Insights from Relevance Theory on the Marxist critique of social media

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Abstract

With focus on Facebook, this paper contributes to the scholarly discussion that draws from Marxist concepts to examine “labour relations” between social media organizations as capitalist enterprises and users as both free labour and unwitting commodities sold to advertisers. This critical stream of research has not yet paid much attention to the ideological processes that may be facilitating the establishment and maintenance of such exploitative relations. We adopt a discursive perspective and draw on linguistic pragmatics to shed light on these processes. In particular, we employ the notions of ‘relevance’ and ‘cognitive illusion’ to explore in detail the discourse that influences how the user-platform relationship is, firstly, constructed in and by Facebook’s organizational communication, and secondly, understood by social media users. We introduce a discursive process we call context manipulation; it is an analytical concept that helps bring to focus the discursive obscuring of the capitalist operational logic and the simultaneous solicitation of users. By empirically elaborating on these discursive processes leading to commodification of users, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the workings of ideology in the context of corporate social media and highlights the discursive nature of such processes that have previously, within Marxist Internet studies, been viewed mainly from an economic perspective.

Introduction

Social media could be seen as a new “layer” through which people organize their lives; however, this layer is anything but a neutral utility—it is associated, instead, with a specific ideology (van Dijck, 2013). In the early 2000s, many web idealists claimed that media consumers now had unprecedented power relative to producers in a “participatory culture” (Bruns, 2008; Jenkins, 2006). However, commercial social media corporations soon appropriated the participatory ideology, nurturing an image of collectivity and user-generated content while
“commodifying” users. By way of commodification, economic value is assigned to things and entities that normally fall outside the economic realm and rendered exchangeable in economic terms (e.g. Appadurai, 1986), for example, human relationships and sociality more generally. Specifically, social media corporations commodify users in two ways, by selling their (passively produced) data and their attention to advertising (see also Smythe, 1977; 1994). At the same time, users’ more active actions, such as producing content for the site, are also exploited as a type of free “labour” (Comor, 2011; Fuchs, 2014a; Kozinets et al., 2008). This is the basis of many recent Marxist critiques of the political economy of the Internet.

While the increasingly commodified nature of online contexts has, for the most part, been examined in the field of critical media and communication research (e.g. Fuchs, 2009; 2014; Thurlow, 2013; van Dijck, 2013), the political economy of the Internet perspective is also of utmost concern from an organizational studies point of view. For example, social media corporations provide organizational scholars with the opportunity to examine new types of value extraction models in contemporary capitalism (see e.g. Böhm & Land, 2012; Böhm, Land & Beverungen, 2012), as well as the new, more fluid forms of labour and power dynamics thereof. In this paper, we approach social media from a critical perspective that treats it as a complex “socio-technical system that shapes and is shaped by life in contemporary capitalism” (Fuchs, 2016: 22). We continue a research stream that draws from Marxist concepts to examine “labour relations” between capitalist social media organizations and users that are in the paradoxical position of simultaneously being the unwitting commodity sold to advertisers, and (free) labour providing content for the site, thereby helping to produce economic value for the company (see e.g. Fuchs, 2012, 2014a, 2014b, 2016; van Dijck, 2013).

The particularly problematic issue of this type of modern labour relations lie in the opaqueness of the relationship itself: most social media users do not see themselves as workers, as producers of added value for a company. Nor do they usually conceive of themselves and their data as commodities, exchanged for advertising revenue. However, so far, little attention has been paid
to the ideological processes that allow the value extraction in the context of digital labour to be organised in such a way. This is what we examine and elucidate in this paper.

Ideological and commodification processes can be understood as being to a significant degree discursive in nature (see e.g. Fairclough, 1994); we believe that in order to shed light on the ideological processes related to the spread of new value extraction models and labour relations, it is useful to take a discursive view. Therefore, we set out to explore the ideological discursive mechanisms that contribute to the engagement of digital labour and the commodification and exploitation of users. As an explorative case study, we analyze the discussion involving Facebook’s “Community Standards”, comparing the company’s own messages and reactions by users and the press from a linguistic, more specifically, a cognitive-pragmatic perspective. In our discourse analysis, we combine corpus tools (which allow both quantitative and qualitative analysis of textual data; e.g. McEnery et al., 2006; Baker 2006) with Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]). Drawing on Relevance Theory, we develop an analytical lens we call “context manipulation”—highlighting an interpretive context that is relevant for the reader, here, social media users, with the consequence that other contexts are obscured, for example, those relating to the economic rationale of the capitalist social media the users are inextricably a part of. The users as readers are thus provided with only a partial, and therefore misleading, representations of the conditions regarding their participation, and therefore denied the grounds for making an informed judgement regarding the relationship they enter into. We examine, then, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, which interpretative contexts are linguistically made salient in the data. Further, in order to examine ‘hidden contexts’, that is, contexts not explicitly provided by Facebook’s organizational communication, we turn to user comments to look for examples of different understandings, alternative contexts made relevant by users in interpreting the organizational communication. By looking at both the organizational communication and the user commentary around the subject matter we are able to recover tensions between different understandings.
This paper contributes to an increased theoretical understanding of the ideological processes underlying commodification of online participation. We argue that the discursive processes of context manipulation can lead to cognitive illusions (see Johnson-Laird & Savary, 1999; Maillatt & Oswald, 2009) regarding the nature of social media services, blurring the underlying economic rationale. The notion of cognitive illusion can therefore be understood as a revised understanding of the Marxist notion of ideology as false consciousness and it explains why many users stay complacent about the exploitation of which they arguably are victims.

**Theoretical framework**

In what follows, we first discuss previous research involving a Marxist perspective to the political economy of the Internet, including commodification of users as online audiences, proceeding then to discuss the ideological process of soliciting users.

**Exploitation and commodification of social media users**

In consuming capitalist social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, “users not just reproduce their labour power” by having fun on the site, but also “produce commodities” (Fuchs, 2012: 704). Fuchs further argues that the labour of users is “exploited because it generates value and products that are owned by others” (Fuchs, 2012: 705). Arguably the social media users as workers do receive something in return for their efforts, namely the right to use the site and anything else they gain from the activity in terms of use value, but at the same time they also produce surplus value which is collected by the social media company. However, this is but one side of the peculiar relationship between users and social media companies: the other side is that, in a sense, users (particularly their data, time and attention) are commodified and sold as a commodity to advertisers. Thus, social media users are both commodities and workers engaged in (unpaid) digital labour.

Commodification is, shortly, the transformation of use value into exchange value (e.g. Kang & McAllister, 2011), or the transformation of social and cultural capital produced by users into
economic capital (Fuchs, 2012; 2014a). The phenomenon is closely related to the prevailing neoliberal rationality, which sees value in and sets a price on things not originally produced as commodities, including all human activities in the realm of the market (e.g. Fuchs, 2014a; Harvey, 2005). Dahlberg (2001) already saw commodification of the Internet as one of the greatest threats to the autonomy of public interaction online, while Thurlow (2013) has later noted that nowhere is commodification “more apparent than in Facebook where the meaning (and spaces) of social networking have been so fully co-opted (and colonized) by corporations”.

Recently, critical online media scholars drawing from Marxist ideas have examined various aspects of the commodification of the Internet, for example, online privacy, which is reconceptualized from a right to a commodity (Campbell & Carlson, 2002). One such approach draws from Smythe (1977, 1994), who coined the term “audience commodity”, arguing that (what he called) audiences are exploited by being sold as a commodity to advertisers. Today, in the social media context it is less appropriate to talk about “audiences” which suggests they are more or less passive receivers, when in fact social media users are active participants and also producers of content (known as “prosumers”)—instead, therefore, the term “internet prosumer commodity” has been proposed for describing the exploitation of users by Internet corporations (Fuchs, 2010; 2012).

**Ideology and solicitation**

The concept of ideology is essential in understanding why users accept the arguably exploitative conditions on social media platforms. Critical definitions of ideology used in the Marxist tradition see it as a distortion, as “false consciousness” (Althusser, 2008 [1971]; Hall, 1985; Thompson, 1990), or the “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 2008 [1971]: 36). Stemming from the Marxist tradition, many authors emphasize the effects of ideologies in (re)producing relations of power and inequality (Thompson, 2013; Fairclough, 2003).
More generally, in the modern world, labour relations are changing; they are increasingly short-termed and project-based, mobility-oriented, and precarious in their non-committal character. This fluidity and fragmentation adds to the insecurity of not only the labour market but of life more generally, and can therefore intensify the distorting effect of ideology whereby collective exploitation and alienation continues to be beyond individual grasp, each experiencing it as a personal difficulty. Bauman (2004: 35) observes that as people are struggling in their daily lives just to survive, it is difficult to see past one’s own predicament; furthermore, he points out how the ever increasing fragmentation of labour conditions serve to diminish the possibility for collective action as it is unlikely that people unsatisfied with the prevailing conditions would meet, gather or organise as “the structures of capitalist enterprises and routines of hired labour [...] no longer seem to offer a common frame”. It thus follows that no organised, collective action toward social improvement is possible, largely due to the invisibility of the structures behind the emergence of such fluid labour relations of today.

In the context of social media, similarly, it is difficult for users to see the bigger picture and to organize resistance against problematic practices—not to mention that many have more pressing issues to worry about. As long as users remain unaware of the exploitative, profit-oriented nature of the labour relationship they are engaged in (or indeed of the fact that it constitutes a labour relationship to begin with), they can not instigate change or engage in collective resistance. Fuchs (2014a) calls such collectives affected by prosumer (users as both producers and consumers) exploitation the new ‘digital proletariat’ unable to organise, and thus not forming a working class in the true sense of the word.

The situation is made more obscure by the fact that, on the one hand, the ideology involved in contemporary social media presents it as a form of participatory culture and new democracy, yet on the other hand, it hides the inherent exploitation by making it appear as play (Fuchs, 2012). Understanding the Internet and social media as “free” and “participatory” hides the contradictions between users and their exploiters (Na, 2015). Following Marxist thinking on ideology, we see that users are persuaded to accept this view of the Internet because of the
deceptive appearance, but also, even if they recognized the contradictions, they are not in a position to easily change them (Na, 2015). Similarly, Fuchs (2012) argues that digital labour is “ideologically coerced”, meaning that not participating in social media carries the threat of social isolation. Consequently, no organised, collective action toward social improvement is likely to happen, however sorely needed.

The ideological nature of online participation and exploitation can also be examined in terms of Baudrillard’s notion of “solicitation” (1998 [1970]). An intense critic of the consumer society, Baudrillard saw consumption as a system of exchange of signs and symbolic meaning(s), instead of a mere economic exchange relation. He (1998 [1970]: 168, emphasis added) discussed systems of consumption, and advertising in particular, as “apparatuses of solicitude” that are designed “both to care for and to satisfy, on the one hand, and surreptitiously to gain by enticement and abduction on the other hand”. In Baudrillard’s thinking, consumers are constantly solicited with the idea (and ideology) of the “Gift” at the one end, and engagement (and commitment) to consumption on the other end. The Gift is forever “serving as an alibi for the real conditioning which is that of [the consumer’s] ‘solicitation’ or entreaty” (Baudrillard, 1998 [1970]: 168), that is to say, the apparent Gift functions as enticement, but can also be seen as a form of manipulation and control. He goes on to claim that in advertising consumers are solicited to vote in “favour of a certain code of values and implicitly to sanction it” (Ibid.). In the social media context, while the user is solicited by enticement and the promise of the Gift, for example free participation and self-expression, she is also entreated to sanction the operational logic based on unpaid digital labour, carried out by the very act of her participation. Thus, users also take part in consumption of the media that entices them in the first place. Smythe (1977) also incorporated the idea of the Gift, “an inducement”, in his formulation of how media content works to entice and recruit audience members, as well as maintain their loyalty.
Data and methods

In this study, we take a critical discourse studies perspective (e.g. van Dijk, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2015) and draw from linguistics in our analysis. Specifically, we use corpus tools in our analysis (a method for analysing large amounts of text) as well as concepts developed in Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]; Wilson & Sperber, 2002). In what follows, we first present the empirical data consisting of texts related to Facebook’s rules concerning user content, i.e. the Community Standards, then proceed to present our approach to critical discourse studies and the use of corpus tools in discourse analysis. Finally, we present the main concepts of and idea behind Relevance Theory, a cognitive-pragmatic approach to communication and comprehension.

Data

The empirical data of this explorative case study comprises communication by Facebook regarding their Community Standards together with users’ discussions relating to it. Although the Community Standards are constantly revised and therefore continually undergoing change, we focus here on the revision dated March, 2015.

The Facebook Community Standards outline what can, and what cannot, be done, said, shared or posted on the social media site. They stipulate the overall code of conduct of the site, grant Facebook the authority and permission to control, manage and discipline users by way of controlling their content and silencing their voices as they see fit. In order to use the social media platform, users must agree to these rules. These standards have at various points raised discussion concerning the relations between Facebook and its users, their roles and rights, making them a good place to start analysing the ideological processes surrounding Facebook and its users. Table 1 lists the documents included in our data set.
Table 1. List of data.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Word tokens</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Community Standards</td>
<td>CS</td>
<td>Organizational communication</td>
<td>2.052</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explaining our Community</td>
<td>ECS</td>
<td>Organizational communication</td>
<td>1.048</td>
</tr>
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<td>Standards</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letter from Bickert Osofsky</td>
<td>B&amp;O</td>
<td>Organizational communication</td>
<td>447</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zuckerberg’s Facebook post</td>
<td>Z_FB</td>
<td>Organizational communication</td>
<td>1.390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments to Zuckerberg’s post</td>
<td>Z_FB_com</td>
<td>User comments</td>
<td>115.615</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Guardian article</td>
<td>TG</td>
<td>Newspaper article</td>
<td>624</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments to The Guardian article</td>
<td>TG_com</td>
<td>User comments</td>
<td>1.848</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NYT article</td>
<td>NYT</td>
<td>Newspaper article</td>
<td>1.134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments to NYT Times article</td>
<td>NYT_com</td>
<td>User comments</td>
<td>6.634</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>130.792</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is noteworthy that user comments to a Facebook post by Mark Zuckerberg constitute the biggest part of the corpus with approximate 4.000 comments and over 100.000 words. We believe that user commentary provides a useful source of alternative readings of the original texts authored by the company. As Lovink (2011: 55) notes, what distinguishes comments from a source text that they refer to is their “unfinished nature”. Comments that “circulate around the static, inflexible source text” can be seen as “oral, informal, fast, fluid” (Ibid.). Thus, exploring user comments in conjunction with the company texts related to the Community Standards reveals tensions between what is communicated in the original text, and the various understandings of the source text, whether similar or alternative and opposing. It follows that
what we in this study call “obscured contexts” (that is, obscured in the corporate texts) emerge from the understandings of the users that are not in line with the explicit message of the organizational content.

Critical discourse studies

Critical discourse studies (CDS) aims to explain how power structures are discursively enacted and reproduced (van Dijk, 2001, 2014), with text and talk understood as sites of struggle (Wodak & Meyer, 2015). Currently, discourse is widely understood as a crucial way in which ideologies are acquired, expressed, and reproduced (Eagleton, 1991; Fairclough, 2003). Our approach focuses on analysing details of language use against the wider social, political and commercial context (see Alvesson & Karreman, 2000; Fairclough, 2003; Gee, 1999). In terms of our linguistic analysis, we thus adopt a pragmatic notion of context as including the wider social context of language use (see e.g. Mey, 2001), that is, context extends beyond the immediate linguistic context.

Corpus analysis

Corpus analysis or corpus linguistics is a research method within linguistics that involves computer-assisted analysis of large quantities of texts encompassed in a so called corpora—machine readable collections of authentic texts. Corpus analysis can be used for basic research within linguistics, but also for discourse analytic purposes (Baker, 2006; Baker et al., 2008; Mautner, 2009), as in this study. There are two main types of corpora: large, balanced corpora that are designed to be representative of a specific form of language (such as American written language from 1960 to 1990), and usually much smaller, specialized corpora that represent a smaller set of language, such as a specific genre, topic or case (McEnery et al., 2006, 5; Baker 2006, 26–27). Being a case study, our corpus is of the latter kind. The data included in the corpus of this study are listed in Table 1.

Although corpus analysis is often thought of as a quantitative method (Baker, 2006, 47), it does in fact allow combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses (Mautner, 2009, 123); usually
it is sensible, and even necessary, to do so. The quantitative tools enable looking at the frequencies of words in the corpus generally, or in various parts of the corpus, as well as calculating so called keywords; keywords are a way of comparing word frequencies in two corpora in order to show which words are unusually frequent or infrequent in one of them. Keyword lists incorporate a measure of statistical saliency (in our case, log-likelihood), whereas a simple word list only provides the absolute frequency (Baker 2006, 125). For the purposes of such comparisons, many large (multi-million word) corpora are available, for example, the British National Corpus (BNC), which consists of 100 million word collection of samples of both written and spoken language. Other common corpus linguistic tools include measures of statistically significant collocates (words that tend to occur close to each other) and clusters (groups of words that occur in a specific order). Finally, concordances are search results that display, with their immediate context, all instances of a search term as found in the corpus. These concordance lines (which can be further expanded) can subsequently be subjected to qualitative analyses.

In this study, we used AntConc (version 3.4.4w), a freeware corpus analysis tool developed by Laurence Anthony at Waseda University, Japan. First, we checked plain word frequencies (using a “stop word list” to exclude most common grammatical words and some technical words that recur in the online discussions such as “reply” or “edited”) for all the sub-corpora and compared the most common content words in them to give us a feel for the topics discussed in the corpus, as well as to conduct a preliminary comparison between different parts of the corpus. Second, we then ran a comparison with the frequencies of the BNC written and spoken sub-corpora (also spoken because online discussions often contain many similarities to actual spoken discussions) to generate keywords, and again conducted a comparison of our sub-corpora. Third, we started to examine more closely some of the most interesting common words identified this way by analyzing their collocates, clusters, and concordances. Concordances were analyzed qualitatively using the conceptual framework provided by Relevance Theory, which we present next.
Concepts from Relevance Theory

Relevance Theory (RT) is a cognitive approach to pragmatics, a subdiscipline of linguistics. Pragmatics is generally defined as the study of language in context (Mey, 2001; Levinson, 1983), that is, how people use language to communicate and how different contextual factors affect the interpretation process. Emphasising the social dimension of pragmatic enquiry, Mey (2001: 6) notes how a “truly pragmatic consideration has to deal with the users in their social context; it cannot limit itself to the grammatically encoded aspects of contexts”. What we take this to mean in our study is that it is not sufficient to include the immediate contextual factors of communication, the grammatically encoded context, but we need to include in the analysis the wider socio-cultural context of social media in modern capitalism. In our case, this includes, for example, behaviour exhibited by social media companies (such as deleting posts or otherwise censoring content) that occurs outside of the immediate context, or even irrespective of it. Thus, the actions taken by platform owners, or news written about them (e.g. newspaper articles such as those included in our corpora), or even conversations had with fellow users (whether online or offline): thus, what is conveyed by Facebook in their communication is interpreted against an immensely rich and varied canvas of a context. Context selection is, in this study, seen as being guided by the overall principle of relevance, which is exactly why examining users’ reactions, and more importantly, their understandings, can shed light on what we call obscured context (un)provided by the platform owner.

Built on the Gricean model of pragmatic inference (see Grice, 1975; Grice, 1957), RT emphasises not only the inferential processes in utterance interpretation, but also the Principle of Relevance (see Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]: 155) both in context selection and in the process of comprehension. Relevance-theoretic view (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]; Wilson & Sperber, 1993, 2002, 2006; Wilson, 2013) emphasises that comprehension is not mere decoding of the literal meaning of words, but also crucially involves an inferential phase that is guided by both relevance and contextual cues. In RT, utterances are seen as encoding logical forms: what this means is that these logical forms have truth conditions that then serve as input to the
inferential system of comprehension and guide the inference; however, Wilson & Sperber (1993: 9, emphasis added) point out one important aspect of their theory, noting how “the primary bearers of truth conditions are not utterances but conceptual representations”. What this means is that it is not the literal meaning of the utterance (what is explicitly expressed) that comes to bear in the comprehension stage (in the form of truth conditions), but the conceptual representations based on the utterance and conjured up in the mind of the interpreter, the hearer-reader. This perspective makes it possible to reconcile how different people comprehend the same utterance in different ways by way of constructing different conceptual representations based on the same utterance, depending on and aligned with the contextual information at hand, also guided by the Principle of Relevance.

It thus follows that users interpret a message in a way most relevant to them in the context (see Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]). At the same time, the communicator is creating a “presumption of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]: 156) by way of ostensive communication (while making manifest a certain context). Wilson (2013) explains how the communicator has two distinct goals when communicating, and producing an utterance: they want to get the hearer-reader to understand their meaning, but also to persuade them to believe it. Equally, the recipient has two tasks: first, to understand the communicator’s meaning, and second, to assess the meaning recovered and based on the assessment, to either believe it or to discard it. According to Wilson (Ibid.), the first task relies on people’s pragmatic ability to infer communicator’s meaning from the available linguistic and contextual cues, whereas the second task entails assessing the accuracy of the meaning to avoid being accidentally or intentionally misinformed. Indeed, relevance-seeking tendencies also cater to misleading communicative ends, and indeed, Wilson & Sperber (2002: 254) state that a “universal cognitive tendency to maximise relevance makes it possible, at least to some extent, to predict and manipulate the mental states of others”; it is this relevance-seeking tendency that makes context manipulation possible.
Similarly, Johnson-Laird and Savary (1999: 191, emphasis added) note that “reasoners build [mental] models of the situations described in premises, and [...] these models normally make explicit only what is true”; however, inferences that are compelling but invalid also occur. The theory has an unexpected consequence: it predicts the occurrence of inferences that are compelling but invalid”, arising from the failure to take into account what actually is false. This opens up the possibility for context manipulation: the key idea behind context manipulation is that as certain contexts can be made accessible and relevant (preferred contexts) while others are avoided (obscured contexts), the interpretation process is constrained and guided to a particular direction. Context manipulation, then, is best defined in terms of the constraints it imposes on mental processing, (mis)leading people to process information in a restricted way. The process exploits the inherent weaknesses of the human cognitive system, leading to “cognitive illusions” (Maillatt & Oswald, 2009): thus, conclusions, while logically valid, may not be accurate reflections of the “state of affairs in the world”. This opens up the possibility for context manipulation. The communicator is able to make certain contexts more accessible and relevant (preferred contexts) while avoiding others (obscured contexts): this is what we focus on next in our findings.

Findings

In this section, we first analyse our data in general terms using corpus tools, then illustrate the different interpretative contexts present in Facebook’s own communication, and finally we elaborate on reactions recovered from commentary around the changes to the Community Standards. This allows us to examine the tensions between what is explicitly communicated (the preferred contexts) and what is understood by the users (alternative contexts conjured up by the readers).

Findings from general level corpus analysis

We begun the analysis with a simple quantitative examination of the texts in our corpus. The 20 most frequent words in the different sources included in the corpus are reported in table 2 (all
data was treated as lower case and common grammatical words were filtered out). In table 2, we have first listed Facebook’s communication in the first four columns (see table 1 for explanation of sources). Then we have listed the user commentary to Mark Zuckerberg’s Facebook post (Z_FB_com), as well as the newspaper articles followed by their user commentary (TG_com and NYT_com).

Table 2. Word frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>CS</th>
<th>ECS</th>
<th>B&amp;O</th>
<th>Z_FB</th>
<th>TG</th>
<th>Z_FB_com</th>
<th>TG_com</th>
<th>NYT</th>
<th>NYT_com</th>
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<td>content</td>
<td>mark</td>
<td>facebook</td>
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<td>reply</td>
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<td>standards</td>
<td>facebook</td>
<td>voice</td>
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<td>content</td>
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<td>better</td>
<td>breastfeeding</td>
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Examining the frequency lists, we notice that, unsurprisingly, many words are related to the general topic of Facebook, for example *mark, facebook, reply*. In fact, almost all instances of *mark* refer to Mark Zuckerberg and they are common only in the Z_FB_com file, where people often either address him directly or otherwise mention him. The more specific topic of community standards is of course also visible in the list of most common words: *community, standards, policies, guidelines, rules*. A keyword analysis confirms the salience of many of the most frequent words; the topic of Facebook appears at the top of keywords—*facebook, mark, zuckerberg, fb, likes, posts*—and some are connected to the context more generally, for example *internet, people, pages*, whereas others are more specifically related to the topic of community standards: *community, standards, account, etc.*

Several of the most frequent words turn out to be related to the power of Facebook to make decisions over what is allowed on the site, for example *remove, allowed, banned, control, allow* and *restrict*. There are also several words that refer specifically to things that are or should be removed. For example, one theme relates to *nudity* (also *sexual*, and in keywords *pornography* and *porn*). In TG, also *breastfeeding* came up. *Harassment* seems to be another theme (also *threats, violence, criminal, abuse* and *hate* (collocate: *speech*), and in keywords *bullying*). Finally, the word *fake* (clusters: *fake account(s), fake profile(s), fake id(s)*) also points to a thing to ban or remove.

The quantitative analysis also gives several clues as to what is promoted or desirable on Facebook. Many of the most frequent words relate to civil liberties, particularly free speech: *voice* (collocates: *giving, people*), *free* (collocates: *expression, speech, internet*), *speech* (collocates: *hate, freedom, free*), *expression* (collocates: *freedom, free*) and *amendment* (cluster: *first amendment*). The words *government* (cluster: *government requests*) and *laws* also seem to be connected with this theme, as well as perhaps *world, global, countries, and diversity*.

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1 We italicize words and extracts from the data except when presented as a separate block quote.
Keywords also include freedom, speech, and voice, suggesting that this is indeed a topic that comes up unusually often in our corpus. Another positive theme seems to be related to human connection; connect, connected and sharing are also keywords.

The most frequent words also include positive evaluating words: good, great and safe. These same words also come up in the keywords, and in addition, they include awesome and love. Thank and thanks (Z_FB_com) are frequent words (and also keywords) related to interaction and they also contain a positive evaluation. It is perhaps noteworthy that negative evaluative words do not appear at the top of these lists (except for hate which appears mostly in the cluster hate speech). One keyword that might be related to criticism, and therefore deserves closer attention, is solve (collocate: problem).

Facebook’s own communication

Next we will take a closer look at the texts produced by Facebook. We found four main themes in the contextual selection. These contexts constructed by Facebook focus on (1) how the company enables the user to express themselves, and (2) to connect with others, and (3) to do so safely. Furthermore, the company also depicts itself as (4) an altruistic benefactor at the service of the user. It can be argued, then, that Facebook aims to foreground use value gained from social media participation.

Again, keywords produced in comparison to the BNC give a good initial understanding of the characteristic themes discussed in the company’s texts (keyword rankings in parenthesis). The word safe (29) gives a hint of Facebook’s rationale behind the actions that remove (8), restrict (14), and prohibit (19) point to. Keywords that point to what users should be protected from include sexual (9), bullying (15), threats (16), hate (18), and harassment (30). These construct a context of protection. In addition, salient words include voice (10) and speech (17), which point to a context of expression, to which governments, government, and laws are also connected. Finally, the words share (5), sharing (24), and connect (24) seem to refer to a context of personal connection.
Extract 1 shows how the context of protection is constructed in the text and how safe is related to issues such as violence and bullying:

**Extract 1.**

Our Community Standards aim to find the right balance between giving people a place to express themselves and promoting a welcoming and safe environment for everyone. As you can imagine, striking the right balance is a tough job that we approach by focusing on a few key principles:

* Keeping you safe. We have zero tolerance for any behavior that puts people in danger, whether someone is organizing or advocating real-world violence or bullying other people. (B&O)

This example also demonstrates that Facebook creates a rhetorical contradiction between the context of expression and the context of protection, suggesting that compromises are needed.

In extract 2 from the Facebook post by Mark Zuckerberg, we see particularly clearly the context of expression (italics) and the context of personal connection (bolded). These are enforced with extensive repetition, a rhetorical device in its own right that serves to emphasise the core message.

**Extract 2.**

Our mission is to give people the power to share and to make the world more open and connected. We exist to give you a voice to share what matters to you -- from photos of your family to opinions about the world. We believe the better you can share and connect, the more progress society will make. **Relationships** grow stronger, more jobs and businesses are created and governments better reflect people's values.

As difficult questions arise about the limits of what people can share, we have a single guiding principle: We want to give the most voice to the most people. (Z_FB)
The context of expression refers to public discourse that incorporates freedom of expression and democratic participation, and allows people to voice their opinions and effect progress in society. A for the context of personal connection, it is largely premised on the ideas of social life, of connectivity that you get from Facebook, namely, social belonging and the possibility for emotional sharing (share, connect, family, relationships). Furthermore, the choices of verbs (particularly share and connect) frequently used by Facebook in their communication, including this post, describe activities that fall in the social realm of human activity that social media foster; such topic selection rules out, or obscures, any explicit mention of an economic context, or indeed the economic relation users enter in when they agree to terms and conditions. In addition, in terms of perceived intimacy, there is something to be said about the post coming directly from Zuckerberg. This serves to make organizational communication appear as personal communication, thereby reducing the social and perhaps also the ideological distance between the users and Zuckerberg as a company representative. This discursive strategy is commonly used in corporate communication on social media (see e.g. Lillqvist et al., 2014; 2016).

Extract 2 also highlights the company’s roles as benefactor. This might be described as a supporting process of producing a context of altruism (underlined), which is a prominent theme both in this post and in Facebook’s organizational communication in general. In terms of linguistic choices, we find the polarised use pronouns, namely referring to the company as us/we and the user as you (see also Fairclough, 2003: 149). While we is present in the text, Zuckerberg heavily emphasizes you, creating a dynamic where Facebook is presented as a benefactor and a provider of what the users need and want: the individual user, addressed as you, is represented as the recipient of something that Facebook gives to you. If fact, give and giving appear as collocates for voice, and the somewhat unusual sounding more voice and most voice (as in extract 2) are clusters for voice. Here, a context that is obscured is what you give to Facebook, or formulated conversely, what they gain from user participation. Thus, the social roles established in the text position Facebook as the one with the power and, more importantly, will to provide, and user as recipients (with no obligation for payment of any services; transaction is usually taken as a marker of economic relations).
All these what we call “preferred contexts” can be seen to present Facebook favourably and thus serve to move the interpretative process away from anything that might show the social media company in a negative light. This, we argue, leads to cognitive illusions, misguided interpretations of the context that do not accurately or fully depict the given situation.

Reactions

We also examined reactions to Facebook’s organisational communication about the changes to the Community Standards. In order to analyze the contexts obscured by the company, namely that which is left out, we looked into the tensions between what is explicitly communicated and what is understood (by the users) as implicitly conveyed in the organizational communication and what new points of view the users bring up. As implicit meaning, and implicature, are central notions in pragmatic enquiry (e.g. Mey, 2001; Levinson, 1983), applying the Relevance-theoretic lens in our analysis proved useful in recovering the alternative interpretative contexts utilised by the users in the comprehension process.

In the user reactions, two broad categories could be identified, namely compliant readings, whereby the contexts provided by the company are accepted and inferences are based on the provided contextual cues, and alternative readings where the interpretative contexts offered are overridden by users who draw on wider contextual cues to arrive at their conclusion. We will next discuss each in turn.

Compliant readings

Compliant readings pertain to users’ acceptance of the rules of the site and willingness to obey the framework laid out in the Community Standards. These readings follow the meanings more or less explicitly communicated by Facebook as preferred contexts.

Under compliant readings we can also observe different nuances regarding the acceptance of the rules, regulations, and the general message of the company. Some users accept the situation at
face value without further questioning the contextual cues and the provided context. This seems to be very common, one sign being the that the words thank (6) and thanks (8) rank high in the keywords (and also frequencies) for reaction texts, and several positive evaluative words also appear in the list of top 100 keywords: great (31), good (46), awesome (66), and love (82). In these texts, many common proper names and others words related to Facebook discussions in general appear in the keywords; for this reason we analyzed slightly more keywords in this case.

**Extract 3.**

Well said Mark. Thanks for all the work you do. (Z_FB_com)

Some of the thanks are used in the sense of “thanks in advance”, but many appear in contexts such as the one in Extract 3, thanking for the work that Facebook does. Mark, Zuckerberg and Facebook are also collocates for thank and thanks. In addition, it is evident in the comments that some react to Zuckerberg as a person more than as a company representative, for example, by showing sympathy for his difficult task.

**Extract 4.**

It's great that you are more than a business, but a vehicle for changing the way the world and people connect. (Z_FB_com)

Extract 4 shows one example of how great was used, and it also exemplifies unconditional acceptance of the context of personal connection—connect (63) and connected (88) were also keywords in the reaction texts—as well as the context of altruism, as Facebook is described a more than a business, as doing something good for all of us. Many of the keywords related to the context of expression appear also in the reaction texts: freedom (38), speech (50), free (61), and voice (76).
Extract 5.
You're really leading the way in innovation, clarity, and freedom of expression compared to the rest of the world's largest tech companies. Please do not allow any NSA (or any other Orwellian type government agencies) backdoors into our private information. We the people stand with you against any oppression of liberty and connectivity. (Z_FB_com)

Acceptance of the contexts of expression and altruism is seen in Extract 5. Here, Facebook is also viewed as a benefactor that provides us with the possibility of free expression, and is also able to protect us from wicked forces that aim to invade our privacy.

Alternative readings
Alternative readings present the other side of the coin in the form of counter-discourses to compliance. There is critique of the rules and of their enforcement, but the also of the behaviour of Facebook as an actor more generally.

Many examples of the way Facebook enforces its rules are found in the context of occurrences of the keywords solve (65) and problem (94), which collocate with each other. These often question whether pornography is sufficiently censored or whether sufficient action is taken against, for example, bullying, hate speech, or identity theft. Some instances all have to do with problems related to Facebook’s functionalities, thus not all of them are related to the Community Standards. Some people seem to be desperately trying to contact Zuckerberg about whatever problem they are struggling with through commenting to this post. The words plz (33) and please appear in similar contexts, sometimes pointing to real criticism, as seen in Extract 6:

Extract 6.
Mark Zuckerberg bro please try to solve our privacy issue.....
#Facebook is not like #ello.....
#Ello is also free but there is no ads and moreover that #ello don't sell our info

(Z_FB_com)

This extract shows that a real world example of a social media platform that clearly differs from Facebook provides an alternative interpretative context that allows questioning the contexts provided by Facebook.

**Extract 7.**

how can we talk freely when greedy Facebook asks us to provide true identification, despite our safety? Shame on you Mark, selling people info is your "great" damn move

(Z_FB_com)

Extract 7, which features an instance of the word great in ironic use, is another example showing that sometimes the economic quality of the user-platform relationship is in fact recognized. Here, the description of Facebook as greedy and reference to shame illustrate a reading of moral disapproval which opposes Facebook’s preferred context of altruism.

The alternative readings show us that not all users accept the provided contexts (that is, the preferred contexts) recoverable from Facebook communication. By constructing alternative interpretative contexts, the users at the same time evoke obscured contexts. This allows us to see how the notions of greed, for one, that come up in the commentary indicate some users are aware of the commodification they are subjected to, but also imply some understanding of the capitalist nature of the platform: thus, there is some evidence that some users are aware of the fact that the social media corporation operates on the basis of forming economic relations with its users, engaging them as free labour. Some ambivalence regarding the enforcement of the Community Standards also occurs which serves to undermine the platform owner’s authority and reliability: with incoherent ‘policing’ of the site, the users perceive that censorship by the platform in fact functions to silence some voices while sanctioning others, even if in contradiction with the rules
set by the platform. Thus, freedom of speech is not realised in the way promised in the soliciting communication.

Discussion and conclusion

This article set out to examine the discursive ideological mechanisms that contribute to the engagement of users as unpaid labour and the commodification and exploitation of them as unpaid labour. Drawing on Relevance Theory, a cognitive-pragmatic approach to comprehension and cognition, particularly the notion of relevance (Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]), and on the notion of cognitive illusion (Maillatt & Oswald, 2009), we introduced an ideological process we call *context manipulation*. Based on the framework presented, and our empirical analysis, we have constructed a model illustrating the relational process between social media users and capitalist platform owners (Figure 1). Thus, this paper sheds light on how the commodification of users on social media is achieved through ideological discourse.

The model illustrates the discursive mechanisms of the ideological processes involved in commodification which we call *context manipulation*; platform owners engage in context manipulation by highlighting some contexts and avoiding others, which we have called the *preferred contexts* and *obscured contexts*, respectively. Context manipulation involves highlighting an interpretive context particularly relevant for the reader (see Relevance Theory, Sperber & Wilson, 1995 [1986]), in this case it is the use value of social media services, instead of their exchange value. By restricting the inference process by providing only information that guides positive interpretation (that is, the most relevant interpretation in a provided context), the capitalist mode of production is obscured, while the company presents as an idealized benefactor, offering a Gift to the users.
Specifically, and foremost, communication by Facebook offers contexts that immediately appear to be the most relevant ones for users; thereby the platform owner engages in solicitation of its users in Baudrillardian sense, inviting the users to, by the act of engagement in participation, to sanction the existence and raison d'être of the social media organisation. Moreover, by prioritizing use value for the platform’s users and altruism of the company, the underlying context of self-interest and the capitalist operational logic relying on exchange value (through the commodification of users) are obscured, so in effect the users are sanctioning operations whose nature is not made explicitly clear. In line with the Relevance-theoretic model used in this study, users interpret the message in a way most relevant to them, guided by the Principle of Relevance and the contextual cues provided. It is important to note that in pragmatic inquiry, context is defined in terms of a wider social context that extends beyond the immediate linguistic context. Thus, it is fair to consider that in interpreting social media organisation’s communication, and in assessing relevance, they also include in their individually construed context information garnered from elsewhere, yet relating to the operations of the said organisation.
Context plays a crucial role in context manipulation. Manipulation of the context so that it seems favourable to the user may give rise to cognitive illusions (Johnson-Laird & Savary, 1999; Maillatt & Oswald, 2009) regarding the nature of social media participation, and hence also regarding the nature of the relationship. Cognitive illusions, as characterised earlier, are conclusions individuals arrive at that are logically valid in the provided context supporting such an inference; however, such conclusions may fail to accurately reflect the ‘state of affairs in the world’. Examined in our case, then, it follows that such illusions as interpretations of the context do not accurately or fully depict the given situation in terms of the prevailing economic relations, but instead highlight the dimension based on social relations, expression and safety; an interpretation that is in line with the manipulated context provided by Facebook.

From the alternative readings of the users, we can conclude, however, that the process of commodification does not escape all users’ consciousness. While the more critical users may not be aware of all the intricacies and complexities involved in commodification, or indeed that the primary utility of users comes in the form of exchange value, we did notice some critique of Facebook’s operation, for example in terms of what the users see as greed. We take this to imply some are, at least partly, aware of the capitalist operational logic. In addition to greed, privacy issues were topical among the critical users, ranging from personal information (user data, etc.) to personal items (such as uploaded photos), to data collected from the use itself (which adverts garner interest or gain ‘clicks’, for example). Some criticise the lack of enforcement of the rules that the social media corporation itself lays down, for example, insufficient removal of offensive content, or of content that contains hate speech or that can otherwise be conceived as violating the Community Standards. The inconsistency recovered by the users can be taken as manipulation of what can be posted and seen on Facebook; the company is choosing which voices are heard, silencing some voices while supporting some others. This can be understood to be in direct opposition with the context of expression that presents Facebook as a protector of freedom of speech.
In the context of capitalist social media, the dichotomy between use value and exchange value is essential, not only because it lies at the heart of commodification whereby use value is transformed into exchange value, but also, and more specifically, because context manipulation as illustrated by our study of Facebook revolves around how these two types of value are presented to users. We thus contend that context manipulation functions as a discursive vehicle for ideological persuasion, or said in Baudrillard’s terms, as a form of solicitation. In fact, Baudrillard’s (1998 [1970]) notion of solicitation aptly describes aspects of the operational logic of social media corporations as well as the ideological discourse produced by them. The companies offer use value for “free”, thus soliciting the user by way of a Gift, by promises that we in this study discovered to be related to freedom of expression, personal connection, as well as security from bullying and harassment while engaging in these activities. But as Baudrillard argues, solicitation has a “dark side”, meaning, in this context, that users become a commodity and a form of unpaid labour. It is under such solicitation that users, some unwittingly due to cognitive illusions as we have argued, enter into an economic relationship with social media enterprises.
References


Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/2182440


