



Research Article

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Manipulating Meaning: Language and Ideology in the Commodification of Online Sociality

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Abstract: Marxist Internet scholars have recently shed light on the commodification and exploitation of social media users. While some of these studies have also acknowledged the ideological nature of how online sociality is understood and discussed, they have not yet addressed in great detail the ways in which ideology figures in the process of commodification of social media users. We address this question by combining Marxist ideology theory with insights from cognitive pragmatics. Focusing on the idea of illusion, we draw on Relevance Theory and employ the notions of “relevance” and “cognitive illusion” to discuss the ideological process we call *context manipulation*, a concept that helps bring to focus the discursive obscuring of the capitalist operational logic of social media corporations. We illustrate our cognitive-pragmatic model of ideology with examples of Facebook’s discursive practices. The paper contributes to the discussion on ideology in cultural studies and the discussion on commodification of online sociality in critical Internet and media studies by offering a revised interpretation of Marx’s ideology theory that highlights the discursive and cognitive nature of ideological processes, and by elaborating on the workings of ideology in the specific context of corporate social media.

Keywords: Marx, ideology, illusion, pragmatics, Relevance Theory, social media

Our mission is to give people the power to build community and bring the world closer together.
Facebook Inc.

One of the largest Internet companies in the world, Facebook, Inc. has recently been at the centre of countless lawsuits, scandals and controversies involving issues ranging from privacy (e.g. Gibbs; Hern) to hate speech and fake news (e.g. Hogan and Safi). One of the most egregious scandals with serious and far-reaching political and social consequences involves Cambridge Analytica. This data analytics and political consulting firm harvested data from tens of millions of Facebook users without their consent, and in addition to this, took efforts to influence the voting choices in the US presidential election of 2016 through targeted political advertising (Cadwalladr and Graham-Harrison). The case, which became public in March 2018, put into serious question Facebook’s ability and willingness to control third parties operating on their platform, but on a more general level, the case also brought into spotlight questions about the ethics of massive data collection, bringing up concerns about safety. The question many now ask is why, under these conditions, people still agree to use Facebook and other similar social media platforms?

Within critical Internet and media studies, there has been a return to Marx that has paid attention to the inherent capitalist nature of contemporary communications systems. Fuchs (“Marx’s Capital in the

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information age” 51), for example, emphasises how a “contemporary reading of Marx needs to be mediated with contemporary capitalism’s structures and the political issues of the day” which presently are the Internet, media, and communications in today’s media-saturated and mediated world. Indeed, scholars drawing on Marxist concepts have recently shed light on the increasing commodification of online sociality, arguing that users’ attention, data, as well as the content they produce are sold to advertisers by the platform owners (see e.g. Dyer-Witheford; Fisher & Fuchs; Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*; van Dijck). As Fuchs (“Marx’s Capital in the information age” 51) points out, “it is time to see Marx not just as a critic of capitalism but also as a critic of capitalist communications.” Indeed, the business model of Facebook is to provide both a platform and an audience for targeted digital advertising (see also Srnicek)—in 2017, 98 % of the company’s revenue came from advertising (as reported on the company’s investor relations website). This means that user presence on the platform, and more specifically the user data (data provided by the user and collected metadata) that allows for targeting advertising, are key parts of the product sold.

However, despite the increased focus on online commodification (see e.g. Fuchs, *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*) and the monetisation of social relationships (e.g. Skeggs & Yuill), little attention has been paid to the *ideological processes* that enable value extraction from social media users; in particular, the discursive dimension of these processes has mostly been sidelined. Yet, ideological processes can be understood as being to a significant degree discursive in nature (see, e.g. Fairclough; Herzog; van Dijk). Embedded in discourse(s), ideology is distributed by language as “we all live and communicate with and through ‘ideology’” (Gee 29). For Marx, the ideas of the elite are always the hegemonic ideas (*The German Ideology* 92; Marx and Engels 35); this means that ideology benefits the elite by representing social reality in ways that support their position and maintain their power. This is because ideology gives rise to illusions, making the working class unaware of the causes of their suffering. With this paper, we want to revisit this critical perspective on ideology and, in particular, the notion of *ideology as illusion* (see particularly Marx, *The German Ideology*, Marx & Engels; see also Marx, *Capital vol. 1* e.g. The Fetishism of Commodities); we do this by approaching ideology from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective.

The non-relative view of truth and reality embedded in Marxist ideology theory (namely, that an objective truth exists and is obfuscated by ideology) has often been considered incompatible with poststructuralist, discursive perspectives. Laclau (298-99), for example, notes that the idea of illusion or distortion “made sense as long as something ‘true’ or ‘undistorted’ was considered to be within human reach.” In recent decades, the Marxist view of ideology has been largely abandoned in favour of more relativistic, value-neutral conceptions of ideology, which see ideologies merely as “mental frameworks” (Hall, “The Problem of Ideology”) or “systems of ideas” (e.g. van Dijk). Some scholars within media and cultural studies have, however, called for a renewed attention to a critical perspective on ideology that continues in the Marxist tradition of ideology as illusion (Corner; Downey; Downey et al.; Downey and Toynbee). Also within discourse studies, Herzog, for example, has argued for a discursive approach to Marxist ideology theory.

To explore ideology in the social media context, we approach the nexus of language and ideology by drawing on Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson), a cognitive approach to linguistic pragmatics (on pragmatics, see Mey; Levinson) that builds on prior theorisation on human reasoning and emphasises cognitive inference in communication. This approach helps us explain the phenomenon of *illusion* in terms of communicative and cognitive processes involved in utterance interpretation and comprehension, highlighting the fallibility of these processes and showing how they can be manipulated. In particular, we employ the notions of *relevance* and *cognitive illusion* to theorise a discursive process we call *context manipulation*. This process involves making salient one interpretive context over another by communicative means (thereby signalling its *optimal relevance* for the reader). We argue that the discursive process of context manipulation gives rise to *cognitive illusions* (Johnson-Laird & Savary; Maillatt & Oswald) regarding the interpretation of the communicative content, and thus, in the context of corporate social media, of the nature of social media services. Cognitive illusion refers to the possibility of arriving at incorrect, or *illusory*, inference from a given premise, inherent in human cognitive reasoning (Johnson-Laird). In our context of corporate social media, we will illustrate how context manipulation blurs the operational logic of Facebook (premised on the commodification of users) so that users are provided with only a partial, often misleading representation of the conditions of their participation.

With this theoretical paper, we thus address the gap in research regarding ideology and language in the context of online commodification and highlight the discursive and cognitive dimensions of ideology. We, therefore, contribute to the discussion on Marx and ideology theory in cultural studies and to the discussion in critical Internet and media studies on the commodification of online sociality. We do this by building a new theoretical perspective on the ideological processes underlying commodification of social media users and bring a cognitive-pragmatic perspective into dialogue with Marxist ideology theory.

Key Points in Marxist Ideology Theory

The concept of ideology is essential in understanding the acceptance by social media users of what some scholars have described exploitative relations (see, e.g. Fuchs; Fisher & Fuchs) with the platforms. For Marx, the relations of production, the material relations and conditions involved in the capitalist mode of production, constitute the economic structure of society, its “real foundation.” On this *base*, determined by it, arises the *superstructure* that comprises the legal, political, religious, artistic and philosophic forms of social consciousness which Marx considers ideological forms (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*). There has been a widespread debate within Marxist literature regarding the degree to which the base actually determines the superstructure; although we agree with the principle that the base is fundamental, we also believe the superstructure does have important material consequences, meaning that it influences the base as well. Clearly, the material foundations of society and social consciousness are intimately interrelated. The capitalist system is thus upheld by economic relations on the one hand and ideological forms on the other.

Ideology works particularly to uphold the current social order by creating a “distortion of reality” (Larrain, 12). As Marx put it, ideology makes “men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*” (*The German Ideology* 68). Furthermore, as Marx famously stated, the “ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas” (*The German Ideology* 92; Marx and Engels 35) where “the ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas” (*The German Ideology* 92). These ruling ideas are invariably depicted “as the common interest of all the members of society ... as the only rational, universally valid ones” (*The German Ideology* 94), and thus difficult to contest. Power, then, is a key aspect of the Marxist theory of ideology because ideology serves to produce and reproduce asymmetrical power relations and inequality (e.g. Thompson; Fairclough). It is important to note that although ideology supports the interests of the elite, it does not necessarily mean that members of the elite intentionally spread ideas that *they think* are false (although sometimes they might do that); they themselves may also be blinded by the ideology. However, it also is worth noting that elites have access to resources, such as the mass media, which allow their ideas to spread much easier than those of the lower classes.

For Marx, then, ideology was fundamentally a negative phenomenon maintaining social inequality, a view that not all later scholars accept. Hall, for example, defines ideology simply as “the mental framework ... which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works” (“The Problem of Ideology”). Moreover, the view of ideology as distortion or illusion has faced serious criticism in later work (e.g. Althusser; Hall; Thompson; Eagleton). Žižek (7) joins the critique, stating “ideology has nothing to do with ‘illusion’,” and explains: “a political standpoint can be quite accurate (‘true’) as to its objective content, yet thoroughly ideological.” The point Žižek is making is that from the perspective of defining something as ideological, the truth value of claims is of lesser importance than the fact that those claims are used to legitimise relations of social domination in a *non-transparent* way. An aspect of illusion thus remains also in Žižek’s view: it is not the ideological claims themselves but their relation to the legitimisation of power that is distorted—not what is said but *why* it is said. We believe that the fundamental illusion, as Marx noted, lies in the perception that ideological claims (supporting the interests of the elite) are the *only* rational and universally valid ideas (*The German Ideology* 94).

Yet others criticise Marxist ideology theory for having a patronising attitude towards the “blind masses ... unable to be cured of their illusions” (Rancière xvi), while we, the scholars, with our “superior wisdom,”

do recognise the distortion (Hall, “The Problem of Ideology” 30-31). However, while people belonging to the “masses” may in fact sometimes recognise the distortion, they might nevertheless feel powerless to change anything due to the social and economic circumstances they find themselves in (Na; see also Bauman). The issue of resignation resonates with Marx’s view that the adoption of ideology is a response to *alienation* (Morris). Although alienation can take many forms, it is broadly speaking a “lack of a sense of meaning” (Elster 41). For Marx, when a person is alienated, “he does not fulfil himself in his work but denies himself, has a feeling of misery rather than well-being, does not develop freely his mental and physical energies but is physically exhausted and mentally debased” (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* 15). As ideology is an expression of a set of beliefs, values, and commitments that allow orienting oneself in an otherwise chaotic world (Morris 31), it can offer, if not real self-actualisation, at least some sense of belonging and understanding the world.

However, Elster (41) notes that a *lack of a sense of meaning* does not necessarily imply a *sense of a lack of meaning*; that is, people do not always realise they are alienated. Adopting an ideology reduces the *perception* of alienation, without actually reducing alienation—religion is one example of this discussed by Marx (*Capital vol. I*). Ideological ways of thinking tend to value social cohesion and conformity at the expense of seeking truth; as a consequence, people are less aware of facts (Morris 31). This, in turn, reduces individual freedom to think and act, thus also preventing dealienation (Morris 31). Ideology, therefore, sustains capitalism, and alienation, by rationalising and legitimising the economic system and its consequences.

Commodification of the Internet and Online Sociality

In capitalism, personal worth is resolved into exchange value (Marx and Engels 12); this is an example of *commodification*, meaning transforming such things into commodities that were formerly outside of economic relationships and considered to have use value only (Mosco). This expansion of the domain of capital has also taken place in the online context where the social life of the users has been transformed into a marketable product and exchange value for the company. Although discussions of online interaction and social media usually highlight *sociality* instead of economic transaction (Lovink 9), Dahlberg, already in 2001, saw commodification as one of the greatest threats to the autonomy of public interaction online. Likewise, Thurlow points out how nowhere is commodification “more apparent than in Facebook where the meaning (and spaces) of social networking have been so fully co-opted (and colonized) by corporations” (232).

Commodification of the Internet is tightly intertwined with the prevailing neoliberal ideology (e.g. Lovink; Skeggs & Yuill; Harvey), the widespread use of social media indicating “the further extension of neoliberal modes of operating within intimate life” (Gill and Kanai). Critical Internet researchers (e.g. Kang & McAllister; Campbell & Carlson) have addressed the question of commodification by drawing from Smythe, who in the context of television coined the term “audience commodity,” arguing that audiences are being sold as commodity to advertisers; similarly, social media users (particularly their data and attention) are being commodified and sold to advertisers (Fuchs, “Dallas Smythe today”).

Social media users have, in fact, been conceptualised as both commodities and workers engaged in *digital labour*. It has been argued that in consuming capitalist social media, “users not just reproduce their labour power” by having fun on the site, but “produce commodities”—without the users’ participation and the content that they produce (and that attracts other users to spend time on the site), the companies would have nothing to sell (Fuchs, “Dallas Smythe today” 704). Thus, digital labour is being “exploited because it generates value and products that are owned by others” (Fuchs, “Dallas Smythe today” 705). For Marx, of course, labour power always was a commodity sold to employers. A key difference in this context is that users receive no monetary compensation for what they do for the site, but they are still a necessary part of the production of surplus value. In fact, they are the commodity in an exchange relation of two other parties, Facebook and its customers (advertising agencies and other organisations), with none of the monetary gain coming back to them.

However, not all scholars agree that digital labour is a very useful concept to explain the problematic of the commercialised Internet. Skeggs and Yuill (386-88) argue that free labour is a “red herring” and that ownership, control, and the circulation of capital are much more significant questions. Indeed, we agree that the concept of labour tends to draw attention mainly to the content that users actively produce on Facebook, rather than the data that is passively harvested from them. This user “metadata” is a key part of the advertising product of Facebook, and it is also a valuable commodity in its own right, sold directly to advertisers to help in market research; this product is known as Facebook Topic Data. Importantly, this harvesting of data goes beyond the platform itself and extends to other sites, too, even when users are logged out of Facebook; Facebook tracks even people who do not have Facebook user accounts (e.g. “shadow profiles”) (Skeggs and Yuill). Because of the covert nature of this data harvesting, Skeggs and Yuill argue that the process is better described as *expropriation* rather than *exploitation*.

Ideology and Social Media

Several authors (e.g. Briziarelli; Fisher; Garnham; Lovink) have argued that both popular and academic discussion around information society and digital economy is often deeply ideological as any possible problems related to the Internet and social media tend to be glossed over. Yet, the new data economy is characterised by asymmetric power relations that favour those with access to data and the capability to make sense of it; this is justified by discourses that focus on the social and political benefits of social media (Myers West 4-5).

Similarly, contemporary social media is presented as “free” and socially beneficial—a form of “participatory culture” and “new democracy” (Fuchs, “Dallas Smythe today”; Na). An older idea of participatory culture was, in fact, appropriated by social media corporations that have deliberately conflated “human connectedness” and “automated connectivity” when they refer to “social” media (van Dijck 11-13). These discursive tactics serve to blur the capitalist operational logic by focussing on “what people do through platforms rather than critical issues of ownership, rights, and power” (Baym 1).

Thus, sociality, community and a sense of belonging are among the social benefits marshalled to attract users to *voluntarily* offer their data to Facebook (Skeggs and Yuill); these are also some of the factors that make using social media appear de-alienating. Using social media, although seemingly voluntary, is nevertheless done under illusions of ideology. Fuchs (“Dallas Smythe today”), for example, argues that digital labour is “ideologically coerced,” meaning that not participating in social media carries a (perceived) threat of social isolation: there is an ideological belief that we *need* to be on social media. In addition, ideological illusions also apply to the business models of social media corporations, of which people are often seemingly unaware. For example, Srnicek (48) argues that, as people call for more privacy on Facebook, they are missing the fact that “the suppression of privacy is at the heart of this business model.”

The distorting effect of ideology can be intensified by the fact that, in the modern world, the labour market and life generally are increasingly insecure as employment is often short-termed and precarious (Bauman). Bauman (35) observes that as people struggle in their daily lives just to survive, it is difficult to see past one’s own predicament, and thus no organised, collective action toward social improvement is possible. Similarly, social media users often struggle to grasp the bigger picture. Regarding the inability to change the circumstances of digital life, we have previously argued that by using social media, users simultaneously (although perhaps unwittingly) participate in legitimating both the practices and the value extraction model of these corporations (Lillqvist & Harju). Yet, as long as users remain unaware of the exploitative nature of corporate social media, they cannot instigate change or engage in collective resistance. In *Digital Labour and Karl Marx*, Fuchs further points out that because users as digital labour are unable to organise, they do not form a politically conscious working class, forming instead a new “digital proletariat.”

Ideology and language: Insights from Relevance Theory

Marx saw both language and ideology as tightly interwoven with social and material reality and processes of social reproduction. Marx had a modern—interactional and concrete—view of the role of consciousness and language, and he emphasised, in particular, their connection to the material world:

language is practical, real consciousness that exists for other men as well, and only therefore does it exist for me ... Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all. (Marx, *The German Ideology* 74)

As Herzog notes, ideology makes for a suitable object of linguistic enquiry, particularly when adopting a discursive perspective and examining “language and practices of signification in social context” (1). We believe (linguistic) pragmatics provides a framework compatible with a Marxist approach as pragmatics focuses on language in its social context and includes *implicit meaning* in the account of language and communication.

Pragmatics can be defined as the study of *language in context* (Mey; Levinson). Emphasising the social dimension of pragmatic enquiry, Mey (6) notes how a “truly pragmatic consideration has to deal with the users in their *social context*; it cannot limit itself to the grammatically encoded aspects of contexts.” Communication, then, is more than the semantic content of a sentence; an utterance “has a variety of properties, both linguistic and non-linguistic” (Sperber & Wilson 9), including contextual factors and varying inputs from both “internal” and “external” sources (Sperber & Wilson 261). Internal sources refer to each individual bringing with them to the communicative event their own cognitive environment (see Sperber & Wilson 38), including prior knowledge and assumptions, all of which figure in the interpretation process by adding to or modifying the context selected. External sources include not only the immediate contextual factors, the grammatically encoded context, but also the wider socio-cultural context. Regarding corporate social media, for example, the wider context includes actions taken by platform owners (e.g. censoring content), news written about them (e.g. on the recent case of Cambridge Analytica), and conversations among users (whether online or offline). Thus, what is communicated by Facebook is interpreted against an immensely rich and varied canvas of a context that is not limited to the immediate context (i.e. textual context).

Two Principles of Relevance

Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson) provides an intricate pragmatic theory by developing an inferential model of communication that stresses the role of cognition and, particularly, the importance of inferential processes in utterance interpretation. Built on the Gricean model of pragmatic inference (see Grice, “Logic and Conversation”; “Meaning”), Relevance Theory takes from Grice the *Maxim of relation* (that states, “Be relevant”) and develops it into the *Principle of Relevance* (see Sperber & Wilson 155). Relevance Theory (Sperber & Wilson 260-61) posits two claims about cognition and communication:

1. Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximisation of relevance (*Cognitive Principle*)
2. Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (*Communicative Principle*)

Relevance-seeking as a human cognitive tendency underlies the theory, giving Relevance Theory its explanatory power. Referring to communication (Communicative Principle), the Principle of Relevance states that the communicator is seen as always communicating a “presumption of relevance” (Sperber & Wilson 156). Simply put, what people communicate is interpreted by the hearer-reader as having optimal relevance to them in the context, rendering the communicative content important in some way and thus worthy of the hearer’s attention (Sperber & Wilson). Importantly, what is communicated is thus not expected to be irrelevant.

Inferential system of interpretation

Interpretation in the Relevance-theoretic framework (Sperber & Wilson; Wilson & Sperber; Wilson) goes beyond decoding of literal meaning to include an inferential phase as a crucial part of the interpretation process, guided by both relevance and contextual cues. Therefore, not only the literal meaning of the utterance but also *the conceptual representation conjured up in the mind of the individual interpreter* (the hearer-reader), based on the utterance, feed into the interpretation process. Individuals thus construct different conceptual representations of the same utterance, depending on the contextual information at hand (both external and internal input). The unique cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson 38) of each individual (i.e. prior knowledge, assumptions, etc.) makes it possible to reconcile how different people interpret the same utterance in different ways. It is also important to note, as Wilson and Sperber (9) point out, that “the primary bearers of truth conditions are not utterances but conceptual representations,” which explains divergent interpretations of the same utterance.

Contexts, then, are highly variable and highly individualised. While communication makes manifest a certain context (Sperber & Wilson 156), context selection on the part of the interpreter is guided by the overall Principle of Relevance coupled with individual’s external and internal inputs. All these add to the range of contextual cues: the outcome of the interpretation process and its relevance will be assessed “in terms of all contextual effects achieved” (Sperber & Wilson 263).

Wilson explains that communicators have two distinct goals: they want the hearer-reader to *understand* their meaning, but they also want to persuade them to *believe* it. Equally, recipients have two tasks: first, to understand the communicator’s meaning, and second, to *assess* the meaning they recover, and based on this assessment either believe it or discard it. The first task relies on people’s pragmatic ability to infer meaning from the available linguistic and contextual cues, whereas the second task entails assessing the accuracy of the interpretation to avoid being accidentally or intentionally misinformed. Some conclusions may indeed be invalid; but in terms of how the human cognitive system and reasoning *functions*, truth is not a factor as such.

Context Manipulation

Relevance-seeking tendencies also cater to misleading communicative ends. Wilson and Sperber (254) state that the “universal cognitive tendency to maximise relevance makes it possible, at least to some extent, to predict and manipulate the mental states of others.” Relevance-seeking tendency thus allows for *context manipulation* whereby some contexts can be made more salient and more relevant (*salient contexts*) by the communicator while other contexts are avoided (*obscured contexts*). The interpretation process is thus constrained (see Maillatt & Oswald), and here lies the possibility for context manipulation: manipulating the context relies on new information adding to or modifying the old in such a way that the sum total of contextual effects guides the inference toward a specific conclusion.

Writing about cognitive models of reasoning, Johnson-Laird and Savary (191, emphasis added) note that when reasoning, people build mental models of situations that “normally make explicit *only what is true*” due to a fundamental representational principle of human reasoning. There is a cognitive bias towards *interpreting* utterances as true (Johnson-Laird and Savary; Johnson-Laird; see also Grice, “Logic and conversation”) rather than false; thus, this process also produces fallacious yet compelling inferences, that is, *illusory inferences*.

Johnson-Laird and Savary explain how such *compelling but invalid* inferences can occur: when presented with two premises, and being told one of them is true and the other false, reasoners will almost invariably forget one is false and instead base their inference on both being true. Johnson-Laird (419) emphasises that “because we can’t hold in mind more than a few possibilities, we tend to focus on what’s true at the expense of what’s false”; in order to disregard false interpretations among all the possibilities, we would first have to entertain what is false, which we often fail to do. This resonates with the Relevance-theoretic notion that communication is assumed relevant; it is also assumed true because a premise that is true is also more

relevant. The difficulty of keeping in mind the possibility of falsity opens up the possibility for manipulating the context by not only selecting what to include or exclude, but also by providing information that seems plausible, or that is only partially true.

Context manipulation, then, is best defined in terms of the *constraints* it imposes on mental processing, (mis)leading people to process information in a restricted way (Maillat & Oswald). The process exploits the inherent weaknesses of the human cognitive system and reasoning (see Johnson-Laird), leading to “cognitive illusions” (Maillat & Oswald): thus, conclusions may seem logically valid, while not being accurate reflections of the “state of affairs in the world” (Sperber & Wilson).

Analysing Context Manipulation: The Case of Facebook

In this section, we revisit earlier empirical work (Lillqvist & Harju) on Facebook communication and discuss it from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective. We also provide some further examples that illustrate the communicative strategies of Facebook that in addition to discursive aspects also occur at the level of interface design. With this, we demonstrate the workings of the discursive process of context manipulation, the underlying principle of our cognitive-pragmatic model of ideology.

In their communication about the service, Facebook foregrounds social life and provides information that explicitly supports the perception of increased sociality and connection. The four main interpretive contexts (Lillqvist & Harju) that Facebook makes salient all focus on what the platform offers the users: it rhetorically offers *protection* (from bullying, from harmful or offensive content, against data piracy and theft), *freedom of speech* (within limits set in the Community Standards), *social connection*, as well as general *altruism*—being concerned about the users, their satisfaction and well-being. These more salient contexts contribute to the external contextual cues shaping interpretation, and they all emphasise benefits for the user.

What is lacking is any reference to the monetisation of sociality; there is also no mention of the drawbacks of using the service (e.g. compromised data security). However, users garner additional information from other sources that add to the external contextual cues, for example, information on data harvesting and compromised privacy, and bring these issues up as alternative contexts (Lillqvist & Harju), making visible the incompleteness of the information Facebook provides. For example, Facebook claims to protect users’ against hate speech, yet some users criticise this by saying enforcement of the rules is insufficient and inconsistent: while the platform bans some hate speech, it allows others. Interestingly, however, the contexts made salient by the company are often echoed by users, which demonstrates the normalisation of ideology on Facebook.

Context manipulation is not limited to how Facebook describes the platform, or to discourse alone, but can be detected in the very design of the service. For example, in a report commissioned by the Belgian Privacy Commission, Van Alsenoy et al. (40) point out the imbalance regards control over privacy, noting how “Facebook’s privacy settings offer users considerable control when it comes to regulating access of their data by other users”; however, much less control is given “in relation to the collection and/or use of data by Facebook itself or by third-parties.” This way, Van Alsenoy et al. argue, the design “gives users a false sense of control.” In terms of context manipulation, Facebook privileges one perspective on privacy over the other, making it more salient. Facebook thus prioritises the context of social interaction over that of the capitalist operational logic.

In addition to the various contexts constructed, the *methods* used for making certain contexts salient over others, and thus constraining the interpretation process, is another interesting aspect of context manipulation. For example, *repetition* as a rhetorical strategy is a powerful tool for instilling ideological thought, as illustrated by a quote from Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Facebook:

When you have access to the internet, you have more voice. When you have better tools for sharing, you have more voice. When you have fewer laws limiting your speech, you have more voice. When you do not live in fear of social isolation or violence if you express yourself, you have more voice. (Mark Zuckerberg, Facebook post on 16 March 2015)

By repeatedly emphasising the context of freedom of speech by using the phrase “you have more voice,” Zuckerberg is constructing an interpretive context where the service seems solely beneficial with no drawbacks while implying that not using the service lessens one’s autonomy and freedom of speech. It is worth noting that Facebook is not alone in communicating the interpretive context(s) of enhanced sociality and freedom, but these interpretations are reflected and reproduced by many users as well; this is precisely how discourse operates ideologically, gradually becoming commonly accepted and normalised as it spreads. It is also what makes it so powerful.

In addition to the discursive, the methods used for making certain contexts salient can be examined at the level of interface design. These include introducing unnecessary *complexity* and *unclarity* (hidden settings for privacy, long and obfuscated Terms and Conditions, etc.) and *insufficient information* (for giving informed consent, or regarding privacy or data ownership, etc.). In terms of complexity and unclarity, the Belgian privacy commission found in 2015 that Facebook violated European consumer protection law, specifically the Unfair Contract Terms Directive (Gibbs), as users must “navigate Facebook’s complex web of settings (which include ‘Privacy’, ‘Apps’, ‘Ads’, ‘Followers’, etc.) in search of possible opt-outs” (Van Alsenoy et al. 41). The default settings on Facebook, and thus the design, support commodification while options for changing the settings are made less salient.

Regarding insufficient information, Facebook’s privacy settings were ruled illegal in Germany in 2018, where a Berlin regional court found Facebook in violation of German consumer law because the platform provides insufficient information to users about collecting and using their personal data (Hern). Similarly, the Article 29 Working Party that oversees data regulation issues across the European Union noted that the view where consent is requested for data sharing between WhatsApp and Facebook “made no mention at all of the key information users needed to make an informed choice, namely that clicking the agree button would result in their personal data being shared with the Facebook family of companies” (Hern). This means that due to insufficient information, users are unable to give meaningful consent (Hern). These examples illustrate how ideology manifests materially in obscure interface design as well as in insufficient communication about the functions and purposes of these features.

Facebook’s communication has on several occasions violated the Principle of Relevance by breaching the presumption of optimal relevance (Sperber & Wilson; see also Grice “Logic and Conversation”), for example, regarding sufficient information to give informed consent. The context manipulation strategies of Facebook aim to ensure and maximise monetary gain which is achieved by attracting and retaining users; this is achieved by obscuring the context of commodification (involving data mining and privacy violations) because this would disclose the disadvantages of using the service. It follows from the Principle of Relevance that given the main context Facebook highlights as relevant, the context of sociality, users are cognitively justified in arriving at the interpretation that using social media is for their benefit and that they can do so safely. There are ethical issues with a value extraction model that is not based on informed consent or genuinely voluntary and mutual agreement, but rather, on solicitation (Lillqvist & Harju) and miscommunication.

Toward a Cognitive-Pragmatic Model of Ideology

The cognitive-pragmatic model of ideology developed in this paper revisits Marx’ idea of ‘ideology as illusion’ and builds on prior theorisation on human reasoning (Johnson-Laird & Savary; Maillatt & Oswald; Johnson-Laird) and on cognitive inference in communication (Sperber & Wilson). In line with the Relevance-theoretic view, users interpret a message (e.g. Facebook communication) in a way most relevant to them in the (wider) context, guided by the Principle of Relevance together with (internal and external) contextual cues. Furthermore, there is a crucial assumption that what the speaker communicates is not only relevant but also true: the human inferential process thus incorporates a level of trust in the communicator, which in the process of context manipulation is exploited.

Interestingly, from the perspective of Marxist ideology theory, examination of human cognitive processes has shown that people can *both* be aware of real conditions *and* be under an illusion: for example, it is

difficult to remember that premises may not correspond to real circumstances (Johnson-Laird & Savary). Importantly, as Sperber and Wilson (263) point out, whether a premise is objectively “true” or “false” has little bearing in terms of the cognitive steps that are taken during the inferential process. Ideological illusions thus arise because of the inherent fallibility in human reasoning.

In terms of commodification of users and the prevalent business model of corporate social media, ideology can be seen as a discursive process promoting information favourable to the communicator, the corporate social media. This process happens through *context manipulation* that gives rise to *cognitive illusions* whereby the representation of “the state of affairs in the world” may not be accurate or complete. Moreover, the ideological obscuring and constraining of information extend to the material dimension at the level of interface design.

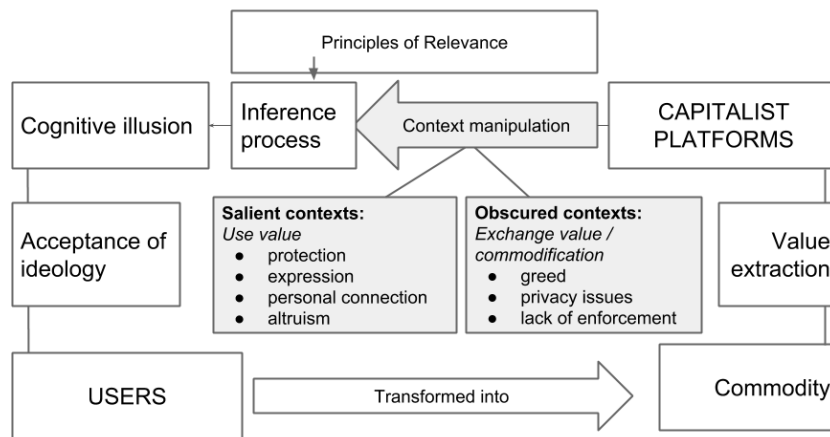


Figure 1. Cognitive-pragmatic model of ideology illustrating commodification of online sociality.

Figure 1 summarises the ideological discursive process involved in commodification of online sociality. The interpretive contexts Facebook provides emphasise the dimension of sociality and human connection as the *raison d’être* of the platform. In other words, using Marx’s terminology, Facebook emphasises the *use value* of the service while the *exchange value* of participation is never explicitly communicated. By constraining the inferential process this way, Facebook obscures the capitalist value extraction through the commodification of sociality and instead promotes the ideological acceptance of the business model. Through this acceptance the users in effect sanction it.

Conclusion

In order to enhance our understanding of why users continue to use social media services despite the many public controversies, we set out to examine the ideological dimension of commodification of online sociality, approaching ideology specifically as a discursive process from a cognitive-pragmatic perspective. We employed the Relevance-theoretic notion of relevance (Sperber & Wilson) together with the notion of cognitive illusion (Maillatt & Oswald) to discuss the discursive process we call *context manipulation*, the underlying principle of our cognitive-pragmatic approach to ideology. By drawing on cognitive pragmatics and research on human reasoning, we bring back the notion of ideology as *illusion* and thus provide a renewed, discursive understanding of Marxist ideology theory. The paper thus contributes to the discussion on ideology theory in cultural studies and to the discussion on commodification of online sociality in critical Internet and media studies.

We have revised the notion of ideology as illusion to be more relevant for the contemporary capitalist context and digital media, but also to reflect the current understanding of language and human cognition

which are crucial to ideology theory. The cognitive-pragmatic perspective shows that illusions are part of human reasoning when the cognitive system is fed information that supports such (illusory) inferences. Thus, by arguing for the importance of context as a crucial element in ideological discourse, we have shown the ways in which it is possible to manipulate the context to construct an interpretive environment that *seems* favourable and relevant, and how this may give rise to cognitive illusions (Johnson-Laird & Savary; Maillatt & Oswald), regarding, for example, the nature of social media participation.

In emphasising the importance of context, we have also discussed the role of salience of contextual cues and their impact on inference. Resonating with this, Corner (271, emphasis added) argues that “exploring the distribution of *salience* and of *marginality* in political and economic narratives” offers a way forward in ideology research; in developing our cognitive-pragmatic perspective to ideology we take seriously this call and make visible the discursive mechanisms that privilege some interpretive frameworks within which some interpretations become more salient, appearing, therefore, more valid.

The concept of context manipulation helps bring to focus the *discursive obscuring* of certain contexts and how power is implicated in this practice, raising the question of who benefits from such discursive practice and whose power it legitimates. We thus contend that context manipulation functions as a discursive mechanism of ideological persuasion that exploits the inherent flaws in the human cognitive system. Furthermore, it is paramount not to restrict ourselves to the analysis of how ideology works, to unpacking the discursive and cognitive dimensions of ideology, but we also need to explicitly criticise, for example, the business models of social media organisations. It is in this way, to quote Herzog (11), that “the critique of ideologies becomes not only a critique of practices of justifications but turns into a genuine social critique.”

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