

Twitter's Reaction to BBC's #TheModiQuestion

Network Analysis, Text Analysis, Polarization, Cultural Dynamics, Twitter

Extended Abstract

In January 2023, the BBC released a two-part documentary called 'India: The Modi Question', wherein they traced the political beginnings of the current Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi. This sparked a controversy on social media, since the documentary was banned in India five days after its release. Further, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry of India, using emergency laws, asked Twitter to take down tweets related to the documentary to which Twitter complied (Prasanna, 2023). The ban of the documentary and the extended censorship on Twitter further strengthened the argument on the risk of vanishing free press in India (The New York Times Editorial Board, 2023).

We are interested in understanding the tight-knit online communities which formed on Twitter after the release of the documentary. We collected 204,740 tweets with the hashtag "#BBC Documentary" OR "#TheModiQuestion" using the Twitter Explorer (Pournaki 2020) between Jan. 23rd and Feb. 7th of 2023. We then transform the data into a retweet network, in which nodes are users and a directed link is drawn from user i to j if i retweets j . Spatialising the network using a force-directed layout algorithm (see Fig. 1), we observe two opposing clusters: for vs against the documentary, and by extension, supporters or critics of Modi. We identify strongly connected communities in the network using the Louvain algorithm (Blondel 2008), which allows us to further investigate the composition of the opposing opinion groups. We observe geographically related communities, such as Indian Muslim diasporas (Indian Muslims in USA, UK etc), other regional communities writing in the Hindi Devanagari script or the Tamil script, which include supporters from the regional opposition parties, along with critics of not only Narendra Modi but also Gautam Adani, who was in the news recently for "brazen stock manipulation and accounting fraud scheme" and his old and strong friendship with the PM. On the opposing side of the network, we see the pro-Modi cluster which is against the documentary, calling it "propaganda" and referring to the BBC as 'Hinduphobic'. Related to this community on the right are smaller regional communities who are supporters of the BJP and of Hindu majoritarianism. The mediators tying together these communities are news channels, with centre to centre-right leanings, such as The Times of India, which are retweeted by both camps.

After getting an overview of the opposing poles of the controversy, we use the clustering of the retweet network to classify the tweets into pro and contra, which allows us to systematically compare the vocabulary used by each camp to depict the documentary. Using a simple comparison of word frequencies (Kessler 2017) we observe that the terms more frequently used by those against the documentary are 'propaganda', 'Hindu' and 'trust'; wherein people referred to the BBC Documentary as propaganda and showed support for championing Hindutva. Trust, in this context, is used for trust for the government for example, "As an #Indian, I have more trust on #Modi than #BBCDocumentary..."

On the other hand, the supporters of the BBC Documentary used terms such as 'Gujarat2002', 'truth', 'violence', 'detained', 'Adani', highlighting the failings of Modi's political career and showcasing the importance of the documentary in opening the eyes of the public to the 'truth'.

What is particularly interesting to analyse in such a context is the term ‘media’ as it is used in opposing fashion by both the factions. Those in support of the documentary refer to the idea of free media and importance of having autonomy of media, one not influenced by the government. This can be witnessed through the following tweet: “Since #Modi came to power, we have watched with frustration and disappointment as his government time and time again has suppressed the right of its citizens to a free and independent news media. #BBCDocumentary #PressFreedom @PressClubDC”

However, those against the documentary, look at the media as influenced by the ‘west’ or funded by China. For instance, “That western Media & Fake Documentary Makers like #BBC would never disclose...” or “#LIVE | BBC taking funds from Chinese firm, UK media publication claims. #BBCDocumentary #BBCDocumentaryRow Tune in to watch -”.

So far, we have analyzed the retweet network statically. Going forward we shall examine the dynamical evolution and growth of the observed communities. Furthermore, the dataset at hand allows insights into a strongly polarized debate, with different opinion leaders fighting for the attention and the influencing capacity of the social network. We wish to explore this aspect further by examining more closely the usage and contextualization of concepts such as trust in institutions, truth and propaganda, that are employed by the actors in the different clusters in order to convince others of their opinion. This will allow more general insights into the dynamics of controversies on social media.

References

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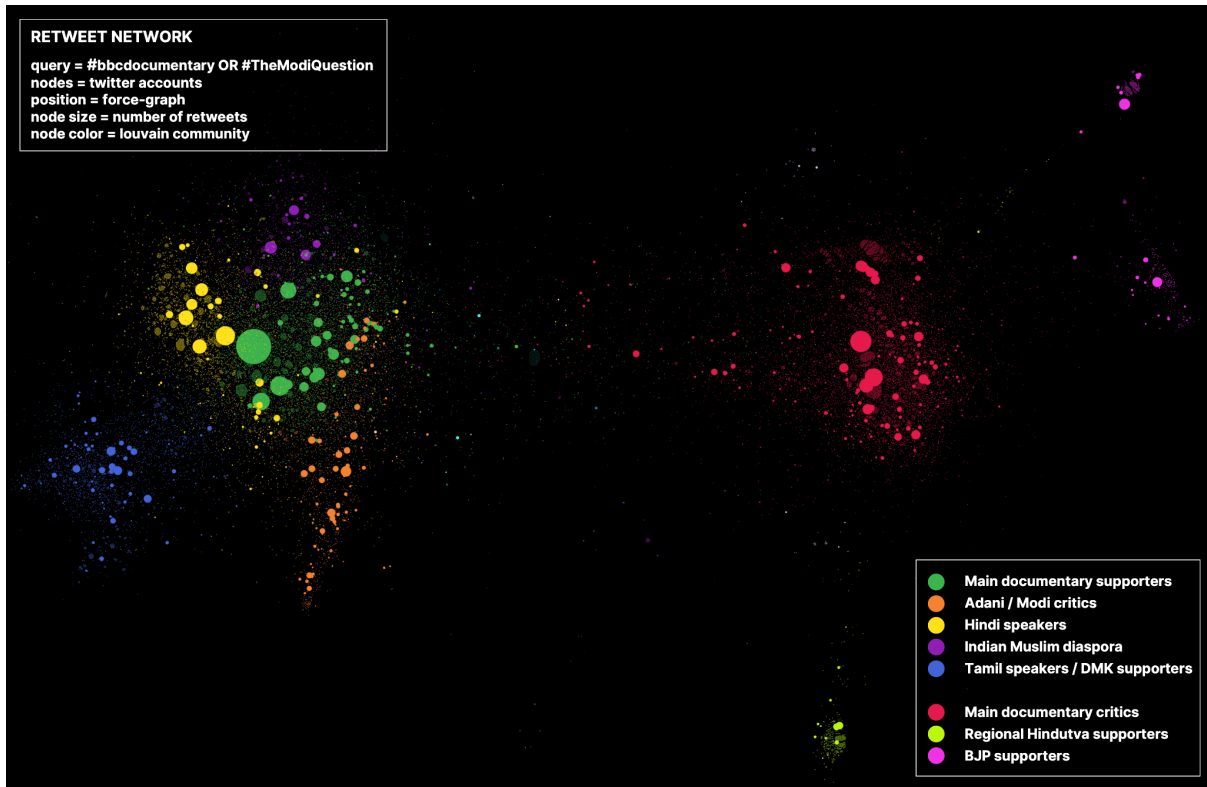


Figure 1: Network of retweet interactions based on tweets containing the query “#bbcdocumentary or #TheModiQuestion”. Every node is a user and a directed link is drawn from user i to j if i retweets j . The node size is proportional to the number of times the account was retweeted in the dataset. The nodes are spatialised using a force-directed layout algorithm which places nodes closer to each other if they retweet each other. Since retweeting is most often a sign of endorsement, dense clusters in the visualization can be interpreted as opinion clusters in the underlying debate. These clusters are made explicit using a modularity maximizing community detection algorithm, and the resulting communities are hand-labeled according to their main accounts and contributions to the discussion. The network can be explored interactively here: <https://bx2xsyrhgmn.github.io/IC2S2/> (nodes with less than 5000 followers are anonymized and cannot be clicked).