

MAPPING DIGITAL MEDIA: INDIA



Mapping Digital Media: India

A REPORT BY THE OPEN SOCIETY FOUNDATIONS

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15 December 2012

3. Digital Media and Society

3.1 User-Generated Content (UGC)

3.1.1 UGC Overview

Census figures for 2011 show that 9.4 percent of Indian households have a computer and/or laptop, and 3 percent are connected to the internet. Moreover, urban areas continue to have an advantage, with 8.3 percent of households having a connection at home, compared with less than 1 percent of rural ones.¹⁶⁹ According to the The I-Cube survey 2011, commissioned by IAMAI, between 2006 and 2011 the number of internet users, who access the web from their homes in contrast to offices, has gone up, and so has the number for those who use their mobile phones to access the internet. Internet usage among youngsters has risen, and has been most pronounced in small towns with fewer than 1 million inhabitants, although the frequency and intensity of usage in these places are much less than that in the bigger cities.¹⁷⁰

The I-Cube Survey also indicates that in 2011, home use overtook cyber-cafes as the most important internet access point, used by 37 percent and 27 percent of users, respectively; mobile internet touched 9 percent,¹⁷¹ but only 4–5 percent of mobile devices sold are smartphones.¹⁷² Growth continues to be driven largely by young people: an estimated 75 percent of users are school or college students and men up to 35 years.

In India, as elsewhere, websites offering extensive platforms for user-generated content (UGC), or primarily centered on such content, are among the most popular: seven of the top 10 such websites in India identified by Alexa.com on 13 July 2011 belonged to this category; of the others, one is a news outlet's site and two are portals, all additionally hosting some UGC, as explained below. Table 21 below is based on detailed country-specific information about these websites.

169. *Census of India 2011: Mode of Communication 2001–2011*, Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner India, New Delhi, 2012, p. 2.

170. IMRB and IAMAI, "Report on Internet in India (I-Cube) 2011," IAMAI, Mumbai, 2011, p. 3 (hereafter, IMRB and IAMAI, "I-Cube 2011"). The definition of an "internet user" in this survey is an individual who has used the internet at least once in the last month.

171. IMRB and IAMAI, "I-Cube 2011," p. 7. Here, a "mobile internet user" refers to an individual who has accessed the internet using their mobile phones at least once in the last month.

172. FICCI-KPMG, 2011, p. 109.

Table 21.
Top 25 websites carrying UGC, as of 13 July 2011

	Name of website	UGC type	Global reach* (%)	Global reach in absolute numbers	Reach in India (% of global reach)	Reach in India in absolute numbers
1	Facebook.com	Social network	43.95	920,755,139	7.30	67,215,125
2	Yahoo.com	Web portal	24.39	510,971,965	8.60	43,943,589
3	YouTube.com	Video sharing	31.95	669,354,419	6.40	42,838,683
4	Blogspot.com	Weblog	14.17	296,862,351	10.70	31,764,272
5	Wikipedia.org	Free encyclopedia	13.72	287,434,824	6.70	19,258,133
6	Twitter.com	Social network, microblog	9.78	204,891,587	6.10	12,498,387
7	Rediff.com	Web portal, social network	0.53	11,103,532	88.50	9,826,626
8	Indiatimes.com	Existing news outlet's site	0.59	12,360,535	73.20	9,047,912
9	Orkut.co.in	Social network	0.56	11,732,034	99.20	11,638,177
10	Wordpress.com	Weblog	4.91	102,864,795	8.50	8,743,508
11	In.com	Web portal and web board	0.415	8,694,275	71.90	6,251,184
12	Orkut.com	Social network	1.32	27,654,079	33.10	9,153,500
13	Espncricinfo.com	Existing news outlet's site	0.57	11,941,534	61.80	7,379,868
14	Msn.com	Web portal	7.58	158,801,455	3.10	4,922,845
15	Imdb.com	Specialized web portal and web board	2.6	54,470,156	8.60	4,684,433
16	Stumbleupon.com	Social bookmarking	0.67	14,036,540	18.50	2,596,760
17	Oneindia.in	Web portal	0.173	3,624,360	81.60	2,957,478
18	Digg.com	Social bookmarking	0.66	13,827,040	23.20	3,207,873
19	Sulekha.com	Web portal and web board, weblog	0.187	3,917,661	86.70	3,396,612
20	Cnet.com	Specialized web portal and web board	1.32	27,654,079	12.60	3,484,414
21	About.com	Directory	1.5	31,425,090	11.80	3,708,161
22	Flickr.com	Photo sharing	2.34	49,023,141	5.80	2,843,342
23	Moneycontrol.com	Existing news outlet	0.094	1,969,306	89.10	1,754,651
24	Ndtv.com	Established media company	0.165	3,456,760	77.60	2,682,446
25	Wordpress.org	Weblog	1.25	26,187,575	9.70	2,540,195

Notes: * Reach measures the number of users, and is typically expressed as the percentage of all internet users who visit a given site daily. The numbers of total internet users worldwide is 2,095,006,005, based on world internet user figures at www.internetworldstats.com (accessed 13 July 2011).

Daily unique IP visits in India have not been provided because calculating these figures with the data available at present (via Trafficestimate.com) would assume a one-to-one correspondence between a unique IP address and an individual user. As 37 percent of urban internet users rely on access via cyber-cafes, the margin of error for any conclusions based on such calculations would be too large to justify them.

Source: Alexa.com. To ensure analytical relevance, a top 25 list of sites hosting UGC (including those hosting other types of content as well) has been created, rather than an unqualified top 10 list of all sites. Moreover, since the focus of this Report is on news, sites that do not allow for such a focus—those around gaming or marriages—have not been included.

Looking at websites carrying UGC in terms of their primary types, we can see the combined strength that weblogs and sharing sites have: they claim almost a quarter of the spots in this top 25, and they have a reach in absolute numbers that slightly exceeds that of social networks. Web portals and/or web boards are the single most popular category of UGC websites. Note: the websites of all existing news outlets in the top 25 also share many characteristics of web portals and/or web boards. The combined reach in absolute numbers of these two categories, in fact, slightly exceeds that of social networks.

Table 22.

Top 25 UGC websites, grouped by type, as of 13 July 2011

Type	Top 25 UGC websites (#rank)
Web portal/web board/directory	Yahoo.com (#2), Rediff.com (#7), In.com (#11), Msn.com (#14), Imdb.com (#15), Oneindia.in (#17), Sulekha.com (#19), Cnet.com (#20), About.com (#21)
Existing news outlet's site	Indiatimes.com (#8), Espncricinfo.com (#13), Moneycontrol.com (#23), Ndtv.com (#24)
Weblog	Blogspot.com (#4), Wordpress.com (#10), Wordpress.org (#25)
Social network	Facebook.com (#1), Twitter.com (#6), Orkut.co.in (#9), Orkut.com (#12)
Social bookmarking	Stumbleupon.com (#16), Digg.com (#18)
Sharing site	YouTube.com (#3), Wikipedia.org (#5), Flickr.com (#22)

Source: Derived from Table 21, based on Alexa.com

But the overall popularity of web portals and/or web boards as a source for UGC requires qualification: as Table 23 shows, five out of nine sites in this category function first and foremost as portals. The UGC on these sites thus remains limited to comments on news items and discussions on these comments; Espncricinfo, Moneycontrol, and NDTV websites, too, function largely in this manner. In contrast, only four out of the nine websites in this category, as well as the Indiatimes website, provide web boards where users themselves can raise issues and questions in a prominent place.

Table 23.

Importance of web portals and web boards as distinctive categories, as of 13 July 2011

Type	Websites among top 25 of this type (#rank)
Web portal/directory	Yahoo.com (#2), Rediff.com (#7), Msn.com (#14), Oneindia.in (#17), About.com (#21)
Web portal and web board	In.com (#11), Imdb.com (#15), Sulekha.com (#19), Cnet.com (#20)

Source: Derived from Table 22, based on Alexa.com

Globally, when news is shared on social networks it is often sourced from news websites: in India, print media—domestic and foreign—dominate Alexa.com's top 500 websites: 21 entries represent established newspapers or magazines. Of the country's television news channels, only NDTV makes the cut, followed by three foreign outlets: BBC Online, CNN Interactive, and Reuters. About a third of the traffic of the India Today Group, which occupies the 174th spot in Alexa.com's top 500, comes from visits to its Hindi television news channel, Aaj Tak. Despite its explicit support for citizen journalism, IBN Live has not achieved such popularity: as of 13 July 2011, its traffic rank was 12,750.

Clearly, there is a continued importance of news media outlets in the era of UGC, as an analysis of the situation in regional languages shows. Some social networks and sharing sites in the top 25 have the option to switch to a language other than English, but it is unclear how much traffic is generated by such sub-domains (except when a website caters specifically to an Indian audience). Among the top 25, figures are available for Oneindia.in, which, according to Alexa.com on 13 July 2011 drew almost 19 percent of its traffic from content in Tamil, 7.5 percent from Telegu, and 5.5 percent from Kannada. Moneycontrol.com has the option to switch to Hindi but drew less than 1 percent of its traffic from this sub-domain that day. Similarly, popular platform Indiblogger.in reports in 2009 that only 8 percent of blogs registered on it were in regional languages (Hindi, Tamil, Marathi, Telegu, etc.).¹⁷³

Similarly, web use for news in languages other than English remains limited: only eight of the top 500 websites have a home page in a language other than English, as listed in Table 24.

Table 24.

Top 10 most popular sites in languages other than English, as of 13 July 2011

	Name of website	UGC type	Language	Global reach (%) [*]	Global reach in absolute numbers	Reach in India (%)	Reach in India in absolute numbers
1	Bhaskar.com	Existing news outlet	Hindi	0.06	1,319,854	93.60	1,235,383
2	Dinamalar.com	Existing news outlet	Tamil	0.06	1,173,203	77.90	913,925
3	Eenadu.net	Existing news outlet	Telegu	0.06	1,194,153	69.80	833,519
4	Webdunia.com	Web portal and web board	Hindi	0.05	984,653	85.70	843,847
5	Sakshi.com	Existing news outlet	Telegu	0.05	984,653	74.20	730,612
6	Manoramaonline.com	Established media company	Malayalam	0.04	900,853	66.90	602,670
7	Mathrubhumi.com	Existing news outlet	Malayalam	0.03	712,302	67.80	482,941
8	Divyabhaskar.co.in	Existing news outlet	Gujarati	0.02	335,201	88.40	296,318

Note: * Reach measures the number of users. It is typically expressed as the percentage of all internet users who visit a given site daily.

The same procedure was followed to construct this table as for Table 21. But only UGC websites with a landing page in a language other than English were included. As with Table 21, since the focus of this study is on news, sites not allowing for such a focus have not been included.

Source: Alexa.com (accessed 13 July 2011)

According to an IAMA-IMRB study on online vernacular content, in 2009 online regional language content was largely driven by news—the most important category of content accessed in languages other than English

173. R. Ravin and G. Mishra, "Indiblogger.in: State of the Indian Blogosphere 2009," 19 May 2009, at <http://www.slideshare.net/Gauravonomics/indiblogging-state-of-the-indian-blogosphere-may-2009?type=powerpoint> (accessed 16 March 2012).

after email.¹⁷⁴ Table 24 confirms this, and it also provides two more insights: the strong presence of South Indian languages and the overwhelming importance of established media where news consumption through UGC in Indian vernacular languages is concerned. Only Webdunia is firmly established in this space as an indigenous player that is not an established media company.

3.1.2 Social Networks

Table 25 shows the reach of the 10 most popular social media sites—i.e. those classified as weblog, social network, and sharing sites in Table 22—in India according to Alexa.com, with reach defined as the number of internet users who visit the site on any given day.¹⁷⁵ While India has two indigenous social networks—Bharatstudent.com, having a reach in absolute numbers of over 1 million, and Indyarocks.com, with almost 700,000—most users prefer global social media sites. Orkut, for a long time the most popular social network, was overtaken by Facebook in July 2010.¹⁷⁶ Between November 2009 and March 2011, unique visitors to Facebook grew from 11,243,000 to 31,593,000; for Orkut, they fell from 17,496,000 to 15,197,000.¹⁷⁷ India remains an important market for Orkut, with over 99 percent of Orkut.co.in visitors and around 33 percent of Orkut.com coming from India.

Table 25.

Top 10 social media sites in India, as of 13 July 2011

	Social media website	Type of social media	Global reach in absolute numbers	Reach in India in absolute numbers
1	Facebook.com	Social network	920,755,139	67,215,125
2	YouTube.com	Video sharing	669,354,419	42,838,683
3	Blogspot.com	Weblog	296,862,351	31,764,272
4	Wikipedia.org	Encyclopedia	287,434,824	19,258,133
5	Twitter.com	Social network	204,891,587	12,498,387
6	Orkut.co.in	Social network	11,732,034	11,638,177
7	Wordpress.com	Weblog	102,864,795	8,743,508
8	Orkut.com	Social network	27,654,079	9,153,500
9	Flickr.com	Photo sharing	49,023,141	2,843,342
10	Wordpress.org	Weblog	26,187,575	2,540,195

Notes: Only websites that can be primarily classified as social media have been considered; thus Rediff.com and Sulekha.com, which have a variety of functions, have not been included. As in the other tables in this section, social networks and other UGC websites that do not allow for a focus on news have not been included here

Source: Derived from data in Table 21 and typology in Table 22, based on Alexa.com (accessed 13 July 2011)

174. IAMA and IMRB, “Report on Vernacular Content: 2009,” IAMA, Mumbai, 2010, p. 10.

175. The number of unique visitors is more reliable than the indication of reach. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to obtain these data for all the social networks listed.

176. ComScore, “Facebook Captures Top Spot among Social Networking Sites in India,” 25 August 2010, at http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2010/8/Facebook_Captures_Top_Spot_among_Social_Networking_Sites_in_India (accessed 14 July 2011).

177. E.K. Sharma, “Millions on the Wall,” *Business Today*, 20 February 2011, at <http://businesstoday.intoday.in/bt/story/facebook-expands-its-reach/1/12900.html> (accessed 14 July 2011); K. Gavane, *State of the Internet with a Focus on India*, ComScore, 2011, p. 15 (hereafter Gavane, *State of the Internet with a Focus on India*).

Although Facebook, YouTube, Wikipedia, and Orkut allow use in select regional languages, and Blogspot and Wordpress make it possible to blog in them, Alexa.com does not provide statistics in this regard. Only 8 percent of blogs registered on Indiblogger.in in 2009 were in a regional language. On 13 July 2011, 1,271 Hindi blogs, 553 Tamil blogs, 296 Marathi blogs, and 171 Telegu blogs were listed on it, with some in Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Punjabi, Sanskrit, and Urdu. On blogger platforms such as BlogAdda.com, blogs in regional languages comprise 12 percent of those registered; CEO Nirav Sanghavi says the percentage is rising, slowly.¹⁷⁸

3.1.3 News in Social Media

According to a ComScore study, the audience for online news has grown rapidly in recent years. In October 2009, traffic to online news sites was 37 percent higher year on year. This growth in visitors (aged 15 and older) to 15.8 million was more than double the growth in total online audience in India. Some 44 percent of the online population accessed news at that time.¹⁷⁹ Although slowing down, robust growth continued to mark subsequent years: corresponding figures for March 2010 and March 2011 were 50 percent and 58 percent, respectively.¹⁸⁰ The Boston Consulting Group, India estimates the number of internet users accessing news is larger: in 2009, it found that 61 percent did so.¹⁸¹ The development of online content in regional languages is believed to be driven largely by news.

Such figures, however, tell us little about the role of blogs and social networks in such consumption. Apart from news, ComScore included social networking and blogs as distinctive categories in its March 2011 data on the reach of different categories of internet use. To what extent there may be an overlap between the three, and whether ComScore's methods allowed for this, is unclear. A similar split marks IMRB's Web Audience Measurement experiment, which lists news as the fourth most important category of content in August 2010, with social networking ranking second in terms of reach.¹⁸² Despite the considerable importance of UGC websites as news sources, studies continue to focus more on websites of traditional news outlets when assessing online consumption of news.

According to the Global Web Index, accessing news is an important aspect of the motivation of social media users: 58 percent stay up to date with news and events. With respect to this, accessing news as a motivation for social network use came only after research for work and for education, and was, remarkably, as important as staying in touch with friends. In addition, 39 percent said they wanted to share their opinions, and while 36 percent had written a blog post, 28 percent had written a news story or article in the month preceding the

178. Interview with Nirav Sanghavi, founder and CEO, BlogAdda.com, New Delhi, February 2012.

179. ComScore, "Online News Attracts Rapidly Growing Audience in India," 14 December 2009, at http://www.comscore.com/Press_Events/Press_Releases/2009/12/Online_News_Attracts_Rapidly_Growing_Audience_in_India/ percent28language percent29eng-US (accessed 14 July 2011).

180. Gavane, *State of the Internet with a Focus on India*, p. 24.

181. Boston Consulting Group, *The Internet's New Billion: Digital Consumers in Brazil, Russia, India, China, and Indonesia*, Boston Consulting Group, Boston, MA, 2010, pp. 10, 18.

182. IAMAI, "Drivers of the Top Performing Categories on the Internet," 26 October 2010, at http://www.iamai.in/PRelease_detail.aspx?nid=2176&tNMonth=10&cNYear=2010 (accessed 14 July 2011) (hereafter IAMAI, "Drivers of the Top Performing Categories on the Internet").

survey.¹⁸³ On Indiblogger.in, there were 830 blogs tagged as “news” on 13 July 2011; in comparison, 5,146 blogs were tagged “personal,” making this the most important tag, followed by “technology” as a distant second, with 2,675. Mr Sanghavi argued that in regional languages the importance of news varies. Among North Indian languages, its significance is striking: in the Hindi blogosphere, many blogs attract an extremely loyal readership, as seen by the large average number of comments (25–30) on posts.¹⁸⁴

Since 2010, many major Hindi television channels have recognized the importance of social media for engaging young audiences.¹⁸⁵ News channels have started to see them as an important avenue for the consumption of news among English-speaking groups. In December 2010, the news channel CNN-IBN was found by social media users to be attributing, in one of its shows, comments consistently supportive of the legalization of lobbying to non-existent Twitter accounts. Finally, as a result of the continued pressure of social media users, CNN-IBN was later forced to air an unconditional apology.¹⁸⁶

Despite these trends, it is noteworthy that according to the IMRB’s Web Audience Measurement experiment, if reach is measured in terms of minutes spent on a content category in August 2010, the importance of news falls dramatically. While social networking emerged as the most important category (with 190 minutes spent on it), news fell to seventh place (16 minutes). While more users look up news online, the time they spend doing so remains limited.¹⁸⁷ Subhash Rai, a web editor based in Bangalore, asserts that while social media, RSS, and mobile devices have changed consumption habits, continuous and participatory traditional media outlets set the news agenda and attract user traffic.¹⁸⁸ Independent journalist and media activist Geeta Seshu points out that in the absence of clear business models, alternative media initiatives often struggle financially;¹⁸⁹ Countermedia, for example, is no longer operational.

3.2 Digital Activism

The potential of new media to make alternative voices heard remains substantial, and it is perhaps in the arena of social and political activism that this has been felt most. In the words of Shiv Bhaskar Dravid of *The Viewpaper*:

183. T. Smith, “Today We Launch the Global Web Index LITE! Free Global Social Media Insights,” Global Web Index, at <http://globalwebindex.net/thinking/lite/> (accessed 14 July 2011).

184. Interview with Nirav Sanghavi, founder and CEO, BlogAdda.com, New Delhi, February 2012.

185. The marketing of reality shows such as “*Sach ka Saamna*” (Facing the truth), “*Pati, Patni aur Wob*” (Husband, Wife, and Her), “*Dance India Dance*,” and “*Dance Premier League*” was augmented through Facebook by Star Plus, Imagine, Zee TV, and Sony; FICCI-KPMG, 2011, p. 22.

186. Dalamedia, “IB—Using Twitter ID’s which Don’t Exist,” [sic] Dalamedia.posterous.com, 16 December 2010, at <http://dalamedia.posterous.com/36632972> (accessed 4 September 2011); Dalamedia, “Rajdeep Sardesai Shows Character,” Dalamedia.posterous.com, 20 December 2010, at <http://dalamedia.posterous.com/rajdeep-sardesai-shows-character> (accessed 4 September 2011); P. Jebaraj, “Fake Tweets Aired on TV News Show,” *The Hindu*, 19 December 2010, at http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tpnational/article962629.ece?sms_ss=twitter&cat_xt=4d0d844b06c25a81,0 (accessed 4 September 2011).

187. IAMAI, “Drivers of the Top Performing Categories on the Internet.”

188. Interview with Subhash Rai, web editor, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Bangalore, March 2012.

189. Interview with Geeta Seshu, independent journalist, New Delhi, February 2012.

What the internet has done is really questioned the concept of democracy today and how media is changing things. Representative democracy came at a time when people were not connected, so you needed a representative starting from the grass-root level. So in today's era, connectivity is the key: the internet has provided this platform where people are actually taking their decisions and voice out that “this is something that I agree with” and “this is something that I don't agree with.” The mainstream media ride on the fact that they have the power of creating and distributing news. The internet kills that. So issues that mainstream media leave untouched at times are forced into mainstream debates because of the internet.¹⁹⁰

A range of initiatives have emerged in various regions addressing themes the mainstream media of those regions have ignored. Examples include E-pao.net about Manipur and Manipuris, the Oriya Samadrushti.org about Orissa, and several initiatives in Kerala and Tamil Nadu. Other initiatives function as watchdogs over corporate media while retaining their own moorings in journalism—be they non-profit-making, like Thehoot.org, or otherwise, like Medianama.com. Still others offer pluralist and critical content on a rich array of contemporary society, including Indiatogether.org, Infochangeindia.org, Sanhati.com, Twocircles.net, and Roundtableindia.co.in.

3.2.1 Digital Platforms and Civil Society Activism

Online activism really started to pick up after the emergence of blogs around 2004. Today, three groups can broadly be identified among Indian online activists: social activists aligned with various movements; political activists who fight for greater regional autonomy or for independence from the Indian state; and middle-class activists defending their interests.

The greatest visibility among Indian online activists has been enjoyed by middle-class activists. Their initiatives are of a varied nature, with some centered on a specific digital platform and others on a variety of tools. For example, the now defunct Vote Report India (previously Votereport.in) was a collaborative citizen-driven platform that encouraged the public to report violations of the Election Commission of India's (ECI) Code of Conduct for the 2009 general elections. The platform found limited traction: although it continues to be referred to widely in commentaries on Indian online activism, little more than 200 reports were uploaded—despite substantial coverage online and in traditional media.¹⁹¹ Initiators learned the hard way that, if implicitly or explicitly, a community of people linked by a common grievance or aspiration does not predate it, then such digital activism initiatives fizzle out.

Such a community existed in the case of the far more successful “tweet” campaign against the chain Café Coffee Day in February 2010. Using the hashtag #ccdsucks, the campaign was started after a tweet-up group of people were told to leave a Café Coffee Day outlet because they refused to pay a cover charge to use the venue for meetings. Seeing a potential PR disaster, the chain apologized the day after the incident.

190. Interview with Shiv Bhaskar Dravid, CEO, *The Viewpaper*, New Delhi, February 2012.

191. Previously reported on Gauravonomics.com; post no longer available.

Perhaps the most rapid and intense online activism has been the India Against Corruption (IAC) campaign (Indiaagainstcorruption.org), which was launched in April 2011 on Facebook, Twitter, and a campaign website to support offline activities, most notably a hunger strike. Within days of the start of the hunger strike, its Facebook page was “liked” by over 40,000 people, hashtags related to the protest were trending on Twitter, and over 600,000 registered their support to the campaign by giving a “missed call” to a dedicated phone line.¹⁹²

IAC was a watershed not only because of its scale: the campaign had roots in offline activism. This marked a crucial difference from most middle-class initiatives that germinate online. In contrast, some of the driving forces behind IAC have long-standing records of participation in more traditional social movements. Though criticized by the traditional activists, the campaign entailed a break from the past.

In contrast to these new groups of middle-class activists, Indian social movements and those that question predominant models and processes of development have been relatively slow to embrace the internet. In so far as they have an online presence, this is in most cases the result of the efforts of well-meaning but isolated individual activists or supporters willing to invest time in running Facebook groups, writing blogs, or maintaining a website. Thus, for example, Narmada.org is not run by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA)—the movement protesting against the construction of dams on the river Narmada for more than 25 years—but by “The Friends of River Narmada,” who, on the site, explicitly distinguish themselves from the NBA. And while the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan (MKSS) and the National Campaign for People’s Right to Information (NCPRI) do have their own websites, these are updated infrequently and make little use of Web 2.0 interactive possibilities.

Social media networks lend themselves better to individual initiatives than do websites (and to some extent blogs), where the efforts of individual activists and supporters of social movements have paid off the most. Though Twitter is not yet popular among this type of activist, many have taken to Facebook in a big way—to engage a larger audience rather than preach to the converted.¹⁹³ Similarly, platforms for progressive activists that are explicitly discussion-oriented, such as Kafilā (Kafila.org), have met with considerable success. On 14 July 2011, Kafilā’s average daily reach over the preceding month was 17,151—although Ms Seshu (see section 3.1.3) underscores the fact that this site presents “views, not news.”

In their efforts, traditional activists collide with groups affiliated with the Hindu right, which—some exceptions notwithstanding—up until 2004 were the groups most active on the internet. Often under the impetus of U.S.-based members of the Indian Hindu diaspora, they run myriad websites espousing their cause.¹⁹⁴ In addition, activists with right-wing affiliations bombard online reports and platforms critical

192. P. Kulkarni, “Support Hazare? Give a Missed Call OR, 6.6L Missed Calls Recorded to Support Hazare,” *Times of India*, 7 April 2011, at http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2011-04-07/pune/29391753_1_support-hazare-anti-corruption-movement-india-against-corruption-movement (accessed 4 September 2011).

193. Interview with two activists (names confidential), New Delhi and Mumbai, respectively, June 2010.

194. R. Chopra (2008), *Technology and Nationalism in India: Cultural Negotiations from Colonialism to Cyberspace*, Cambria Press, Amherst, pp. 135–179.

of their causes with aggressive comments. For left-wing platforms, this phenomenon has proved a serious challenge. Thus, the Indian chapter of Indymedia closed down after it was “overtaken” by the Hindu right, as its initiators did not find an effective way to deal with the onslaught within the ideology of openness integral to Indymedia worldwide.¹⁹⁵

Finally, in areas where political movements seek greater autonomy or even independence from the Indian state, activists have taken to the internet, notably in Kashmir, where it played a crucial role in planning and broadcasting extensive protests, characterized by stone throwing in the summer of 2010, in an environment of curbs on the media and a ban on SMS messaging, and a partial ban on voice telephony in some districts of the state. Early on in the protest cycle, a hitherto little-known Kashmiri separatist leader began to post recruitment videos on YouTube. Activists started Facebook groups and posted videos on YouTube to spread the word about the atrocities committed against protesters by the Indian police and army. The government responded by arresting some digital activists and ordering service providers to block YouTube and Facebook. In September 2010, the Inspector General of Police in Kashmir zone started his own Facebook page.¹⁹⁶

As the IAC campaign indicates, initiatives are slowly emerging that defy easy categorization, mixing a range of audiences, techniques, and technologies. While the IAC campaign is a high-profile example, there are more modest (and radical) examples. For instance, the driving force behind Greatindianclearancesale.org (most active on Facebook) is a young man with a corporate job he does not intend to give up. Yet via art and critical questioning, this initiative tries to raise concerns close to the heart of traditional activists. At the other end of the spectrum, Cgnetswara.org seeks to allow tribal people in Chhattisgarh to record and listen to, using their mobile phones, small news items in Hindi and local languages; such reportage is then put on the internet (Cgnetswara.org) and shared on an email list. Its founder Shubhranshu Choudhary explains: “Although the internet has a limited reach ... when you mix the usages of internet with mobile and radio, then it does wonders with all the minority languages—especially tribal languages, many of which don’t have scripts.”¹⁹⁷

Some such trends are mirrored by experiments with news on mobile phones. Many major newspapers have mobile sites. Nikhil Narayan, a Value Added Services (VAS) professional from Bangalore, says: “Some regional papers provide SMS content and voice services as they can be delivered in their markets which are largely non-metro.”¹⁹⁸ The BBC has been exploring using mobile phones to spread content in Hindi and English. Subscribers to the mobile operator Airtel can get access to a voice blog with news updates in Hindi on a monthly subscription basis,¹⁹⁹ while an Interactive Voice Response number, accessible across mobile operators in India, offers access to BBC news in Hindi and English, as well as sports entertainment news, on demand.²⁰⁰

195. Interviews with two activists (names confidential), New Delhi, May 2010.

196. See <https://www.facebook.com/pages/SM-Sahai-IG-Kashmir/131455413567934?sk=wall> (accessed 4 September 2011).

197. Interview with Shubhranshu Choudhary, Knight International Journalism Fellow and Founder, Cgnetswara.org, New Delhi, February 2012.

198. Interview with Nikhil Narayan, VAS professional, Bangalore, 27–28 January 2012.

199. N. Pahwa, “BBC News Launches Premium Voice Blog on Airtel; How Will It Become Viral?” [Medianama.com](http://www.medianama.com/2010/03/223-bbc-news-launches-premium-voice-blog-on-airtel-how-will-it-become-viral/), 15 March 2010, at <http://www.medianama.com/2010/03/223-bbc-news-launches-premium-voice-blog-on-airtel-how-will-it-become-viral/> (accessed 22 June 2011).

200. N. Pahwa, “BBC Launches Hindi Mobile Site with Audio News Bulletins,” [Medianama.com](http://www.medianama.com/2010/09/223-bbc-launches-hindi-mobile-site-with-audio-news-bulletins), 27 September 2010, at <http://www.medianama.com/2010/09/223-bbc-launches-hindi-mobile-site-with-audio-news-bulletins> (accessed 22 June 2011).

3.2.2 The Importance of Digital Mobilizations

Digitization has had a significant impact on modes of activism. Mr Dravid, CEO of the *Viewpaper*, observed with respect to an environmental campaign to prevent a bauxite mining project damaging an area of particularly rich biodiversity in the eastern state of Orissa: “[The] Niyamgiri hills petition which went mainstream—the original petition filer wrote an article²⁰¹ for the *Viewpaper* more than three and a half years ago, and at that time we went ahead and promoted the cause. If you do a campaign like an open source campaign, everybody takes it and makes [their] own version. So mobilization is significant in that sense.”²⁰²

Indeed, the considerable digital divide has had significant consequences for the trajectory and impact of online activism. One reason social activists have been slow to take to the internet is that the average digital activist and his/her audience are an urban elite and large parts of the communities they owe allegiance to are not online.

3.3 Assessments

Internet usage, both on laptops and mobile phones, is on the rise in India, although there is still a huge digital divide between urban and rural areas as well as between high- and low-income groups. Sharing sites and weblogs enjoy more overall popularity among Indian users if one looks at the top 25 sites. Among the social networks used, most are global ones like Facebook, but a few specifically Indian ones, like Bharatstudent.com (1 million users), have come up in the rankings in the recent past. The expanse of non-English languages, though on the increase, is still limited. Overall online traffic and activity suggest that the internet, much like television as a whole, does not get attracted by news sites; though unlike television, online users seem to gravitate more toward foreign or foreign-owned media outlets.

Because of limited and concentrated internet penetration rate, not all—nor even most—Indians have been able to access, let alone leverage, online opportunities. Initiatives aimed at increasing access receive less attention and tend to generate less debate in news, than those initiatives furthering or broadening the needs of the already connected/online sections of the population. Among broadband and smartphone adopters, varying initiatives to use (i.e. produce and consume) information to engage with social and political affiliations have seen varying degrees of success and sustainability. Amid this plethora and diversity of “alternative” online initiatives, be they news or views, three common traits surface: their reader numbers tend to be fairly small, their impact on mainstream news media remains unclear, and they often struggle to get by financially, let alone commercially. Their dividend may well lie, for now, in forging extensive and more intense forms of social capital, often both online and on the ground.

201. See <http://theviewpaper.net/save-the-niyamgiri-hills> (accessed 25 February 2012).

202. Interview with Shiv Bhaskar Dravid, CEO, *The Viewpaper*, New Delhi, February 2012.