

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The Bully in the Pulpit: Autocracy, Digital Social Media, and Right-wing Populist Technoculture

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Focusing on new media's disruption of conventional politics, we trace populism's restylization of mass expression and political power. Through an analysis of the rise of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, we argue that online platforms offer new ways of concretizing political fantasies through the affective engagement of the user/citizen. While this seems to endow greater agency to "the people," political authority is increasingly rerouted to the figure of the leader through religious and charismatic channels. In our elaboration of right-wing populist technoculture, we aim for a broader analytical framework that takes stock of the technological forces reconfiguring the conduct of contemporary politics, arguing that the link between digital social media and right-wing populism is not only contextual but also constitutive.

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Right-wing populist reality check: mid-2017. British electoral support for the U.K. Independence Party has collapsed and "Brexit" commitments remain shaky. Following the losses of nationalist anti-immigrant parties in Austria and the Netherlands, a newly minted centrist, pro-Europe party has crushed the National Front in French elections. Donald Trump has banished the chief architect of his presidential campaign and is striking short-term fiscal compromises with the political opposition. Do these events amount to a rolling back of the surge of right-wing populism across the globe? We think not. The articulation of populism within extremist xenophobic resentment, going well beyond mere political adventurism or superficial rhetorical resemblance, demonstrates that the global indignation reshaping national electoral politics is here to stay. Marshaling the disorientation of a worldwide economic

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downturn, channeling anti-elite and anti-government sentiment into retaliatory nationalism, exploiting the fear of terror attacks, and refusing to empathize with displaced people fleeing the chaos of civil war and regional conflict, populism has helped to frame right-wing claims on national futures. Digital social media has played a critical role in the virality of right-wing ideological resentment, fanning the flames of mass religious fervor and spurring violent action, culminating in the brutal murder of journalists and even casual Facebook posters (Narrain, 2017). Given their dispersed and varied nature, how might we situate these radical practices within a broader analytical framework that takes stock of the technological forces reconfiguring the conduct of contemporary politics?

The mediated precedents of this political disequilibrium can be seen, on one side, in the mobile organization of social movements and the state's crackdown on digital infrastructure in Internet blackouts in Egypt, Cameroon, Gambia, and Gabon. On the other political side, 4chan, Reddit, and trolling have served as effective ways to share, aggregate, and propagate (often) anonymous vitriol and intolerance. Across the ideological spectrum, a distributed yet collective dissent has found a voice in these new networked politics.

Accounts of populism detailing the central tenets of popular resentment, disenfranchisement, anti-elite sentiment, and institutional distrust often focus either on its specific ties to local conditions and histories or its conceptual generality as an umbrella category of political behavior. Shifting attention from these classical analytical divisions towards an account of its performativity, Ernesto Laclau suggests that populism "appears as a distinctive and always present possibility of political life" (2005, p. 13). Furthermore, given its recent invocation across geographical and regional political realities, populism may be less a coherent political ideology and more of a tendency, or what Benjamin Moffit (2016) calls a political style.

If new media technology has disrupted institutionalized politics, it has also afforded populism's restylization of the relations between digital social media and conventional forms of political power. In its alignment with right-wing populism, social media has served to normalize, broaden, and reframe extremist commitments, articulating them to longer histories of media technology and political identity. The recent presidential election in the United States and the Twitter-enabled rise of Donald Trump represent the latest iteration of American conservatism's eager adoption of communication technologies like publishing, radio, television, direct mail, faxes, and computer-generated lists (Halleck, 1991). From the early 1940s on, American conservatism was very much a media activist movement that relied heavily on new technologies of diffusion (Hemmer, 2016). With the newly deregulated electronic mass media in the 1970s and 1980s, even the anti-establishment strain of American conservatism was able to secure its own channels of political partisanship (Horwitz, 2013).

This techno-ideological predilection is not simply an American vocation, of course, and the database politics of anti-deliberative sentiment are finding expression across Europe and Asia, where organized right-wing forces have utilized digital

social media to forward their agenda and marshal public support. With Viktor Orbán in Hungary, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Narendra Modi in India, digital social networking has given absolutist charismatic fascists new ways of engaging the masses.

Digital connectivity is crucial to this new political configuration, and its affordances are integral to the infrastructure of networks as well as their rearrangement and potential alternative uses (Levine, 2015). In this paper, we use the phrase right-wing populist technoculture to refer to the non-determinative organization of sociopolitical experience through technological fantasies of virtual access, affective mobilization, and political action.

In *Aliens in America*, Jodi Dean (1998) shows how postwar conspiracy culture spread through a populist technoculture that challenged scientific and elite dismissals of UFOs and alien abduction. In this networked conspiracy culture, afforded by new technologies of interconnection like the Internet, Dean locates a broader dispersion of paranoia that redirects judgment from traditional collectivities of political consensus towards the virtual reality of viral plausibility. Writing in the early Internet age, before fake news, alternative facts, and the confirmation bias of social media newsfeeds, Dean is remarkably prescient about how the relativization of authority—where “news” is as likely to be found at disinformation.com as it is on CNN.org” (1998, p. 132)—creates participatory cultures of networked belief that are skeptical of hierarchical practices of mediation.

We take Dean’s suggestion that populist technoculture inaugurates a new form of coding politics as central to the contradictory political logic whereby social movements that multiply and distribute common resentment against the elite operate under the aegis of a single autocratic figurehead. In this way, anti-elite resentment designed to disaggregate power from the body of the elite finds expression in the person of the singular demagogue, and the affordances of social media transform the autocrat into the everyman. While right-wing populist technoculture promises to circumvent media in order to directly address the electorate, the fantasy of unmediated access actually depends on this new linkage between political authority and “the people.”

The theatricality of populism is essential to its capacity to reframe politics (Fisher & Taub, 2017). It is not just that populism is mediated or dependent on media infrastructures and strategies, but that right-wing populist technoculture remediates the relationship between political leadership and the electorate. This remediation enacts what William Mazzarella calls the “affectively charged ideal of communicative immediacy” (2006, p. 481) in the virtual political spaces of digital social media. We are suggesting therefore that the link between digital social media and right-wing populism is not only contextual but also constitutive.

Historically, this link was forged in the crucible of neoliberal media deregulation, as a digital infrastructure coalesced around the coordinated cybertarian agendas of militarization, privatization, and entrepreneurial individualism. Coupled with the

slow erosion of support for traditional news organizations, institutional transformation in politics, education, finance, media, and entertainment has led to social media serving as an instrument of ideological polarization masquerading as free-form civic participation, seemingly liberated from conventional party politics. The largely unregulated glut of user analytics—prioritized by online credit systems, biometrics, and surveillance and oriented towards commerce, data-mining, and the mechanical reinforcement of personal preference—now forms a technological infrastructure where algorithm and political attitude must be understood as complementary rather than coincidental.

In what follows, we focus on the political fortunes and digital media strategies of India's current Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. Though his role as the fist of the Hindu right's grasp on national power is relatively recent, Modi has long been lionized for fomenting violence against the Muslim minority community in his home political territory of Gujarat. Deploying the affective strategies associated with digital social media, this extremist, strong-armed authoritarian has been able to mobilize popular anti-elite sentiment and link his party's future to a decidedly populist agenda. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has had a somewhat contradictory engagement with populism since the 1990s, periodically engaging economic populism while maintaining links to elite voting classes and a historically inflexible ideological purity. At the same time, it has also criticized the populist campaigns of regional parties (Thachil, 2014). While Modi's victories in Gujarat might be partially responsible for a recent inflection in the national party platform, there can be little doubt that digital social media played a key role in transforming the BJP from elite party to a more right-wing populist one.

The material production of virtual proximity

The election of Narendra Modi as India's Prime Minister in 2014 not only represented the conservative BJP's first majority win since its founding in 1980, but it also marked the consolidation of a technocratic power that aligned traditional political knowledge with digital affordances (Chadha & Guha, 2016). For years, the BJP has been at the forefront in adopting digital media technologies for political purposes (Jaffrelot, 2015; Sen, 2016). Paula Chakravarty and Srirupa Roy (2015) describe the 2014 national elections as a mediated populism that coordinated privatized commercial media and the 24-hour news cycle with new political affiliations between local and national political authority and an increasingly partisan social media.

In 2004, the BJP shifted attention away from aggregating local and regional electoral victories by pursuing an aggressive national marketing strategy, using the tagline "India Shining" through a digital campaign with websites, text messages, emails, and customized ringtones. In 2007, the BJP organized these strategies through a newly founded Information Technology (IT) Cell. Tasked with collating and analyzing electoral data and creating strategies for online reputation management

and social media publicity using online and cellular platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and WhatsApp, the IT Cell thrives in large part from a crowdsourcing model of online volunteerism from Indian citizens located at home as well as abroad (Shukla, 2014). The activities of these volunteers to influence potential voters using targeted micro-messaging during the 2014 campaign has been described as multimedia carpet-bombing (Sardesai, 2014).

The BJP has been accused of employing the service of dedicated individuals and teams who operate through anonymous support, partaking in invisible data organization, exchanges, and trolling. While sometimes distancing itself from trolling, the party has failed to take definitive steps to contain cyber-bullying, harassment, and rumormongering. One of the criticisms levied against Narendra Modi is that he personally follows several Twitter handles that have repeatedly partaken in online abuse (Chaturvedi, 2016). In 2017, the BJP defended Modi's failure to unfollow social media users that advocated for and celebrated the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh, a fierce critic of right-wing politics in India.

Modi has been a member of Twitter since 2009 and currently has over 30 million followers. With just over 23 million monthly users in 2016, Twitter has a relatively small market share in India, compared to 142 million for Facebook and 160 million monthly active users for WhatsApp (News 18, 2016; Singh, 2016; Statista, 2017). Twitter's underpinning in personalized political broadcasting, endorsement, and self-promotion is essential to the management of Modi's public persona. Twitter "following" and "follow-backs" have been critical to the semblance of interactivity between the BJP and its supporters (Ahmed, Jaidka, & Cho, 2016; Mohan, 2015; Pal, 2015; Torri, 2015). Modi's tweets are not limited only to issues of governance, foreign policy, and the national economy; on many occasions, his tweets include personalized greetings and responses to questions from other users. This mode of direct, personalized engagement with the public reflects Benjamin Moffitt's observation that the turn to Web 2.0 has allowed populist leaders to create a perceived intimacy with followers, giving "the appearance of direct accountability and representation" (2016, pp. 88–89). Through its direct address, social media reassembles a massive audience into a political constituency.

Individuals followed by Modi on Twitter often declare themselves "blessed" or "honored" to be followed by the Prime Minister (see Figure 1). As Twitter user @harish_purohit notes, "favoriting" and "re-tweeting" can inoculate the sender from the explicit ideological content of the forwarded message. Despite this avowed separation, the devotional language of "blessing" actually foregrounds the affective foundation of political affiliation, creating intimate contact between sender and receiver. Mass media's engagement of religious following has a longer history and can be seen in the strategic use of television by American evangelicals such as Billy Graham and Pat Robertson. Stewart Hoover (1998) observes that Graham's television broadcasts were central to the consolidation of moderate conservatism and the revitalization of Protestant ethics in American society in the 1950s, creating an explicit affiliation between religious and broadcasting institutions. Hoover notes a



Figure 1 “Following” and “blessing” on Twitter.

similar link between televangelism and public presence in the case of Pat Robertson and the Christian Broadcasting Network in the 1980s. Instead of blending into an existing broadcasting network to widely disseminate sermons, however, Robertson focused on creating a network whose overtly religious programming exploited the unabashedly secular aspects of video broadcasting, like the use of commercial breaks (Hoover, 1988, p. 77). As Hoover observes, television, for evangelists, was not only a means of disseminating religious ideology, but provided a way of “existing at all in contemporary culture” (1988, p. 150).

A similar claim can also be made of today’s digital environment, with a Twitter and Facebook presence being essential to maintaining a public presence. However, in the case of the BJP and the network environment, there is a subtle difference where religiosity is fused with the figure of the political leader himself. Although the BJP and its fellow organizations—the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and the Vishwa Hindu Parishad—have used propaganda videos intensely (Brosius, 2005, p. 82), their distribution has almost never taken place through mainstream television channels. On the other hand, platforms such as Twitter and Facebook disseminate the overt religiosity of propaganda videos within the larger network ecology, often foregrounding the political leader as the public face of an ideological and moral higher ground. In these “neutral” platforms, religious affiliations and assertions appear as rationalist claims about development or righteous political claims about nationalist ideals. Hence, following on Twitter is both a standard aspect of the platform’s affordances as well a subtle repurposing of the network for specific religious and ideological purposes.

The devotional aspect of Twitter following resonates with the broader religious vernacular of political solidarity. In contemporary India, the Sanskrit term *bhakt* is used to denote supporters of the Hindu right wing, and Modi's supporters are often pejoratively termed Modi *bhakt*s to equate their following with the devotee's blind following of the deity (Khan, 2015). Every follow-back, retweet, and "like" is a reverberation in the network that signifies the passing on of an affective charge. These are new tactics of political affiliation, where rapid viral diffusion can publicize the expressive capacity of a vote in a distributed fashion. At the same time, this affective charge engages older forms of religious attachment, leading to what Sriram Mohan (2015) pointedly calls the "viralization" of "Internet Hindus."

In some instances, social media can become a way to translate radical ideas into populist ones, as extremist parties try to normalize by sanitizing histories of their more radical leanings in order to make them more widely palatable to a broader electorate. At the same time, the multiplier effect of Twitter virality—where a tweet can rapidly become a roar—can consolidate extremist claims. A condensed tweet often bears the stamp of an original poster, while its viral circulation resembles the authorless propagation of rumor. This tension between univocality and polyvocality frames the expression of authority and collectivity within right-wing populist technoculture.

Twitter is only one facet of the overall digital consolidation of the BJP, whose e-governance initiatives facilitated a seemingly unmediated interaction between government and citizen that bypassed the usual party loyalties and the fealties of bribery and political corruption. This fiction of co-presence and virtual proximity—what William Mazzarella calls the "functional and affective faces of the desire for immediacy [that] have become embedded in contemporary hypermediated governmentality" (2006, p. 500)—emerged as a critical strategy in the 2007 Gujarat state elections that returned Modi to power as Chief Minister of the state and set the stage for his eventual prime ministership. In the state campaign, the BJP intensively mobilized the cellphone to reach out to potential supporters with Modi's voice messages, which, unlike text messages, made the voting public feel as if they were being addressed individually by the leader (Doron & Jeffrey, 2013). The emergent political formation hinged on an interactive collapse between the crowd and the leader, filtering the political through an affective mediation (Tzankova, 2015). The potential of networked media to release "psychosocial forces" (Thrift, 2009) or to induce "affective contagion" (Sampson, 2012) is organized by a relational network of transmittable affect through which the social, as Geert Lovink suggests, "manifests itself in the network" (2012, p. 3).

The porosity and interaction allowed by social media technologies creates a personalization effect whereby questions of participatory governance and political accountability are siphoned off by the perception of one-on-one interaction. In the 2014 elections this personalized call to political participation was seen in the #SelfieWithModi campaign, in which supporters would upload their selfies onto social media platforms, and in the BJP's creation of a nationwide toll-free number

to facilitate contact between supporters and party workers (Shekhar, 2014). This construction of accessibility is also evident in post-election strategies. On India’s Republic Day in 2016, it was widely reported that Modi had sent personalized SMS messages to millions of members of India’s police force (Times of India, 2016), supporting the ongoing fantasy of direct, unmediated contact.

The same invitation to interactivity can be seen in the politics of the recently released Narendra Modi digital application (app; Figures 2 and 3). Available for both Android and iOS platforms, the app advertises itself as “a unique opportunity to receive messages and emails directly from the Prime Minister” (Google Play, 2017), integrating news and videos with to-do tasks like sharing news over social media and networking with other users. The Narendra Modi App is available to users in a smartphone- and tablet-friendly interface that invites touching, swiping, and tapping, but of course the end-user of the Narendra Modi App interacts with the touch-screen of the mobile device and not with Narendra Modi himself.

The Narendra Modi App is symptomatic of what Alexander Galloway (2012) calls the “occult logic” of visually-based software interfaces, where the display of information takes place simultaneously with its obfuscation. Like much social media, for all its veneer of functionality and information transmission, the app’s actual processes of data organization, collection, and sorting remain behind the scenes. Furthermore, the app user’s haptic caress with the occult and occluded materiality of the leader’s physical body produces a kind of political affect through sensation. Feeling political is a necessary precondition of the collective public’s common association with the virtual body of the leader. Through the charge of touch and virtual connection, emotional investment inculcates the popular attachment that is the linchpin of affective politics.



Figure 2 Web banner advertising the ‘NaMo’ app



Figure 3 ‘NaMo’ Android app’s registration page.

Specters and masks

The affective potential of networked media is not restricted to digital affordances alone; it borrows from and coexists with practices of ritualized circulation in material culture. An early instance of the mediated relationship between Narendra Modi and the crowd can be traced back to the 2007 and 2012 elections in Gujarat, where the BJP distributed cut-out and latex masks in the image of Modi to supporters at public rallies (see Figures 4 and 5). The strategy of using masks for public mobilization is part of the contemporary logic of participatory networks, seen both in corporate as well as revolutionary tactics. For instance, in 2005, the American fast food chain Burger King started producing vinyl masks of its eponymous mascot and began airing commercials featuring it in 2006. In these advertisements, the Burger King can be seen in non-commercial settings: a man working at a construction site, a couple in a living room, or a man waking up in the morning. The advertisements sold the idea that the Burger King experience could now be delivered outside of the fast food establishment itself, an idea encapsulated in the advertising slogan, “Wake Up with the King.” The sale of Burger King masks echoed this notion of pervasive presence. On the revolutionary front, members and supporters of the hacktivist organization Anonymous have used a Guy Fawkes mask both as a way of



Figure 4 Modi cut-out paper masks.



Figure 5 Modi latex masks.

maintaining anonymity and as an “eternal beacon” and a “signature icon” for equality and democracy (Coleman, 2014, p. 75). Gabriela Coleman calls the Anonymous Guy Fawkes mask “a prime example of counter-commodification” (2014, p. 271), since it deploys an image made famous by a Hollywood film, *V for Vendetta* (2005; an image over which Time Warner holds copyright).

In the case of the Modi masks, one can see both corporate and revolutionary tendencies at play. However, while the corporate/advertising function is fused with political mobilization in the Modi mask, Modi supporters did not wear the mask to remain anonymous. Instead, donning the face of the leader was an assertion of political identity in which Narendra Modi was both mascot and beacon. Images of de-individualized, mask-donning crowds proliferated throughout Indian media, lending credibility to the impression of a “Modi wave” (Kumar, 2014; Torri, 2015) and signifying a “semiotic reversal” of the democratic ethos of electoral representation, with the crowds representing Modi as much as Modi represented them (Mukherji, 2011).

If right-wing populist technoculture affords the transformation of the autocrat into the everyman, it is clearly capable of a reversal, where every man becomes an autocrat. In terms of aesthetic politics, these masks interpellate the subject into a spatial field where the mass public is visualized as a form of serialized anonymity.

This dramatization of the right-wing populist agenda is critical to the simultaneous aggregation of political authority and the atomization of political subjectivity, where mass mobilization is directed against elite authority by reconstituting the unquestionable physiognomy of the leader. As Cas Mudde puts it, “regarding ‘the people’ in populism, we know *what* they are—that is, homogenous and pure—but not *who* they are” (2015, p. 434, emphasis in original).

Confirming what Christopher Jaffrelot (2015) calls a “visual populism,” in which Modi’s face metonymically stands in for a collective we, the Modi masks remediate the connection between political authority and the people. Such strategies of visualization are critical to the representation of political collectivity as image. Historically speaking, fascism provided many of the representational conventions of the political rally, where the social is produced as an aesthetic form. Right-wing populism’s engagement with this history resonates in the BJP campaign’s use of Modi’s image as a symptom of an efficient and forceful “manly leadership style” (Srivatsava, 2015).

The apotheosis of this virtualized political embodiment can be seen in the BJP’s adoption of holographic technology in pre-election rallies prior to the 2014 general elections. The Modi hologram was produced in collaboration with the U.K.-based company Musion Holograms, which also famously produced a hologram of the deceased American hip-hop artist Tupac Shakur for the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in southern California in 2012. Modi’s holographic projection was shot indoors in a studio while being simultaneously projected across the country in several locations. Unlike the high-security conditions surrounding his physical presence, the hologram allowed crowds to get very close to the virtual politician. According to filmmaker Mani Shankar, who spearheaded the hologram project, the hologram’s power to “awe and stun” comes from the audience’s proximity to the holographic image (Headlines Today, 2014). This assertion of proximity is inherently paradoxical, in that proximity here is both physical and virtual. The crowds were granted physical proximity to a leader who was not really there (see Figures 6 and 7). The holographic projection fused an actual crowd in physical space with a virtual image.

In the hologram, the televisual body is somewhat disassociated from the apparatus of projection, lending the leader a kind of spectral claim to authenticity. Modi is not the only right-wing populist autocrat to deploy the embodied digital trace in this fashion. At a political rally in Izmir in early 2014, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan employed holographic projection to represent himself as a ten-foot image (Figure 8), which came into slow focus in a swirling blue luminescence reminiscent of *Star Trek*’s transporter. While Erdogan was physically able to avoid appearing during an ongoing corruption scandal, his virtual monumentality helped to affirm his commitment to his political supporters.

Of course, there is something more here than just the mass distribution of a political image through televisual means. The hologram is ontologically different from a flat video image, and the 3-D hologram is not isolated on a screen. It occupies the same space as the audience and is therefore simultaneously present and absent. The hologram’s power has been associated with this immaterial quality: its

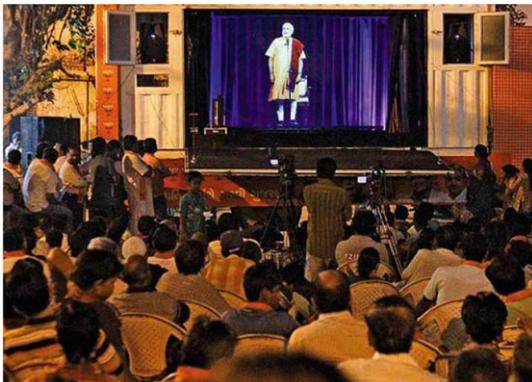


Figure 6 Modi hologram.



Figure 7 The cordoned-off hologram.

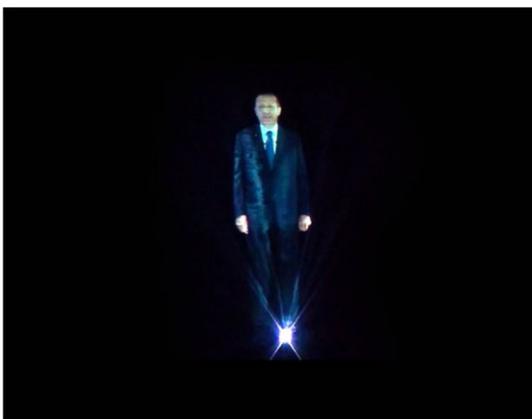


Figure 8 Erdogan hologram, 2014.

“ability to generate the uncanny appearance of solidity from a featureless flat plate; and, its revelation of mysterious scenes in impossible spaces” (Johnston, 2016, p. 211).¹ The hologram’s “ontological incertitude” (Schröter, 2011) between the still and the moving image endowed the Modi holograms with an auratic power in excess of televisual liveness. Modi himself equated this power of the hologram with the omnipresence and universal address of Hindu deities (Price, 2015), deploying technology in service of the cult of the charismatic leader. In the register of Indian politics, this charismatic authority has an underlying religiosity that is connected to the practice of *darshan*.

The term *darshan* (Sanskrit for vision) is used in Hindu religious practice to imply a visual register in which an iconic image of the deity is seen by the devotees, who are also simultaneously seen by the deity. In their examination of Hindu calendar art, Christopher Pinney (2004) and Kajri Jain (2007) have identified *darshan* as a form of reciprocal viewing. Arguably, as a three-dimensional image that doesn’t share the full-frontal aesthetic of flat calendar images, the hologram hardly returns the viewer’s gaze in the same way. But *darshan* is a layered term that resonates in more registers than just the visual. In his study of the TV serial *Ramayana*, Arvind Rajagopal describes *darshan* as a form of haptic contact (2001), a mutual presence that facilitates a congregational experience. The spectral power of the Modi hologram lies not so much in the silent reciprocity of the gaze but in its quality of being there simultaneously with the crowd.² The holographic rallies achieved this by using fixed stages as well as mobile platform units that were transported to different regions via trucks (Musion, 2014). If holograms deified the political figure of Narendra Modi, then his relationship with his support base is also marked by an underlying religiosity that aligns technological forms with Hindu right-wing ideology.³

Jacques Derrida’s identification of media technologies as inherently spectral turns on the “visibility of a body which is not present in flesh and blood” (Derrida & Steigler, 2002, p. 115). In this sense, Modi’s hologram is both an effect of the spectrality of all media as well as the virtuality of populist engagement. Nalin Mehta (2015) has suggested, given the prominence of attention and mass publicity, that “Modi is Media.” Modi as media—the disembodied voice in the cellphone, blessings conferred by the Twittering host, the omnipresent holographic ghost, and the mask that mobilizes the collective—suggests a dematerialization the body of the leader, dispersing political authority among the crowd. Historically speaking, right-wing mobilization has rarely required the presence of a leader. In the current conjuncture, however, right-wing populist technoculture catalyzes political affect through a form of distribution held in place by the virtual body of the leader himself.

Conclusion

Of course, extremism and its alignment with right-wing populism is subject to local, national, and regionally mediated cultures. In Hungary, for example, Viktor Orban’s ruling Fidesz party uses its control of television networks, the press, and

extensive billboard campaigns to couple linguistic provincialism with anti-cosmopolitanism and opposition to the European Union. The urban liberal Hungarian opposition uses social media and digital media strategies more directly, sharing uncomfortable common ground with the neo-fascist extreme right party Jobbik, which aggressively uses social media in concordance with municipal meetings. Furthermore, digital campaigns developed in one context do not always translate into another: for example, American alt-right social media strategies failed to significantly move French voters in the 2017 election (Scott, 2017).

Despite the emergence of digital strategies, television and print news remain at the forefront of political antagonism. In 2016, for instance, the Modi-led Indian government issued a 24-hour blackout of *NDTV*, a news channel that had been critical of the administration in many instances. In Turkey after the 2016 coup d'état attempt, Erdoğan likewise clamped down on journalists and media outlets to control the flow of information in his favor. Similarly, in the United States, television and print media journalists have been under constant fire since Trump's election.

The political right wing can hardly claim a monopoly on digital strategies. While the National Front was the first French party with a website, the socialist supporters of Jean-Luc Mélenchon created an online community called *Le Discord Insoumis* ("Defiant Discord"). There can also be distinctive articulations of digital visibility among the extremist right. In the Netherlands, the Freedom Party's Geert Wilders uses social media prodigiously, partially because of infrequent public appearances after assassination plots against him in 2004.

However, it is harder to argue against the constitutive relationship between digital social media and right-wing populism in the newly configured "illiberal state." In this age of viral diffusion, a tweet can rapidly transform into a political treatise that amplifies nationalist outrage and an increasing hostility against immigrants and asylum seekers. Like social media, right-wing populism can shelter univocality behind the facade of polyvocality, and mercurial extremists can become the charismatic authorities of a new political imaginary.

It is not just that male extremist authority casts a virtual shadow over right-wing populism, but that the economy of xenophobic mistrust and anti-immigrant resentment depends on the properties of social media, where, to echo Sara Ahmed, "feelings do not reside in subjects or objects, but are produced as effects of circulation" (2014, p. 8). If populist sentiments can be enabled by the viral disaggregation and reintegration of singular political authority, what Brian Massumi (1997) calls the "virtual synaesthetic perspectives" of affect play a formative role in the affordances of right-wing populist technoculture.

Notes

- 1 In fact, the Pepper's Ghost illusion, developed in the mid-19th century and on which the modern hologram is based, was used in Victorian theaters to create stunningly lifelike spectral illusions in theaters (Brooker, 2007, p. 190; Burdekin, 2015, p. 154). For an

- account of how the Pepper's Ghost illusion was recreated for the Modi rally, see the section on 3D-holography on Narendra Modi's website (NarendraModi.in, 2012).
- 2 The language of *darshan* reared its head during the campaign for the Uttar Pradesh state elections in 2017 as well, when Narendra Modi's public appearance in the city of Varanasi was termed *janata darshan* (public appearance; see [Srivastava, 2017](#)).
 - 3 Modi himself alluded to this religiosity in the holographic projection on December 10, 2012, when he resorted to mythical tropes to rebut criticism by the rival Congress party. Responding to Congress leaders' comments in which Modi was likened to a monkey and a mouse, Modi reacted by comparing himself to the monkey god Hanuman and to the mouse that is the vehicle of the deity Ganesha ([Singh, 2012](#)).

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