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#MeTooIndia : Automating hate on social networks in India

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Marine Al Dahdah is a CNRS researcher at the Center for studies of social movements (CEMS-EHESS), and a member of Unit 1276 “Risks, Violence, Reparation” of the French National Health and Medical Research Institut (INSERM). She is currently posted at the French Institute in Pondichéry (India). Her research focuses on health policies in Asia and Africa, and more particularly on digital healthcare in India, Ghana and Kenya. In 2023, Marine Al Dahdah was awarded a bronze medal by CNRS for her work.

Mehdi Arfaoui is a research associate at the Centre for the Study of Social Movements (CEMS) and a sociologist at the CNIL (French Data Protection Authority) Digital Innovation Laboratory (LINC). His work focuses on the modernisation of public action and the appropriation of technological innovations in different spaces and by different social groups.

Marie Chartier is a geopolitics student from IRIS. She joined CEMS in 2021 as an intern as part of her dissertation project. Supervised by Marine Al Dahdah, she analysed the issues at stake in digital social movements in India. Eventually, Marie Chartier hopes to extend her research into the digital politicisation of young people in the Global South.

Abstract:

#MeToo has been studied as an international social movement that offered a model for women’s rights activism. Using a mixed method approach, this article examines #MeTooIndia between 2018 and 2021, through the analysis of 354.496 tweets combined with a media framing analysis of news coverage and qualitative interviews. It discusses the chronology of the movement and assesses the more precise mechanisms by which the participatory and transformative potentials of #MeToo were realized – or not – in the particular case of India. It shows that instead of strengthening victim’s and feminists’ voices, the violence and abuse many women experience on the platform can lead to self-censor and even driving them off X completely; leaving mainly the floor to ‘Meninists’ who think they are victimized by feminism and who use #MeTooIndia to defend their struggle. This specific case study questions the (non) inclusivity of women in the Twittersphere in India and beyond.

Keywords:

MeToo, India, Feminist, sexual harassment, trolling, X/Twitter

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#MeTooIndia : Automating hate on social networks in India

By Marine Al dahdah, Mehdi Arfaoui and Marie Chartier

Introduction

Numerous studies have been conducted on digital activism and the emergence of political counterpowers through social media and the internet (Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017). Taking India as an example, this paper will take a very different angle, focusing on how social media are used to maintain power and exacerbate strategic political polarisation. In India, some scholars talk about 'high-tech populism' to describe the unprecedented use of digital tools by Narendra Modi, the Indian Prime Minister, and his party (Zain, 2019). A new class of political professionals is training e-supporters, trolling opponents and administering apps to conduct propaganda on a massive scale in India. Through the study of the #MeToo movement, this paper proposes to analyse the different techniques of manipulation used to silence the voices of victims of sexual violence and feminists of the #MeTooIndia movement, particularly on X (formerly-Twitter). #MeToo has been studied as an international social movement that offered a model for women's rights activism and opened the way to new narratives. Relying on social media, female victims in their millions have used this specific # to report their experience of sexual abuse to the public from 2017 to the present. Still, social media networks have been proved to be biased demographically toward those who hold the most power. In the Indian context, where only 1% of the population is using X, individuals who have access to this platform tend to be men from privileged classes, castes, and locations. Indeed, for many women around the world, X is a platform where violence and abuse against them flourishes, often with little accountability. Such violence and abuse can have a detrimental effect on their right to express themselves equally, freely and without fear.

This article examines #MeTooIndia and its adoption by different social groups in India. This research uses a mixed method approach relying on a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of the 354.496 #MeTooIndia tweets posted and shared on X between 2018 (start of the MeToo "moment" in India) and 2021, combined with a quantitative and qualitative media framing analysis of news coverage about #MeTooIndia between 2018 and 2021. This paper discusses the origins and the chronology of the MeToo movement in India. It defines different groups organizing this hashtag-led discussion— Media, Victims, Feminists and 'Meninists' - and unpacks their narratives and evolution between 2018 and 2021 on X. It shows that instead of strengthening victim's and feminists' voices, the violence and abuse many women experience on the platform can lead to self-censor and even driving them off X completely; leaving mainly the floor to 'Meninists' who think they are victimized by feminism and who use #MeTooIndia to defend their struggle of being a man in the 21st century. It empirically assesses the more precise trolling mechanisms by which the participatory and transformative potentials of #MeToo were not realized in the case of #MeTooIndia. It questions the (non) inclusivity of women in the Twittersphere in India and beyond. More broadly, it allows us to think afresh about the relationship between access to digital technology, democratisation processes and gender relations.

Social movements, X and #ctivism

Research has been conducted on digital activism and the emergence of political counterpowers through social media around the world (Potts *et al.*, 2014; Xiong, Cho and Boatwright, 2019). Social science works around media feminism (Gill and Scharff, 2013; Harvey, 2019), online feminism and activism (Thrift, 2014; Trott, 2021), and also online harassment (Everbach and

Vickery, 2018; Hackworth, 2018) have emerged recently. According to multiple scholars, X offers an avenue for the formation of global networks of communities. Hashtags in particular (Jackson, Bailey and Welles, 2020), it is claimed, make visible new kinds of social movement activities and commemorations (Merrill and Lindgren, 2020) as shown in the cases of #MeToo (Starkey *et al.*, 2019), #BlackLivesMatter (Jones, 2020), #OccupyWallStreet (Tremayne, 2014) or #OccupyCentral in Hong Kong (Zhu, 2017). In the continuity of these reflections, this paper proposes to focus on the #MeTooIndia hashtag.

- Studying social engagement through # usage on X

X's interface and design encourage users to participate by answering the question "What's happening?" in 280 characters or less. X can be used for a range of communicative purposes. Social scientists have defined three key layers of communication on X: "the micro level of interpersonal communication, the meso level of follower-followee networks, and the macro level of hashtag-based exchanges"(Bruns and Moe, 2014, p. 55). In this paper we will focus on hashtag-based content, but we will be attentive to their interconnections with micro- and meso-level exchanges as well.

Including a hashtag in one's tweets signals a wish to take part in a wider communicative process, making X a platform where inputs tend to immediately be perceived and registered as a contribution to public debate. Hashtags can aid the rapid assembly of ad hoc issue publics, especially in response to breaking news or any sudden developments (Burgess and Bruns, 2020). The inclusion of a topical hashtag in a tweet thus means that the message has the potential to reach well beyond the user's existing group of followers.

Research work has demonstrated how X users mobilize hashtags to respond almost instantly to natural disasters (Bruns *et al.*, 2012), or political unrest (Procter, Vis and Voss, 2013), how, around some long-standing hashtags, genuine communities of regular participants can form and evolve (Lindgren, 2013), how hashtag activities operate alongside the mainstream media coverage (Larsson, 2017) and sometimes even outperforms conventional mass media (Enli and Simonsen, 2018).

- #MeToo has brought together women from all over the world

MeToo started out in 2006 as a grassroots initiative for minorities, launched by Tarana Burke, a social worker from the Bronx, based on two words that victims of sexual violence can exchange to show that they are not alone. In 2017, the accusations against Harvey Weinstein, the former Hollywood magnate, made the MeToo campaign a global phenomenon. On 15 October 2017, actress Alyssa Milano tweeted an appeal to victims of harassment, sexual assault and rape to speak out using the hashtag #MeToo to give the public a sense of the scale of the problem. While the use of #MeToo began in the USA, it spread very rapidly to other countries as a tool for giving greater exposure to sexual harassment and bringing social change (Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2019). Some cases proved particularly striking in the global MeToo campaign. In Costa Rica, #MeToo exposed the actions of Oscar Arias, Nobel Peace Prize winner and twice president, showing that no-one is beyond the reach of this transnational wave of denunciation. For several scholars, the movement was not a sudden revolution but a catalyst for pre-existing and long-lasting feminist struggles within the societies it touches (John, 2020). Some however consider that the movement has moved away from its origins, by focusing on the perpetrators of sexual violence, and not focusing enough on minorities, who are less visible than movie stars (Nanditha, 2021). If at first sight the movement seems homogeneous, the temporalities and participants are very diverse and need to be highlighted and analyzed more closely. Some studies tried to map the movement across countries, political spectrum and

platforms (Rho, Mark and Mazmanian, 2018; Quan-Haase *et al.*, 2021), others tried to isolate and compare local differences (Mendes, Ringrose and Keller, 2018; Lopez, Muldoon and McKeown, 2019a). Local translations of #MeToo can be emblematic of such disparities: in France “#BalanceTonPorc”, which can be translated as “Expose your pig” was often described as very aggressive and controversial compared to the more neutral “#Quellavoltache” (“That time when”) in Italy. It is clear from multiple international comparisons, that women’s concerns and demands behind #MeToo are not the same from one country to another and that the movement has allowed women to speak out with varying degrees of spontaneity (De Benedictis, Orgad and Rottenberg, 2019; Oleszczuk, 2020).

#MeTooIndia: context and method of analysis

Only one-third of Indian citizens are exposed to social media. A large part of social media activity is found to be driven by smartphones, whose ownership has gone up from one-fourth to one-third of the population in the last two years. Smartphone ownership is still twice as high in big cities than villages, and much higher among upper than lower castes and among men than women. As a consequence, “upper castes are twice as likely to have high or moderate exposure to social media as Dalits and tribals [...] the college-educated, young, urban and male voters continue to be dominant in the social media space” (CSDS, 2019, p. 6). X plays a particular role in this landscape and has been seen as a very strategic lever of political commitment in India in recent years.

▪ Contextualizing X in India

X’s penetration in India is rather weak, only 15 million users¹. That is still a fifth of the X base in the United States and just 1% of the Indian population. In comparison, Facebook has 410 million, while WhatsApp and YouTube have around half a billion users in India. Yet, these numbers hardly convey the impact that X has on public conversation in India, where powerful political organizations are gaining further advantage through their use of social media. Some even speak of “high-tech populism” (Zain, 2019) to describe the unprecedented use of social media by Narendra Modi, India’s Prime Minister. Despite being the head of a still relatively unconnected country, he is nonetheless the world’s most-followed politician on Instagram, Facebook and X.² Thus, India is an interesting illustration of how social media can be used to maintain those in power and to exacerbate strategic political polarization.

It has been said that the rise of the ruling party (BJP) in 2014 was partly driven by activity on X, which then trickled out to larger audiences through the regular news media.³ The BJP’s presence on the platform has been acknowledged and criticized. Several journalists and scholars even accused the BJP “IT Cell” of using trolls and running coordinated attacks in an effort to dominate narratives about India on social media (Mirchandani, 2018). In January 2021, X suspended Trump’s account, leaving Modi to become X’s almighty politician. From the pandemic to international relations, government policy is often announced first on X (Rodrigues and Niemann, 2019). Even if the platform’s reach in India is small, it is critical for political communication and the government has been trying to control it for years.⁴

¹ <https://www.indiatoday.in/technology/news/story/government-reveals-stats-on-social-media-users-whatsapp-leads-while-youtube-beats-facebook-instagram-1773021-2021-02-25>

² Modi was just behind Trump on Twitter before the former US president’s account was closed.

³ <https://www.thehindu.com/data/how-twitter-helped-create-brand-modi/article8321800.ece>

⁴ By Sameer Yasir and Emily Schmall. “India Signals Its Irritation With Twitter”. *The New York Times*, May 26, 2021.

In February 2021, India's government announced a new set of rules for social media platforms,⁵ stipulating that social media platform needed to censor speech as per a vague and expanded array of definitions, to base a compliance team in India, and to take down content within 36 hours of being ordered to do so. Consequently, it demanded that X delete hundreds of accounts featuring criticism of the state in connection with the large-scale farmer protests that had been running since November 2020. The social network complied after its local employees were threatened with prison terms.⁶ The platform has been caught up in highly political turmoil that it was probably not expecting, given its feeble presence in Indian households. Indeed, the X user population in India has been described as highly political and elitist, led by urban, educated, affluent males who are trying to maintain their dominant position through social media activities and engagements; characteristics that were to have an important impact on how #MeToo was received in India, and how it would evolve into #MeTooIndia (Mishra, 2020; Pain, 2021).

- Methodological choices for analyzing #MeTooIndia

Our investigation relies on a comparative analysis between the content collected on X and the content produced by traditional Indian media outlets.

The X collection, to begin with, covers a 3.5-year period, running from October 16, 2017, to April 19, 2021. We collected all tweets posted during this period that contained the expression “#MeTooIndia” (regardless of case sensitivity, thus also including for example “#metooindia”). To do so, we used Python scripts,⁷ with Postman software as a facilitator,⁸ to connect to X's official application programming interface (API).⁹ Our database contains a list of tweets (including retweets and conversational mentions) published during the period, a body of metadata (publication dates, unique tweet identifiers), as well as data concerning the user who posted it. In total, data and metadata on 353,025 tweets, retweets or mentions were collected – including 63,529 tweets, 271,143 retweets and 18,352 mentions, from 103,668 different users.

Our methodology for the analysis followed several steps. We first used the time stamp of the tweets to build a chronological distribution. We then had to reduce the sample to qualitatively analyse the tweets. Using only a fraction of the tweets still allowed us to grasp a important part of the controversy and its main actors, as our user based appeared unevenly active in producing tweet associated with #MeTooIndia. Indeed, we will see that 13 users are responsible for 10% of all tweets and mentions (7,500), 159 users are responsible for 25% (20,000), and 1,480 for 50% (40,000). Meanwhile, 50% of the remaining tweets and mentions (40,500) were published by about 25,000 different users, having used this hashtag only 1.6 times on average.

To sample our database, we combined different strategies: we isolated the 100 most active users, the most retweeted tweets (100 RT and more, representing 345 tweets), the links shared in the most retweeted tweets (representing 40 links) and the most popular hashtags (70 appearances and more, representing 117 hashtags) used with #MeTooIndia. This allowed us to manually code the sample from the content of the tweets and the profile descriptions, and notably identify categories of users among our sample. Going back and forth between our categories and the sample, we ended up with 4 main categories (“Victim”, “Feminist”,

⁵ Called the Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code, see the Internet Freedom Foundation article on Scroll.in: <https://scroll.in/article/988105/explainer-how-indias-new-digital-media-rules-are-anti-democratic-and-unconstitutional>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/10/technology/india-twitter.html/>

⁷ Python is a programming language.

⁸ <https://www.postman.com/>

⁹ We were granted access to Twitter's API through their special academic research product track.

“Meninists” and “Media”) which could be assigned to 95 of the 100 most active accounts (5 accounts had ambiguous or contradictory position). When it was relevant, the main category was complemented with sub-categories (“Activist”, “Politician”, “Lawyer”, etc.). Looking at which categories of users mostly mobilized a hashtag or shared a link also helped us categorizing hashtags and links themselves. We then produced a series of statistical descriptions and graphs (see below) based on these categories, allowing us apprehend the evolution of position – presence and absence – of different types of actors along. The methodology allowed us to show an interesting shift in the typology of active users, as detailed in the last section of the paper.

Studying a specific hashtag as a starting point to extract a specific corpus does not limit the research to social media dynamics only. Conducting a press analysis also appeared necessary to understand how contents circulate (or not) between traditional media outlet and social media. To do so, we first looked at the international press coverage of MeToo in India, by searching the Factiva and Europresse databases with the keywords “MeToo” and “India”, yielding a corpus of approximately 2,600 articles from between 2018 and 2021. We then refined the corpus by filtering on the Indian press only to have a more precise analysis of events and to be able to build a timeline in parallel with our X corpus. Three different corpora were developed to study the English-speaking Indian press. From Europresse, which references mainstream national press media, 303 articles matched the keyword MeTooIndia over the studied period. We also needed to access the regional treatment of MeTooIndia. The Factiva database, which relays regional and local media from India, enabled us to identify 312 articles, despite many duplications. Comparison of these two databases allowed us to verify the temporality and check it against our X data. Peaks of activity can be found in all the databases. We also carried out a press review based on three Indian pure-player news sites (The Wire, Scroll In, India Today), which gathered 106 articles on MeTooIndia from between 2018 and 2021. We cross-referenced all these press databases in order to establish an accurate chronology, but also to understand the mass media-X dynamics of #MeTooIndia. This mix-method approach and the analysis of the exhaustive corpus of all #MetooIndia tweets posted over this period of time is a premier.

The chronology of #MeTooIndia between 2018 and 2021

Similar to Alyssa Milano’s popularization of the MeToo movement, India’s plight became increasingly publicized in 2018, when Tanushree Dutta, an Indian actress, alleged that her co-star, Nana Patekar had sexually harassed her in 2009. At first sight, one might think #MeTooIndia started with a Bollywood case. Dutta’s public stance was highly publicized, with both press and tweets corpora pointing to the actress’ declarations in 2018 as a starting point. However, thanks to our interviews with several researchers and activists, we discovered that #MeToo emerged in India before Dutta’s case, and a long way from Bollywood.

▪ Once upon a time in Bollywood?

For Pallavi Guha,¹⁰ the LoSHA list, which targeted academics and universities was a precursor event to the rise of #MeToo in India. LoSHA (List of Sexual Harassers in Academia) was a crowdsourced list of sexual harassers that was compiled in 2017 by Raya Sarkar, a law student at UC Davis School of Law. Published on her Facebook page, this document listed academics who abused their students or who adopted inappropriate behaviors towards women in Indian universities. For Jean-Thomas Martelli,¹¹ the publication of this list caused a certain split among

¹⁰ Interview with Pallavi Guha on July 2, 2021.

¹¹ Interview with Jean-Thomas Martelli on February 4, 2021.

feminists. While young activists used social networks to relay such lists, and as a space for denunciation and action, traditional (upper-caste) feminists denounced this “blame and shame” method as unacceptable (Rao, 2018). Indeed, fourteen notable feminists published a statement expressing dismay over the list, saying that this “can delegitimize the long struggle against sexual harassment, and make our task as feminists more difficult”.¹² While the LoSHA list had no long-lasting visible impact, it has been cited as marking the start of the #MeToo movement in India.

As stated earlier, in India the advent of #MeTooIndia triggered the movie industry. Actress Tanushree Dutta has been the voice of #MeTooIndia, testifying about the omertà surrounding sexual harassment in Bollywood, the lack of support from doctors despite plentiful medical evidence, and the willful blindness of the police. Her lawyer Nitin Satpute spoke to the press about the difficulties they have had in being heard by the police, who accused them of spreading rumors about a public figure. This argument of wanting to “spread rumors”, to “damage the reputation” or to “take advantage of the situation” was used extensively against Dutta’s statements. Dutta denounced the hypocrisy and corporatism within the artistic community in India. When she had been attacked in 2008, she had warned her superiors, filed a complaint and written to the Cine & TV Artist Welfare Association.

Although she had no support in 2008, ten years later her speaking out encouraged other victims to come forward. This was made possible by massive press coverage in the wake of the globalized MeToo movement. Dutta was presented as a strong, iconic woman, carrying the MeToo struggle forward to India, coverage that drew several criticisms alleging that her testimony was over-represented in the media and reflected a search for sensationalism as well as the contagious transfer of a social movement from Hollywood to Bollywood. Dutta's accusation against Nana Patekar prompted other actresses to speak out, and Bollywood saw various key personalities accused of sexual assault or inappropriate behavior. According to the X and Press corpora, the two cases most widely reported and commented upon were those of Sajid Khan in 2018 and of Anurag Kashyap in 2020.

The Sajid Khan case was one of the most publicized #MeTooIndia cases, particularly as there were concrete repercussions for the accused. As a result of the #MeToo allegations, the film director Sajid Khan was suspended from the Indian Film and Television Directors' Association (IDTDA). This suspension was enforced under the PoSH (prevention of sexual harassment) Act, the law against harassment at work. This wave of denunciation affected the entire cultural industry, as reflected in certain positions taken, notably during the Kochi festival in 2018 or at the Goa literature festival in 2019, where the journalist Priya Ramani was the guest of honor and testified to her own harassment story, against a sitting minister: M.J. Akbar.

- The Akbar case and the political turn of MeTooIndia

Priya Ramani is a journalist, and the second hyper-publicized #MeTooIndia victim after Dutta. Following her accusation, Akbar had to resign from his post as a serving (BJP) minister, and retaliated by filing a defamation suit against Ramani. But the allegations kept coming, and 20 women journalists said they were ready to testify against the editor-turned-politician in court. A two-year defamation trial followed. Ramani's use of X has been at the center stage of this headline case. In February 2021, Akbar lost his defamation case. The Akbar-Ramani case is the

¹² Menon, N. (2017, October 24). Statement by feminists on Facebook campaign to “name and shame.” Retrieved from <https://kafila.online/2017/10/24/statement-by-feminists-on-facebook-campaign-to-name-and-shame/>

most prominent case in all our corpora, and accounts for more than 60% of our X content database.

At the Goa literature festival, Ramani claimed the right to “name and shame” and urged women to follow her lead, despite the burden of social norms and guilt. For her, #MeToo is the latest response to rape culture and the #MeTooIndia movement has put pressure on women’s work standards, as well as on the laws that govern them. The resignation of this minister is seen as the #MeTooIndia movement’s biggest victory. The Akbar case embodies various characteristics of the MeToo movement in India. First, it is an elitist battle: a resourceful journalist fighting against a powerful minister. Secondly, the time frame of the case set the pace for #MeTooIndia. It is because of this case that there is a sustained follow-up and not a complete fading-away of this # for three years.

In our X dataset, aside from the Akbar case, in September 2020 there was a second important spike in activity around #MeToo: the Anurag Kashyap case. Although its presence is less overwhelming than for the Akbar case, there are at least 30 articles dedicated to the subject in both of our Indian Press databases and it represents 6% of the X database content. Contrary to the Dutta-Patekar case, where the female accuser was on center stage, the media did not give as much space to the plaintiff (actress Payal Ghosh), and the support for the accused (filmmaker Anurag Kashyap) coming from public personalities, and from Bollywood and the cultural industry, was massive. In particular from women, who defended Kashyap and encouraged him publicly to fight Ghosh’s allegations. One of the key differences with the other described cases is the vehemence with which people pushed back against the accuser. When Ghosh accused Kashyap on X she mentioned @NarendraModi to attract the attention of the Prime Minister’s team on this matter, and created a huge tweet spike because of this political name-drop. Kashyap immediately replied on X and declared that her accusations were unfounded. Ghosh consequently criticized the #MeToo movement, as she did not receive the massive support she expected, while Kashyap was publicly supported on X by anonymous people as well as many film industry professionals – especially by famous women, from his ex-wives to female colleagues who worked on his movies, with many actresses describing Kashyap as a “feminist”.

Mobilization and engagement dynamics of #MeTooIndia

Our study shows that there was a MeToo “moment” in India which boomed in 2018, then rapidly declined, becoming very minimal nowadays. On X, this period spans more than two years, with two key moments: October 2018, with the indictment of the Minister M.J. Akbar, and September 2020, with the accusation against the filmmaker A. Kashyap. We performed a qualitative analysis of the most retweeted tweets, the most used hashtags and the most posted links and we studied in depth the top users in terms of original tweets (over 100) and the top hashtag users in terms of tweets and retweets (over 35,000). We categorized our top “original tweet” users into four groups: Media, Victim, Feminist and Meninist. The Media category stands for the official X accounts of Indian news outlets. The Victim category stands for accounts that relayed individual stories of sexual abuse.¹³ The Feminist category stands for accounts that explicitly state that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way.¹⁴ The Meninist category stands for accounts that explicitly state that men are victimized by feminism and that men’s rights need to

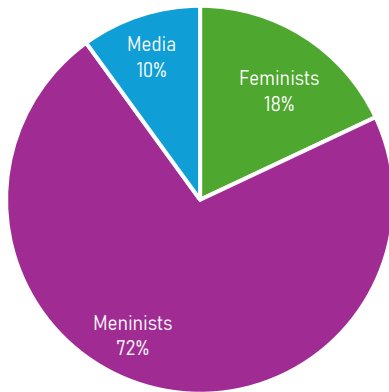
¹³ Example of one of the most retweeted messages from a Victim user account: “I finally decided to share my story with you. Writing this was like re-living all that horrible past I’d chosen to let go of, but I knew if I don’t today, I may never. So here’s #metoo #MetooIndia <https://t.co/brouTYIBC7>”

¹⁴ Examples of one of the most retweeted messages from Feminist user accounts: “Since many men and women alike are not able to understand “CONSENT”. here is it for you, as simple as a cup of tea!#MeToo #MeTooIndia <https://t.co/MyjFhaVL8q>”

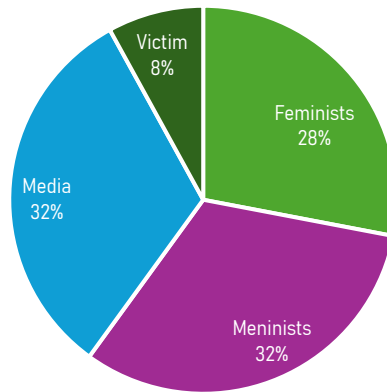
be defended.¹⁵ We did not apply the same categories to the top retweeting users, on the grounds that retweets are not always proof of endorsement. However, we decided to position these users either as Media accounts, or in favor (Pro) or against (Anti) the MeToo movement, according to the analysis of their retweet output. As we wanted to analyze how the tone of the #MeTooIndia campaign evolved on X over time, we first did a broad analysis of the campaign between 2018 and 2021, then compared the two major activity peaks of October 2018 and September 2020 (see the visualisations below).

¹⁵ Examples of one of the most retweeted messages from Meninist user accounts: “#MenToo #ABLANARI #FakeCases #NirupaRoy #toxicFeminism #FEMINAZI #GenderBiasedLaws #womenempowerment #LegalTerrorism #LegalExtortion #CrimeByWomen #CrimeHasNoGender #GenderEquality #Golddigger #FraudWatch #Metooindia @unwomenindia @UNWomenWatch @UNWatch @UNHumanRights @NCWIndia <https://t.co/VEY2wOMEGg>”

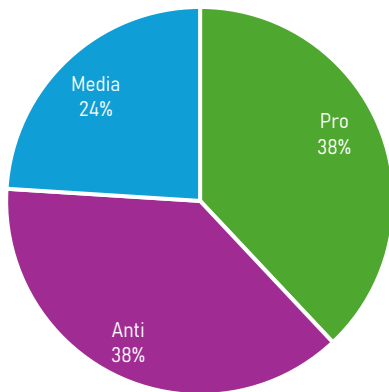
Top Users (Tweets and retweets)
2017/2021



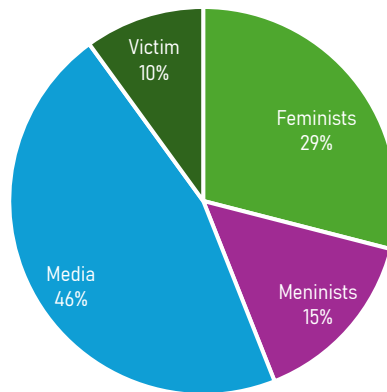
Top Users (Tweets only)
2017/2021



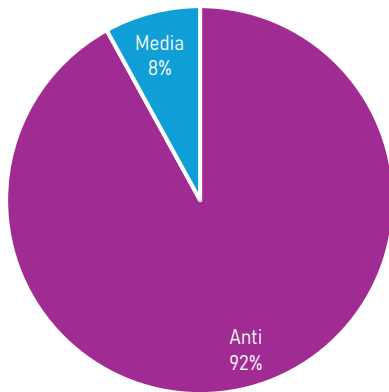
Top Users (Tweets and retweets)
October 2018



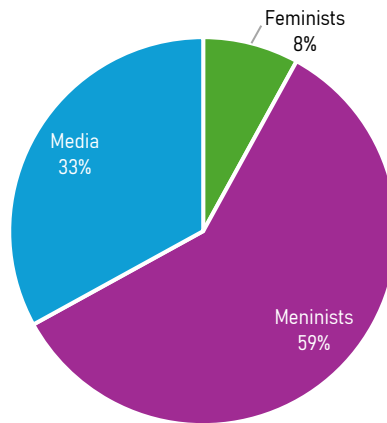
Top Users (Tweets only)
October 2018



Top Users (Tweets and retweets)
September 2020



Top Users (Tweets only)
September 2020



Short description: The graphs compare the proportion of tweet and retweets by different groups of users: Medias, Victims, Feminists (or Pro #MeToo) and Meninists (or Anti #MeToo).

Long description: The 6 graphs compare the proportion of tweet and retweets by different groups of users: Medias, Victims, Feminists (or Pro #MeToo) and Meninists (or Anti #MeToo). 3 of the 6 graphs are based only the “original tweet” only to show the distribution between four groups of users: Media, Victim, Feminist and Meninist. The 3 other graphs are based on tweets and retweets, which implied to not apply the same categories as retweets are not always proof of endorsement. They show a distribution between in favor (Pro) or against (Anti) the MeToo movement, and Media accounts. The graphs first broadly show the distribution between 2018 and 2021 based on original tweets only as well as on tweets and retweets, then compared the two major activity peaks of October 2018 and September 2020 based on original tweets only as well as on tweets and retweets.

The data points for each graph are as follows:

- Top Users (in tweets and retweets) from 2017 to 2021. Pro #MeToo, 18%. Anti #MeToo, 72%. Media, 10%.
- Top Users (in tweets only) from 2017 to 2021. Feminist, 28%. Meninist, 32%. Media, 32%. Victim, 8%.
- Top Users (in tweets and retweets) in October 2018. Pro #MeToo, 38%. Anti #MeToo, 32%. Media, 24%.
- Top Users (in tweets only) in October 2018. Feminist, 29%. Meninist, 15%. Media, 46%. Victim, 10%.
- Top Users (in tweets and retweets) in September 2020. Pro #MeToo, 38%. Anti #MeToo, 32%. Media, 24%.
- Top Users (in tweets only) in September 2020. Feminist, 8%. Meninist, 59%. Media, 33%. Victim, 0%.

Our findings show that, if at first sight the #MeTooIndia movement seems to convey the voices of sexual harassment victims as well as feminists, the violence and abuse many women experience on the platform can lead them to self-censor and may even drive them off X, leaving the floor open to antagonistic groups – in our case “Meninist” groups representing themselves as victims of feminism. In this last part of the article, we seek to substantiate three results: acknowledging the strong presence of antagonistic voices in #MeTooIndia; describing the trolling strategies of anti-MeToo users; and understanding what happened to feminists’ and victims’ voices.

▪ Antagonistic discourses, trolling and violence

For many women around the world, X has been identified as a platform where violence and abuse against them flourishes, often with little accountability (Lopez, Muldoon and McKeown, 2019b). Indeed, the relative anonymity of some forms of social media interaction makes people less likely to self-censor, and to instead express mean, categorical, or hateful comments (Suler, 2004). This has been particularly acknowledged in the case of India where hateful speech has been a constant driver of social media usage (Mirchandani, 2018). According to this logic, campaigns such as #MeToo risk triggering eruptions of sexism and antifeminism. However, in most research on #MeToo, such discourses remained marginal and did not constitute the

majority of content and discussion around #MeToo, even in the case of #Balancetonporc in France (Méadel, 2021), which has been described as one of the most polarizing translations of #MeToo.

In India, the #MeToo debate rapidly brought out antagonisms between #MeToo advocates and their counterparts from the beginning of the movement in 2018 onwards. For example, Anti-MeToo users argued that #MeToo supporters were overreacting and were just seeking attention, or that they seemed to wrongfully target all men as violators, whereas men can be victims too. #MeToo activists retorted by stating, among other things, that their Anti-MeToo critics were hijacking the hashtag to provoke and blame victims. The discursive pattern is therefore highly polarized and antagonistic, tipping heavily toward negativity and aggressiveness. Antagonism, from one perspective, is important for the struggle against inequality and for deepening any democratic debate. But contradictions can also make mobilization more difficult and may even nip it in the bud (Benford and Snow, 2000).

Between 2018 and 2021, we can see on our X corpus that the majority (72%) of our top users¹⁶ are openly against the MeToo movement. And this tendency is particularly striking if we focus on our two major peaks of activity. In October 2018, the distribution of top users is more balanced, with Anti- and Pro-MeToo users being equivalent in proportion (38%), which already reflects the very high proportion of Anti-MeToo users in the corpus. In September 2020, during our second significant peak, Pro-MeToo users completely disappeared from the top users, leaving the floor to an overwhelming majority of Anti-MeToo users.

In addition to the obviously antagonistic forms, we identified a major pattern contributing to the significant share of Anti-MeToo discussions in the #MeTooIndia corpus: retweet-only accounts and trolling strategies. We sought to assess the level at which users of #MeTooIndia engage and express themselves by looking at the proportion of tweets that were simply echoed (i.e., retweeted), compared with how often users made the additional effort to craft replies or original tweets. Indeed, a retweet may represent a lower degree of engagement than do mentions and replies. Retweets are the result of clicks, not of creating original content. It has been demonstrated that #MeToo displayed a much higher degree of participation and interactivity than normal run-of-the-mill tweeting, with a proportion of retweets of less than 3%, when random samples of X would show retweets at almost 50% (Lindgren, 2019), showing that the majority of the content was original or customized content, rather than a simple recirculation of messages for #MeToo. In our #MeTooIndia database, 60% of the content consists purely of retweets, and our analysis shows that half of the top 50 active users never published a single original tweet about #MeTooIndia – all of these top “retweeting-only” accounts relayed Anti-MeToo messages.

In the case of #MeTooIndia, the X platform above all enabled inward unity among Anti-MeToo users, with very high re-circulation rates of very few original messages, creating a massive presence of antagonizing forces and messages against the #MeToo campaign. Our major result is that antagonism in the form of sexist and antifeminist speech and trolling clearly found their way into the #MeTooIndia discourse, becoming rapidly dominant. While feminists’ and victims’ accounts and tweets were visible in October 2018, they almost completely disappeared from the X database in September 2020. This overwhelming dominance of Anti-MeToo users brings into question the suitability of the X platform for building #MeToo movement mobilization in India, but simultaneously shows the ability of offline unequal power relations to replicate themselves online.

¹⁶ We are talking here about the top users in numbers of their tweet and retweet count.

- Accounting for the fading voices of #MeTooIndia victims and feminists

Several activists we interviewed shared their frustration with us about #MeTooIndia. They pointed at a growing lassitude among activists due to the discredited procedures for bringing sexual predators to court. This widespread disappointment among pro-MeToo campaigners is a result that lies outside the scope of this paper, coming from our qualitative interviews and not from X accounts or uses. We can describe three findings, based on X activities, that might account for the weakening of victims' and feminists' voices around #MeTooIndia.

In our survey, all of the X users identified as victims of sexual assault refused to be interviewed. Most of them told us that they were actually boycotting #MeToo as they received too many threats through it. Most Anti-MeToo accounts are not just automated trolls in India; they are run by real people, who put in place a sophisticated strategy in which the most active accounts are all retweeting each other. Of the top 50 most active accounts, half make use of such trolling practices. They therefore pollute the Twittersphere and relay ultra-virulent messages against victims and feminists, who quickly realized that X was not a peaceful space for them. Due to its pseudo-anonymity, the Twittersphere is often presented as a space for free expression. However, it is also obvious from our study that it is very easy to silence someone on social networks. This may therefore offer a first explanation of why several of our feminists' and victims' voices vanished in 2020.

During our survey, one of our interviewees told us that she thought X had deliberately tried to block her messages and deleted her account because she was actively relaying messages that were against the dominant patriarchal pattern of X. Such an allegation is not verifiable, but in the past months on X in India a body of corroborating evidence points to the growing deletion of activists' accounts. Such accusations of censorship have been a common complaint made by X users across the political spectrum. Another hypothetical result is that several feminist X accounts are reported to have been censored starting in 2020 due to the new forms of control exercised by the BJP and the Government of India on the social media platform.

Another result of our study is that rather than being confined to X, #MeToo spread and moved across platforms. In an increasingly complex digital media landscape, it is reasonable to assume that people and contents circulate across media. Indeed, several of our feminist interviewees point to closed Facebook groups as a safer place for conversation than X. This rise in closed Facebook group activity for #MeToo – in many cases not accepting men as members – has been identified in other studies (Lindgren, 2019). This pattern has several possible interpretations. It may be that the issue of #MeToo, due to its nature, demands an element of autonomy and privacy that X does not allow for, thus creating a need to mobilize both privately and publicly. Or perhaps it indicates, less encouragingly, that #MeToo had its moment in the limelight, and that the form of contention it represents has been driven back into less public domains. This at least tells us that significant knowledge about digital movements will be missed by looking at single platforms.

A further result from our interviews ascribes the weakening of the online movement to the multiple fractures of feminism appearing alongside the use of #MeToo in India. We have already discussed the public disagreement among feminists around the LoSHA list. On X, two accounts – @TheRestlessQuil and @MassalaBai (run respectively by Sandhya Menon and Rituparna Chatterjee) – played a determining role in shaping the X Pro-MeToo campaign. Menon identifies herself on X as a journalist and a feminist, Chatterjee as a feminist and gender equality activist. Chatterjee is also the editor of the @IndiaMeToo account – one of the most

followed accounts in our database. Both were encouraging women to come forward, in order to gather complaints and present them to The National Commission for Women. This initiative was weakened by the fact that it was not followed up by the Commission, but also because Menon was accused of using #MeTooIndia to gather financial support for her own benefit.

Finally, these two women, along with Priya Ramani, are upper-caste journalists. The majority of women who have denounced abuses on X are intellectuals, journalists, artists or actresses. The accounts that have been the most widely federated, relayed or supported are those of prominent and well-connected public figures. This elitist stand may also be a reason for a perceived discrepancy in the #MeTooIndia movement, which has been accused of helping powerful women to gain more power, leaving the vast majority of abused women in the dark. Several tweets denounce the invisibility mechanisms reinforced by #MeTooIndia. Similar denunciations were also reported in the USA around the under-representation of Black and Latina women (Leung and Williams, 2019). In India, this result is of course correlated by the considerably lower usage of X by Dalit, tribal, less-educated and non-urban Indians. Age, caste, economic, educational and geographic backgrounds were very clear dividing lines that gave rise to growing disagreements among feminists and affected the robustness of the online mobilisation.

Conclusion

This article set out to present our methodology and results when observing the adoption of the hashtag MeTooIndia. By leveraging an online and offline, quantitative and qualitative analysis of content and networks, we were able to detail the mobilization and engagement dynamics of the #MeTooIndia phenomenon. We showed that contemporary research has invested the platform's data and metadata to observe the formation of political events and social movements. We showed that even if the #MeTooIndia movement that took place on X initially seemed to pave the way for emancipatory and feminist voices, the anti-MeToo voices rapidly constituted themselves as a reactionary and dominant voice on the platform. The last section of the article attempted to provide the reader with some preliminary hypotheses to explain this shift: local trolling strategies; censorship, as well as more structural mechanisms of exclusion; or disputes within the movement.

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