclusion and representation (Singh, 2009). Journalists we interviewed were quick to point out that whatever their merits as tools for background information, updates or sources, social media remain unrepresentative of the country. Indian citizens who use social media are more likely to live in cities, hold a passport, and share values with social media users in the West. Both Indian and foreign reporters we interviewed stated that if they relied too heavily on social media, their coverage would be skewed toward a narrow readership. Speaking about the coverage of the Delhi gang rape case, a reporter for *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* said:

It is easy to share ideas and read articles of colleagues or see what intellectuals think ... Television, newspapers, and talking to people on the streets were much more important [in newsgathering]. Only a very small part of society has access to social media, but everyone watches television. ... If you read social media you would think everyone was extremely shocked and devastated. But if you talked to people on the streets, in slums you would get an idea that many Indians are having extremely backward and conservative idea about women and how they had to behave. Social media cannot replace doing research on the ground, in slums and villages. That's the most important thing of working in India.

Yet journalists said that Twitter helped them to be in contact with the urban middle class. Fitter indicated that he uses Twitter to communicate with contacts who live outside the capital: "Twitter helps me connect with voices I do not get exposed to sitting at a news center in Delhi. Twitter has replaced my RSS Feeds and makes up 90% of my social media usage." On Twitter, many journalists followed hashtags (including #delhiganrape, #iamhayat and #amanet), @PMOIndia (the official Twitter account of the Indian Prime Minister), several prominent women's groups, other lobby organizations, political parties, and Indian media covering the protests. A foreign correspondent said that: "Twitter was really helpful to get a sense of the public sentiment." Twitter was used for sourcing to cover a particular segment of India. Intentionally or not, this gave priority to the voices of the urban middle class, intellectuals, city-based women's groups, social organizations, and political elites. Julien Bouissou from *Le Monde* said: "I don't need real-time. My work is to explain the movement. Twitter is not going to give me information on feminism. I am going to understand that by talking to people for hours." Reflecting the majority of journalists we interviewed, Bouissou added that:

It's more interesting to go to a chai shop in the streets. Twitter has a skewed vision of reality: it's rich people, English-speaking and those who have access to a computer. I am wary of this skewed vision of India. ... The danger with Twitter is what we lose touch with reality. I could have covered the demonstrations on Twitter, but while we are not in the field we don't see people.

Similarly, a senior reporter with *The Hindu* told us:

I don't depend on social media for sources. I rely on what I see when I am on the ground. We really don't have the time to look for sources on Twitter. Twitter just helps me know various perspectives on news offered by well-known journalists. I don't interact with readers on Twitter. That is for senior journalists, famous personalities, whom readers recognize on Twitter. Also, I

don't have time to spare for finding out what people say on Twitter. I am not a 24-hour social media person. There's so much clutter on Twitter that really don't help you in any way.

While social media offer instant information, they also reflect the priorities of their participants. In their efforts to get the best out of social media while avoiding the drawbacks, the journalists we spoke to followed the 'boundary maintenance' discussed in journalism studies (Carlson, 2007; Hallin, 1986; Lewis, 2012; Revers, 2013). It was striking how much time our interviewees (even those who followed, tweeted and sourced enthusiastically) spent discussing the limitations of social media in Indian journalism. We nevertheless found that social media have enhanced storytelling and political dissent in India because social media have become a space for journalists to engage with their audiences, and offer a new window on a small but growing part of India's public sphere.

### *An aggregator of updates*

Most journalists we interviewed said that they used Twitter to monitor updates and get immediate responses from activists at events. To a greater extent than in previous protests, the journalists we interviewed felt that social media helped them keep a finger on the pulse of the Indian urban middle class, and get immediate feedback on events as they unfolded. Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, Senior Reporter and Editorial Writer at *Mail Today* said:

Social media evolved in India during the Anna Hazare and Delhi gang rape protests. ... These days I see more journalists and editors go to social media in response to a major event. You have to use social media because the conversation online is way ahead of what's in the paper.

Michael Edward, whose public service media organization is committed to social media uses, told us that he and colleagues turned to Twitter to find the latest on the case: "[When one of the accused was found dead in his jail cell], we found out about it on social media. Students tweeted it, and from there, the Indian media pick-up and we called sources and confirmed the story." Similarly, Ruchira Singh, social media editor at *Network 18*, said that during the protests, social media played a critical role in reporting:

Our editors and reporters were tweeting individually – we had very hectic social media activity during the case. We were inviting opinions on the goings on in the case; we were asking questions, we were asking people what they think are the solutions to the problems. We were interacting with people, asking them if they are joining a protest and how they are reaching the protest grounds. We promoted certain petitions by change.org. We asked people if they felt certain provisions should be incorporated in these petitions.

As the Delhi gang rape story played out, journalists used social media to aggregate updates from protests, press conferences and media outlets, allowing them to compare and scrutinize fast-flowing information before deciding what to accept as fact. While many journalists were concerned with accuracy in social media postings, some also pointed out the *risks* journalists face when they depend on mobile devices for coverage.

Some of these are ethical matters. To preserve his independence as a journalist, Jaskirat Singh Bawa, a reporter for *NewsX* made a point of following strict procedures while tweeting about the Delhi gang rape protests:

When the scene got crazy during the protests at India Gate, I tweeted a picture of the area. When the government stopped public transportation in certain areas, I tweeted about it. Of course, I did not tweet information about where people were gathering for the protests. I am a journalist, not an activist. I always maintained that boundary line. But once the police allocated a certain area for the protests, I tweeted about that too.

In addition to the problem of being seen as biased, journalists we interviewed stated that they were at risk from hackers who want to scoop, monitor or intimidate journalists. Ridhima Tomar told us that hacking was one of biggest challenges to journalists' use of social media. Not all journalists focused on public commentary on social media. A senior reporter with *The Hindu* said that during the case he focused mainly on what journalists posted:

I was reading what other journalists were saying. I was on vacation during the protests in Delhi. If I had been in Delhi, I would have done a couple of stories on the protests. I started covering the case when it went to the court in January. I would read what other journalists are posting about the case during this. I did not really look up what readers or ordinary people were posting.

*The Hindu* journalist's remark shows that social media allow inward reporting among journalists; while the public may participate in discussions, this is no guarantee that journalists will pay attention. Rather than enlarging the public sphere, social media can lead to a reinforcement of practices that exclude the public and minimize public debate.

### *New beats for journalists*

When asked about the wider implications of social media in Indian journalism, several journalists described the creation of new beats for reporters and new narrative spaces in India's public sphere. The networked nature of the protests, based largely on communication by mobile phone, enabled large gatherings of like-minded protesters. Mohammad Ali, a reporter at *The Hindu* covering the "Religious Minorities and Social Movements" beat, said it was impossible to ignore social media in the coverage of the Delhi gang rape case:

In order to understand the sense of popular outrage, it was important to see how people were expressing themselves on social media. People poured their emotions out on social media. I also posted stories on the case on Facebook. There were several Facebook pages formed within a day or two of the gang rape demanding justice.

Ali followed the events highlighted on these Facebook pages and kept track of the multiple ways in which the protests against the Delhi gang rape were shaping up in both online and offline spaces. With events unfolding in physical spaces and updates and analysis arriving online in real time, journalists gained a new and more complex understanding of what constituted a beat in their reporting. Ridhima Tomar, a reporter with

*NewsX*, a 24-hour English-language news channel in India, realized the extent of online audiences when she was injured while reporting the Delhi gang rape protests:

I was standing at India Gate when they imposed Section 144.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly, they started firing tear gas shells at the protesters. It was horrible. I started running to the outer circle of India Gate. Just as I was describing the situation on camera, a tear gas exploded on my right leg. I did not realize it at first and we continued shooting. Then I must have fainted. I was taken to the hospital. A journalist friend of mine tweeted about my injury when I was in hospital. After just one tweet about my injury, the number of people following me dramatically increased in a matter of a few hours. International journalists started calling me up probably because I was the only journalist who was injured.

Shivam Vij, blogger at *kafila.org* and freelance writer for *The Daily Beast*, said that social media helped him follow the protests. He described how he covered the events from the streets of Delhi, posting updates as events unfolded and issuing corrections when he thought that mainstream coverage was inaccurate or missing information. With social media at their disposal, some journalists were able to change the spatial dynamic of reporting, by simultaneously reporting a media event, disseminating directly to audiences, and interacting with those audiences.

Reporters have previously reported from live events and at a distance. What is new in India's contemporary public sphere is the speed with which events can be reported, the accountability provided by related technologies (e.g. cameras in phones), and the ability for more people (inside and outside India, including Non-Resident Indians) to participate in discussions related to the news. These changes highlighted in the Delhi gang rape case news coverage reveal how social media have enabled wider conversations with audiences across India and, increasingly, worldwide. Our data suggest that conversations are transforming the traditional gatekeeping process of journalism and making it more collaborative, but to what extent? At the same time, social media offer a shortcut to journalists who lack the time or inclination to go into the streets to report events. Several of our interviewees suggested that excessive use of social media for sourcing was 'frivolous' or 'lazy.' This point will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

We found that journalists' uses of social media varied more between types of news organizations than between Indian and foreign correspondents. For example, in our sample, television broadcast foreign journalists used social media to a greater extent than foreign correspondents using print. Ali spoke about this tendency:

I think print journalists are not as much on social media as broadcast journalists. I think that's because broadcast is live and has continuous deadlines while print usually has just one deadline. But it's also true that high-flying print journalists, the decision makers, are more on social media than the foot soldiers, the news reporters. The latter have to be more out in the field.

Social media beats have a spatial and social dimension (Broersma and Graham, 2012). As Marcel Broersma and Todd Graham write: "Twitter has turned into a beat: a virtual network of social relations of which the journalist is a part with the purpose of gathering news and information on specific topics" (Broersma and Graham, 2012: 405). Our research substantiates these claims: today in Indian journalism, social media is adding

new complexities, new points of inquiry and new accountability in the networked public sphere. The following section will discuss how Castells' concept of the 'space of flows' enables us to understand India's networked public sphere using national and international reporting of the Delhi gang rape.

## Discussion

Social media is still marginal in India's public sphere. Our interviews documented journalists' relationship with social media during coverage of the Delhi gang rape and protests. These interviews showed the emergence of a networked public sphere based on new 'spaces of flows' in India, transcending geographical distances between posh neighborhoods in a handful of Indian cities, while simultaneously following pre-existing social divisions. We found that social media coverage of the Delhi gang rape reveals new spaces of storytelling and a new participatory culture of networked online conversations that has emerged in India thanks to social media. As Rohan Venkataramakrishnan, Senior Reporter and Editorial Writer at *Mail Today*, highlighted, the protests have been incubators for social media sophistication in India: "following the Anna Hazare case and the Delhi gang rape case, social media began to achieve a critical mass." Journalists used social media for background information, beat reporting, and sources of information. Yet these practices, both for foreign and Indian reporters, were managed and rearranged around pre-existing journalistic norms and practices including reputation of sources, balance between social media and non-social media users, time constraints, accountability, and accuracy.

These new spaces of storytelling remain *exclusive* in terms of social media skills, types of news organization, and access to social media. In their efforts at social media participation, journalists have so far reached an unrepresentative segment of India's people. Today, social media are being put to increasingly active and sophisticated uses within niche populations. While social media offer possibilities of greater participation in public debates, they also reveal limitations in India's contemporary public sphere. In the case of the Delhi gang rape, social media presented journalists with questions of representation, inclusion and national interest in a fragmented society. In India, social media play a more limited role than in Western journalism and generate a discourse limited mostly to young members of the middle and upper classes. Socialbakers (2013) indicates that in India, 48% of users on Facebook are between 18 and 24 years old. The second largest user group (with 28% of users) is between 24 and 35 years old. Together these two groups make up for 76% of the total users of Facebook in India. Journalists told us that social media provide a narrative space for a small but growing percentage of the country.

In the coverage of the Delhi gang rape, journalists often struggled with the lack of inclusivity in India's social media. This shows the persistence of India's diversity, as well as the social and communicative legacy of India's colonial divisions (Freitag, 1989; Sarkar, 1993). To gain access to the vast majority of Indians not on social media, journalists realized that they had to "go in the slums" and "spend time in chai shops." Conversely, within Delhi, several journalists we spoke to were able to get multiple voices on social media. According to Michael Edwards, "social media is city-based and at the center of the life of the middle class, university students, and mobile professionals." While social media are subject to limitations, we can identify changes in the scale of public discourse on social

media. Among those groups who use social media, the past few years have seen noticeable changes: social media have provided a window into India's middle class and youth, and provided a medium on which previously taboo subjects have gained attention.

From the perspective of journalists, despite significant limitations, social media interactions with sources have added value to news coverage in India. We see this value in journalists' enhanced ability to do background research, follow updates and find new sources. We also see it in the time-space expansion of news coverage. We found that in this case, journalistic uses of social media reflected a complex, and at times conflicting, set of changes: the growth of a networked public sphere in India, the maintenance of existing divisions (linguistic, economic and social) in access to public discourse, and new relationships with time and space for the country's small but growing number of social media users.

In this article we have analyzed how Indian and foreign journalists used social media during the coverage of the Delhi gang rape and protests, how journalists represented the public sphere in their social media usage, and what this representation says about the future of the Indian public sphere. Our study highlights how emerging networks add new complexity to a public sphere characterized by historical divisions and diversity. We found a set of remarkable possibilities for Indian journalism: symbolically and materially, the Delhi gang rape case shows a new 'space of flows' in Indian journalism, as well as a growing mix of traditional journalistic reporting and contributions from ordinary citizens in times of crisis. At the same time, social media remain a niche element in news production in India. We have noted the importance of the urban middle class in India's development of social media, as well as the omission of vast swaths of the country's population in the new communicative space.

While this article provides revealing data on social media usage in Indian journalism, there are limits to what the data can tell us. First, a larger sample of interview subjects would offer greater external validity and reliability. Second, our research leaves room for further study: this could include in-depth social network analysis and mapping. Current trends in usage of mobile phones and social media suggest that emerging communication networks will play a growing role in India's public sphere. With fiber optic networks still limited and computer ownership rare outside urban elite and middle-class populations, mobile phones are the most common means of social media access (TRAI, 2012). The divergence in technological access suggests that urban and rural India will have different experiences with social media. As India's social media networks continue to develop, a major question for researchers will be what effects these networks will have on India's public sphere.

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## **Note**

1. Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code in India empowers a magistrate to prohibit an assembly of more than 10 people in an area.

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