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E-Seminar 52

Abusive exchange on social media: the politics of online Gaali cultures in India

by
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Hello everyone,

I'm so delighted to be able to participate in this discussion with my comments. I'm also looking forward to a lively discussion. Please find my comments below.

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This paper, "*Gaali *Culture in India: The Politics of Abusive Exchange on Social Media" by Sahana Udupa explores the use of insult and abuse on Indian Twitter, often in contexts of religious and political difference. She uses a framework of performance and verbal art to explore this phenomenon as experienced by social media users in Mumbai and Bangalore in 2013 and 2014. The paper specifically looks at abuse as a form of and response to political participation among urban youth, asking what consequences these practices may produce. Udupa suggests that while the use of abusive language may open up new lines of political participation, they also reinstantiate silencing mechanisms of women through masculinist discourses of shame.

My comments focus on three different topics arising from Udupa's paper and relevant to broader discussions of social media. First, Udupa's paper addresses an analytical question taking her subject, not as some monolithic entity known as Twitter, but as a specific, contextually nuanced Indian Twitter, thereby supporting the notion that the importance of social media lies in the ways they are used by individuals in particular situations, rather than how they may prescribe certain types of usage. Second, Udupa suggests the lens of performance to look at social media usage, a

valuable way of thinking through user motivations, while keeping in mind the fact that audience interpretation is essential to any understanding of social media expression. Finally, Udupa's paper addresses a question of who speaks in what contexts/publics, and who is *allowed* to speak. This gives the paper more weight in terms of its application to more general anthropological discussions bridging themes of media with social justice and contestations of power. So, in asking what constitutes social media abuse, and what is its meaning, Udupa expertly interweaves a number of different important themes and debates of contemporary anthropology, making for a lively and fascinating paper.

Udupa begins with an implicit acknowledgement that a study of social media must be centered on content, and not a platform as a whole, taking into account place and context. She provides important information about the nature of Twitter in India and how users generally use the platform, thus providing a background for discussing the particular phenomena of abuse. Further, pointing out that "social media for political debates still constitutes a middle class urban phenomenon with an overrepresentation of privileged class groups" (p. 6) focuses our attention to a specific subset of the population. This specificity contributes to understanding social media use, and issues of voice and silencing which I address later, within relations of power.

While Udupa concedes that the 140 character limit of Twitter may contribute to the rapid and hostile nature of abusive exchanges, ethnographies of Twitter from other contexts remind us this outcome is anything but inevitable. Udupa employs Nick Couldry's (2010) term protoagency (p. 10) to acknowledge the important context of verbal art in politics in India, and this framing might be equally useful in thinking about the choice of Twitter within a Polymedia context, as the space in which abuse takes place. This is indeed a complicated question, not only of what media might provide space for feedback, but also where politics and news are frequently discussed. Thus, we return not just to the technical parameters and affordances of the platform but the ways that individuals use it that are important background to this phenomenon.

Abuse is central to this question of social media usage because it reminds us that new media are perhaps never an entirely positive or negative phenomenon. Udupa expertly contextualizes these abuses within Indian verbal art, particularly in politics, as well as within religious and gender regimes that are important to their understanding. In doing so, she places abuse as an important topic of concern in thinking through the ways that local "culture" remains central to social media use even while so many cautionary accounts suggest that social media represents a globally homogenizing force. Udupa rightly eschews the legal definition of abuse to concentrate on users' own definitions of malicious intent that has an effect on their social media participation (p. 6). Following Irvine (1993), she sees abuse as an interplay of the Internet's structure and the specific local histories and processes that create certain moral expectations and assumptions. Indeed, this pushes us to think about what might constitute the moral geographies of online spaces.

Focusing on what users do in a specific context leads to my second point, highlighting the theorizing of social media use as a kind of performance. Udupa framed her treatment of Twitter abuse as analyzing performance, a framework that allows for questioning what are the intentions and interpretations of these performances, what are the roles of actors and audience, and to what extent are these performances tied to identification.

I was looking forward to an explicit treatment of performance, which seems to dwindle after the literature review section, but the fact that performance serves as theoretical base for this paper, even in implicit terms, advances thinking about what it is people *do* on social media. Thinking about social media use as performance could lead us to deeper and perhaps more broadly applicable

analyses of this online abuse, interrogating the intentions and interpretations of both the abusers and the abused. This might contribute to broader discussions on social media conflict, as well as considerations of the use of performance as political act, such as those related to "disidentifications" (Muñoz 1999).

Performance as a mode of analysis also leads us to what is perhaps the most important aspect of this paper, a classical anthropological question: Who has the right to speak in a particular context and what does this tell us about power relations? Of course, the fact that the paper focuses on social media is not coincidental. With seemingly endless examples of popular media and scholarship suggesting that social media, and Twitter in particular, create new avenues for political engagement and voice for those who are often silenced, Udupa's paper provides an important contribution for thinking about the ways that political repression and silencing may become reestablished even through the media which on the surface seems so revolutionary. And in detailing the small negotiations that users make—blocking users, ignoring them, responding with intentions of productive debate, or simply lashing back—we see not only the "verbal art" that emerges through online abuse, but also the active choices those who are abused must make on a case-by-case basis. These choices are not just about responding to critics, but bring us back to thinking through the valuation that individuals place on making their own voice heard and their choices about the extent of abuse they will endure.

Her example clearly illustrates the ways that implicitly held ideas about who has a right to voice, to presence, etc. are made explicit through the types of abuses (policing) that occur. As she explains, women journalists are primary targets, and the abuses their critics write to them are generally formed on sexual themes: prostitution, the vagina, and illicit sex, and aimed at individuals rather than political arguments. Udupa writes that her goal was not strict linguistic analysis, nor to represent the full range of abusive language used on Indian Twitter, but rather to focus on the contextual factors of the abuse. This is an important goal, but I also wonder if future research might lead her to Critical Discourse Analysis, which takes such context into account, in order to parse out the ways gender and the "right to speak" are intimately connected in this context, as well as the ways shaming associated with sexuality (even when based on entirely untrue occurances) are a particularly powerful approach.

And while myself, seemingly Udupa, and I would guess most readers tend to see the targets of abuse as those who are the sympathetic characters in the story, the paper does not limit us to this view. More subtly, the paper demonstrates the ways that Hindu nationalists may also feel silenced, seeing "paid media" as influential of hegemonic political stances, and understanding their own positioning as subaltern or unheard. From this vantage, we see not a unidirectional policing of "voice" on social media, but instead a negotiation of two groups who are in some sense threatened through silencing by the other.

And on a third level, we see issues of voice in the interplay between India and "The World." If Twitter abuse opens the field of political debate to a broader social sphere (as did tabloid journalism (p. 10), this broadened field may have implications for how Indians envision themselves and their nation. Udupa acknowledges many individuals' use of Twitter may be interpreted as a way to give India as a whole a voice on a global forum where they can assert their country as a global power; to "challenge the gnawing stereotypes of India," as she phrases it (p 16).

What we see then is the complexity the issue of online abuse may represent. From local to international levels, abuse is a form of contestation of social forms, whether they be centuries-old vestiges of colonialism, newly emerging exercises of power, or fall somewhere in the middle.

This paper is an important contribution to thinking about issues central to media anthropology, but also has wider implications for subaltern studies and gender studies that make it equally valuable for a broader audience.

References

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