

Social Media, Public Sphere and Counterpublics: An Exploratory Analysis of the Networked Use of Twitter During the Protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act in India

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This study has examined the roles of social media in the formation of a multifaced virtual public sphere for networked political participation. A visualization app/tool and content analysis method were used to collect and analyze 1702 tweets during the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)-2019 in India to examine how rival groups like dominant publics and counterpublics involve in a series of confrontational and discursive interactions to occupy Twittersphere as a networked public sphere. The findings demonstrate that the counterpublics represented by the anti-CAA protesters effectively used both the offline public sphere and Twittersphere as essentially complementary spaces to resist their hegemonic relations with the dominant publics and discriminatory policies, whereas the individuals from the culturally and politically privileged groups and communities dominantly occupied Twittersphere as an alternative to the offline public spheres. Twitter offers political participants a medium for creating networks of engaging political and cultural

discourses and frequently communicating them across social media networks as a new way to simultaneously participate in protests. The platform-specific interactive attributes like scalability, multipurpose re/usability and re/purposability that allow diverse groups like counterpublics and dominant publics to concurrently engage themselves in networked political discourses make Twitter a multifaceted online/virtual public sphere. Frequent re/tweeting of engaging contents in the networks of affinity tweets, re/sharing of the engaging contents in the networks of anchor tweets, avoiding offline participation and opting for either one or both of the online and offline protests were the protest-tactics conspicuously employed by the CAA protest participants.

Keywords: multifaceted public sphere, networked discourses, counterpublics, dominant publics, counternarratives, protests, social media

The emergence of the Internet-based interactive platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube has brought every individual into global networks of effective communication that help them communicate political issues and launch protests and movements faster and more effectively than ever before.

The patterns of their political engagements or ways of mobilizing masses and participating in protests and movements have been propitiously changed. The political use of social media has emerged as an inevitable component of modern protests and movements ever since the Arab Spring, Indignados and Occupy movements that were first observed in early 2011 in the Middle East, Europe and America as highly social-media-mediated social and political movements (Conover et al., 2013; Theocharis et al., 2015). Social media has rigorously enhanced political involvements, offline and online protest participation and civic engagements, rendering them revolutionary endeavours to bring social, economic and political changes (Yuan et al., 2019, p. 267). Social media were remarkably used in the protests that broke out in December 2019 and lasted until March 2020 against the promulgation and implementation of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)-2019 in India, which has been considered as the continuation of the Citizenship Act-2003, known as National Register of Citizens (NRC).

The CAA-2019 considers Hindu, Christian, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh and Parsi migrants from the Muslim majority countries of Pakistan, Afghanistan and Bangladesh as eligible to apply for Indian citizenship if they have lived in India for five years (Deka, 2019, para. 3). As it excludes the Muslim migrants, the protests broke out across the country alleging it to have been a discriminatory act based on religious faith against the secularism of the Indian constitution (Deka, 2019; Dutta, 2019; Punj, 2019). Social media warriors worked tirelessly behind the scenes, “providing the fuel with social media posts for a week, ensuring there was no confusion or misinformation about the protests” (Mengle, 2019, para. 1). Many anti-CAA protests were first launched on social media and then expanded to mass protests in streets and parks (Hindustan Times, 2019). The protest participants used social media as an easily available and accessible channel for dialogues between them and their federal government (Reuters, 2019). Much of the existing literature on the political use of social media as such reveals that social media has been used by voiceless, ordinary citizens and marginalized dissidents as an alternative media and a public sphere. The celebratory notion of social media as an alternative media for counterpublics often tends to emphasize that social media offered citizens, marginalized peoples and voiceless peoples a new medium and a new space to express their voice, stand united against

suppressive power structures and practices and perform political engagements in new patterns and frequencies beyond geographical and temporal limitations.

This study takes up the anti-CAA protests of India as a distinct case study to re/examine how counterpublics can use Twittersphere to proficiently and dominantly resist or oppose hegemonic relations and discriminatory policies, and if dominant publics can use the Twittersphere as an alternative space and medium to create narratives and counternarratives. Twittersphere is a multifaceted online/virtual public sphere where powerful groups can actively create political discourses with direct impacts on offline protests launched by marginalized and/or voiceless groups. The rival groups like dominant publics and counterpublics can simultaneously use Twittersphere as an alternative public sphere and a complementary space.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the broadest terms, the existing literature on social media's political use critically describes social media either as a dissident public sphere or a corporate sphere. The body of literature that makes a critique of social media as a dissident public sphere indicates that counterpublics have advantageously used it in multiple ways for their networked political engagements and sociopolitical enhancements. Contrarily, a small body of existing literature pessimistically views social media as a corporate space for business interests and a medium of surveillance on citizens; it is not a public sphere for citizens' privacy and empowerment. These discordant perspectives obliquely also shed light on potentialities for using social media in diverse ways and for multiple purposes that in turn expose and establish it as a multifaceted public sphere. This section makes both a critical review of existing literature and a theoretical discussion on the notions of counterpublics, publics, networked political engagements and social media as a multifaceted public sphere.

Social Media as a New Public Sphere for Counterpublics

Counterpublics are those publics that function with purposes, ideologies and sociopolitical discourses alternative to those of dominant ones, providing "a sense of active belonging that masks or compensates for the real powerlessness of human agents" (Warner, 2002, p. 81). Instead of replacing (dominant) publics, counterpublics "offer a

viable alternative for population designated as outsiders to cultivate their power, identities and discourses” (Daum, 2017, p. 523). Following the ways that dominant publics have practiced to establish and prevail themselves in media and social, political, cultural and economic domains through discourses, counterpublics also establish their existence by communicating and circulating texts, creating counter-narratives/-publicity and using media to challenge or resist hegemonic relations with the former (Warner, 2002) and attempting to seek for their existence, meaning and importance beyond the existing dominant discourses and discursive spaces as well (Paso, 2017, p. 112). What is at the core of these arguments is the emphasis given to the significance of media and communication that play vital roles not only in discourse level of counterpublics, but also in the formation process of modern networked counterpublics (Penny & Dadas, 2014) and the novel ways for launching and participating in modern protests and movements like the Black Lives Matter and Occupy movements which mainly depended on social media for their initiation, development and sustenance (Boudreau, 2011). The research on the political use of social media during the Occupy Wall Street movement conducted by Penny and Dadas (2014) shows that “the digital circulation of texts (which includes links, photos, and video in addition to prose) allows protestors to very quickly build geographically dispersed, networked counterpublics that can articulate a critique of power outside of parameters of mainstream media” (p. 88). Precisely, social media has substantiated sociopolitical activists and citizens to quickly form new networked counterpublics.

Social Media as an Alternative Means of Political Communication

Another concept central to critical discussions on social media’s role in enabling counterpublics is the concept of social media as an alternative media—an alternative means of political communication and an alternative platform for political engagements. Social media provides “an alternative platform for minorities and marginalized people to defy mainstream discourses in the public sphere” (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1949), and it is used as an alternative media for diffusing protests and movements (Boudreau, 2011; Suh, Vasi & Chang, 2017). It has been widely entertained as equally accessible and easily available to citizens who have participated in the movements and protests such as Occupy movements. The easy availability of social media has made it an alternative media not only for diffusing protests but also for upholding networked and collaborative political

participations and resisting suppressions and undue dominations. Boudreau's (2011) research indicates that eighty percent of information about the Occupy Wall Street movement was disseminated among the participants or ordinary citizens through social media that helped the occupy activists diffuse the protests worldwide and all the participants stay connected and united. The key finding of the research on the Occupy Wall Street movement conducted by Shu et al. (2017) is that social media has been used as an alternative media to avoid government repression during the offline Occupy Wall Street protests. When the Occupy protesters were repressed to launch protests, they were left with the option of going online. They created "Facebook and Twitter accounts in their cities, which then served as important vehicles for the initiation of new Occupy protests" (p. 282) and helped them to diffuse the protests.

Political Engagements of Loosely Connected Counterpublics in Online-Offline Spheres

Along the threads of discussion on social media as a new public sphere for counterpublics and as an alternative means of political communication, Yuan et al. (2019) argue that social media provides counterpublics like voluntary groups or self-organized Occupy participants with a loosely connected, fragmented and clustered structure, shaping themselves in networked flows of communication. The notion of an alternative medium of political communication is closely associated with the idea of networked communications and collaborations. Political participants and activists can communicate horizontally, form loosely connected networks and networked groups who are bound by protest issues (Haunss, 2015, p. 22). Huanss (2015) argues that these networked communications and collaborations have given a rise to the new form of leaderless mass protests and movements.

Counterpublics who, in the past, before social media was introduced, used to demonstrate or participate in the real world/offline public spheres can now perform their sociopolitical activities in both the online and offline public spheres. A social, cultural and political concept widely used across diverse academic disciplines is the "public sphere" that was first introduced and extensively elaborated by Habermass (1989) precisely referring to a realm of social life "in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body" (p. 136).

Social Media as an Inclusive and Democratic Subaltern Sphere

Tending to closely align themselves with the critics who view social media as a democratic and inclusive public sphere, Dahlgren (2009), Lee et al. (2018) and Yang et al. (2020) argue that the political use of social media and the resistive power it generates among citizens are closely associated with the idea of a public sphere where citizens can communicate and practice political engagements democratically. There has also been a large body of literature that accounts for social media as a new public sphere with its basic defining attributes like citizens' accessibility, the formation of public opinion and private individuals and that celebrate it also as a subaltern public sphere (Lee et al., 2018); the new public sphere or subaltern sphere has been abundantly hailed as an alternative to the traditional offline public spheres such as coffee houses, streets and public parks where citizens assemble to discuss and form a public opinion; it has been often hailed as an insurgent public sphere (Lee et al., 2015). Dahlgren (2009) argues that social media is an inclusive and democratic public sphere because it has been accessed by all citizens and used as an inclusive and democratic media to express their opinions, bring new topics for public discussions and democratically participate in them. Lee et al. (2015) and Lee et al. (2018) elaborate on social media as a subaltern public sphere which counterpublics can propitiously use to resist dominant publics, and which is also synonymous with an insurgent public sphere when it is used to mobilize anti-establishment movements. They view counterpublics, like the ones with a certain political stance, marginalized in the mainstream or "excluded from the dominant public sphere, thus extending the public sphere to accommodate multiple opinions and perspectives" (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1949).

Social Media as an Exclusive Online Sphere: Not for Counterpublics

Turning to the category of pessimistic views on social media as a corporate sphere, a small body of literature is found to have been uncomfortable in entertaining and endorsing social media as a public sphere; it does not consider it a realm where private individuals can act or converse freely to form a public opinion because corporate interests dominate it. Papacharissi (2010) argues that the Internet-based online spheres cannot be considered fully public because of unfair distribution of access to information and commercialization of all activities or discussions on them. Losifidis and Wheeler (2015) are also doubtful if social media can expand the public sphere because networks of communication have

always been serving capitalist interests rather than promoting citizens' democratic rights. Kruse et al. (2018) view social media users, who are under surveillance, as being compelled to, in many cases, avoid political discourses and deny the understanding of social media primarily as a place of happy interaction and entertainment. They argue that "social media are not revitalizing a public sphere because the requisites for a public sphere are absent from social media" (p. 81).

Briefly, the previous research or existing literature shows that counterpublics use social media as a multifaceted online public sphere for establishing their sociopolitical issues and voices, standing united against dominant publics during protests, forming networked political engagements, diffusing protests and resisting hegemonic practices of the dominant publics (Boudreau, 2011; Dahlgren, 2009; Haunss, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Lee et al., 2018; Lutz & du Toit, 2014; Penny & Dadas, 2014; Suh et al., 2017; Yuan et al., 2019). There has also been a small portion of literature that reflects the discomfort of some researchers and authors with social media as a public sphere (Kruse et al., 2018; Losifidis & Wheeler, 2015; Papacharissi, 2010). This paper takes up the anti-CAA protests of India as a case study to re-examine how counterpublics use social media for their political participation and civic engagement, how and in what conditions people from politically and culturally dominant communities can use it to oppose counterpublics.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Massive protests broke out against the CAA in December 2019 and the Indian society and citizens were divided between its supporters and opponents. In the present research, the supporters have been broadly referred to as "the dominant publics" that include individuals from the Hindu majority community, elite politicians connected with the ruling party, officials and ministers in the federal government, politicians and ministers associated with the provincial/state governments and renown political leaders as well as critics. And, the opponents have been referred to as "the counterpublics" that include individuals from the Muslim, Sikh and Assamese minority cultures and communities. A faction of the dominant publics that aligned themselves with the counterpublics were some elite politicians such as former ministers and opposition party

leaders and some state governments. This study has primarily concentrated on the following questions.

RQ1: How do the counterpublics use Twitter to proficiently and dominantly resist or oppose hegemonic relations and suppressions?

RQ2: Can the dominant publics use Twittersphere as an alternative space and medium to create narratives and counternarratives?

METHODS

The digital data of 1,702 tweets collected during the anti-CAA protests in India were a starting point for re/investigating social media as a scalable, re/usable and re/purposable multifaceted new public sphere that simultaneously accommodates rival groups in their compatible and non-compatible political activities. The visualization of the networked use of Twitter and networked protest participation in the CAA protests provided an appropriate occasion for critically re/examining the conflicting and diverse perspectives on the counterpublics and dominant publics when they got involved in protest activities in the politically focused multifaceted Twittersphere. The tweeter visualization tool/app known as Tweet Sentiment Visualization (Sentiment Viz, 2020) was used to collect 1702 tweets at 16 different times between January 17, 2020, and March 4, 2020. Quantitative and qualitative content analysis methods were employed to analyze and interpret the total tweets primarily concentrating on networks of the most frequent tweets and dominant tweets, which have been termed as Affinity tweets and Anchor tweets respectively, to find out how counterpublics occupy digital public spheres to resist hegemonic suppressions and if dominant publics also use Twitter as an alternative space and medium to oppose offline protests. The app visualized the networked nodes of 490 tweets as the most frequent tweets and 461 tweets as the anchor tweets that form conversations and narrative threads. Content types were identified by hovering the mouse/cursor over or clicking on each node in the networks of the affinity tweets and the anchor tweets.

First, the 1702 tweets and the 461 anchor tweets were broadly categorized into three groups: a) the pro-CAA tweets of logical justifications and explanations in support of the promulgation of the CAA-2019 and its implementation; b) the anti-CAA tweets that

included all the information-tweets about the updates of protests, clashes and the cultural, historical and religious references against the CAA; and, c) the category of “others” included all the tweets that did not fit into the former categories because the tweets either expressed neutrality and reconciliatory positions or were indecipherable.

Second, the 490 affinity tweets and hashtags were further grouped under four thematic categories: 1) information about protests, 2) political debates, 3) cultural issues/themes, and 4) others. The category of information included all the tweets that provided information about updates and reports about offline protests, changes, development of protests, clashes between protesters and police in different public spaces like streets and parks. The political debates included the tweets about provincial/state governments’ resolutions and other activities against the CAA. The category of cultural issues included both issues of cultural minorities and the majority in support of and against the CAA, and the last category included all tweets about the international pressure upon the federal government of India to reconsider or guarantee human rights while implementing the CAA-2019 as well as other neutral and unclear tweets.

Additionally, the anti-CAA groups of 1702 tweets, the anti-CAA tweets of 461 anchor tweets (group b) and the anti-CAA political debates of 490 affinity tweets (category 2) were further divided into two sub-groups respectively: (1) a faction of the dominant publics and (2) non-dominant others in which the former included tweets about the individuals and elite politicians who were associated with provincial/state governments and the Hindu majority cultures and the latter included tweets about diverse civic groups and the individuals who belong to the politically and culturally marginalized minorities such as Sikhs, Assamese and Muslim minorities and student-protesters.

RESULTS

The content analysis revealed that Twitter offered the CAA protest participants a new way, medium and space to participate in the protests by expressing cultural, historical and political issues in the forms of engaging and networked discourses or narratives. The inherent attributes of Twitter that allows the political participants to form such networked discourses make it a multifaceted online/virtual public sphere where political participants can form issue-based alliances such as dominant publics and

counterpublics that can simultaneously participate in protests and counterprotests with active and equally motivated zeal (see Tables 1, 2 & 3). In the first step, the 1702 sampled political participants, activists, civic groups and professionals were found to fit into three categories of loosely connected alliances or groups conditioned by contextual, political, historical and cultural reasons. In terms of active online political participation, 35.3% stood as pro-CAA in utter support of the promulgation and instant implementation of the CAA with their justifications and logics that related themselves to vibrantly recurring historical events associated with the emergence of modern India and neighbouring countries and their consequential cultural and political impacts on majority and minority communities; whereas, 38.3% aligned themselves with anti-CAA against the promulgation and implementation of the CAA-2019. The anti-CAA group was further divided between the dominant publics and the “non-dominant others” that included participants like civic groups, e.g., artists and authors, professionals such as lawyers and students, minority communities such as Muslims and Sikhs. 26.4% were neutral and reconciliatory or their expressions were indecipherable (see Table 1).

The anti-CAA alliances were designated as the loosely connected counterpublics that primarily refer to the marginalized and/disadvantaged Muslim communities and the pro-CAA groups as the dominant publics referring to the entirety of federal and state governments, ministers, policy-makers, elite political leaders of the ruling party and the politically and culturally privileged individuals from the Hindu community in India (Deka, 2019; Dutta, 2019; Punj, 2019; Tirodkar, 2019). As the CAA was allegedly criticized for supporting the Hindu majority and discriminating against the Muslim minorities (Deka, 2019; Dutta, 2019), the pro-CAA participants and tweets (N=601) were considered as forming the networked dominant publics to defend the CAA and its implementation. However, the analytical concepts of the counterpublics and the dominant publics are not so straightforward; the process of their flexible formations and dynamic patterns of their functional implications embody them to be understood as a significant process that conveys tactical, political, flexible and procedural meanings. For instance, in Table 1, a faction of the dominant publics (39.9%) in the anti-CAA group belonged to the politically and culturally privileged Hindu community and were associated with provincial/state governments often recognized as sociopolitically elite groups. The individuals from the

dominant publics or the culturally and politically privileged community got divided between the pro-CAA (N=601) and a faction of dominant publics (N=260) aligning with the anti-CAA camps as key factors contributing to the formations of the dominant publics and the counterpublics (see Table 1). Many renown political leaders of the opposition parties and some provincial/state governments such as West Bengal state government, Punjab state government and Kerala state government, which are also by definition considered as a faction (39.9% of 652) of the dominant publics, aligned themselves with the anti-CAA group (N=652) and opposed the CAA by participating both in offline and online protests launched by the dissident groups. This shows that Twitter provides issue-based counterpublics and dominant publics with a virtual network to participate in protests with their conflicting motifs and goals. Twittersphere as a multifaceted online public sphere accommodates both the counterpublics and the dominant publics simultaneously involved in concurrently evolving protests and counterprotests (Lee et al., 2018, p. 1949).

Table 1
Thematic Categories of Tweets

| Alliances/Groups | n | % |
|------------------|--|-------|
| Pro-CAA | 601 | 35.3 |
| Anti-CAA | 652 | 38.3 |
| | 260 (A Faction of Dominant Publics) | 39.9% |
| | 392 (Non-Dominant Others) | 60.1% |
| Others | 449 | 26.4 |
| Total | 1702 | 100 |

Regarding the narratives and counternarratives generated by political participants in Twittersphere, the Tweet Sentiment Visualization app identified 461 of 1702 tweets as anchor tweets (see Figure 1 & Table 2). The anchor tweets display “a time-ordered sequence of tweets that form conversations or narrative threads passing through the anchor tweets” (Sentiment Viz, 2020, para. 2). The anchor tweets are the most dominant

tweets, playing a key role in the process of generating narratives and counternarratives in support of and against the CAA-2019. The anchor tweets are the most engaging tweets. Figure 1 is an illustrative graph that visualizes how a sequence of tweets passes through a dominant node which raises a central issue by generating responses from other political participants to form narrative threads or interactive conversations in temporal linearity. In the graph, the dominant tweet is represented by the bigger circle in red colour and other sequential tweets are represented by the smaller circles in black colour. The 461 anchor tweets were identified as dominant tweets and grouped into three types: 31% of the anchor tweets were pro-CAA, 39.3% were anti-CAA and 29.7% did not fit into them (see Table 4). The anti-CAA tweets or tweeters (39.3%) were further divided into two subgroups: (a) a faction of dominant publics (50.8%) aligned with the anti-CAA protesters, and (b) 49.2% were non-dominant others such as Muslim, Sikh and Assamese minorities as well as students. In Table 2, the total summation of the pro-CAA (31%) and the faction of the dominant publics (50.8%) becomes much larger than the others (29.7%). This implies that Twittersphere was abundantly used by the dominant publics and the counterpublics to generate powerful networks of political discourses in their favour. The marginalized and/or disadvantaged peoples from minority cultures used Twitter to resist their hegemonic relations with the ruling peoples who historically, politically and culturally belong to the Hindu culture. However, Table 1 shows that the dominant publics were no less active in Twittersphere. The networks of powerful discourses as such have direct impacts on online and offline political participation (Theocharis & Lowe, 2016).

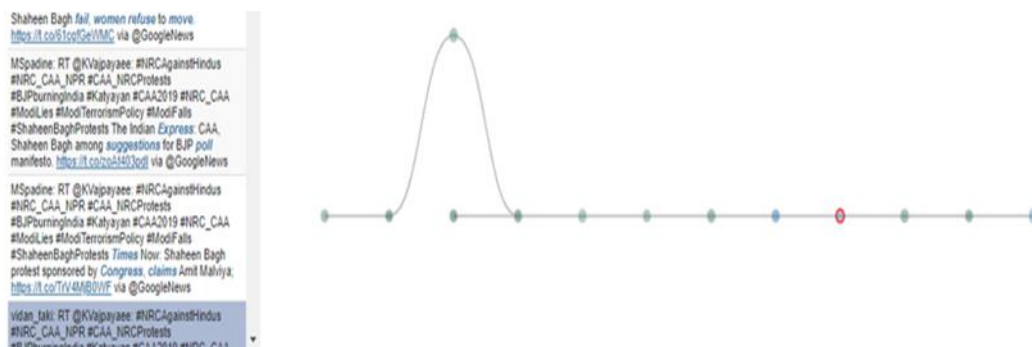


Figure 1. An example of anchor tweets forming conversations or narrative threads.

Table 2
Categories of Anchor Tweets

| Anchor Tweets | n | % |
|---------------|--|---------------|
| Pro-CAA | 143 | 31 |
| Anti-CAA | 92 (A Faction of Dominant Publics) 89 (Non-Dominant Others) | 50.8% 39.3 |
| Others | 137 | 29.7 |
| Total | 461 | 100 |

The app identified 490 of the 1702 sampled tweeters and tweets as the most important actors and the most frequently recurring tweets termed as “affinity” that refers to the frequent “tweets, people, hashtags, and URLs” which are “drawn in a graph to show important actors in the tweet set, and any relationship or affinity they have to one another” (Sentiment Viz, 2020, para. 2). Figure 2 is an illustrative graph that visualizes the networked-affinity-patterns of the most frequent tweets, actors and hashtags that represent the most important/active actors and the most frequently recurring thematic issues (also, see Tables 3 & 4); they have been visualized in the form of connected nodes in amber, dark green, mustard and blue colours. At the centre is the largest circle in the amber colour that shows a vector of the frequent tweets directed toward the dominant public represented by @narendramodi and the hashtag #citizenshipamendmentact, and the circles in dark green close to them were identified as the pro-CAA tweets and the pro-CAA participants.

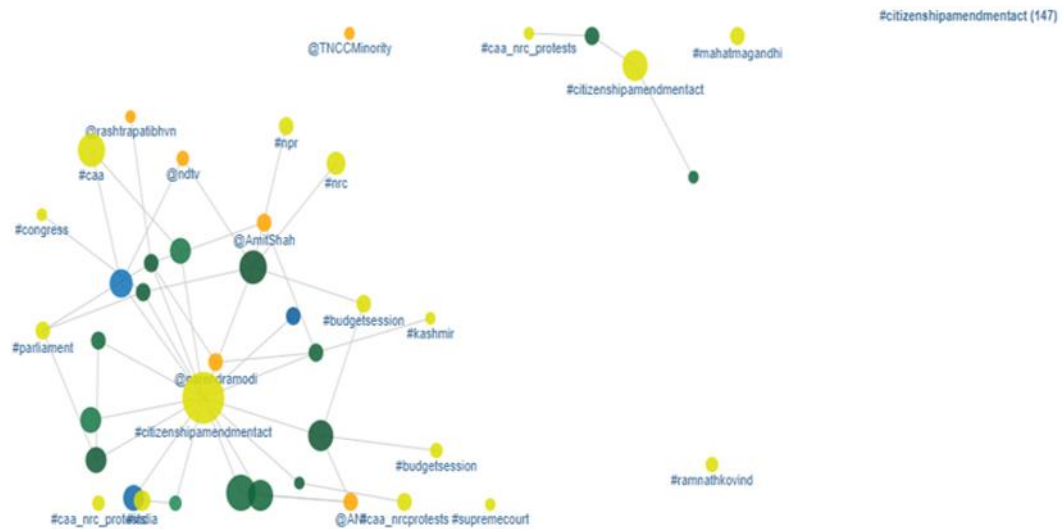


Figure 2. An illustrative visualization of the most frequent tweets, hashtags and Twitter users.

Figure 2 is a networked graph of recurring patterns that reflects degree-centrality (e.g., the largest node in amber colour as the largest degree-centrality and then the one in blue colour with six connections) and interactive directions of nodes (here, directed and undirected not differentiated). The interactive vector of the affinity tweets shows that the elite political figures, federal and state governments, TV channels, the supreme court, the protests, political parties and the political issues—@narendramodi, @AmitShah, @ndtv, @AN, @rashtrapatibhvn and TNCCMinority—formed the politically motivated gravity centres of re/tweeting activities or the centres around which the protests and counterprotests were simultaneously accomplished in Twittersphere. As these elite political persons held the positions of high degree and betweenness centralities in the networks, they were considered the most influencing actors. Warner (2020) argues that the material conditions such as historical, economic, media, and political conditions in totality contribute to the emergence of counterpublics and their necessity. Similarly, the material conditions that contributed to the eruption of the CAA-2019 protests were political as reflected by the information hashtags such as #caa_nrc_protests, the political hashtags such as #caa, #npr, #congress, #parliament, #citizenshipamendmentact, the cultural hashtags such as #kashmir and other themes like #budgetsession and #mahatmagandhi. These material conditions embodied by the Twitter hashtags played a

crucial role in determining who aligned with the counterpublics and who did not, or who aligned with the dominant publics and who did not.

Table 3
Thematic Categories of 490 Most Frequent Tweets

| Themes/ Content | Pro-CAA | | Anti-CAA | | n | % | Anti - Pro (Difference) |
|----------------------|---------|-------|----------|-------|-----|------|----------------------------|
| Information | 52 | 48% | 57 | 52% | 109 | 22 | + 5 |
| Political Debates | 99 | 43% | 132 | 57% | 231 | 47 | + 33 |
| Cultural Themes | 59 | 50.9% | 57 | 49.1% | 116 | 23.7 | _ 2 |
| Others | | | | | 34 | 6.9 | |
| Total | 210 | | 246 | | 490 | 100 | |

Table 4
Frequent Tweets Generating Political Debates

| Political Debates | n | % |
|----------------------|--|-------|
| Pro-CAA | 99 | 42.9 |
| Anti-CAA | 67 (A Faction of Dominant Publics) | 50.8% |
| | 65 (Non-Dominant Others) | 42.2% |
| Total | 231 | 100 |

The content analysis further showed that 22% of the 490 most frequent tweets were about offline protest events and 47% were about political voices, issues and debates. The first category primarily focused on recording live-updates and digitizing the events of offline protests, re/uploading and re/sharing them across social media networks, and the second focused on re/creating rival discourses by relating the CAA-219 to the political

history of the nation, roles played by great leaders and their contributions to the nation-building in attempts to justify their respective alliances. 23.7% fit into the cultural category that reflected a cultural division between the Hindu majority and other Assamese, Muslim and Sikh minority cultures. The tweets in the cultural category mainly concentrated on relating the cultural issues with the political and cultural rights guaranteed in the Indian constitution. 6.9% did not fit into any of these thematic categories. In Table 3, each of the first three thematic categories was further grouped into two conflicting sub-categories: (1) information tweets/tweeters between pro-CAA (48%) and anti-CAA (52%); (2) political debates between pro-CAA (43%) and anti-CAA (57%); and (3) cultural themes between pro-CAA (50.9%) and anti-CAA (49.1%). The marginal difference between them points out that both the dominant publics represented by the pro-CAA tweeters and the counterpublics represented by the anti-CAA tweeters abundantly used Twitter as a medium of networked communication and as an online public sphere for their active political engagements.

In Table 3, the further analysis of the differences indicates that the total number of anti-CAA tweets and active participants in the information category was bigger than that of the pro-CAA by 5 and by 33 in the category of political debates. Inversely, the total number of pro-CAA was bigger than the anti-CAA by 2 in the cultural category which implies that more people from the Hindu cultural background were active than the ones from cultural minorities to support the CAA and justify its importance from the perspectives of cultural and political rights of the Hindu majority people. In Table 4, the anti-CAA political debates were further divided into two sub-groups: a faction of the dominant publics (50.5) and non-dominant others (49.2%) in which the former was found to have been as active on Twittersphere as the latter. The virtually active pro-CAA participants were individuals and elite politicians from the Hindu majoritarian community and state governments as well as the federal government. In addition to this, the larger faction of the anti-CAA alliance (N=67) who belonged to the politically and culturally privileged community was also found to have been active against the CAA (see Table 4).

These findings show that Twitter provides not only protest participants with an alternative space and medium to resist discriminatory policies and hegemonic dominance

imposed by the dominant publics, e.g., governments, elites and majority communities, but also the latter with a networked digital sphere to perpetuate their domineering existence and discriminatory practices and policies. The digital/virtual public spheres or spaces as such are powerful networks because they are made in the processes of selective and powerful discourses (Shirky, 2011). They are the embodied expressions of political actors and protest participants. During the CAA protests and counterprotests, both the dissident publics and the dominant publics used Twittersphere predominantly, proficiently and beneficially to produce antagonistic political and cultural discourses (see Figures 1 & 2, & Tables 3 & 4). To a great extent, this empirical fact also substantiates the argument that “expressions on Twitter would rather form part of the dominant public sphere” (Lutz & du Toit, 2014, p. 53). Similar to the way the voiceless, marginalized and underprivileged minorities used social media to form networked counterpublics, the politically and culturally privileged peoples like the pro-CAA participants also used the Twittersphere as a networked public sphere proficiently and beneficially; they used it as an alternative to the public spheres such as streets and public parks.

The anti-CAA groups and students massively participated in the offline protests, primarily in the public spheres like Azad Maidan, Kolkata streets and Shaheen Bagh of New Delhi (Express Web Desk, 2020; Hindustan Times, 2019; Tirodkar, 2019). Dutta (2019) reports that students were demonstrating on the fronts of protests, whereas opposition parties, their sister organizations and elite political leaders did not participate in the anti-CAA protests. He argues that they were not participating in those protests led by the students and the Muslim minorities because they were afraid to “face the barrage of charges for ‘Muslim appeasement’ from BJP [Bharatiya Janata Party]” (para. 14). However, the availability and political use of new communication technologies like Twitter make their actions and motivations alternatively visible in new ways in virtual networks (Ems, 2014, p. 728). The counterpublics occupied both the offline public sphere and Twittersphere. Contrarily, the dominant publics used the Twittersphere as an online public sphere alternative to the offline public sphere such as Azad Maidan, Kolkata streets, Shaheen Bagh of New Delhi and many more.

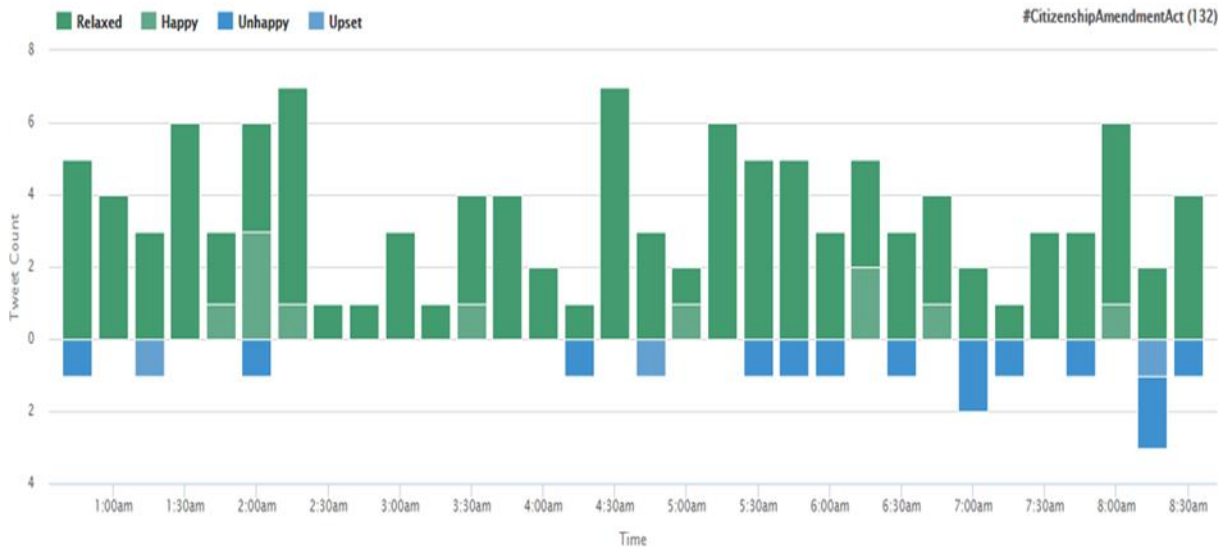


Figure 3. An illustrative bar chart of pleasant and unpleasant tweets.

Lastly, Figure 3 is an illustrative bar chart of the pleasant and unpleasant tweets in the chosen timeline. The green bars on the top represent pleasant tweets and the blue bars on the bottom represent unpleasant tweets posted during the chosen time. The number of tweets, which reflects the relaxed and happy mood, experience and sentiment in the green bars, is larger than the total number of unhappy and upset tweets represented by the blue bars. In all the bar charts as such, collected in the sixteen different times, the green bars were higher than the blue bars on the bottom. What a logical connection the bars make about the political use of Twitter is that the green bars represent the happy mood, interests and sentiments of the actively dominant publics, whereas the blue bars represent the unhappy moods and upset conditions of the marginalized and/or disadvantaged Muslim, Sikh and Assamese minorities (also, see Tables 1, 2, 3 & 4). This suggests that, during the CAA protests in India, the dominant publics predominantly, tactically and creatively used Twittersphere as a networked digital public sphere and as an alternative to the real-world public sphere.

DISCUSSION

The power of social media in re/drawing a virtual demarcation between the dominant publics and the counterpublics is contextual and contingent upon the degree of intensity in networked interactions of political participants in both the real world and

online protests. Social media as a multifaceted digital public sphere allows civic groups and political participants to form loosely networked alliances (Yuan et al., 2019) and provides rival groups always with an open possibility for them to switch their positions and alliances or camps at any time, and accordingly certain civic and political groups re/emerge as dominant occupants of the digital public sphere. From an analytical perspective very different from the way a great deal of previous research view social media as a dissident media for networked counterpublics and an alternative public sphere where marginalized and voiceless people launch and demonstrate protests (Lee et al., 2018), this study explored the ways and patterns the political participants, motivated by their political and cultural ideologies, practices and needs, employed to occupy and dominate social media like Twitter as a digital or networked public sphere equally useful for both the counterpublics and the dominant publics. Whether the political use of social media triggers anticipated results primarily depends upon how dominantly and frequently the networked alliances and rival groups use it (Matsilele & Ruhanya, 2020, p. 1).

The notion of social media as a multifaceted public sphere is not confined to interactive networks of dissident publics only but is also expanded to include the activities of generating dominant discourses by increasing the frequency of regular patterns in disseminating supportive political and cultural contents. During protests and sociopolitical movements, social media functions as a public sphere where rival groups divided between the dominant publics and the counterpublics come into a series of discursive confrontations by objectively and argumentatively relating their positions to an urgent material condition shaped by the entirety of historical, political, cultural and other immediate or contextual factors. A series of consensual and discordant interactions and discourses between the dominant publics and the counterpublics on social media is based on contextual factors (Urman, 2020) integral to the processes of building up a networked and discursive public sphere. If materially “existent people make meaning and constitute the real world” (Pason, 2017, p.112), the politically consensual and discordant interactions and discourses make meaning and constitute the online public sphere. The group which becomes more active than others can better occupy the online public sphere; it becomes discursively more dominant in the networked spaces. Discursive activities constitute an essential component of online protests launched and developed either as an alternative to

offline protests or to promote ongoing offline protests. Dissident and/or marginalized people opt for social media to expand circulations of information and build up networked counterpublics (Penny & Dadas, 2014, p. 74). Similarly, the dominant publics also opted for active participation in online protests though they escaped from a politically uncomfortable situation for offline demonstrations in support of the CAA; they dominantly occupied the online public sphere like Twittersphere by holding an assertive position in the networked production of the dominant discourses, represented by the networks of the affinity tweets and the anchor tweets. Opting for a comfortable one of the online and offline public spheres and producing more networked political discourses can be considered as the two important protest tactics adopted by the dominant publics. Twitter hashtags have offered political participants a new medium and way to produce engaging discourses, e.g., anchor tweets and frequently circulate them across social media networks in the forms of affinity tweets; the CAA protest participants employed the acts of producing engaging-tweets and frequent re/sharing of them across social media networks as other two important protest tactics.

The most important cloud attributes very indigenous to interactive virtual platforms are the scalability, multipurpose reusability and re/purposability (Edingo, 2017, p. 28) that make social media a multifaceted public sphere where protests and counterprotests can be simultaneously and tactically launched and developed as opposed to the offline public spheres like streets and parks where peaceful protests and counterprotests generally cannot be organized or demonstrated at a time. As a scalable, reusable and re/purposable space, many networked collaborations and political alliances among like-minded individuals and communities (Edingo, 2014, pp. 270-271) and politically and culturally discordant groups can concurrently and globally perform their defensive and confrontational activities. Their divisions and unities are built up in the simultaneous processes of interactions of agreements and disagreements in Twittersphere. The dominant publics and the counterpublics are not absolute concepts, rather they are flexible to be used politically and tactically as illustrated by the research findings of this study that a large faction of the anti-CAA protesters was from the dominant community and state governments and was designated as a faction of the dominant publics who became effectively active on Twittersphere in order to support the counterpublics.

The ideas of forming alliances and rival groups such as counterpublics and dominant publics are contextual, temporary, political, tactical and issue-based. One of the celebratory notions about counterpublics is that social media has been used tactically to construct a virtual public sphere where the groups, individuals and communities who feel excluded from or aggrieved by the wider culture and deprived of cultural and political rights for equality and equity come together to form a networked alliance based on the issues of common concerns (Renzi, 2008, p. 82). The findings of this research have demonstrated that the scalability, reusability and re/purposability of social media also offer the same opportunity to the culturally and politically privileged groups, individuals and communities to defend their political, social and cultural legacies, interests and privileges in their status quo. The anti-CAA protesters concurrently used Twittersphere tactically to create networked counterpublics to oppose the hegemonic and suppressive policies and practices like the CAA-2019. At the same time, the pro-CAA participants also used it more tactically, actively and vibrantly to form networked-dominant-publics to oppose the online and offline protests against the CAA-2019.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The present research relied on the data collected by the Tweet Sentiment Visualization app that imported/imports the tweets composed in the English language only. As this study focused much on the networked use of Twitter during the protests — focus more on the use of the interactive platform/medium, it did not elaborate on the historical, political and cultural contexts of India that created a background for the promulgation of CAA-2019 and the protest-outbreak. The elaboration of these background issues would, of course, give us a better picture of how social media as a multifaceted public sphere helps the politically and culturally privileged groups or communities to perpetuate the hegemonic and discriminatory political, social and cultural practices and legacies of the polarized Indian society from the colonial time through different phases of postcolonial India. Next, this study has examined the anti-CAA protests as a distinct case study; a study of these protests in relation to similar other protests mainly in Myanmar and Turkey where the dominant publics or governments have used social media as an important component of their power exertion for suppressing dissident protests would

provide a wider context for a comparative understanding of the political use of social media in different social, political, cultural and historical contexts.

CONCLUSION

Despite the limitations, the present study has shown that Twitter has offered diverse groups a publicly accessible medium for creating networks of engaging political discourses like the networks of anchor tweets and frequently communicating them across social media networks as exemplified by the networks of affinity tweets as a new way for them to simultaneously participate in protests. Such networked political discourses and their frequent re/disseminations make Twitter a scalable, reusable and re/purposable online sphere — a multifaceted online public sphere. The counterpublics — the anti-CAA groups and students — massively demonstrated protests in the public spheres like Azad Maidan, Kolkata streets and Shaheen Bagh of New Delhi (Express Web Desk, 2020; Hindustan Times, 2019; Tirodkar, 2019) and simultaneously used Twittersphere to resist or oppose their hegemonic relations with the dominant publics; they concurrently used both the offline public sphere and the online public sphere as complementary spaces of their political engagements. But, a large number of elite politicians, ideologically motivated people from major opposition parties and their sister organizations and culturally dominant Hindu community who belong to the dominant publics standing on the side of the federal government's act of promulgating the CAA-2019 and implementing it did not come in the front of the protests or did not launch any pro-CAA demonstrations in the public spheres like streets and parks (Dutta, 2019). However, they became more active online in order to oppose the offline dissident protests in streets and parks and hence used the multifaceted online public sphere as an alternative to the offline public spaces. This empirical evidence supports the view that the dominant publics or political elites can prevail their dominance in the digital network/online world if they want to do so (Dagoula, 2019).

Frequent re/tweeting of engaging contents in the networks of affinity tweets, re/sharing of the engaging contents in the networks of anchor tweets, avoiding offline participation and opting for either one or both of the online and offline protests were the main protest tactics most conspicuously employed by the CAA protest participants. The

dissidents like the anti-CAA participants and the individuals from the culturally and politically privileged groups and communities had dominantly and concurrently occupied Twittersphere by using it effectively for networked political and cultural engagements. The functional implications of Twitter as a multifaceted online public sphere are predicated on its platform-specific interactive attributes like scalability, multipurpose reusability and re/purposability that allow diverse groups like counterpublics and dominant publics to simultaneously engage themselves in networked political and cultural discourses. The elite CAA protest participants were found as active as the individuals from the minority cultures and had prevailed their dominant networks through the compositions and circulations of dominant discourses, e.g., anchor tweets and affinity tweets. Such online protests and counterprotests had real impacts on offline participation as the “theme underlying the social media posts was participation, as opposed to being mute spectators” (Mengle, 2019, para. 2).

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