India's Use of Social Media in Public Diplomacy

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Abstract

Public Diplomacy has assumed great significance in foreign policy and strategic communication for Rising Powers like India and China. These Rising nation-states, with expanding economies and global ambitions, are taking to purposeful communication with global audiences for building positive image and enhancing goodwill. In such efforts, the use of social media has become extensive and widespread. India is a major example of a Rising Power's employment of social media in fostering communication. Mainstream social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook have become forums for direct engagement between Indian policy establishment and its foreign and national constituencies. This paper identifies the key characteristics of India's digital communication and examines its effectiveness while exploring the contribution of digital communication to India's international stature.

Keywords

Rising Power, India, Social Media, Public Diplomacy, Foreign Policy, Narendra Modi, Digital Communication, Twitter, Facebook, Nation-branding, Brand Modi, Brand India, New Media

Introduction

Modern states are consciously reaching out to the public — both domestic and foreign — for shaping public opinions on one hand and exerting influence on the other in a world rife with conflicts. Public Diplomacy (PD), defined as 'efforts by the government of one nation to influence public or elite opinion in a second nation for the purpose of turning the foreign policy of the target nation to advantage' (Manheim 1994) has assumed a new context with social media platforms facilitating two-way communication, allowing for dialogue, and direct engagement (Dahlberg 2011; Henderson & Bowley 2010). National leaderships, as a result, are showing the urgency to connect to people for explaining government postures and decisions and communicating the desired 'images'. In the context of the pro-

liferation of social media, images are critical when the public evaluate politicians (Lalancette & Raynaud 2017). Global leaders, including those of Rising Powers, have therefore taken to connecting to people and creating images through active online presence in social media platforms like Facebook (FB) and Twitter.

The rapid rise of India, Indonesia and China and their enthusiastic deployment of social media in diplomatic communication requires an alternative perspective for studying PD — less reliant on visions and approaches employed for studying the same in the Western and the Anglo-Saxon world. Social media in several respects is also a force equaliser in the world order with both major and Rising Powers harnessing it in diplomatic communication. PD therefore must be examined from a Rising Power perspective to understand its nuances, development and challenges, such as those for India. The paper identifies the evolution and characteristics of India's digital diplomacy and the challenges it encounters in creating images and enhancing effective communication.

The Discourse

A careful analysis of the literature on PD reveals a predominantly Western perspective and the traction it has had in the Western foreign policy and diplomacy narrative. Since its coining by Edmund Gullion in 1965, PD has been noted an important practice in the diplomatic praxis of several Western countries, such as the US (Melissen 2005; Cull 2009), UK (Fisher 2006), Canada (Batora 2005; Brown 2011), Australia (Brown 2011), Norway (Batora 2005; Melissen 2005) and Turkey (Cevik & Seib 2015). Indeed, African countries like South Africa and Ghana (Brown 2011) have also, like the Western nations mentioned, have aimed to build 'longer-lasting networks of individuals and institutions that may influence the wider relationship between states and peoples' (Hall 2012a). Nevertheless, PD is still less in vogue in European countries like Germany (Auer & Srugies 2013) and has not been enthusiastically seen by many European scholars who are engaged in exploring if Europe's PD efforts have yielded a coherent overall image or worked at cross-purposes (Cross 2013). A debate on the effectiveness is noticeable in the US too, particularly after the tragic incidents of 9/11 (Beehner 2005; Comor & Bean 2012). Effectiveness of PD is being closely scrutinized elsewhere too, like in India, where, despite increasing emphasis on its exercise, many are skeptical about the influence of India's 'nation brand' (Hall 2012a).

India symbolizes the increasing embrace of PD by non-Western nations largely for 'nation-branding' and influencing the 'global information environment' in order to increase their brand images as attractive destinations for tourism, trade and investment (Javier 2006). PD of several Asian countries has begun focusing towards the West (Hall & Smith 2013) through a decisive alternative narrative on development and progress. China has been an aggressive employer of PD in

this regard (Melissen 2005; d'Hooghe 2007; Zhao 2015) aiming to brand itself as a 'benign' power — antithetical to the majority of the international perception for cultivating international respect (Zhao 2015) — critical for its ascent to the great power league.

Practice of PD by Asian countries — in its early phases — is in contrast to such practice by the US, which primarily aimed at countering the former Soviet Union's influence during the Cold War years. Asian countries with colonial histories like India and Indonesia — that developed 'post-imperial ideology'[1] — adopted PD for different reasons. After achieving independence, PD provided these former colonies a medium for pursuing anti-colonial agendas, aimed at undermining European influence in Asia and throughout the 'Third World' (Hall & Smith 2013). Since then, Asian PD, despite being noted by some scholars as 'still in its infancy' (Anholt 2008), has been growing at a fast pace, on the back of the benefits that can flow from positive engagement (Nincic 2011). Indian foreign policy strategists recognize the multiplication of benefits that can arise from far greater engagement enabled by new technologies that can transform diplomacy and politics in general (Seib 2010; Hall 2012a; Ritambhara 2013). Consequently, PD has been fast gaining significance in India's foreign policy (Suri 2011) with the literature on the subject growing (Seib 2010; Dutta 2011; Hall 2012a; Natarajan 2014).

Practice of PD is fundamental to the goal of promoting soft power (Batora 2005; Melissen 2005; Nye 2008) with the latter becoming a key aspect of external engagement of countries, including the Rising Powers, which have been active in building soft power in their foreign policies (Wang 2008; Zhang 2011; Hall 2012a; Hall & Smith 2013; Cross 2013). India exemplifies the approach. India's economic liberalisation from the 1990s, aimed at greater integration with the world economy, was accompanied by a conscious decision to engage with its immediate neighbourhoods of South and Southeast Asia more through soft power, thereby 'trying to become a 'benign' hegemon of the 1990s from being a 'malign' one in the 1980s (Wagner 2005). In a world that was yet to allow space for growth to new players in the international order (Holsti 1991), making their presence felt was important, as was gaining acceptance in the international hierarchy. Rebranding through PD became important (Cooper 2009) as the new actors wished to be 'recognised and understood globally' (Brown 2011). With the Western media projecting India as a 'recalcitrant state' for decades — thereby damaging it's image abroad (Dasgupta 2011) — pursuing these objectives were significant for India for upgrading its global stature. Continued emphasis on these goals have led to the deployment of social media by India in communicating its stories with PD

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[1] A term coined by Manjari Chatterjee Miller, the concept clearly indicates a sense of grievance about the past, an insistence on entitlement in the present as restitution for the humiliation and exploitation of the past and a search for respect and status. For details see Bajpai, Pant: 14

acquiring a conspicuous digital character.

It is noticeable that PD has also had to proceed among blurring of borders with domestic issues being debated by the international audience and vice-versa (Batora 2005; Huijgh 2011; Yang 2011). The transition has been pronounced in the digital era with the explosive growth of social media. Tharoor, an Indian diplomat turned politician, points out: '[I]n today's world, you cannot meaningfully confine your public diplomacy to foreign publics alone. In the current media environment, whatever message any government puts out is also instantly available to its domestic audience on the internet' (Hall 2012, p. 1098). While diplomacy has historically transformed by adapting to advent of new technologies – beginning from telegraph in the 1860s to radio and television in the later century —internet has reshaped diplomacy in a way difficult to fathom. It has made people equal participants in the diplomatic process (Castells 2008; Cowan & Arsenault 2008) with governments compelled to 'look both inward and outward' (Yang 2011) at the same time. It is therefore hardly surprising to note the stellar importance PD is assuming in diplomacy and communication in the world of social media with its attempt to become 'a central activity which is played out across many dimensions and with many partners' (Leonard 2002) as more and more governments use new technology for communication, information gathering, and promoting values at home and abroad (Bradshaw 2015). Indian governments are no exceptions 'believing it is in their national interests to "explain" their growing impact on the rest of the world by "engaging, informing, and influencing key international audiences"' (Brown 2011) through social media.

India's expanding PD has drawn inevitable comparisons with that of China (Dutta 2011; Hall 2012b). It is interesting to note that notwithstanding being an active and robust democracy unlike China, there are instances where government action in India too has been criticized for restricting access to social media.[2] However, latest studies on freedom of access of citizens to the internet define India 'partly free' with no change in score for India with respect to *Freedom of the Net 2017 Improvements and Declines* with a majority of countries recording a decline. The administrative challenge of managing democratic credibility with assurance of unrestricted access to internet and information is bound to remain with India, like several other Rising Powers, for the foreseeable future.

Public Diplomacy and Social Media: Evolution and Progress

The External Publicity Division was created within the Foreign Ministry of India as early as in 1948 for conveying messages and communicating India's vibrant

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[2] For example, Indian authorities's suspension of pay-as-you-go mobile data plans in restive states like Jammu & Kashmir ('Manipulating social media to undermine democracy' 2017) are measures for thwarting democracy in the Indian state.

culture and heritage to the international community: upholding virtues of a pluralistic society and democracy and spreading the same to the rest of the world – objectives considered essential for the new-born sovereign state to address for countering the prevailing negative global perceptions for India as a servile British colony (Dasgupta 2011). While there was international appreciation about India's long struggle and success in winning independence through non-violent means, such goodwill did not reflect corresponding faith in the leadership and institutions in the aftermath of a turbulent territorial Partition in 1947 and administrative complications and challenges it created for the new state. Moving on, compulsions of the Cold War politics and India's own struggles for achieving economic progress and domestic harmony, saw Indian foreign policy and diplomacy aiming to stay non-aligned from the major power blocks. Following the end of the Cold War and a decisive outward shift in its economic strategy, India's foreign policy also changed with the objective of enlarging its presence in world affairs. This is best articulated by the former Prime Minister Manmohan Singh:

> *This was not merely an external economic policy, it was also a strategic shift in India's vision of the world and India's place in the evolving global economy. Most of all it was about reaching out to our civilisational Asian neighbours in the region (Gupta 2011: 11–16).*

India's modern PD began shaping from the 1990s with the country 'reaching out' to neighbours, evidenced prominently through the Look East Policy (LEP)[3] aimed at Southeast Asia. However, it wasn't until 2006, when the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) set up the Public Diplomacy Division (PDD) primarily 'to address the challenges posed by this rapidly changing global environment' as outbreak of terrorism, climate change and international trade negotiations begun influencing domestic politics (Suri 2011, p. 297). Modelled on the Public Diplomacy Office of the US State Department, and partly geared towards enabling 'Indian missions to project the diverse facets of India', India's PD initiative was much in tandem with its soft power efforts: 'the projection of India's soft power is very much a part of the processes of public diplomacy' ('Inaugural Session of Conference on Public Diplomacy in the Information Age' 2010; Suri 2011; Heng 2016). Soon after, as social media platforms became extensively available for communication, India — seen by many for long as 'exotic', 'chaotic' and geopolitically undefined with an ineffective PD (Seib 2011) — begun moving towards 'network' model of diplomacy, underpinning efforts by diplomats to create and maintain relationships with actors outside of the core diplomatic community. The transition marked a decisive departure from a 'club' model of diplomacy, whereby diplomats primarily interacted with peers alone (Heine 2008).

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[3] India's Look East Policy (LEP) was an effort to cultivate extensive economic and strategic relations with the nations of Southeast Asia.

Careless diplomatic communication can be damaging. While such communication is important for 'correcting and adapting to inadvertent or private one-way communication flows, if left unanswered, could undermine transnational relationships and national reputations' (Cowan, Arsenault 2008). India's PD was marked by enhanced communication aiming to create greater traction with efforts like 'more high-level visits, telephonic conversations and informal contacts, using pegs like private visits, religious pilgrimages and [travel stopovers] in order to make personal assessments, exchange views, [and] resolve problems' (Sikri 2009, p. 17). The PDD's tagline, Advancing India's *Conversation with the World* was aimed for two-way interaction with audiences while marking efforts to make such communication as non-*sarkari* (devoid of government interference) as possible (Natarajan 2014).

Beginning from an early focus on the neighbourhood and the greater developing world (Hall 2012a) over the last decade and more, India's expanding world vision and great power ambitions, emanating from rapid economic growth, instilled a new-found confidence visible in its communication with the global community. The expanded confident outreach has been facilitated by the new media. India's Ministry of external affairs (MEA) begun to disseminate information through its website launched in 2003 (See Table 1). A few years later in 2009, Shashi Tharoor, the then Minister of State for External Affairs engaged in social networking for communicating directly with the people. This was remarkable given that computers in government offices were still not allowed to access social media (Desai 2017). Soon enough, the @IndianDiplomacy Twitter handle was established, followed by a Facebook Page, a YouTube channel, and a blogspot page under the same moniker. On 20 October 2010, India's PD website went live utilising the full range of Web 2.0 tools thereby formally launching India's digital diplomacy. The Twitter handle @IndianDiplomacy and its use of the hashtag '#digitaldiplomacy' for official engagement not only disseminates information on Indian culture for the global audience but is also a global hashtag being used by other foreign governments and international agencies (Sachdeva 2017). Two other Twitter handles of the MEA — @MEAIndia and @SushmaSwaraj — apart from assisting distressed Indian citizens abroad[4] — provides an opportunity to the Indian 'citizens to voice how they believe India should present itself to the world' ('Citizen engagement with Indian ministries through Twitter' 2017).

While Indian political leaders have been actively embracing social media, as we will see in the following section, the discourse on digital diplomacy in the country was shaped by India's diplomatic community during its early days. The then Indian Ambassador to the US, Nirupama Rao used Twitter to communicate support

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[4] An interesting example of effective digital diplomacy in its early days is the use of Twitter in organising 'Operation Homecoming' for evacuating stranded Indians in Libya. See Thakur 2012

for India's proposal for a 500 MW cross border transmission facility to Pakistan (Rajghatta 2012). While the communication attracted criticism from unhappy netizens over India's 'generous' overture towards its estranged neighbour despite the country's inability to overcome domestic electricity supply deficits, Rao tweeted fast to quell such fears (Rajghatta 2012). The incident is an example of senior Indian diplomats utilizing the reach of social media in purposeful foreign policy communication. The Pakistani media responded positively by extensively covering Rao's tweets (Rajghatta 2012). The episode personifies the ability of social media to blur borders as mentioned earlier. Despite not being targeted specifically towards a foreign audience, the communication extended its influence to both domestic and external audiences and drew in involved actors while demonstrating diplomatic willingness to 'listen' — fundamental for dialogues 'deserving special status as the starting point for public diplomacy' (Cowan & Cull 2008, p 295). The 'listening' character, however, is not integral to all diplomatic communication by India. For instance, Modi's tweets publicising his bold economic initiatives like demonetisation of the Indian currency[5] in 2016 was essentially criticised for being one-way public address with little effort to 'listen' to the difficulties encountered by the Indian people during this state action (Vishnu 2017).

Blurring of borders and close intertwining of global issues with domestic political agenda (Suri 2011) has prompted an active PD posture by the Indian state for seeking new audiences like the politically engaged educated youth, the diaspora in the West and key opinion-makers in India's immediate neighbourhood (Hall 2012b). Employment of both social and traditional media platforms with a more intensive role of the former, has been noteworthy, more so given that India's PD seeks to communicate with its own domestic population (a strategy recognised more commonly as Public Affairs elsewhere (Hall 2012b, p. 1097)). Table 1 traces the various milestones in India's PD in this regard with respect to the evolving role of social media in communication.

Table 1: Social Media and Indian PD

Year	Initiatives	Details
2003	Launch of a new, comprehensive and secure website of the Ministry, http://meaindia.nic.in	A vital tool in dissemination of information by the Office of the Spokesperson and source of information related to India and the Ministry
2009-10	"Distinguished Lecture Series on India's Foreign Policy" launched at Banaras Hindu University	A new initiative aimed at taking the discourse on key foreign policy issues to university campuses around the country
	Launch of 'India Africa Connect' website (http://www.indiaafricaconnect.in)	Reaching out to African countries

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[5] In order to curtail shadow economy and to come down on black money, the Government of India, in November 2016, had demonetised all ₹500 and ₹1000 banknotes.

2010-11	India.Inclusive@Davos' initiated during the World Economic Forum's Annual Summit in Davos in January 2011	To promote Brand India overseas
	A closed Google mail group created	To facilitate interactions between scholars and PDD officials
	A Conference organised in New Delhi: 'Public Diplomacy in the Information Age'	To create greater awareness about PD and its increasingly important role in foreign policy
2012-13	Over 50 Indian Missions open social media accounts	To engage the young and influential in cyberspace
2013	Launch of an integrated Smartphone app 'MEA India'	To provide a single digital platform for citizens to access information on-the-go
2014	MEA India mobile App updated to include 'Push Notification'	To provide regular alert notifications on uploading of new information at the MEA's website
	External Publicity (XP) and Public Diplomacy (PD) Divisions were merged to become a single division- (XPD) in MEA	Mandated to effectively articulate the position of the Government on various foreign policy issues to the national and international media, as well as engaging with domestic and global audiences to explain India's foreign policy and various aspects of its global engagement
2014-15	Introduced: • A New ASEAN-India website: http://www.mea.gov.in/aseanindia/index.htm • MEA Online • India Global on Radio • Interactive World Map MEA website (http://www.mea.gov.in/indian-missions-abroad.htm)	• In keeping with the new government's 'Act East' foreign policy • A discussion forum facilitating interactions, sharing and discussions by officers on a wide range of issues & common concern to all • All the episodes of the popular programme 'India Global', prepared in consultation with Indian Missions abroad, are made available for broadcast on AIR FM channel as well as Podcasts on MEA's dedicated channel (http://mea.gov.in/mea-campaigns.htm) & MEA's SoundCloud page (https://soundcloud.com/meaindia);YouTubeChannel https://www.youtube.com/user/meaindia. • A user can visit all the integrated web pages of Indian Missions abroad through a single interface, Indian Treaties Database (http://www.mea.gov.in/treaty.htm). This Database, strives to provide an accessible and searchable link or series of links to the Treaties/Agreements/MoUs between India and others
2015-16	e-books created	To highlight the achievements and key events during the visits of the Indian Prime Minister to other countries
2016-17	*India Perspectives* goes digital	Flagship magazine of the MEA
2017-18	MADAD (help) launched	Consulate Servises Management System available in Mobile Apps & through social media for redressal of grievances for diaspora
	Ask the Spokesperson' Moniker	A bi-monthly Twitter that enables the public to interact with the Official Spokesperson

	MEA debuted on LinkedIn	Attempts to publish a periodic blog on various aspects of the Ministry's work
	SAMEEP-'Students and MEA Engagement Programme'	An attempt to connect with students and create awareness about MEA and India's success stories on the foreign policy front

Source: Compiled from various MEA Annual reports 2003-18, retrieved 10.10.18, https://www.mea.gov.in/annual-reports.htm?57/Annual_Reports

Since the launch of its website in 2003, the MEA's online presence has grown phenomenally with its FB followers crossing more than 2.0 million and its combined twitter handles (@IndianDiplomacy and @MEAIndia) registering followers of around 3.0 million (MEA Annual Report 2017-18). More than 800,000 subscribers have added MEA India G+ page to their inner circles and subscription is picking up on the MEA and the Indian Diplomacy YouTube channels. Indian Missions have gone online and are actively communicating with locals in host countries and the diaspora. As of 2017-18, there are 172 Indian Missions & Posts where FB has been permitted by the host government, and are having FB presence under titles like 'India in USA', 'India in Ireland' and so on, with regular information being disseminated on Embassy activities, investment opportunities and India's flagship initiatives such as 'Make in India' and 'Digital India' (MEA Annual Report 2017-18). The Indian Missions & Posts are equally active on Twitter as well. Documentaries aimed for specific target audiences are being regularly commissioned by the PDD for uploading on the Indian Diplomacy Channel on YouTube and being included in the PD tweets and MEA FB page. These products cut across themes and aim to reach out to diverse audiences. For example, 'India: A Science and technology Superpower' focuses on India's scientific temper and achievements; 'Ramayana: A shared culture in India and Southeast Asia' targets Southeast Asian audiences through the common underlying theme of mythology; whereas 'India-Bangladesh: Beyond Borders' narrates the bilateral Land Boundary Agreement (LBA) and short films like 'India-Afghanistan: An enduring friendship' underscore role of soccer in boosting Indo-Afghan friendship. The key point to note is the vast scope that social media offers in connecting to audiences cutting across borders and on multiple themes – and the active utilization of such scope and depth by India's PDD. Indeed, the opportunities for taking communication to new heights have been noted by other ministries in India as well, such as shipping, for promoting online cruise tourism[6] through targeted hashtags on Twitter: 'Potential of cruise tourism in India #IncredibleIndia #cruisetourism #sagarmala' (January 2018) and 'Boost to #cruise tourism in India #Sagarmala' (July 2018).

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[6] Author interviews with Indian government officials.

Social Media, Political Leaders and Narendra Modi

Rapid growth of social media has encouraged Indian political leaders to create personal brands 'with an amazing mix of personal feelings, nationalist pride and smart positioning' (Ramalingegowda 2014). Cutting across parties and ideologies, the online presence of Indian leaders' has accelerated fast. The phenomenon is perhaps best exemplified by the online presence of the Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The Twitter handle @NarendraModi of the Indian Prime Minister has the third largest following among world leaders with a followership size of 30 million. Modi has another 18 million followers on his institutional account (@PMOIndia), which is in fourth place globally, right after his personal account (*Twiplomacy* Study 2017). Rahul Gandhi, leader of the Congress – the main Opposition Party in the Indian Parliament – while way behind Modi, is working on ramping up his social media presence ('Narendra Modi's popularity as PM dips to 34%, Rahul's rises to 24%' 2018) to re-brand himself. Shashi Tharoor - Congress leader and former Minister - and Omar Abdullah – leader of the National Conference Party and former Chief Minister of the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir - are also avid social media users. Among incumbent leaders, Sushma Swaraj, is not just active on social media but is also a leading female politician with a strong online presence. Modi and the BJP's active social media presence is also accompanied by robust digital communication with constituencies by a young political party like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP to the Common Man). While Indian political leaders continue to strengthen their online presence, the Modi government has raised outreach through social media to a high pitch by mandating all Ministries 'to integrate Twitter into their communication strategies' ('Citizen engagement with Indian ministries through Twitter' 2017) outlining the priority it attaches to communication through social media. Both Ministers and Ministries have distinct identities on the social media with each Ministry having a dual presence in the virtual world (Mahajan 2017) to communicate 'non-political, development-oriented, policy and awareness creation' as well as for making political statements' (Mahajan 2017).

Modi's observation that 'the world of social media has played a key role in democratising our discourse and giving a platform to millions of people around the world to express their views and showcase their creativity' ('Social media has democratised discourse, says PM Narendra Modi' 2018) underscore not just the importance of engaging global and local audiences through social media, but also the need for strategizing such engagement. In a country that has the world's largest young population and where the number of internet users is expected to rise to 720 million by 2020 ('Citizen engagement with Indian ministries through Twitter' 2017), engagement of people through multiple social media platforms

(e.g. YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/MEAIndia); YouTube Public Diplo-macy (https://www.youtube.com/user/Indiandiplomacy); Facebook (http://www.facebook.com/MEAIndia); Facebook Public Diplomacy (https://www.face-book.com/IndianDiplomacy); Flickr (http://www.flickr.com/photos/meaindia); Google+ (https://plus.google.com/u/0/ 103329416703761384109/posts); and Twitter@IndianDiplomacy, (@MEAIndia Posts) (MEA Annual Report 2017-18) is an obvious strategy. Indeed, it is hardly surprising that the current ag-gressive use of social media, for conveying the content and scope of government initiatives to the public, have been without precedence. Such use has been led by Prime Minister Modi himself through tweets reflecting the urge to communicate deep, strong and wide with constituencies:

> *28th April 2018 will be remembered as a historic day in the development journey of India. Yesterday, we fulfilled a commitment due to which the lives of several Indians will be transformed forever! I am delighted that every single village of India now has access to electricity. 12:58 PM - Apr 29, 2018*

While primarily aimed for the domestic audience, these posts are intended to 'ap-peal' to foreign audiences too, particularly the diaspora, for projecting a 'changing India' and a government committed to development.

For India, and other Rising Powers who have been erstwhile colonies, social me-dia is an enabling tool for reversing negative impressions and establishing positive credentials with the developed world. This is due to the scope social media offers for engaging with diverse audiences and the ease with which leaders can 'directly' communicate. For a country like India, social media enables positive communica-tion about its coming of age, in terms of modern ideas, scientific achievements and technological progress, captured through state initiatives like Digital India. Modi's digital diplomacy displays strong faith in this postulate. His attempts to project India as a pioneer in the field of science and technology and continuous highlighting of the endeavours of the Indian scientific community needs to be noted from this perspective. Tweets like 'Absolutely. Our space programme is our pride' in February 2017 and 'The launch of the 100th satellite by @isro signi-fies both its glorious achievements, and also the bright future of India's space programme' in January 2018 substantiate the point in the light of Modi and his government's efforts to position a new *Brand India* that draws strength from cutting-edge advances in scientific and technological applications nurtured by home-grown resources and institutions.

Modi's proclivity to engage through social media is not accidental; nor is it a re-sult of his becoming Prime Minister and thereby being bestowed with the onus of engaging with the rest of the world. He has been an avid user of social media from the time he was the Chief Minister of Gujarat. He is among those modern Indian

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leaders who realized early on the power of social media for generating broad-based public support. His intelligent use of social media catapulted him to the stature of a national leader, as well as one with the image of a nation-builder from an identity confined to the narrow domain of provincial Hindu fundamentalism. The makeover targeted both local constituencies and the international communi-ty, most of which had chastised him for inaction during the Godhra riots in 2002[7] and termed him an 'international political pariah' (Doherty 2014). His new image was directed towards the Indian diaspora as well, whom he sought to engage in flagship initiatives like 'Make in India' and 'Swachch Bharat' (Clean India).

Building *Brand Modi* and manipulating the social media was fundamental to the campaign that saw him winning elections to the Indian Parliament in 2014 with an overwhelming majority. Established and entrenched through digital commu-nication, the *brand* made him a viable political alternative for large chunks of both liberals and conservatives alike in India, as well as a global leader. The transforma-tion was a result of a well-thought out strategy comprising relentless and rapid communication of messages from, and pictures of Modi on social media. Modi's following on Twitter, already on the rise during his campaign trail, reflected quan-tum jumps of 400 per cent along with the FB page of the MEA ('India's foreign policy a big draw on new and social media' 2014) following his entry into office mid-2014. The evidence leaves little doubt about the role of social media in the making of Modi and the concomitant importance has attached to digital diplo-macy. Right after being declared victorious in the election, Modi enthusiasti-cally engaged with the global community, acknowledging greetings from heads of states on Twitter, setting the stage for a new phase of external engagement by shifting the ground rules of India's PD.

Modi's unorthodox engagement tactics through social media platforms has also made international headlines. His use of the Weibo platform before visiting China in 2015, drew widespread attention, evident from his first post on Weibo - 'Hello China! Looking forward to interacting with Chinese friends through Weibo' be-ing heavily forwarded and commented upon by Weibo users. His tweet on the eve of his arrival in Japan also elicited similar enthusiastic response. These messages could have been part of the push for his Act East policy[8] targeting the region. But they also exposed the other side of social media-enabled direct communication where people are hardly restricted in voicing opinions of leaders, countries and societies. Chinese microbloggers took the opportunity to draw Modi's attention

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[7] The 2002 Godhra riots was a three-day period of inter- communal violence when Narendra Modi, the current Indian Prime Minister of India, was the Chief Minister of this Western Indian state of Gujarat.

[8] Under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi the government of India has made its rela-tions with East Asian neighbours a foreign policy priority — an extension of the Look East Policy (LEP) launched in 1993 by the then Indian Prime Minister Narasimha Rao.

to the plight of Indian women with one Chinese netizen posting: 'I suggest improving the social status of Indian women and protecting the safety of females! Or we foreign women will not dare travel to India'; the post, while attracting considerable attention ('Narendra Modi "scores big hit" with Weibo account: Chinese state media' 2015) underlined challenges that social-media active leaders like Modi can hardly avoid in their attempt to influence perceptions through digital diplomacy. The example underscores an interesting aspect of interaction through social media on image-building: *the risk of pushing particular agendas for specific purposes turning counterproductive*. In this regard, it is not clear to what extent Modi's FB and Twitter posts on his foreign visits and other achievements have actually achieved in terms of better 'perception' of India.

While scholars argue 'Prime Minister Modi's charismatic interaction with world leaders' now represent 'a strategic advantage in the soft power for India in the region' (Heng 2016), India's absence from *The Soft Power 30*, an index ranking 30 countries in terms of soft power resources, underlines 'India evidently does not yet benefit as much from international awareness, positive associations, or investments in cultural diplomacy as many other countries' (Jaishankar 2018). Unorthodox engagement tactics by Modi also include 'selfie' diplomacy that has become an integral part of his overseas travels. Again, much like his FB and Twitter posts, while breaking perception stereotypes and casting the Prime Minister in a charming and engaging light, it is not clear how selfie diplomacy has changed perceptions about India as a nation. It's interesting to note the contrasts between perceptions of Modi and India in this regard: *The Soft Power 30* report marks India's best performing area in the Digital sub-index[9] and highlights the 'Indian Prime Minister Modi's unrivalled skills in digital diplomacy' (*The Soft Power 30* 2018). The recognition of Modi as a champion of digital diplomacy and India's capacities as a digital nation, is in sharp contrast to its absence from the list of most successful soft power nations in the world.

Communication aimed at building of *Brand Modi* and *Brand India* is aimed at the diaspora as one of its major target groups. Modi's Tweets like: 'Our diaspora are our "Rashtradoots". We are immensely proud of their accomplishments and their passion towards India & India's progress' in 2017 underscore the priority. Engaging the diaspora has been a sustained part of Modi's foreign policy communication on the firm belief that 'well-structured diaspora bonds would directly finance key development priorities. And that would give everyone in the diaspora, not just its entrepreneurs and its financiers, the opportunity to translate their long-distance patriotism into tangible economic gain and share in India's growth story,

[9] The measure of soft power has been included with a new component — the Digital sub-index. Its inclusion aims to capture the extent to which countries have embraced technology, their connectivity to the digital world, and their use of digital diplomacy through social media platforms. For details see The Soft Power 30

as Modi often encourages them to do' (Subramanya 2015). Initiatives like e-visas (Jain 2015) and MADAD meaning 'help' (Table 1) for addressing grievances of the overseas Indians online are specific to the diaspora. In this regard, however, styles of engagement between leaders have shown contrasts. Sushma Swaraj, the foreign Minister, has been visibly dialogue-oriented in engagement: her immediate response to a tweet plea by a Yemeni woman with an 8-month old son married to an Indian in April 2015 is perhaps the best example of digital diplomacy shifting from monologue to dialogue. The *Foreign Policy* magazine acclaimed the Minister 'for fashioning a novel brand of Twitter diplomacy' and included her in the list of 100 Global Thinkers. Swaraj's social media engagement certainly appears more interactive and distinct from Modi's. This could, however, be due to the nature of her portfolio given that the foreign ministry has to focus on addressing grievances as part of its responsibilities, which several other Ministries and Ministers, including the Prime Minister need not.[10]

Notwithstanding the robust engagement on social media by Modi and several other contemporary political leaders of India, they need to note the much greater role that social media offers to people for influencing and conditioning foreign policy-making due to enlargement of the public sphere. Examples like the online activism by Indians in 2016 with respect to Pakistan could corroborate Castells' definition of PD as the 'diplomacy of the people' and can be studied for assessing if social media has indeed enlarged scope in contemporary communication. The reaction pertained to the Indian government's decision to strike terror launch pads across the Line of Control (LoC) in Pakistan in response to an earlier terror attack that killed several Indian soldiers and upload it on a video on social media. Needless to say, the content whipped up frenzied emotions with Twitter and FB being inundated with messages of support for the government. Whether the government precipitated such support by announcing strikes, and used the same to demonstrate popular support for its actions to global and national audiences, are questions that would continue to be debated. Interestingly, online activism by Indians was much less during the Doklam crisis with China in 2017 when it was their Chinese counterparts 'shaping the public discourse on Doklam standoff' (Ranjan 2017). Was the government and other institutional actors shaping foreign policy perceptions through social media careful in not raising the pitch against China, as opposed to Pakistan? Does this, as an extension, reflect the 'middle-power syndrome' for India?

While enabling governments and people to connect and communicate, social media platforms have also permitted unhindered criticism. The Modi government's digital diplomacy and image-building efforts have been affected by the disapprov-

[10] A view emanating from author's interview with Ministry officials. The latter pointed to Mr Suresh Prabhu, who as the Railway Minister in Modi government was also noted to be highly interactive given the nature of his portfolio.

al and denunciation — facilitated in equal measure by social media –– on Modi's conspicuous silence on socio-economic matters assuming ominous proportions, such as mob-lynching and agrarian distress. Modi's digital diplomacy to rebuild India's global image by capitalising its intrinsic soft power runs the risk of being damaged by negative aspects of his governance, which, ironically, are common knowledge due to social media only. This is evident from findings of preliminary research on Modi's communication through Twitter and FB posts. While he is seen as a leader prompt in making birthday wishes, sending congratulatory messages and even expressing condolences following calamities and other setbacks in foreign countries, his stoic silence on serious domestic matters is disturbing: 'Our loquacious prime minister has gone quiet. Unlike his predecessor, Modi hasn't addressed even a single press conference and prefers to only give tame interviews' (Kohli 2018).

Conclusion

Rising Powers like India are employing PD to bolster global status and communicate to the world their distinct stories. India has become a robust user of social media in external diplomatic communication in pursuit of these objectives. Its proclivity is to an extent the result of Modi being an avid user of such engagement tactics in his political career. His remarkable political success in rising from a state Chief Minister to not just the Prime Minister of world's largest democracy, but also a leader of considerable global standing, is a result of *brand* Modi being fashioned by the social media. There is therefore every reason for Modi and his government to repose faith in the aggressive use of digital diplomacy in all forms of communication. However, the desired outcomes might not always be forthcoming as 'in the brave new world of the internet, where authority is evenly distributed to everyone with a voice or a podcast, no one believes anybody, or (it is the same thing) everyone believes anybody' (Stanley 2018). The use of social media as a statecraft, notwithstanding the great momentum it has gathered in India, is still evolving. As a tool of PD, the Indian experience reflects the dichotomy of digital diplomacy: the ease with which it can connect to hearts and minds within and across territories is accompanied by the ease with which leaders and countries are held responsible for lack of meaningful action and poor governance. Social media, while revolutionising PD, has undoubtedly created new formidable challenges for Rising Powers like India.

Bio

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