

# **Context design and critical language/media awareness: implications for a social digital literacies education**

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## **Abstract**

Our starting point is the growing concern around the role of Facebook in spreading (dis)information and polarising political opinion, and subsequent debates around the need for enhanced critical digital literacies. The article reports on a study which drew on elicited data from Facebook users to explore their critical awareness of the communicative norms and social networks shaping their use of the site. Our analysis makes two key contributions. Firstly, we theorise the connection between our interviewees' online practices and their critical language/media awareness through the concept of *context design*, which explains the dynamic ways in which people frame their interactions, based on unfolding understandings of the social space. Secondly, in tackling issues around disinformation and political polarisation, we highlight the need for critical digital literacies programmes at higher education institutes, which typically focus on information literacies, to take account of the social or interpersonal nature of much contemporary internet use.

**Keywords:** context design; critical awareness; digital literacies; Higher Education; ideology; social media

## 1. Introduction

The starting point for this article is the growing concern around the role of Facebook and other social media in spreading mis/disinformation online and polarising political opinion, and subsequent debates around the need for critical digital literacies in tackling this. As a social network site, Facebook was originally conceived of, and used, as a space for social interaction with friends, enabling people to make visible and expand their interpersonal networks. Key to the design and development of Facebook as a social space was the notion of sharing and transparency (Zuckerberg 2010), which conveniently also enabled Facebook the company to monetise the site by providing advertisers, apps and other companies with access to vast amounts of user data (Kirkpatrick 2010). With concern over Facebook's apparent role in key political events of the twenty-first century – initially the 2016 US Presidential election and the UK's vote to leave the European Union in the same year – it became evident that Facebook was also a platform on which media news texts and political opinions were being circulated through the sharing practices of media organisations, political groups and individual users. The role of Facebook as a news-sharing platform raises important questions about the way in which the flow of information through society is enabled, filtered and structured through social networks, and how critical media literacies thus become entwined with the management of social relationships, concerns about privacy and identity, and other interpersonal concerns.

In addressing these issues, this article examines how people's critical awareness of their use of social media, and the implications this can have for how they manage interpersonal issues, shape their behaviour on a site such as Facebook. Extending previous work in this area (Tagg et al 2017), the article draws on interview data from our project *Creating Facebook* to explore the media-ideological beliefs of a sample of Facebook users about interaction on the site, and the underlying critical language/media awareness with which they contextualise and

rationalise their online practices and thus, by extension, their own sharing and consumption of political opinions and information.

This article thus makes two key contributions to contemporary debates around the need for critical digital literacies. Firstly, it theorises the connection between our interviewees' online practices and their critical language/media awareness through the sociolinguistic concept of *context design* (Tagg et al. 2017), which explains the dynamic ways in which people shape the context for their posts which then serves to frame their interactions, based on their unfolding understanding of the social space. In this way, we conceptualise users' critical language and media awareness as a fluid, constantly developing process, which exists in a mutually constitutive relationship with their interactional experiences. People's critical awareness of the communicative potential of Facebook (and other media) develop dynamically over time in response to their experiences on the site, and these go on to shape their future actions.

Secondly, in tackling issues around mis/disinformation and political polarisation, the article highlights the need for critical digital literacies programmes at higher education institutes, which typically focus primarily on information literacies, to take account of the social or interpersonal nature of much contemporary internet use. In doing this we are primarily concerned with the implications of our study for enhancing social media users' critical awareness of the social dynamics underlying communication on Facebook and better equipping them to recognise, and potentially resist, the ways in which they are positioned. We conclude the article by laying out our argument for the key role that higher education institutions can have in delivering a critical digital literacies programme that incorporates the *social* as well as the academic; that is, a critical education that enables people to recognise the interplay between their everyday social interactions and the hidden agendas and site design decisions which shape what is possible on social media.

## **2. Language/media ideologies**

The premise underlying our arguments is that Facebook as a site for communication is shaped in great part by its users' communicative practices, and that these practices are in turn shaped by users' ideas about, and critical awareness of, the sociolinguistic and technological contexts within which they interact. Ideologies—sets of entrenched beliefs about the social world—are seen as structuring people's understanding of their social realities and as justifying or interpreting their actions (Silverstein 2001). These ideologies are not necessarily fixed or coherent but can be 'multiple, competing and contradictory' (Schiefflin and Doucet 1998, p. 286), shifting and overlapping.

Whilst recognising that multiple ideological assumptions will guide communicative behaviour in any one instance, our particular focus is on language/media ideologies as they pertain to digitally mediated platforms such as Facebook. Isolating language and media ideologies in analysis can, as Gershon (2010, p. 284) points out, 'raise productive questions about how media ideologies and language ideologies intertwine': for example, for language researchers, a focus on media ideologies – those beliefs that people have about 'the material forms people use to communicate, from bodies, phonographs, to smartphones' (Gershon, 2010, p. 283) – highlights the materiality of language use and the implied practices and norms that are presupposed by technological structures (and see Blommaert, 2005 for ideologies as they pertain to language and discourse). However, the two are mutually constitutive and can be seen as subsets of people's broader sets of beliefs about semiotics, serving to rationalise people's selection and use of signs and semiotic modes and render them meaningful (Keane, 2003, 2018). Our use of the term 'language/media ideologies' reflects the fact that, on social

media, communicative choices are shaped not only by linguistic norms and expectations, but also by interlocutors' perceptions of the affordances and constraints of the media.

With the proliferation and ongoing development of social media, language/media ideologies have emerged in the form of 'culturally specific, nuanced understandings of how these media shape communication and what kinds of utterances are most appropriately stated through which media' (Gershon, 2010, p. 290). These understandings are shaped by the perceived place of a platform among the other opportunities for communication in the immediate digital and social environment (e.g. Ito et al., 2010) and by the extent to which use of the platform remediates existing practices and perceptions associated with antecedent technologies (Bolter and Grusin, 2000). Each new social media platform thus finds a niche in people's communicative repertoires depending on its affordances and group practices, as well as people's past experiences of technologies (Madianou 2015). For example, Miller (2016) reports on the emergent perception among teenagers in the UK that Twitter is a private space for interpersonal interaction in response to the adult surveillance that came to characterise their ideas about Facebook. How people reach these ideological understandings is a complex matter which often involves online networks implicitly negotiating and co-constructing appropriate social uses. As this suggests, language/media ideologies are rarely universal or static, but instead emerge in different ways across different networks.

### **3. Critical language/media awareness**

The nature and extent of people's critical awareness of the context in which they interact is crucial both in shaping their ideological assumptions and structuring the extent to which ideologies actually shape practices (Silverstein 2001). In the age of social media, this awareness can be uncovered (and potentially enhanced) through the complementary lenses of two fields addressing critical language and critical media awareness. The study of critical

language awareness explores the extent to which people recognise how language is shaped by the wider contexts in which it is used and, as such, how it can both reproduce and potentially transform dominant ideological assumptions and entrenched power relations (Alim, 2010; Clark et al, 1990; Fairclough, 1992). Parallel research into critical media literacies draws closely on semiotic theory in highlighting the ways in which media (re)present social reality and uphold underlying economic and political structures (Kellner and Share, 2005). Central to both fields is the pedagogic aim of enhancing people's critical language/media awareness through formal teaching. In achieving this, language awareness researchers such as Metz (2018) draw attention to the importance of both valuing and building on existing understandings of (their own) language use that students bring to the classroom, an argument that has parallels with work exploring the intersections between digital literacies outside and inside the classroom and the need for the former to inform the latter (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009; Ivanič et al., 2008; Satchwell et al., 2013). Such studies highlight the need for research into people's everyday digital literacy practices in developing pedagogic methods for enhancing critical language/media awareness.

In this article, we build on existing work into critical language/media awareness to make two main arguments. Firstly, we argue that an increasingly crucial aspect of critical language/media awareness in the contemporary age of social media is the underlying social dynamics of different digital platforms and the ways in which interpersonal relationships are restructured by media technologies. The interpersonal element of social media use is, we argue, still overlooked in the literature on critical media awareness (e.g. Kellner and Share, 2019), and in debates and policies around digital literacies in the wake of recent disinformation controversies (Buckingham, 2019). Of particular importance is the fact that people are increasingly sharing news and engaging in politics in semi-public online spaces (such as Facebook) which are also – and perhaps predominantly – sites of social interaction

(as well as, of course, commercial entities). Consequently, people's access to news is being filtered and shaped through their personal networks in ways which – given the reach of social media and the way experiences are structured and shaped by algorithms (Jones, forthcoming) – are unmatched by offline practices. As we have shown elsewhere (Sergeant and Tagg, 2018), this means that how people critically read and evaluate media texts online is bound up in new and complex ways with their maintenance of interpersonal relationships, issues of social identity positioning, and a range of ideological assumptions around communicative, social and cultural norms. Understanding and enhancing critical language/media literacies in an age which 'places the onus of judging the news more on us as an audience' (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. xvii) given the lack of editorial input that a site such as Facebook has over the content it hosts, is therefore also a question of understanding people's critical awareness of the underlying social or interpersonal dynamics of different digital platforms and the ways in which their social relationships are restructured and represented by media technologies.

Secondly, we argue for the need to focus specifically on the extent to, and ways in which people's online practices are actually shaped by their (enhanced) critical awareness: to what extent are people able to act on their awareness, and in what ways? To address these questions, we take a sociolinguistics perspective in our analysis. From this perspective, our concept of *context design* is an attempt to explore how and why social media users' critical language/media awareness might translate into practice. As elaborated below, context design focuses particularly on understanding how, at the moment of interaction, people's ideologically framed and unfolding understandings of a particular site and its social dynamics both shape their communicative behaviour and guide their evaluation and response to others.

#### **4. Context design**

The premise of *context design* is that Facebook users imagine particularly complex contexts to which they respond as they style their utterances or posts. The theoretical model accounts for the dynamic, socially co-constructed nature of context, especially as this is a feature of social media, so as to better understand the particular nature of online communication. In doing so, it builds on the widely adopted concept of ‘context collapse’, as used within media and communications research (Marwick & boyd, 2011). This describes the social processes evident in the way many people – at least those in Western Europe and the US (Costa, 2018) – appear to use Facebook, and specifically the way in which contacts from various contexts are brought together in one online space, where they form the potential audience for a user’s status updates (Marwick & boyd, 2014). In relation to communication, the argument is that context collapse poses a problem of self-presentation, given the observation that users cannot easily vary the way they come across to different segments of their audience, as they would in offline spaces or private conversations.

While context collapse as a concept has proved valuable in developing theories of networked privacy (Marwick & boyd, 2014), from a sociolinguistics viewpoint the metaphor of ‘collapse’ is somewhat misleading in its conceptualisation of context (cf Androutsopoulos, 2014; Blommaert and Szabla, 2017; Costa, 2018). A context is not a fixed, predetermined set of situational factors, nor does it exist as a discrete entity, but instead is co-created discursively through interaction (Duranti & Goodwin 1992). In line with this sociolinguistic understanding of context, we draw on Androutsopoulos’s (2014) argument to assert that offline contexts defined thus cannot be said to move online and to collapse into other contexts but rather that people co-create new contexts in the course of their online interactions as interactants (re-)position themselves through linguistic and other communicative choices. The concept of context design captures the way in which people collaborate to (re-)design and negotiate these online contexts.

In developing this concept, we build on sociolinguistic theories of audience design such as Bell's (1984) which similarly offer a more dynamic view of communication than that offered by context collapse through their recognition of the ways in which speakers actively position their listeners and then style their utterances in accordance with their projected ideas about each listener. Our context design theory draws on these insights from Bell's audience design framework and on Hymes' (1974) work on the ethnography of communication in order to understand the dynamics of social media interaction, including the ways in which people perceive, and act on their ideas about, a number of contextual features. These variables include the poster's beliefs about the nature of online writing and the role or function of a particular site within the wider mediascape, as well as their perception of its affordances and of the various norms of communication likely to be relevant to any one online interaction. Also relevant is a poster's knowledge of the people they are friends with and their experience of their friends' past behaviour and interaction on the site, as well as the more immediately relevant feedback provided by their interlocutors' responses to their posts, alongside an awareness of self and the ways in which posters position themselves in relation to particularly ideologies, discourses, individuals and social roles (see Tagg et al 2017: 37-39).

Importantly, in line with Bell's (1984) work and a sociolinguistic understanding of context, we argue that people's ideas about a particular site are not only shaped by their understanding of these contextual factors and of the communicative niche that the platform fills within the wider communicative environment, but that their emerging and shifting ideologies also contribute to shaping the kind of communication that takes place on it. In other words, our argument is that people are not responding to a pre-existing and complete social setting but that, in styling an utterance, they are involved in actively constructing the context or frame in which it will or can be interpreted. As such, context design enables us to explain the process by which people's critical language/media awareness – their ideologically framed

understanding of the social contexts in which an online post is embedded – serves both to shape their immediate online communicative practices and frame future interactions.

Although context design is a feature of all forms of interaction, it is of particular importance for online written interactions. The co-construction of context may be particularly challenging for participants in online contexts where communication is virtual rather than embodied and where people discursively co-construct a context for their posts exclusively through writing and other semiotic means (Lyons, 2018). Importantly, Facebook users must also take into account the multiple trajectories along which their posts may travel; that is, the likelihood that their posts will be shared and thus reproduced and reinterpreted in new contexts. Processes of ‘entextualisation’ (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) entailed by this can transform both the meaning and value attached to a post. That is to say, given the large, diverse nature of social networks on Facebook, and the ease with which digital text can be copied and distributed, Facebook users must attend to an almost infinite array of potentially relevant communicative spaces, including not only the multiple contexts made relevant by their diverse audience, but also imagined future trajectories. We noted in our previous research what might be called a ‘fear of entextualisation’ based on an awareness of the implications of these trajectories, as participants in our study voiced their concerns over the lack of control they experienced over how their posts were read and interpreted (Tagg et al., 2017).

Finally, although processes of context design take place on both conscious and less reflective levels, social media has been seen to encourage an enhanced level of reflexivity, not least because of its quasi-synchronicity – the editing and planning time that users enjoy between producing and sending their messages (Androutsopoulos & Staehr, 2017). On Facebook, this feedback loop is enforced by the way users are encouraged by site design decisions to reflect on, and respond to, others’ posts through ‘liking’ or commenting on them (Androutsopoulos & Staehr, 2017). This observation lies at the heart of context design: the way in which users

respond to previous experiences on the site when styling future posts (Tagg et al., 2017, p. 36).

## **5. Methodology**

In the analysis that follows, we focus on identifying processes of context design: on how users' critical language/media awareness as it relates to Facebook (and as discursively constructed in interview) shapes the ways in which they rationalise their behaviour on the site and guides their evaluation of the behaviour of other users. We draw on three in-depth, semi-structured interviews which form part of a wider study, *Creating Facebook* (Tagg et al., 2017), which aimed to elicit people's understandings of Facebook, and how their ideas were shaped by their past experience of the site as well as their language/media ideologies, and in this way explore how the interplay of these ideological and experiential factors shaped people's justifications of their communicative behaviour as well as their expectations around social norms on the site. In comparison with our analysis elsewhere of survey data (e.g. Seargeant and Tagg, 2018), our focus on the interview data enables us to explore in more depth various facets of individuals' critical language/media awareness and how this is drawn upon to justify each individual's behaviour in often idiosyncratic ways.

The three interview participants were selected from a wider pool of survey respondents in part because they were among those who had given particularly detailed answers to the survey questions, as well as for practical reasons regarding their availability for interview and the nature of their prior relationship with the interviewer (i.e. that they were not close friends).

The interviewer – the research assistant attached to the project – had pre-existing relationships of some kind with all participants in the study, who made up her network of Friends on Facebook. An invitation to participate was sent out via personal message to all members of the researcher's Facebook network in mid-2014, with a link to the survey also placed on her

wall. This link was then shared by several of her Friends, thus extending the scope across the network (and resulting in 141 responses being used for analysis). The decision to distribute the questionnaire via a single individual's Facebook account was made in order to access the kind of 'ego-centred' network we wished to examine. The diverse nature of the researcher's network means that the social characteristics of the participants were shaped by her age and gender, as well as her travels (particularly in South East Asia), her life trajectory (including working abroad as a teacher of English) and the various connections she made along the way: close friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and so on. The interview participants are in this sense typical of the wider respondents.

The three participants have been given the pseudonyms Heather, Jacob, and Jessica. Heather is a friend and former colleague of the researcher, who at the time of interview was in the 22–30 age group. She used to live in Japan, but was working as a teacher at the time in the UK, and active in various drama groups. Jessica is again a friend of a friend, from Canada but also living and working in South Korea. She was in the 31–45 age group. Jacob is from the USA, a friend of a friend of the researcher, living and working in South Korea at the time of interview. He was in the 22–30 age group. The interviews were semi-structured and conducted via online voice calls, which allowed participation irrespective of physical location, and lasted around 60 minutes. Each interview was recorded and transcribed.

The interviews gave us the opportunity to ask in more detail about issues of interest that had been recorded in the questionnaire. The survey included questions focusing on what people do and do not post to Facebook, and the rationale behind their practices. The aim was to illuminate Facebook users' ideas about the social network site as a forum for communication, to explore the extent to which users felt that they could act on these ideas and the type of agency they felt they had, and to trace how their awareness of the site developed over time; in other words, to document and explore their shifting critical language/media awareness. The

interviews then focused specifically on instances in which participants felt that they had given offence, or been offended, by interactions on Facebook, and what this revealed about their beliefs about norms of communication on the site. In probing these questions in interview, participants not only elaborated on their responses – by, for example, narrating at length instances where they had been offended on the site – but also raised issues not covered in the original survey (such as the way in which online activities sometimes stretched offline), and they thus allowed us to gain a more coherent picture of individual users’ language/media awareness and ideologies as they relate to Facebook.

In analysing the interview data, we adopted what we call a ‘thematic-discourse analytic approach’. This involved reading through the data to identify key themes, drawing on the procedures associated with thematic analysis (Guest, 2012), the selection of which was influenced in part by the research questions for the project and our context design framework as well as current literature around relevant topics, but which also emerged from the data.

Themes of relevance to this article included contextual factors such as awareness of audience, future text trajectories, norms of communication, and site affordances. Analysis then focused on the discourse generated by the interviews, paying close attention to the ways our respondents’ attitudes and perceptions were expressed discursively. We were thus able to identify and categorise the various stances toward communication via Facebook which our interviewees constructed in their answers.

## **6. Analysis**

In this section we analyse the context design processes evident in our respondents’ accounts of their use of Facebook, exploring the implications of their stated beliefs for how they justified their behaviour on Facebook and, ultimately, for how they experienced the site. We structure the findings around each of the three individuals, building a detailed picture of their

reflective understanding of their experience of the site, and the different ways in which users understand and structure their communication on the site, as expressed in interview at one moment-in-time. As we argue in the concluding section, the role that users' critical language/media awareness plays in shaping their social or interpersonal use of Facebook underlines the need for educational initiatives that enable them to reflect on their beliefs and how these might intersect with wider social and political processes in contemporary society.

### **6.1 Heather: 'Oh yes that is the sort of thing Heather would say'**

Although Heather positions herself throughout her interview as the kind of person who says what she thinks, she also expresses critical awareness of the reception her discursive identity performances are likely to receive from different audiences. Heather refers repeatedly to the fact that her use of Facebook is shaped by her understanding of the nature of her interpersonal ties on the site and by what she assumes are shared norms around appropriate register, style and communicative norms. Her critical language/media awareness of Facebook thus highlights the complex ways in which audiences are discursively constructed and structured on the site and how these in turn shape communicative behaviour in processes of context design.

Firstly, Heather's language/media ideologies, as constructed in the process of the interview, involve a particular idea about Facebook, in contrast with Twitter, as a space in which she interacts with *friends* (in the conventional sense of the word). In interview, she reconstructed her reflective process as follows:

when I have a thought in my head that I think I want to communicate to the world, does it go on Twitter to people that don't know me or is that something that is going to go on Facebook, so is this just for my friends?

Her reflections suggest that, in the contemporary media environment, her choice of media and subsequent communicative choices are determined not only by her own communicative goals

or immediate purposes but by her awareness of her likely audience on different platforms, defined chiefly with regard to the nature of the ties she perceives she has with people on the different sites along with their distinct affordances of those sites (cf Madianou and Miller, 2012). Specifically, her decisions are motivated by her assumption that the people who ‘know’ her will interpret her posts in the light of their shared communicative history and background knowledge. This experiential knowledge appears to be associated with face-to-face communication (elsewhere she suggests that on Twitter ‘people follow you that don’t know you personally, they have never heard you speak’), suggesting ideological assumptions about the relative transparency of face-to-face contact which contrasts with the mediated nature of online written communication. Given this awareness of her imagined audience, their communicative histories and the norms to which they ascribe, she assumes not only that her audience will construct the context of her posts in a way which aligns with their previous experience of her, but that she is able to accurately reconstruct the impression that her audience has built up of her. Having designed the context in which she believes her posts will be interpreted, she thus conducts her behaviour on Facebook accordingly (i.e. she feels free to say what she thinks). In turn, as we shall see, she uses her assumptions about her audience as a framework within which to evaluate her interlocutors’ responses.

The paradox is that her experience of when this does not work – when she misjudges her public – helps her articulate her communicative expectations. For example, her expectations are challenged by her use of the Facebook Groups functionality, which in Heather’s case tends to bring together into one communicative space people with whom she does not share the same communicative norms or language/media ideologies. At the time of interview, Heather had started working with a drama group based in the city of Bath (in the west of England) and had joined their Facebook group. In her words, ‘I am much closer to the Bristol groups [another city in the west of England] than I am Bath, so they are quite a tightknit

group and it was the first time I had done a show with them'. She told us about one occasion in which the drama group had to hold an extra rehearsal because one girl hadn't learnt her lines, which prompted Heather to write on Facebook, 'well actually, if everyone goes away and learns their lines and looks over the words of their own songs then we will have a much more productive rehearsal' (as recalled in interview). Heather thought it a 'bit odd' that nobody responded, 'because it was obviously a bit of a provocative thing to say'. When she went back in to Facebook later that day, she found that the group administrator had deleted her comment.

Heather's response to this is that the comment itself was to be regretted (she said, 'I still agree with my reasons for doing it but actually it probably wasn't the best way to go about it') but that that in itself was not the problem so much as the context in which she was interacting and how her post had been responded to. Heather expressed particular annoyance at the group administrator's having deleted her comment, in what could be described as his own act of context design:

him deleting the comment is saying 'this is an issue' and people don't do it that often on Facebook, actually deleting a comment ... but it is one of things as well isn't it, if there is a PR company, if they make a tweet and people make a comment on it and the tweet is removed it almost does them more damage.

On Facebook, the act of deleting a post as a group moderator can come to take on social meaning as a communicative act in its own right (in part, for Heather, because it is not seen as typical practice), while also serving to re-interpret or recontextualise the deleted post (in Heather's words, 'him deleting the comment is saying "this is an issue"'). In a face-to-face context, Heather felt that 'it would have been easier for me to have said something like "well if we all learned our lines it will be fine" and then for her or anyone else to be like "alright

Heather, shut up” and for there just to have been a bit of banter about it’. Her reflection reveals an awareness of certain language registers being better suited to particular media (the idea that ‘banter’ is more easily conducted in face-to-face contexts), as well as the way in which people’s online actions contribute to the co-construction of a particular kind of social context.

Heather is also aware that her audience is not something she can fully control, given the ways in which this is (re-)structured by the networked technologies. Facebook not only brings together people who have varied interpersonal ties – including distant ones – into one online space, but the trajectories of Facebook posts – the ways in which posts can be shared and viewed – means that users can interact around a particular post with people who are not in their immediate Facebook network. As Heather put it,

I have ... had several political discussions on Facebook with people, and it is generally people who I know from back home, who are friends of friends on Facebook so someone will post a comment and I kind of agree with them so I chime in and say something and then all of a sudden I am having an argument with a brother of some girl I used to be in school with

In this context, Heather’s perception of whether these other people share her communicative norms and expectations is determined not so much by any shared offline history but by how they express themselves linguistically on that and other occasions on Facebook, and over time this determines how she responds to them when they say something she disagrees with. That is, she will only engage them in debate if she feels they are open to hearing opposing views and will respond reasonably. This act of context design was illustrated in her discussion of whether she would respond to derogatory comments about teachers’ long holidays.

it kind of depends who it is, whether it is someone who I can actually be like ‘do you actually realise that the average teacher works 68 hours a week?’, or whatever else needs to be told, but if it is someone just deliberately trying to wind you up I just try not to ... I don’t know, it depends on who it is and how they have said it.

Again, we see Heather’s concern with appropriate language registers; her judgements are often based less on the content of what people say and more on the language they use. As was also evident across the survey responses, Heather reported that she increasingly responded to comments she found offensive not by engaging in debate but by quietly removing them from her newsfeed. ‘I am getting to the point,’ she told us in interview, ‘where I just take thing[s] out [of] my news feed, you know?’ As we have discussed elsewhere (Seargeant and Tagg, 2018, 2019), this act of context design – whereby opposing views are removed from a person’s newsfeed – may contribute to the ‘filter bubble’ effect usually attributed solely to Facebook’s personalisation algorithms (Pariser, 2011).

In sum, Heather constructs the context for her utterances on Facebook with the assumption that she is talking to friends who will draw on their shared communicative history in evaluating her posts, and it is for this reason that she claims to be quite open and say what is on her mind. Within this sharply delineated context, she expects any negative responses to her posts to be discussed openly, and values that approach in other people, which shapes how she responds to them. However, while Heather for the most part seems able to exploit the affordances of Facebook to structure her audience in ways that adhere to her language/media ideologies, there are elements of the site design – such as the diverse nature of the potential audience for any one post, and the exposure to Friends of Friends – which challenge her attempts to design the context in which her posts are interpreted. This loss of control, which often involves people she does not know ‘personally’, highlights the limits of Heather’s ability to act on her critical language/media awareness in this online social space.

## **6.2 Jessica: ‘There are a lot of things that I don’t post about’**

Transparency and openness are not principles that drive Jessica’s use of Facebook, but rather the opposite: she carefully controls what she posts as a way of managing different relationships on the site and protecting what she describes as her personal privacy. At the time of interview Jessica was married to a Korean man and had been living in Korea for a number of years. In contrast to Heather, her Facebook experience was predominantly organised around membership of a number of interest groups, including ones for non-Korean women married to Korean men. Unlike Heather, then, Jessica’s experience of Facebook is organised more carefully about her understanding of the different audiences with whom she interacts. She carefully designs her online context in response to her experience with the different groups, and in line with her sociocultural and language/media ideologies. In turn, these language/media ideologies as they pertain to Facebook are shaped by her shifting experiences with these groups which (as we shall see) appear to reflect her wider frustrations with living as an ex-pat in Korea. Her critical language/media awareness thus highlights the complex intersections between communicative behaviour, social networks and ideological assumptions.

For Jessica, Facebook is not an open forum but a space in which various audiences are carefully demarcated and managed. She keeps her Facebook groups separate from her (less active) personal feed – ‘Oh yes,’ she said when we asked about this, ‘I keep those very separate ... or I hope I have’. Jessica’s use of Facebook in this regard perhaps resembles that described by Costa (2018) of users in Turkey who maintain different profiles for distinct purposes and audiences. Jessica’s language/media ideologies are bound up with her perception of the different groups with which she interacts, which in turn centre around sociocultural ideologies pertaining to individuals’ experiences of Korea, and in particular the

different experiences of women married to Korean men who are based in the US and those living in Korea. As she explains:

culturally it is quite different right, to be living here and actually seeing your mother-in-law and dealing with a lot of cultural different aspects. Things like going to funerals or having to deal with your husband's workplace culture... well for most of the ladies that are in the States they just don't have to deal with that right. I mean maybe they say something they are like 'oh, what is Thanksgiving called in Korea?' whereas the nitty gritty it is a little different.

An example of the way she organises her online audience on the basis of her perspective on cultural issues is how she left one group that was based in the US and moved to one based in Korea specifically because of how she conceptualised the differences between the different 'communities' (Tagg et al., 2017, pp. 68-69). In this way she designs her online interaction around her beliefs concerning these emergent and locally relevant categories.

Jessica repeatedly returns to the importance of privacy in her interview, and it appears that her ideas around this also play a key role in structuring her interactions on the site. She feels that her ideas about privacy contrast with others in the groups she belongs to, and this tension is pivotal in shaping her online behaviour: in fact, she leaves one group because they do not take her concerns seriously. She also relates her feelings about privacy to her 'personality' which, as she explains below, guides her decisions about how much to post about her unborn child.

I mean that is not what my personality is, I would never do that. Things like ... I mean we are expecting our first child and we are talking about privacy on Facebook and you know do we want to post any pictures of our child on Facebook? And we are saying 'well maybe once in a while', I mean not very often because for his digital footprint, as he gets older he doesn't need one created by us right?

In this case, she and her husband's decision to limit the number of posts about their child on Facebook arises in response to an imagined future scenario: she is projecting current norms and ideologies onto the future, and tailoring her current communicative behaviour accordingly.

In interview she told us that her frustrations with the people involved in the Korea-based groups had risen since she completed our survey questionnaire. This, she claims, leads her to restrict her activities on the site so as to avoid engagement with others.

I probably potentially restrict it even more, what I am doing, just because I get more frustrated with the people that I interact with in terms of the groups here ... I am probably not interacting as much as before and I am purposely wording what I do put on-line to be more specific so that I can try and limit some of the people that I don't want to interact with, if I have to ask questions or not

In other words, Jessica deliberately frames her communication in order to limit social interaction on the site and exclude or discourage people in her network with whom she does not want to interact: 'there are a lot of things I don't post about', she told us. This sociolinguistic addressivity strategy mirrors those identified by Marwick and boyd (2014) and in our own research (Seargeant et al., 2012; Tagg and Seargeant, 2014). Jessica also exploits the site affordances in order to shape her behaviour, based on the apparent understanding that if she is not alerted to any comments made in response to her post, she will not have to engage with them: 'usually, I write my comment and I turn off the notifications because I just can't be bothered'.

For similar reasons as those which lead her to control what she posts, she told us that although she feels she cannot publicly defriend people who offend her, 'now I generally "unfollow" or

hide their news feed so that I don't need to see it [an offensive post]'. This reflects Heather's response to offensive posts, and may similarly serve to enhance any 'filter bubble' effect.

Jessica's concern with compartmentalising her networked publics and protecting her privacy can be explained in part by her wider language/media ideologies and what, in comparison with the other platforms and apps that make up the wider media ecology, Facebook is best suited for. She views Facebook as something of a double-edged sword or necessary evil; for her, leaving Facebook is not an option. This is because she feels that belonging to the Korean-based groups is useful or even essential to her because of her social situation:

the community here is transient and I feel like I need to try to make some more permanent friends if only because they have more experience navigating the culture and have specific information that makes life here simpler. I feel guilty knowing that I most likely couldn't get through a meal with many of these people but at the same time the social isolation, plus lack of information isn't helping me either

Facebook for Jessica is a means of securing social support and information but is also a potentially hostile space. It is this set of ideological beliefs that appears to shape how she then responds to others on the site and to determine precise communicative choices.

### **6.3 Jacob: 'Once it is out there, anything that you put on the internet, it is public'**

Unlike the other interviewees, Jacob claims not to be a heavy user of Facebook, and it is interesting that he focuses in his interview to a greater extent on the site affordances than the other interviewees do, both in seeking to understand the site and in exploiting it for his own ends. Unlike Jessica or Heather, Jacob designs his Facebook primarily as a public space rather than a place where he communicates with the expectation that he is interacting with friends or a place which comprises separate audiences. His attitude to the site reflects Jessica's concerns with image management and privacy, rather than transparency or sharing. In the interview, he

spoke repeatedly of the ways in which his privacy and control could be threatened, such as when Friends posted photos of him which were open to misinterpretation. In particular, he recognised that his own posts have an uncertain trajectory – there is always the potential for them to be forwarded, and thus entextualised in various different ways. He expresses what we earlier called a ‘fear of entextualisation’, a concern over (or at least an awareness of) the lack of control he experiences over the trajectory and interpretation of his posts:

If I put something up there and I select it only to be for this group of friends or whatever it is really not, like anybody can copy it, take a screenshot, it goes public, it has the potential to go to a public domain ... Once it is out there, anything that you put on the internet, it is public

In this, Jacob recognises issues around what boyd (2012, p. 348) calls ‘networked privacy’, a term, she argues, that captures the shift from conceptualising privacy as matter of protecting an individual’s data to a recognition that information flows through, and is amplified by, social networks (this conceptualisation can also be seen in Jessica’s concerns around her online groups’ ideas about privacy and her desire to protect her unborn child). Jacob shows his critical awareness of the role of the site architecture in shaping and facilitating networked privacy: ‘the ability for people to be able to post things on your page ... it really opens the door to anything, especially if something is going around and happening, something even outside of your friends’ control’.

Jacob’s critical language/media awareness also rationalises his account of his online behaviour in ways that both reflect, and differ from, the other two interviewees. Although recognising that this control can be ‘violated’, Jacob expresses his desire to ‘have a little bit of control over who takes what and what shows up in terms of my information’ (and appears confident in his ability to act on his awareness). He returns throughout his interview to this

desire to control his online image; for example, he talks about an occasion when he contacted a woman to ask her to untag him in a photo. Interestingly, his worries about privacy led him somewhat counter-intuitively *not* to use his privacy settings, but instead to keep his Facebook profile public:

I mostly keep it public intentionally so that anybody can view it whether they have signed up to Facebook or not. I do that intentionally just because it helps me kind of see it more for what it is ... I think what it does, it essentially forces me not to put anything too private on Facebook to begin with'

His manipulation of Facebook's privacy settings for his own purposes shows how context design is often, though not exclusively, achieved through the exploitation of site affordances, sometimes in ways far removed from their original design purpose (see Barton and Lee, 2013 on the frequent disconnect between site design and use). For example, in the early days of the platform the option to indicate one's relationship status in a Facebook profile allowed college students to broadcast their relationships in much the same way as wearing a wedding ring does. Drawing on the social expectations of the communities they were part of, students were able to use the affordance as a way of altering the context in which they interact. A more recent example from a different platform is that of mobile messaging apps such as WhatsApp, whereby a group name change works to steer the topic of the group or determine what kind of communication is required (Kell, 2017). Similarly, we saw how Jessica exploited Facebook settings, by stopping automatic alerts, in order to stop her from engaging with comments on her posts.

Jacob's statement also illustrates the idiosyncratic and unpredictable nature of context design; that is, the sometimes unexpected ways in which people's language/media ideologies shape their actions – in this case, how the action of keeping a profile public is deliberately designed

to further shape his future actions, and remind him not to reveal too much. Although these actions are shaped by his fundamental belief in the public nature of Facebook – based in turn on his critical awareness of how the site is designed to function – the conclusion he draws from this lies not in the opportunities this offers for sharing and openness (as envisaged by the site designers), but rather the need to actively engage in controlling what is revealed to his online audience.

## **7. Implications for a social digital literacies education**

Our interview data reveal complex understandings of Facebook as a communicative space and in particular draw attention to the importance of individuals' ideas about privacy, appropriate behaviour, and the value of different social ties. These understandings shape behaviour in apparently idiosyncratic ways that play an important role in people's approach to and organisation of their online communication. This, we argue, can be conceptualised as context design, by which the nature of the online communicative space is itself interactively co-constructed as people explore, negotiate and contest ideas regarding the developing communicative and linguistic norms of the site. In this final section, we argue that the role of people's evolving language/media awareness in shaping online experiences needs to be taken into account by researchers and policy-makers wishing to effectively build a critical awareness for the digital age, as it is what people do, and how they rationalise this behaviour, which creates much of the actual social experience of using a site such as Facebook.

In the immediate aftermath of the initial panic about 'fake news' around 2016, the solutions advocated in the media were largely technological ones, calling on Facebook to alter its algorithms, or change aspects of its site design (see Mosseri, 2017a,b, for Facebook's implementation of such measures), and downplaying educational and digital literacy solutions. As Buckingham (2019) notes, debates around digital literacy in the public domain

continue to uphold a functional approach that focuses on the linguistic skill sets required by critical media readers – sifting, evaluating, and authenticating information – and an assumption that, armed with these tools, readers can get to the truth (cf. Kellner and Share, 2019). Similar skills-oriented understandings of digital media literacy have been explored and theorised in the research literature (e.g. Dudeney et al., 2013), and are already incorporated in many existing digital literacy programmes (e.g. Johnston and Webber, 2010; Webber and Johnston, 2017). However, what is also needed is a critical approach which builds on established critical language/media literacy programmes (e.g. Benesch, 2006; Metz, 2018) to take into account the notion of literacy as a situated critical practice shaped by sociocultural factors and political motivations (Cope and Kalantzis, 2009), in order to enhance people’s critical awareness of the complexities of social media interaction within and across platforms. While programmes of internet safety awareness have tended to be prioritised at primary and secondary school to ensure children understand the potential dangers of the internet,<sup>2</sup> we argue that higher education institutions are ideally placed to educate young adults about how people process, share and consume information on social media and in preparing them for their roles as critically-engaged citizens (for wider debates around the role of the university in the digital era, see Goodfellow and Lea, 2013).

In particular, our research leads us to identify a need for an interpersonal approach to critical digital literacies – a *social* digital literacies education – that recognises the ways in which people’s online social interactions, often carried out in the pursuit of immediate interpersonal concerns such as interacting with friends, securing social support or managing networked privacy, may inadvertently play a role in wider processes of information flow and news consumption in contemporary networked society. Such an approach recognises, firstly, that the circulation of media and other texts is increasingly taking place on social media sites which simultaneously constitute social spaces in which interpersonal concerns are key; and,

secondly, that these interpersonal concerns may shape how an individual engages with political issues and whether and how they might choose to share online information. A focus on *social* digital literacies not only seeks to build on informal digital literacy practices in the development of individual digital capabilities in the classroom (Lee, 2013), but also situates both within a broader awareness of how the flow of information in society as a whole is managed in the era of social media, and the implications this can have for the maintenance of an effective society. This approach, which represents a transformational shift (at least in higher education) from seeing digital literacy as a study skill to recognising its role in civil society, is less well incorporated into existing programmes and requires a more ambitious transdisciplinary approach which draws on literacy and media communication studies and sociolinguistics, as well as journalism and social informatics.

To understand the role that localised social interactions can play in wider processes, it is necessary to appreciate the interface between user behaviour and social media affordances and algorithms, as evidenced in Jacob's exploitation of Facebook's functionalities (and see Jones, forthcoming). However, the 'click signals' on which algorithms pick up are not the only way in which the context of the communicative space that users experience is designed by their behaviour. As we have seen, there are a host of other factors, which range from people's underlying language/media ideologies, their subtle manipulation of style and content, decisions about how to react to others (which can result in an absence of action, i.e. deciding to do nothing), awareness of and agency over the affordances, their past experiences and their future expectations. Changing or removing the algorithm, or taking measures to police people's use of the site through fact-checkers and facilities to flag controversial content (all of which have been introduced by Facebook in response to the 'fake news' panic), will not address the fact that sharing information on Facebook is a social activity, and nor will it tackle the impact this has on the way people consume, evaluate and share information. Higher

education has a key role to play in delivering an interpersonal approach to critical digital literacies education that recognises the role of social interactions – and people’s perceptions of Facebook as a particular kind of social space – in shaping how they engage with the information and opinions circulated through their social networks.

Footnote:

<sup>1</sup> We follow boyd and Ellison (2008) in capitalising ‘Friends’ where it refers to Facebook contacts.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the UK Safer Internet Centre (<https://www.saferinternet.org.uk/>), which is funded by the European Commission and offers a wide range of services for teachers and other professionals working with children, including educational resources and sessions, as well as shaping school and government policy.

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