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## Taking Offence on Social Media: Conviviality and Communication on Facebook

### Book

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## Chapter 1: *Creating Facebook*: a study of online conflict and conviviality

### *Chapter abstract*

In introducing the new concept of *context design*, this book draws on data collected as part of a research project titled *Creating Facebook*. This introductory chapter outlines the aims and rationale of the book, explaining the issues it addresses and how it draws upon an empirical survey and interviews into the giving and taking of offence in order to explore and illustrate these issues. The chapter also provides the academic context for our investigation of online interaction, situating the book within the rapidly developing field of language and social media studies, and in relation to work on media ideologies and media ecology.

**Keywords:** affordances, media ecology, media ideologies, online survey, social media

<*End of chapter abstract*>

### **Introduction**

This book introduces the concept of *context design* as a way of understanding online communication and the extent to which users have the agency to shape the social media contexts in which they interact. In both evidencing and illustrating context design, the book draws on findings from a two-year research project called *Creating Facebook: the management of conflict and the pursuit of online conviviality*, which elicited people's media and language ideologies through an empirical online survey and follow-up interviews involving Facebook users. The focus in this book is on occasions where our participants claimed to have been offended or to have offended others on Facebook, revealing the site to be shaped by both *intradiversity* and *online conviviality* (both of which we explain below). Acts of offence-taking and offence-

giving on Facebook constitute an important gap in the research literature, despite a focus on online aggression in more public sites such as Twitter and YouTube, and despite the prominent role played by Facebook in contemporary social and political life. As we explain below, understanding how and why offence occurs not only feeds into current discussions about online debate and civic discourse, but also reveals how people actively (re-)design the online context as they respond to perceived instances of miscommunication. In other words, the project findings act as a heuristic for understanding context design.

In this introductory chapter, we set out the socio-political and academic contexts for our investigation of online interaction, situating the book within the rapidly developing field of language and social media studies, and in relation to work on media ideologies and media ecology. We also elaborate on the aims, rationale and methodology of *Creating Facebook*, explaining the issues it addresses and how we draw upon the empirical survey and interview data relating to the giving and taking of offence in order to explore and illustrate these issues.

### **The social significance of taking offence on Facebook**

(1) I avoid posting things that I know will offend some people because I don't like offending people. I don't feel Facebook is the best place to discuss different viewpoints due to its public nature and the very mixed audience who would be reading my posts. I would rather discuss different opinions in real life when someone random isn't likely to join in. [Q24-76]

The ways in which people behave on social media sites are of great social and political importance in today's society. This is frequently illustrated in stories in the news, such as, to pick just a couple of examples, the sexist bullying experienced on Twitter by the journalist Caroline Criado-Perez who campaigned for Jane Austen to be the new face on the £10 banknote in the UK (e.g. Doward 2013); the discussion and debate around users' reactions to racist comments posted on Facebook during the

so-called European migration crisis of 2016 (e.g. *Independent*, 2016); and the apparent spread of fake news across Facebook during the 2016 US Presidential elections (Solon 2016). While the last in particular raised questions regarding the way social media sites are designed – with particular attention paid to the role played by Facebook’s ‘personalisation algorithm’ (which pushes particular content onto a user’s newsfeed) – also central to such debates are questions regarding appropriate norms of behaviour on various social media platforms (and how these should be promoted and regulated), as well as differing ideas about the acceptability of voicing what can be (either by intention or accident) views which other people find offensive. In the quote above, which is taken from one of the responses to the survey undertaken as part of our research project, *Creating Facebook*, the respondent talks specifically of trying to avoid offending others when interacting with them on Facebook. She talks of how she draws a distinction between online interaction and ‘real life’, how she predicts the possible ‘audience’ for her posts, and how she has specific beliefs about what this particular social platform is best suited to – beliefs which then form the basis for what she herself does when communicating via Facebook. As can be seen, there is, even in this one short quote, a reflective awareness of the media, the way it is used, and the role it has in the wider context of everyday life, which shapes how she approaches the social network site and how she manages her communication on it.

This book examines the nature of this reflective awareness, as expressed by the range of Facebook users whose views we elicited as part of *Creating Facebook*, in order to explore the role of social media in the contemporary social and political landscape. By focusing on the particular online interactional dynamics that give rise to the giving and taking of offence on Facebook – an issue which can act as a touchstone for more general notions of communication – the book aims to illuminate the challenges and hazards that people encounter in social media interactions, how people manage their communication on Facebook in the context of constantly evolving technologies, practices and social environments, and, in particular, the ways in which people’s awareness of the affordances of new communicative technologies influence the way they conduct themselves online.

To examine how people manage the potential giving and taking of offence, the book draws on survey and interview data collected as part of *Creating Facebook*. The survey data comprises the responses of over a hundred people about their experiences of and beliefs about personal communication via their Facebook accounts, while the interview data includes more in-depth exploration of the views expressed by selected participants. Analysis of the participants' accounts across these datasets explores the way that communication on Facebook apparently gives rise to frequent examples of offence giving which, we argue, is a result of the type of *intradiverse* community that Facebook facilitates. Intradiversity, which we discuss in details in Chapter 4, emerges from the type of 'ego-centred' network (Androutsopoulos 2014a, p. 63) facilitated by personal Facebook profiles, whereby participation is to some extent structured around one user's personal connections, meaning that the diversity of a Facebook community is the product of, and to an extent constrained by, individual experiences and mutual friendships. The research shows that the participants in our project were most likely to be offended by particular types of post, namely, political, religious, sexist or racist opinions with which they disagreed. In the main they accepted that some disagreement was inevitable, thus illustrating an awareness of the participant structure of Facebook, and for the most part simply ignored the offending posts. Where they did respond to things they took exception to they generally did so non-aggressively by ensuring through various methods that they no longer had access to such posts. These actions suggest that these Facebook users tend to be less interested in argument or conflict (of the kind described on sites like Twitter and YouTube) or indeed in more reasoned debate around differing views: as the respondent says in the quote at the top of the chapter, Facebook is not seen as a good forum for this type of interaction. Instead, two different scenarios appear typical. On the one hand there is an attempt to construct a newsfeed filled only or predominantly with opinions with which they agree, a phenomenon that Jones and Hafner (2012, p. 126) call the 'ghetto-ization' of the internet; on the other there is a pattern of seeming indifference in that people will tolerate opposing views without challenging or engaging with them. The overall result is that *online conviviality* – the desire for peaceful co-

existence online through negotiating or ignoring difference and avoiding contentious debate – appears to be an overarching principle for this particular type of ‘ego-centred’ social media encounter. As noted above, this is not the case for all social media platforms however – an issue we will return to at the end of the book.

In exploring offence for the insights it offers into people’s ideas about appropriate behaviour on Facebook and how their ideas may shape the type of communication that Facebook typically gives rise to, the book uses the examination of discursive constructions of online offence as a heuristic for theorising the analytic concept of *context design*, which we put forward as a key theoretical model for understanding online communication. Building on the concept of audience design (Bell 1984) and contemporary models of the interactive construction of context both offline (Duranti and Goodwin 1992) and online (Lyons 2014), context design highlights the ways in which social media users imagine and respond to a particularly complex set of contextual variables as they design their posts and interactions. As such, context design offers a powerful critique and refinement of the widely-used yet relatively under-theorised concept of ‘context collapse’ which has shaped research across the social sciences (e.g. Georgakopoulou 2017; Marwick and boyd 2010). It also has important implications for our understanding of how online behaviour is shaped not primarily by the technology but by users’ responses to their perceptions of what the technology is for, how it functions for this purpose, who they are communicating with, and the appropriate norms for doing so. This is not to dismiss the importance of technical features such as Facebook’s personalisation algorithm in shaping online experiences, but rather to argue that the effect of such algorithms must always be understood in relation to how site users perceive and exploit the available affordances. If trying not to offend is a communicative dynamic shaping much Facebook use, then instances where people have been offended or have caused offence indicate the boundaries and disparities between people’s different expectations, and in this way highlight the role of context design in the communicative dynamic.

## **Online communication and media ideologies**

The premise underlying this book is that Facebook, as a site for communication, is shaped in part by its users' communicative practices, and that these practices are in turn shaped by users' ideas about the context in which they are interacting. Ideologies – sets of entrenched beliefs about the social world – have long been seen as structuring people's understanding of their social realities and as justifying or interpreting their actions (see Blommaert 2005 on ideologies as they pertain to beliefs about language and discourse). These ideologies are not necessarily fixed or coherent but can be 'multiple, competing and contradictory' (Schiefflin & Doucet 1998, p. 286), as well as dynamic. Although shifting ideologies overlap and intersect, it has proved useful to separate out different types so as to more precisely pin down how they align and where they do not (Gershon 2010b, p. 284). Both language and media ideologies, for example, can be seen as subsets of people's broader sets of beliefs about semiotics. Semiotic ideologies serve to rationalise people's selection and use of signs and semiotic modes, and render them meaningful (Keane 2003). From this perspective, media ideologies are those beliefs that people have about 'the material forms people use to communicate, from bodies, phonographs, to smartphones' (Gershon 2010b, p. 283).

In exploring ideologies as they relate to Facebook, we focus primarily on media ideologies (whilst acknowledging the interplay between language and media ideologies), arguing that people's ideas about the site on which they are communicating form the basis on which they develop ideas about appropriate linguistic, communicative and behavioural norms. Our particular focus is on media ideologies as they pertain to digitally-mediated platforms or channels (in the case of the research drawn upon in this book: Facebook). The proliferation of social media, Gershon (2010b, p. 290) explains, has resulted in the development of 'culturally specific, nuanced understandings of how these media shape communication and what kinds of utterances are most appropriately stated through which media'. How people reach these understandings is a subtle and varied matter which, crucially for the purposes of this book, often involves online communities implicitly negotiating and

co-developing appropriate social uses (Gershon 2010, p. 6) or, as we would also argue, learning the hard way through the experience of being judged to act inappropriately or judging others for doing so (see also Broadbent and Bauwens 2008). As this suggests, media ideologies are rarely universal, nor are they static, but instead emerge in different ways across different online communities. Despite the myriad of factors feeding into the local negotiation of people's media ideologies, it is useful to pick out three main factors which are of importance for an understanding of their influence: perceived site affordances; prior technological experience; and the place of the channel in the wider media ecology (that is, among the other opportunities for communication in the immediate digital and social environment, see e.g. Ito et al. 2010).

The concept of affordances as applied to social media – that is, the functional opportunities that a particular platform offers to its users (Lee 2007) – is important in foregrounding the role that technologies themselves play in shaping people's ideas about how to use them. However, by claiming that a technology 'has affordances', we do not mean to suggest that its properties or features determine how somebody will act, or that all users or online communities will perceive the site functionalities in the same way. Instead, affordances emerge from a process of interaction between a particular technology and a user. It is the user who determines what they want to do with a technology and what they are able to do with it. These decisions are based on how a technology is encountered (for example, whether a platform is accessed in its web or mobile version, or which operating system is used) as well as users' critical awareness of the technology's possibilities, their prior encounters with similar technologies, their intended communicative functions, wider social patterns of technology use, and so on. As Miller and Sinanan (2014, p. 139) point out, '[o]ne reason for being cautious about concepts such as 'affordances' is that often the key elements of media usage come more from happenstance than anything that could be called the propensities of that media'. The uses of different media are often justified and explained in various ways by individuals and communities with reference to what they can or cannot do because of the technology but, Miller and Sinanan argue, these



justifications are related as much to people's cultural judgements and their awareness of a site's complex and shifting functionalities (it is commonplace now for sites like Facebook to update their software on a very regular basis) than they are with what they can actually achieve with any one technology.

One outcome of this is that communities and even individuals will often use the same technology in different ways. In his study of the use of social media in an English village, for example, Miller (2016) documents the varied ways in which the villagers interpret the affordances of Twitter and thus the functions for which they use it, from the teenagers who perceive Twitter as 'personal and intimate' (p. 39) to the adults who use the site as a source of online news, one woman who uses the site to keep tabs on her abusive ex-husband, and one individual who sees it as a public platform on which to make complaints to companies. Similarly, studies of media ideologies often highlight differences in expectations between site designers and users (Barton & Lee 2013; Spitnulk 2010). That is, media ideologies for those who use rather than design or oversee the technology can 'be at odds with the assumptions embedded in the technologies themselves' (Gershon 2010b, p. 286). One example of this can be found in Hendus's (2015) study of the 'See Translation' button on Facebook which offers machine translation of people's posts, and which, she argues, reflects Facebook's desire to overcome language barriers in its bid to make a more connected and open world (a mission that Hendus found was frequently cited by the company owners). However, certain users in her study reported not using the button in part because it was seen as violating the privacy of the sender, who may have purposefully chosen a particular language so as to address (and exclude) certain groups within their overall friend base (Hendus 2015, p. 410; see also Tagg & Seargeant 2014, for more on language choice as an addressivity strategy). In this case, users' ideas about communication on Facebook appeared to directly shape uptake of a particular affordance in ways which did not match the intentions of the designers.

People's prior experiences of technologies are central to how a current technology is perceived and exploited. Jones and Hafner (2012) note how certain social practices

become associated with particular technologies to the point where it is difficult to imagine using a tool in any other way. This *technologization of practice*, as they term it, comes to influence how new technologies are exploited and evaluated; for example, people may compare social media unfavourably with more ‘traditional’ forms of communication because short digital posts do not seem to require the time and commitment of a handwritten letter or exploit the immediacy and directness of face-to-face interaction. Bolter and Grusin’s (1999) concept of *remediation* explains how the use of new media are not only shaped by the ideologies that surround existing technologies, but how their introduction and development serves to alter the ways in which existing media are understood. For example, in her study of how people break up using social media, Gershon (2010a) describes the fury one girl felt when her boyfriend broke up with her, not by phone, but in a handwritten letter on ‘cream stationery’; ‘who does that anymore?’, she asked (p. 392). ‘The choice of cream stationary’, concludes Gershon (2010a, p. 392), ‘in a context of so many other possibilities was interpreted as cold, as distancing, as disconcertingly formal’. Technology also needs to be understood in terms of the particular trajectory of the individual medium (Miller & Sinanan 2014, p. 136) so that, for example, text messaging comes to be seen as more conversational once people have mobile phone contracts and once they shift from SMS to free messaging apps such as WhatsApp (Evans & Tagg 2016). In relation to this, it is also relevant to point to the constant development of social media platforms. Facebook in particular has undergone several changes since it was opened up to the general population in 2006, not all of which have been initially popular (boyd 2008), but which tend to be eventually accepted by users and to shape subsequent behaviour, as well as people’s ideas about how and why the site is used.

The more general point here is that people’s perceptions of any one medium are always comparative; that is, a platform is always evaluated in relation to the other media that make up a media ecology (Horst et al. 2010) and in terms of how it finds a particular niche alongside other media. For example, within the context of how people chose to end relationships, Gershon (2010b, p. 287) suggests that decisions are

shaped by students' perceptions of what is appropriate vis a vis the different options available, so that letter writing can be seen as cold in comparison to digital communication. To take an example involving Facebook, it appears that in some contexts the social network site fills a niche alongside more intimate media for sharing somewhat trivial upbeat news and keeping social acquaintances at a particular distance (Miller 2016, pp. 140-143). boyd and Marwick (2011) explain how a group of American teenagers that they surveyed switched from discussions on their (semi)public Facebook walls to more private channels – such as text messaging or what is now known as Facebook Messenger – to discuss anything 'embarrassing or upsetting, intimate or self-exposing' (p.14). As this last example illustrates, different functions within the same platform – such as status updates and Facebook Messenger – can also afford different kinds of communication.

Madianou and Miller's (2012) concept of *polymedia* is also useful in this context, in that it addresses the consequences of social and moral choice when it comes to the particular media that an individual employs, as well as their decisions to switch media (Gershon 2010a). Polymedia posits an integrated media ecology, which emerged with the recent proliferation of communication technologies but which is shaped not by a division into different platforms but in terms of cross-cutting patterns of user engagement with an 'emerging environment of communicative opportunities' (Madianou & Miller 2012, p. 170). In other words, Madianou and Miller's argument is that users should be seen not as switching between different platforms (as Gershon suggests), but as selecting more fluidly from the affordances offered across their mobile or computing device(s). We might illustrate this with the example of someone posting a photo on Instagram who might then upload it into a Facebook album, given this particular functionality afforded by Facebook (i.e. the possibility to group multiple photos together, which Instagram at present does not offer). Similarly, we might point to the example of 'crossposting' (Adami 2014) or 'transposting' – the fact that it is increasingly possible to post the same content simultaneously on different platforms – as a practice which blurs the boundaries between sites. This point is analogous to arguments in sociolinguistics regarding the use of different

languages in users' communicative repertoires – while users recognise (the idea of) distinct languages and the important social and political meanings associated with them, they nonetheless often move fluidly between them in interaction in ways that suggest they are drawing on available signs in processes of 'translanguaging' rather than switching between languages (Garcia & Li Wei 2014). Similarly, in interaction, we suggest that users might be seen as moving fluidly between platforms as they select the affordances they feel are best suited to their immediate communicative purpose.

A further argument from Madianou and Miller (2012) is that, once issues such as cost, accessibility and digital literacy skills are largely resolved (as in many, though by no means all, parts of the world), choice of media becomes ideologically significant and open to social evaluation. This has already been illustrated with the example of Gershon's break up stories, where an individual's choice to finish a relationship by letter rather than phone is judged to be cold and distancing, while in previous contexts it was text messaging rather than direct contact which would have had this meaning. Madianou and Miller (2012, p. 180) refer to this as *resocialisation*, whereby media affordances become imbued with socially-indexical meaning. Gershon's examples also make clear how digital media not only shape wider social processes (such as the break-up of a relationship) but are also shaped by them (so that which digital media are appropriate comes to be defined within the parameters of what is acceptable behaviour when it comes to breaking-up). This, as Madianou and Miller (2012, p. 174) point out, is a key tenet of theories of mediation – the representation and circulation of meaning by traditional and social media – which highlight the mutually constitutive relations between media and society (Coudry 2008; Madianou 2012; Silverstone 2002; Williams 1977). In other words, people's ideas about a particular site are not only shaped by their understanding of its affordances within the wider media ecology, but their emerging ideologies also contribute to shaping the kind of communication that takes place on it.

The starting point for our own research and for this book, then, is that Facebook users have multiple and competing ideologies about the affordances and appropriate uses of Facebook, and it is through these that they rationalise their own use of the site and justify their responses to others' actions. These ideologies are formed through negotiation (both implicit and explicit) with other users, and are shaped by users' current and past experiences with Facebook and with the technologies that preceded their use of the site, as well as by their evaluation of the social network site in comparison and in conjunction with the other platforms and channels of communication with which they engage. In line with theories of mediation, people's Facebook ideologies can be seen as both emerging from, and shaping, the wider social context; that is, how they feel about the site is not only shaped by their experiences on it but goes on to shape the nature of future experiences. By focusing on instances in which different people's ideologies do not align or are in conflict, as signalled in their reports of having been offended by others' actions or of having offended others through their own behaviour, we seek to pin down the ideological beliefs that feed into the contexts that users bring into being in this particular virtual space. In the next section we outline *Creating Facebook*, the research project that underlies this study, and the approach taken to the collection and analysis of the data.

### ***Creating Facebook: the research project on which this book is based***

*Creating Facebook*, the project around which this book is based, was a two-year research project (2014-2016) led by Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg, with Amy Aisha Brown as research fellow. The project was motivated by our previous research which drew on interactional data taken from Facebook status updates and comments to explore people's addressivity strategies and language choice (Seargeant et al 2012; Tagg & Seargeant 2014). Whilst findings from our earlier research using interactional data highlighted who people had in mind when they styled their posts, and the impact their imagined audience had on the linguistic choices they made – issues which, as discussed above, have a fundamental influence on the nature of online

communication – the interactional data left us with a number of unanswered questions regarding why people chose to post what they did, whether there were topics they purposefully avoided, and how they perceived and negotiated the dynamic norms and expectations of communication via what has become such a central part of contemporary society. *Creating Facebook* therefore started out as a way of exploring the motivations and perceptions that lie behind people's online behaviour, and from this developed into an investigation of the reflective understanding that people have about Facebook as a space for interaction and expression. As such it offers original insights which inform not only our own previous research, but also studies within the wider literature on language and social media which tend to rely primarily on interactional data (Georgakopoulou & Spilioti 2015; Seargeant & Tagg 2014).

The project data were collected from the online network of friends of one of the researchers, by means of two data collection instruments: an online questionnaire and follow-up interviews. The questionnaire consisted of eighteen questions, and was designed, piloted, and implemented on the online platform SurveyMonkey. In 2003, Denscombe noted that online surveys and questionnaires are not necessarily the best method of collecting data from the general population because some sections of society are less likely to be online or have the same technical skill as others, and this is likely to still hold true today, despite the growing use of internet technology. In this instance, however, the decision was made to use an online questionnaire because the intention was to specifically target Facebook users and because it was assumed that it would be the best way of accessing the geographically diverse members of the network under investigation. In addition, this method of distributing the questionnaire through one individual's Facebook account enabled us to access the kind of (intradiverse) network that we have found typically characterises interactions on the site.

Invitations to participate in the online questionnaire were sent in mid-2014 to members of the researcher's Facebook network via personal messages on Facebook, and a link encouraging others to participate was also placed on the researcher's

Facebook page. Some friends also shared the link. As Hewson and Laurent (2008, p. 67) note, this form of sampling cannot offer generalizability because it is impossible to determine the sampling frame but, as mentioned above, it does present a way of evaluating the network of interest in this study in an exploratory fashion. Of the 184 responses collected, 43 were discarded because they were incomplete. This left 141 responses that were subject to analysis. We describe the survey respondents in more detail in Chapter 4, when we discuss the intradiverse nature of Facebook networks.

Prior to this main survey we conducted two pilots, which gave us the opportunity to refine the research instrument, and to calibrate its focus. The original research question for these pilot projects looked at people's perceptions and awareness of the ways their posts might be viewed and interpreted by an audience *beyond* their Friends on Facebook (i.e. friends of friends, or wider), and yet the responses they elicited indicated a strong trend toward people being more concerned about how they came across to those with whom they already had an offline relationship and the issues around this (Tagg 2013). In the version of the survey used for the main project we therefore adapted the questions to explore this in greater detail.

The eighteen questions posed in the final questionnaire were divided in two sections: the first asking for demographic details and basic information about how respondents use Facebook; the second asking questions that allowed for lengthier answers focused around what respondents do or do not post on Facebook and their rationales for and reflections on this. The overall aim of this second section was to elicit information relating to Facebook users' perceptions of their varied and potentially vast online audience, their awareness of the site affordances, their beliefs regarding their agency in exploiting these affordances, and their ideas about how all these factors influenced their linguistic and communicative practices. The specific questions we draw on in the analysis for this book comprise the following:

- Q. 14: Describe your typical status update. What do they tend to be about?
- Q. 17: Which information and/or topics would you not post about and why?
- Q. 22: Are there any instances where you have posted something which has inadvertently offended someone on Facebook? If so, please specify what it was and why it offended, and what happened as a result.
- Q. 24: Does the possibility of offending someone worry you or affect what you post on Facebook?
- Q. 26: Have you ever taken offence to something a Facebook ‘friend’ has posted onto Facebook? If yes, please specify what it was and why it offended, and what happened as a result.
- Q.30: If you have ever offended or been offended, has this resulted in you changing what you write about on Facebook? If so, please specify how you have changed what you write.

For the open-ended questions we urged respondents to ‘explain [their] reasons as fully as [they] can’. Responses ranged in length, with the occasional one-word reply and a number of very lengthy answers. The survey data were used in the first instance to document the kinds of offences that took place, why and how, and how people responded to these acts of offence. As will be seen in the analysis, the responses provide evidence of context design, by highlighting users’ awareness of the ways in which their identity performance and interactional behaviour online is continuously (re-)shaped in response to their interactions with other users.

Following a preliminary analysis of the questionnaire responses (see below), respondents who had given detailed responses in the questionnaire suggesting that they had either been offended or caused offence on Facebook were invited to take part in a follow-up interview. These semi-structured interviews were conducted using online voice calls, which again allowed for the opportunity to interview respondents irrespective of their physical location. The calls were recorded using QuickTime player, and the interviews were later transcribed. The interviews focused on asking



the interviewees to recall and comment on times when they had caused offence and/or been offended, and some more general information about their Facebook usage and Facebook networks were also elicited.

Before completing either the online questionnaire or an interview, respondents were asked to give their consent to the use of their data in the research project. In addition, steps were taken to ensure that the participants' data were collected and stored securely. For example, SurveyMonkey enables questionnaires to be constructed on its site free of charge but that basic service does not provide the secure connection required for the collection of personal and identifying information; therefore, a more secure version was used to make sure that we could offer participants this security. Despite these steps, however, there is still the potential issue that other Facebook users may be able to access information about members of the network who participated in our project. The researcher has organised her privacy settings on Facebook so that her list of Facebook friends was private, meaning that only she can see the entire list, with other friends only being able to see common friends. However, even with this setting, Facebook offers the following warning (Facebook 2012):

Remember: People can always see mutual friends and your friends also control who can see their friendships on their own timelines. If people can see your friendship on another timeline, they'll also be able to see it in the newsfeed, search and other places on Facebook

We therefore took two main measures to protect participants. Firstly, we anonymised the questionnaire and interview responses. For the questionnaire, responses are quoted in this book without identifying participants but instead are coded for question and response number; for the interviews, we use pseudonyms. Secondly, when describing the network, reference has been made to the network as a whole or broad groups therein, rather than identifying or describing individual respondents. This step is important because, as Zimmer (2010, p. 319) highlights, it is sometimes possible to

identify Facebook users from information researchers supply, even in anonymised sets of data, and we saw it as essential to avoid that situation given that some of the members of the network who did not participate in the research are nonetheless mentioned in the data, and are visible to others in the network. Both steps were also seen as important because of the sensitive nature of some of the responses given by participants. Discussion of these ethical issues is essential as language research in the field develops, and feeds usefully into wider debates (Spilioti and Tagg 2016).

Our approach to the analysis of the questionnaire data, which we labelled a ‘thematic-discourse analytic’ approach, combined the principles and practices of both thematic analysis (Guest 2012) and discourse analysis. This approach involved two of the researchers (Philip Seargeant and Caroline Tagg) reading through the survey data and identifying key themes across the data. The two independent analyses were then compared and contrasted and a final list of themes was negotiated. The selection of themes was shaped in part by our research questions and by our focus on how users’ responses to instances of offence related to their media ideologies, as well as on the current literature around relevant topics. However, we remained careful not to impose an existing framework on this new dataset but instead allow themes to emerge from the data, thus adhering to principles enshrined in a data-driven approach to data analysis. Indeed, there were a number of ways in which participants interpreted and reconstructed their online experiences, such as the importance of conflicting political views in triggering offence or the passive ways in which people claimed to respond, which we had not predicted. This approach thus enabled us to represent our respondents’ voices accurately whilst remaining within the parameters of our study’s aims and objectives. Importantly, the thematic analysis was accompanied throughout by discourse analysis, which involved careful consideration to the ways in which people’s attitudes and perceptions were encoded linguistically. The attention to linguistic detail enabled us to take into account the importance which was discursively accorded to an issue, as well as relying on its prominence or frequency across the data. It is worth noting at this point that our study is not intended to be primarily quantitative although we have indicated frequency of themes across the data

set where relevant. In this way we identified and categorised the different stances which people discursively constructed in their answers to our survey and their perceptions of the context in which they were interacting, as well as their expression of agency in responding to their stance.

The interviews were carried out subsequent to the questionnaire, and we therefore used them to probe more deeply into the themes identified in the questionnaire data. As such, the interview data allowed for an enriched interpretation of the issues emerging from the questionnaire data, whilst also enabling us to further refine our analytic categories. In other words, we used the interview data in a data-driven fashion to include new elements or themes which entailed revisiting the questionnaire data in an iterative process which involved revising or refining our themes. For example, one issue which we explored in more detail in the interviews was that of the intersection of offline and online interactions (see Chapter 6). Whereas the questionnaire data had highlighted the way in which participants positioned Facebook interactions in a wider media ecology (e.g. as less suited than face-to-face interactions for in-depth debate), the interviews threw up the fact that people often moved between online and offline spheres in negotiating instances of offence on Facebook. Although other language and social media studies point to a blurring of the distinction between the online and offline, it is interesting that research into online abuse or aggression in this field often does not (e.g. Angouri & Tseliga 2009; Hardaker 2010) and so our research sheds light on this neglected area.

The rest of this book elaborates on and discusses the themes that emerged from our data analysis, drawing extensively on examples from our data. Before turning to the data itself, however, Chapter 2 begins by outlining our concept of context design as a key theoretical element in understanding online behaviour on social media sites such as Facebook. In Chapter 3, we then explore the literature relating to online offence, focusing on the discursive nature of online disagreement as an example of relational work, and the affordances and practices that appear to enable or encourage its occurrence on different online platforms. Following on from this explication of the

academic context, we move in the next chapters to a clearer focus on our own research data. Chapters 4 and 5 explore our notion of *intradiversity* as a way of describing and explaining the nature of social networks as they are realised on Facebook. This is done in Chapter 4 by explaining how our participant sample itself represents an intradiverse network of the type we also saw evidenced in our elicited data; and, in Chapter 5, by drawing on the survey and interview data to explore the strategies that people adopt to manage their intradiverse audience, particularly when offending or taking offence, and in this way contributing to our understanding of offence as it occurs on this particular site. In Chapter 6, we draw again on our research data to explore how the management of offence is driven in part by users' desire to achieve *online conviviality* or peaceful co-existence, motivated in turn by the intradiverse characteristics of Facebook networks and shaped by the particular affordances of the site. Finally, in an Afterword to the book, we consider how our findings relate to the wider media ecology of different forms of social media, and reflect on the broader significance of our study for contemporary debates surrounding the role that Facebook and other social media sites play in political and social life, particularly the implications for understanding how online news is shared and consumed.