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Online with Garfinkel. Essays on social action in the online-offline nexus

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Online with Garfinkel

Essays on social action in the online-offline nexus

by

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Chapter 1

Online with Garfinkel

Jan Blommaert

The *Durkheim and the Internet* project (DAI in what follows) being completed, I now move on towards a more radical exercise: using some of Harold Garfinkel's central intuitions as a lead into forms of online analysis. This exercise, I should underscore, builds onto DAI and does not replace or qualify it – it extends it. For a summary of DAI, see Blommaert (2018).

This extension is warranted, I believe, because of one methodological outcome of the project: the “[four lines of sociolinguistic methodology](#)” that I designed as a way to investigate new forms of collectivities in online-offline contexts. Here they are:

1. Patterns of communication necessarily involve meaningful social relationships as prerequisite, conduit and outcome;
2. Such relationships will always, similarly, involve identities and categorizations, interactionally established;
3. Thus, when observing patterns of communication, we are observing the very essence of sociation and “groupness” – regardless of how we call the “groups”.
4. And specific patterns of interaction shape specific forms of “groups”.

I added the following reflection to these four lines:

“Groups, then, are not collections of human beings but patterned sets of communicative behaviors and the relationships with which they are dialectically related. Whenever we see such ordered forms of communicative behavior, there is an assumption of active and evolving groupness – sociation – but the analytical issue is not the nature of the group (or the label we need to choose for it) but the specific social relationships observable through and in communication. All other aspects of sociation can be related to this. So if one needs the definition of a group: a group is a communicatively organized and ratified set of social relationships.”

This analytical point pushed me to a re-examination of Garfinkel's work, notably Garfinkel (2002). I shall not *follow* Garfinkel in any canonical way, however. The nature of the exercise I undertake here would prevent it, and the fact that Garfinkel's incredible methodological idiosyncrasy makes much of his book barely readable further supports that decision. Fortunately, Anne Rawls does a great service to Garfinkel in her introductory essay to the book (Rawls 2002 and other contextualizing essays, 1987, 1989). And finally, I keep my distance from several of Garfinkel's assumptions and principles. But there remains much that can be profitably reformulated and redeployed as well. Let me summarize these reformulated elements.

Garfinkel's intuitions

Let me start by listing what I see as productive fundamental intuitions in Garfinkel's work. The connections with the "four lines" above should be clear at once.

1. Garfinkel focuses on *social order* as a *locally accomplished* social fact. In this, he is entirely *empirical*, in the sense that he rejects any conceptual a priori and prioritizes the actual, observable social actions as a site of "structure" and "theory". That naturally implies that Garfinkel rejects the old binaries of "micro vs macro" or "structure vs agency", as well as an ethos of scientific practice in which conceptual and theoretical "implementation" is sought.
2. Rather than to take (predefined and "known") individuals and groups as a starting point in his analysis, he takes *situated actions* as the point of departure; the people acting within such situations are merely the "local staff, its local production cohort" (Garfinkel 2002: 247). And in line with G.H. Mead, action is *interaction*.
3. Actions can be shown to have "autochthonous order properties", i.e. "empirically observable properties of the congregational work of producing social facts" (id. 245). Rawls (ibid, FN) further clarifies: "Congregational refers not only to the idea that these social facts are made collaboratively by a group, but that the population cohort has its cohort or congregation by virtue of being engaged in doing just this thing".
4. In other words: *groups are made by the actions they are involved in*, and Garfinkel emphasizes "situations that provide for the appearances of individuals" (Rawls 2002: 46).
5. Such involvement is predicated on the *recognizability* of actions and their properties of order. Social actions occur as *formats*, the characteristic features of which are recognizable to others and, thus, *intelligible* as action x, y or z. Garfinkel's example of a queue (2002, chapter 8) is telling: it is the queue itself that organizes the behavior of people *as* a queue. The queue has a set of "properties of order without which the phenomenon ceases to be recognizable as what it is" (Rawls 2002: 45).
6. This aspect of formatting is *reflexive*: there is no "external" or explicitly stated rule for action, but its execution "must work and be seen to work by others" (Rawls 2002: 41). Thus, rules become reflexively apparent *after* their implementation in social action. It's when a queue has been formed that people can tell you that there *is* a queue, and that it starts there, not here. Social actions "have a [normative] coherence when one is finished with them that they did not have at the outset" (ibid).
7. Recognizability and reflexivity as features of social action involve and presuppose at least two things: (a) that no social action is "individual" in any sense of the term but always *interactional*; (2) that the formats of social action need to be learned, acquired.

It is clear that Garfinkel attributes a *sui generis* character to situated social action and its forms of order: its characteristics cannot be reduced to individuals' intentions and interests, nor to external ("institutional") constraints. In fact, the *sui generis* character of situated social action is an echo of Durkheim's qualification of "social facts" as having a *sui generis* quality – the very foundation of Durkheim's sociology. And just like Durkheim's statement, Garfinkel's is easily (and widely) misconstrued. So we must be precise here. The *sui generis* character of situated social action involves – *contra* methodological individualism – that individual social beings are constrained in their choices of action; people rather "enter into" the orderliness of situated social action, as soon as such an order is recognizable, and attribute intelligibility to their own actions in that way. Their actions become meaningful to others by entering into the orderly procedures that make such actions recognizable as specific actions.

Garfinkel joins Goffman here, and Rawls attributes the same *sui generis* character to Goffman's notion of interaction order: "the interaction order has an existence independent of either structures or individuals" (Rawls 1987: 139). This point, too, has often been overlooked, and Goffman's concept of *self*, consequently, has often been misrepresented as strategically performed identity, central to his social theory. In actual fact, Goffman's self is "a *dramaturgical effect* arising diffusely from a scene that is presented" (Goffman 1959: 253, in Rawls 1987: 139; italics added). So it is not just "performed" but *interactionally ratified* – morally sanctioned – by others: "both in its capacity as performer and performed, the self ultimately depends upon interaction" (ibid.). Such interactions require a scene – an orderly and recognizable situation that makes the dramaturgical effect (the particular, enacted and ratified self) an intelligible outcome of social action. In Rawls' (ibid) terms:

"The self is therefore not the ontological starting point for a theory of social order. For Goffman it is an end product, the existence of which depends upon a presentation order which is the primary constraint of situations of co-presence".

This presentation order is replete with reciprocally exchanged moral expectations – "involvement obligations" – providing a degree of security in social encounters (cf. Rawls 1987: 140). There is slightly more space for empathy and anxiety in Goffman's view of order than there is in Garfinkel's, and Goffman's "ground rules of interaction" are moral ones (id. 142). Goffman's insistence on the *ritual* character of interaction (often seen as an insistence on communicative *routine*) is in actual fact an insistence on the maintenance of a moral order in social action. And this is done in view of the interaction order itself (*sui generis*), "and not directed toward the reproduction of social structure at all" (id. 145).

Rawls here brings Goffman and Garfinkel together once again: both rejected "micro vs macro" and "agency vs structure" distinctions, since for both, whatever we understand by "structure" should be empirically observable in the orderly features of actual, situated social action; the former actually *coincides* and *identifies* with the latter. And in both, the self is an outcome, a product, an effect of the orderliness of situated social action – which, consequently, should be attended to in full detail. In most work, situated social action would be seen as a building block or a reflection of "larger" social-structural phenomena (power, class, gender, race, etc.). What we have here is a radical refusal to treat situated social action as "just" the small stuff that relates to bigger stuff. Instead, we get a view in which the big things are right there, *in* and *through* situated social action – which is, consequently, a big thing. Social order in any form is interactional.

Qualifications

Garfinkel's radicalism is certainly appealing because it refutes most of mainstream social theory, with a particular vehemence reserved for deductive theory-internal analysis, concepts-as-realities and simplistic interpretations of "micro vs macro" and "agency vs structure". Aspects of this refutation are compelling and inescapable, while others are potentially fertile as a heuristic, and still others are probably nonsense. Thus, I will adopt the elements I sketched above and add two important qualifications to them.

1. I maintain the theoretical framework designed in DAI, with its emphasis on complexity, mobility, scalarity and polycentricity. The "social order" and its "autochthonous order properties" that Garfinkel was after (and Goffman's "interaction order" and its "involvement obligations") are, consequently, made more precise and accurate when we see them as

ordered indexicalities occurring in social arenas that are by definition polynomic, dynamic and flexible.

2. Garfinkel's view of situated social action as necessarily recognizable presupposes a mutually assumed sharedness of expectations (which he confirms), and of resources. The latter remains unaddressed, while it is precisely the *sociolinguistic* dimension of DAI. While situated social action may be a form of order *sui generis*, the stuff that enters into such actions isn't: it is conditioned historically and assumes its concrete shape in interactions in the form of entextualizations, the nature and valuations of which need to be learned and acquired. So here is the second qualification to Garfinkel's intuitions: we need to add to them an awareness of the concrete historical conditions enabling certain forms of action to assume certain kinds of order not others. This, I underscore, does not mean that we need to revert to an older vocabulary of institutionalization, routinization or even "macro" or "structural" aspects of action. What we need to do is to see situated social action as historically conditioned (and we can take some cues here from Bourdieu, for instance). This, I believe, is crucial if one wishes to maintain the claim about the *sui generis* character of the orderliness of such situated social action.

The historical conditions for action include infrastructural conditions as well. I underscore this because we intend to go *online* with Garfinkel – entering into a world not just of queues in front of the Starbucks counter at LAX, but of virality, memes and social media profiles. And a world not just of presenting and presented selves but of *selfies* – new technologically mediated modes of self-presentation for which Garfinkel, Goffman and others provides necessary, but insufficient, analytical frames. Such infrastructures have changed the "order" of social actions, and we must take them on board.

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Chapter 2

From groups to actions and back in online-offline sociolinguistics

Jan Blommaert

It is profoundly flattering and humbling at the same time to be asked to comment on a body of other scholars' work inspired by and drawing on one's own.¹ The reason why it is flattering should be self-evident; the reason why it is humbling is less easy to explain. It has to do with how these other scholars demonstrate, in their application of ideas and notions drawn from my work, the limitations of the latter – the loose ends; the points where a concept or line of argument is merely an inspiration to be reshaped by entirely different approaches to the issue; the places where my individual efforts reached their limits and demand the creative commitment of a community of others. I encounter all of these in this collection of papers, and the work of these authors pushes and motivates me to take things further.

The work reported in the papers in this collection articulates a *fundamental* shift in perspective: not merely an adjustment of method and of the choice of data, but a shift at the level of what I called (following C. Wright Mills) the “sociological imagination” informing sociolinguistic work (Blommaert 2017, 2018).² It is a shift from a scholarly universe almost entirely dominated by theoretical and methodological preferences for offline spoken discourse in fixed and clearly definable timespace, sociocultural and interpersonal contexts and identities, to one in which the world of communication is – at the most basic level – seen as an online-offline nexus in which much of what we assumed to be natural, primordial and commonsense about language-in-society needs to be revised, rethought and redeveloped.

The argument I tried to build was that in such revisionist exercises, the facts of communication are a fine point of departure for reassessing their place in what we conventionally call the social order or social structure. This outspoken empirical bias inevitably leads to a focus on *small things*: actual moments of interaction taking the shape of meaningful social conduct, provoking effects of ascribed and/or inhabited identity, group formation, alignment and/or distancing (cf. Parkin 2016). These small things include the kinds of routine acts of communication often qualified as “phatic” or otherwise “light” – the use of emojis, memes and likes in social media discourse; sharing, retweeting and reposting; forms of deference, politeness and repair in online conversation; the acquisition and deployment of implicit codes for “normal” conduct in online gaming communities; and the

¹ This paper is a commentary to a special issue of *Multilingua* 38/4, “Society in Digital Contexts: New Modes of Identity and Community Construction”, Guest Editor: Najma Al Zidjaly. I am grateful to Najma Al Zidjaly for a million things, including bringing me to Oman to attend a spectacularly interesting conference; including her relentless enthusiasm for preparing this collection of papers; and including her infinite patience in waiting for my contribution to the collection.

² Note that I use the term “sociolinguistic” here in its widest sense, not as a disciplinary label but as a loosely descriptive term to capture work addressing language-in-society. For such work, a wide range of disciplinary terms can be and are being used.

establishment of conviviality in ad-hoc and “light” online groups. Precisely such phenomena are central to the papers in this collection, and the authors all demonstrate how such innocuous, “light” forms of communication have powerful ordering effects in the communities in which they are normatively ratified, structuring not just personal and collective identities, but lodging such identities firmly in highly specific, circumscribable chronotopic forms of context. The chronotopic nature of identity work is hard to overlook in online interactions – all the papers in this collection testify to that – but the validity of that point is undoubtedly much wider (cf. Blommaert & De Fina 2017; Karimzad & Catedral 2018; Kroon & Swanenberg 2019; also Agha 2007). And in the same move, the specific chronotopic character of online discourse points us towards a crucial analytic feature too often neglected but fully addressed by the authors in this volume: infrastructures for social action.

Infrastructures, actions, moralizations

As briefly mentioned above, studies of language-in-society have long taken spoken dyadic interaction as the “primitive” and, consequently, the theoretically most fundamental form of language and language usage. This meant that, in practice and in several branches of the study of language-in-society, a highly fragmentary notion of ‘context’ emerged, often restricted to the ‘co-textual’ features of discourse, i.e. the parts of discourse preceding and following the particular fragment to be analyzed. The invocation of elements of so-called ‘distal context’ (non-immediate [or non-co-textual] inferential material) has consistently been a bone of contention, notably in sub-branches of conversation analysis, and has remained a diacritic identifying specific ‘schools’ and approaches (cf. Gumperz 1982; for discussions see e.g. Silverstein 1992; Cicourel 1992; Duranti 1997; Blommaert 2001). Such narrow views of context, obviously, did not address the fullness of what Goffman called “the social situation”:

A student interested in the properties of speech may find himself having to look at the physical setting in which the speaker performs his gestures, simply because you cannot describe a gesture fully without reference to the extra-bodily in which it occurs. And someone interested in the linguistic correlates of social structure may find that he must attend to the social occasion when someone of given social attributes makes his appearance before others. Both kinds of students must therefore look at what we vaguely call the social situation. And that is what has been neglected. (Goffman 1964: 134)

Observe how Goffman balances two dimensions of the social situation here: (a) the ‘hard’ physical setting for interaction and (b) the sociocultural conventions governing the interaction. The first dimension is, if you wish, ‘infrastructural’ and points towards the material conditions affecting the situation and delineating the affordances available to participants. In an age of social media, this infrastructural dimension becomes compelling, and for the simplest possible reason: no form of online communication is possible without the affordances offered by the technology shaping the online sphere of social life.

Infrastructural aspects of the situation are, thus, *determining* the actions performed online, and they form the decisive argument in favor of the newness of the communicative and interactional phenomena we observe there: no equivalent for the present usage of emojis and hashtags, to name just those, existed prior to the availability of the infrastructures presently organizing and enabling their discursive deployment. These infrastructures have effectively and profoundly reordered the deep structures of the sociolinguistic economies in which we

live – the *sociolinguistic system* in the words of Dell Hymes (1996).³ There remains, therefore, a huge task ahead of redescribing and reinterpreting modes of interaction and communication that may, indeed, look similar to forms previously attested, but now incorporated in entirely new and fundamentally different patterns of circulation, distribution and social effects. *Linguistic* similarities should not obscure *sociolinguistic* differences.

This brings me to the second point. These infrastructures shape new conditions for *social action*, and close attention to such actions is indispensable in the huge task I just outlined.

One good reason for this is offered in Sinatora’s excellent discussion of online activism in the context of the Syrian crisis, and Tovares’ equally incisive analysis of Ukrainian YouTube examples illustrating emerging grassroots political movements. In both cases, we can see how the online infrastructures shape *new public spaces* affording modes of political critique and mobilization not otherwise, or elsewhere, possible in that way and to that degree of intensity. Such new spaces are chronotopic (as Al Zidjaly and Sinatora emphasize), in the sense that we should see them as specific timespace configurations in which participant roles, behavioral scripts and appropriate resources for realizing the script are interactionally established as normative. We get, to adopt Garfinkel’s (2002) terminology for a moment, chronotopically circumscribed “formats” for social action requiring constant “congregational work” by those participating in the social actions.

This congregational work is performed by means of new multimodal discursive resources. YouTube clips (as in Tovares’ analysis) evidently belong to this category, but perhaps the clearest examples of new multimodal semiotic resources are the emojis, selfies and memes discussed in the papers by Graham and Gordon, now deployed as normal and unremarkable discourse-functional instruments – an expansion of the repertoires of participants in online discourse events, and a rescripting of genres such as those of “debate” or “learning”. As for the latter, Gordon demonstrates how the use of pictures (selfies, notably) can be deployed as an *argumentative* device in strategies of persuasion, articulating a particularly compelling “veridictional” epistemic stance – pictures don’t lie, and displaying them puts the addressee in the equally compelling position of “eye witness”.

Such forms of stance-taking and addressee-positioning can be ranged under what Najma Al Zidjaly calls “complex identity work” in online environments. It is the deployment of specific resources – indexicals, in other words – in online chronotopes that enables such complex modes of identity work, and those can be transient and “light”, as in Graham’s online gaming communities. But they can also be oriented towards more traditional “thick” identity categories, such as nationality and ethnolinguistic belonging in Tovares’ discussion of Ukrainian YouTube clips. The “congregations” doing the congregational work can, thus, be organized and oriented in very different ways: pointing towards relatively enclosed online chronotopes (such as that of online gaming), as well as towards a relatively more open online-offline set of chronotopes, such as those of nationality and ethnolinguistic “groupness” or (as in Sinatora’s paper) positions within an existing political field. In each case, we need to look into the fine grain of the congregational work performed by the actors, for we usually only have the actions as hard evidence.

³ I am making this point with some emphasis because of persistent denials of the innovative character of online sociocultural and sociolinguistic conduct and the necessity to rethink some theoretical foundations of our disciplines as a consequence of this innovation. For an early discussion, see Blommaert (2015).

To clarify the latter: in observing online discourse, we cannot as a rule use reliable a priori assumptions about the participants, nor the ratified resources deployed. Participants, as we know, often operate as an avatar in online interaction, rendering impossible any robust inference as to gender, age, nationality and so forth. Add to this the algorithmic effects on audience-shaping and the presence of inactive participants in online interaction (sometimes called “lurkers”) and the methodological issue is clear: we usually *don’t know* who is involved in the interaction, and this counts both at the individual level and the collective one. As for resources, we can only observe the values and effects they acquire in the interaction itself – take as examples the convivial effects of “light” practices of emoji exchange, of repair and of “winking and nodding” described in the papers by Gordon, Tovaes and Graham. There is no a priori “convivial” function to the resources deployed by participants, they are interactionally and chronotopically established as ratified resources within a particular congregation, and they are done so by overwhelmingly “moral” practices of normative ratification, uptake and re-deployment.

Next to infrastructures and actions, *moralizations* form the final element in the analytical line I can extract from the papers in this volume, and together they cast, in my view, the foundations for a programmatic analytical strategy. The complex identity work outlined by Al Zidjaly proceeds largely by means of ratifications of (or challenges to) interactional patterns congregationally emerging in online chronotopes. In simpler terms: the moral-normative interactional order is an emergent phenomenon in which existing and relatively enduring moral-normative codes (such as those circumscribing national belonging in Tovaes’ paper, political positions in Sinatora’s paper, or membership of specific gaming communities in Graham’s paper) can be blended with, or exchanged for, purely situation-specific actor positions articulating specific epistemic-affective-moral stances in an ongoing event – as we can see in Gordon’s examples of online discussions on weight loss (cf. Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2917; see also Goodwin 2007). The moral dimension shines through in the plethora of “light” interactional practices of conviviality in online environments – something observable in all the papers in this volume (and see also Varis & Blommaert 2015). And it is best epitomized by the various forms of “like” functions that have become a standard feature of all social media platforms.

From groups to actions and back

I mentioned earlier the established preference in many branches of the study of language-in-society for dyadic spoken interaction as the most elementary and theoretically fundamental form of human communication. And my review of the papers in this volume was aimed at showing the creative revisionism practiced and displayed by the authors. In passing, I hinted at the uncertainty, unavoidable in online contexts, about participant identities, both individually and collectively.

I wish to expand a bit on this latter point, for this, too, refers to an age-old assumption used in studies of language-in-society. The assumption can be summarized as follows: whenever we analyze language-in-society, we see language as the final part of a heuristic triad:

GROUP > INDIVIDUAL > LANGUAGE

In plain terms: the language we analyze is tied to a “([non-]native) speaker”, who in turn is a member of a “(speech/language) community”. Concretely, when we analyze a French utterance, we consider it the product of a speaker of French, who is a member of the French

language community. Features of that community affect the individual speaker, and in sequence affect the particular forms of language produced by that individual. Communities and individuals – as *identity constructs* – are thus seen as *pre-existent* and somehow “reflected” in the features of language we have in front of us. And while language is a variable given, degrees of stability are attributed to the speaker and the community.⁴

This is a form of sociological imagination, and – I am not the first to observe this – it is flawed on several points (see e.g. Blumer 1969; Cicourel 1973; Williams 1992). One of its flaws is the focus on *language* as an outcome, a product with a *sui generis* character, rather than on *interaction* in which language is deployed as part of a larger behavioral arrangement. In sociological terms, the flaw is in the absence of a theory of action explaining the social order in relation to language-actors.⁵ There is no space here for developing the full argument, but when we take interaction as the point of departure – as the most essential form of social action in general – the order of the triad is reversed:

INTERACTION > INDIVIDUAL > GROUP

The papers in this volume provide sound empirical reasons for adopting this alternative theory of action, and I have briefly mentioned them above. In the online chronotopes addressed here, the identity of participants is a matter of fundamental and unsolvable uncertainty, and the *tentative* or *indicative* nature of interactional moves (already emphasized by Mead; see Blumer 2004) is highlighted. When we make an interactional move, we do so with an anticipated reaction and uptake by the interlocutor in mind; when the addressee is unknown, such proleptic moves are inevitably more perilous than when we make them in the presence of a better known interlocutor. We thus *attempt* to make meaningful moves, but unless there is ratifying uptake from someone else our attempts are merely indicative of what we wish to achieve.

This problem was described in an earlier literature on online interaction as “context collapse”:

“the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients”.
(Vitak 2012: 541)

Context collapse is the effect of a technology which “complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other” (Marwick & boyd 2010: 115). We see how, in this definition of the problem, the flawed assumptions mentioned above control the argument. We can only produce clear and transparent meanings *from within* clearly defined communities of which we as well as our audiences are members – so it seems. When we examine the interaction itself, however, we see different things: people are eminently able to make themselves understood even in the presence of unknown or diffuse audiences (Szabla & Blommaert 2018; also Tagg, Sargeant & Brown 2017; Georgakopoulou

⁴ Classical variationist sociolinguistics is a textbook example of an approach operating on this assumption (for a discussion, see Eckert 2012). But the idea of the (native) speaker is much more widespread across language-focused disciplines and, certainly in assumed connection with more or less established communities, perennially problematic, as Ben Rampton (1995) conclusively demonstrated. See also Silverstein (1998) for an incisive analysis of the problem.

⁵ Or, one could alternatively say, the flaw is in the adoption of a highly simplistic linear theory of action in which features from the community are merely “carried over” or “transmitted” by individuals into language. See Blumer (2004, chapter 1) for a lucid discussion.

2017). In fact, it is through the *specific actions by participants that “audiences” take shape* and that the modes and resources required to make sense of them are identified, very much in the ways documented in this volume by Gordon and Graham. We see how the particular actions of participants precipitate specific identity positions and patterns of normativity within the congregation, regardless of the a priori uncertainty about all of this.

I see the growing awareness of the impact of the online infrastructure on really-existent sociolinguistic economies as an opportunity to change the general direction of our heuristic strategies: not a heuristic that takes us from groups (linearly) towards individuals and eventually towards language; but one in which we start from actual instances of interaction and move towards individuals and groups. This may enable us to make far more accurate and realistic statements about who is who in the online-offline nexus of communication. But even more importantly: it would equip our disciplines with an exceptionally powerful theory of action and, consequently, with exceptional relevance for more general social-theoretical arguments and constructs.

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Chapter 3

Does context really collapse in social media interaction?

Malgorzata Szabla & Jan Blommaert

1. Introduction

In social media studies, the notion of “context collapse” has acquired considerable currency.⁶ It is part of an – often tacitly adopted – theory of communication grounded, in turn, in a particular imagery of the social world, and stands for

“the flattening out of multiple distinct audiences in one’s social network, such that people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients”. (Vitak 2012: 541)

This is generally seen as a *problem*, something that distorts “normal” assumptions about communication and requires caution and repair strategies. This problem is an effect of the specific features (affordances as well as constraints) of social network communication, the technology of which “complicates our metaphors of space and place, including the belief that audiences are separate from each other” (Marwick & boyd 2010: 115), and has taken us from a world of relatively transparent audiences to that of far less transparent “networked publics” (boyd 2011). Users on social network sites (SNS) have assumptions about whom they are addressing and interacting with, but the features of SNS do not correspond to these assumptions and create indeterminacy in audience selection, with confusion and uncertainty of users as one effect.

While the notion of context collapse certainly has its merits and should not be dismissed entirely – the indeterminacy of addressees is irrefutable – it invites critical scrutiny (cf. Georgakopoulou 2017a, 2017b; Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017). In what follows, we shall engage in such an examination, aimed, specifically, at the assumptions about the social world and communication carried along with the notion. And we shall do this by means of a relatively straightforward approach: confront such assumptions with a detailed analysis of a sample of SNS interaction. The latter, we undertake by means of well-established methodological tools drawn from the interactionalist discourse-analytical tradition, notably linguistic ethnography and interactional sociolinguistics (e.g. Cicourel 1973; Gumperz 1982, 1992, 2003; Rampton 2017; Blommaert 2018).

Let us first look somewhat closer at how the problem of context collapse is sketched by some prominent authors and highlight some of the more questionable assumptions underlying such sketches.

⁶This paper was presented as a plenary lecture at the conference on *Moving Texts: Mediations and Transculturations*. Aveiro, 12 July 2017, and at the annual INCOLAS Workshop, Leuven 3 November 2017. We are grateful to the audiences for lively discussion, comments and suggestions. The data for this paper are drawn from Gosia Szabla’s fieldwork on the online and offline networks in the Polish communities in Belgium and The Netherlands.

The problem called context collapse rests on a general imagination of communication – in earlier times – as *not* (as) sensitive to context collapse. Before we had SNS, communication was relatively simple. Davis & Jurgenson (2014: 477) speak of “the relative segmentation [of communication] of earlier times”, and this has to do with a presumed clarity of *audience* and *situation*. People (it is presumed) used to know quite clearly with whom they interacted and, thus, how they should interact. The big problem caused by SNS lies in the latter’s unique affordances: communication through SNS is persistent, replicable, scalable, searchable and sharable – features, all of them, characterizing communication beyond the immediate interactional situation (or beyond the single speech event, to quote the title of an excellent recent study of such phenomena: Wortham & Reyes 2015).

This, of course, has effects on who can be addressed by SNS messages, and how such unintended audiences might respond and react to them. People tend to get confused on SNS in a specific way:

“While Facebook and Twitter users don’t know exactly who comprises their *audience addressed*, they have a mental picture of who they’re writing or speaking to – the *audience invoked*. Much like writers, social media participants imagine an audience and tailor their online writing to match”. (Marwick & boyd 2010: 128)

This analogy with professional writers turns SNS interaction into something *special*, exceptional. While SNS “combines elements of broadcast media and face-to-face communication” (id: 123), spoken face-to-face interaction is the *normal* default mode of communication, the source of people’s expectations and norms in interaction, also in scholarship:

“Most of these studies [on ‘normal’ interaction] draw from data and observations that involve people interacting face-to-face, where it is fairly easy to gauge the gender, race, status, etc. of the audience. Removing this ability creates tensions”. (ibid)

To be more precise:

“The requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites”. (id: 122)

These tensions often have to do with issues of “privacy” and have effects in the ways in which people handle issues of unintended addressees, by means of privacy settings, self-censorship or “unfriending” and “blocking” (e.g. Marwick & boyd 2014; Sibona 2014; Dugay 2016).

We can pause now and take stock. Underlying discussions of context collapse, there is a social imagination of communicative simplicity and determinacy. SNS communication complicates a world in which “normal” interaction was:

- Dyadic and spoken, with clear, transparent, “authentic” and verifiable (singular) identity positions deployed
- in a linear, simple and bounded activity, not replicable beyond the speech event, not shareable, not searchable etc.
- and with a maximum of social sharedness, relating to the nature and identities involved and the audiences addressed.

People, so it seems, had just one set of common assumptions about communication: those directing simple dyadic face-to-face conversation in a world known to both participants. Complex and non-homogeneous audiences used to be exceptional and only familiar to specialized practitioners: “professional writers” (Marwick & boyd 2010: 115). Within acts of communication, ordinary people performed simple bounded activities resting on shared assumptions and conduct-and-meaning frames circulating in a “real” community; all of this, together, constructed the “context” with which people were familiar. Such simple contexts are no longer afforded in the blended, complex networked publics of SNS, and tensions arise. As we can see, people are, in a way, “stuck” in specific contexts: “people from different contexts become part of a singular group of message recipients” (Vitak 2012: 451). And even in more sophisticated discussions, where the assumption of a “verifiable, singular identity” is replaced by a more Meadian-Goffmanian emphasis on specific and diverse forms of social roles and role expectations, such roles and expectations appear to “belong” to specific networks:

“These expectations inform appropriate – and inappropriate – lines of action and identity performance. In these terms, collapse refers to the overlapping of role identities through the intermingling of distinct networks”. (Davis & Jurgenson 2014: 477)

Groups – “audiences”, “networks” or “publics” – appear to have amazing degrees of stability and persistence, and “contexts”, in that sense, are features derived from group membership. It is the presence of such unintended audiences that generates context collapse.

2. An interaction-centered alternative

There is no need, we think, for a lengthy refutation of the assumptions directing the concept of context collapse. All of them are sociologically and sociolinguistically questionable in a variety of ways.⁷ Rather, we would state an alternative general principle and take it through into an analysis of a concrete example.

The principle is that of *action*, and we adopt it from the interactionist tradition (Goffman 1961; Blumer 1969; Strauss 1993; also Mead 1934; Schutz 1967; Garfinkel 2002). We have seen that some authors refer to this tradition in their attempt to escape the sociological overgeneralizations in the concept of context collapse; we intend to take this line of argument much further.

The literature on context collapse, we have seen, starts from assumptions about *groups* (‘audiences’), their features and stability in explaining interaction; and the latter is done

⁷The assumption that dyadic spoken conversation is the most ‘elementary’ kind of interaction is a widespread one in several branches of language and communication studies – Conversation Analysis, of course, being the most prominent one. The assumption is however vulnerable to a broad set of critical objections, and we can distinguish some broad lines of critique: (a) a ‘primordialist’ critique in which one might argue that rather than ‘conversation’, ‘narrative’ might as well be considered the most elementary form of interaction (many narratives are conversationally organized), or ‘argumentation’ (many conversations are argumentative); (b) a culture-historical one revolving around the observation that communication cultures today are, almost everywhere, marked by spoken *and written* forms of communication, where the suggestion that 21st century adolescents in, say, Copenhagen, would still draw their cultural assumptions about communication from spoken forms only is hard to sustain; and (c) an analytical one observing that ‘conversation’, as an activity type, can be broken up into several sub-types such as narratives, question-answer sequences, silence and so forth – ‘conversation’ is too rough a label to cover such diversity. We adopt and shall use this latter objection in our analysis.

generally: authors speak of ‘SNS communication’ as one single object, features of which include context collapse. Instead of these, we focus not on groups but on actual *practices performed by people*, and we focus on *specific* practices. People do not just communicate, they perform highly specific actions such as ‘asking’, ‘arguing’, ‘shouting’, ‘quarreling’ or ‘storytelling’, and they do so within the space of higher-level social actions such as, for instance, ‘conversation’. It is within the layered structure of such complex actions that we consider ‘context’ and how people deal with it. Such contexts include chronotopic patterns of identity work (a term we prefer over for instance ‘role taking’) based on the genre characteristics of specific activities (Wang & Kroon 2016; Blommaert & De Fina 2017; Karimzad & Catedral 2017). All of this is interactional, i.e. it is driven not by just individual motives and choices but by social (normative) ones that need to be dialogically established and ratified in order to be meaningful in interaction.

We can turn this old interactionist principle into a simple, four-line methodological program for the sociolinguistic analysis of interaction (cf. Blommaert 2017, 2018).

1. Patterns of communication necessarily involve meaningful social relationships as prerequisite, conduit and outcome;
2. Such relationships will always, similarly, involve identities and categorizations, interactionally established;
3. Thus, when observing patterns of communication, we are observing the very essence of ‘sociation’ (Georg Simmel’s term for the continuous evolving of society through social action), and of ‘groupness’ – regardless of how we call the groups.
4. And specific patterns of interaction shape specific forms of groups.

The points of departure underlying context collapse are turned upside down here: we do not start from images of groups, with actions and their features derived from them, but we start from actions and see which kinds of groups might emerge from them. In this sociolinguistic frame we approach groups pragmatically and axiologically, from the angle of the actual observable communication practices and through the values attributed to such practices. Groups, then, are not a priori given collections of human beings but must be taken from patterned sets of communicative behaviors and the relationships with which they are dialectically related. Whenever we see such ordered forms of communicative behavior, there is an assumption of active and evolving groupness – sociation – but the analytical issue is not the nature of the group (or the label we need to choose for it) but the specific social relationships observable through and in communication. All other aspects of sociation can be related to this. So if one needs the definition of a group: a group is a communicatively organized and ratified set of social relationships.⁸

To shift back to context collapse notions: ‘networked publics’ do not exist in any real sense independently of specific patterns and modes of interaction, they are *generated* by them and they *change* from action to action, for each action can (and usually does) involve different forms of relationships between actors. When someone tells a story in a conversation, s/he ‘leads’ the event, so to speak; when a few minutes later that same person asks an informative question to the interlocutor, s/he shifts into a subordinate role in the event; and when the interlocutor’s phone rings, s/he changes from participant to non-participant in a moment’s notice. The ‘group’ made up of the interlocutors is, thus, unstable, continuously emerging and

⁸ Observe that we follow a long-established interactionist principle of methodology here, often insufficiently emphasized and clarified: to start from *the situation* rather than from its participants. See e.g. Goffman (1964) and Garfinkel (2002).

subject to dialogical (re-)ratification at any moment in the conversation, depending on what *exactly* goes on (see Rampton 2006; Goodwin 2007; Goodwin & Goodwin 1992 for excellent examples).

When we apply this frame now, we begin to notice certain things. For instance, we notice that people don't usually interact with 'audiences' or 'networks' but with specific addressees placed in specific relationships with them during highly specific forms of interaction. In the examples given by Marwick & boyd (2014) to show the dynamics of privacy control on SNS, thus, we see that much of what people actually do is *addressee selection* (expressed quite transparently in lines such as "I wasn't talking to you", Marwick & boyd 2014: 1057), or more generally the construction of highly specific participation frameworks for specific actions (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992, 2004; Goodwin 2007). Dugay (2016) describes strategies of deliberate simultaneity and ambivalence performed by SNS users, so as to separate specific addressees from the broader audiences; and Sibona's analysis of 'unfriending' on Facebook (2014) is evidently a practice of addressee selection-by-exclusion. Thus, the diffuse (and confusing) 'audiences' and 'network publics' causing context collapse appear, in actual practice, to be chopped into much smaller and highly specific sets of addressees. The reasons for that may be privacy concerns or anxieties over undesirable disclosure of information on SNS – we do not exclude that possibility. But they may *also* be an effect of much simpler features of social action on SNS. We shall now attempt to demonstrate that by turning to our case.

3. Complex compound social action on SNS: A case

The case we shall examine in some detail is a long discussion on a Facebook forum for Polish migrants in the Netherlands.⁹ The data, as will become clear, represent a lengthy and complex case of Facebook interaction, starting from an update which then triggers likes, comments and reactions to comments. The interaction ran for five days, from March 14 until March 19, 2016.¹⁰ No less than 65 individuals were involved in the conversation, and the update triggered a total of 192 responses – 'comments' as well as 'replies' to comments. In our analysis, we shall call the entire interaction the *event*; the update defines the *main action*; comments and replies to comments are all *actions*. We shall need to provide more precise descriptions of those actions later. Thus, the main action, performed by a female journalist whom we shall nickname 'Ala', invited 79 comments and 113 replies: a total of 192 actions. In our transcript (available online) the main action is numbered 0, the comments are numbered as 1, 2, 3... etc., and the replies to comments as 6.1, 6.2, 6.2 ... etc.

The main action occurred on March, 14, 2016 at 12.37 p.m. when Ala posted this update:

⁹ Though we cannot belabor this point to any satisfactory degree in the space of this paper, the event presented as a case here is in itself, of course, an abstraction. The Facebook discussion we examine here appeared on a forum, and the histories of themes, modes of interactions, shifting 'camps' and conflicts on this forum evidently provide a backdrop – a higher-scale context – for what happened in the case we focus on. The sensitivities regarding the 'correctness' of the Polish language, for instance, were frequently articulated on the forum, as was, more generally, the issue of what it means to be a 'true' Polish migrant.

¹⁰ Initially, the conversation received 75 likes; on June 22, 2017 (date of data retrieval) there were 73 likes. 11 to the initial message, and 65 to the edited one. There were no new comments after March 19, 2016. The entire data set, in transcript, can be consulted on <https://alternative-democracy-research.org/2017/06/26/data-set-context-collapse/>

Ala (F): witam, jestem dzienkarkatelewizijnaiszukampolakow, co pracuja w szklarniach co chca cos opodwiadac o warunkachpracylubmieszkacipracowaczagranica bez rodziny. chetnieinformacie na priv. krecejmieziesiastactezanonymowo.”

Translation: Hello, I am a television journalist and I am looking for Polish people, who work in greenhouses who want to tell me about the working conditions or living and working abroad without family. Gladly information on priv. Filming can also happen anonymously.

Due to the initial negative responses, the comment was edited at 01.40 p.m., and from then on appeared online in the following form:

Ala (F): witam, jestem dzienkarkatelewizijnaiszukampolakow, co pracuja w szklarniach co chca cos opodwiadac o warunkachpracylubmieszkacipracowaczagranica bez rodziny. chetnieinformacie na priv. krecejmieziesiastactezanonymowo. (boduzoludzypytadlaczegotakzlepisze: jestemurodzona w polsce, alepracujedlatewisjiniemieckiejiholenderskiej. przepraszamzabtedy, alewyjechalampolskijakmialam 4 latka. wydaje mi siejednak, zekommunikacja w tejgrupiepowinnabyc po polsku, dlategostaramsie..)”

Translation: Hello, I am a television journalist and I am looking for Polish people, who work in greenhouses who want to tell me about the working conditions or living and working abroad without family. Gladly information on priv. Filming can also happen anonymously. (because many people ask why I am writing so badly: I am born in Poland, but I am working for German and Dutch television. I am sorry for mistakes, but I left Poland when I was 4 years old. It seems to me however, that communication in this group should be in Polish, that’s why I am trying).

The update of Ala is a straightforward statement with a request for assistance. Her Polish however is questioned, because it is orthographically, grammatically and pragmatically awkward.¹¹The text visible above is understandable, but there are spelling mistakes and grammatical errors, and upper case or punctuation are (not unusually in online writing) missing too. Generally, the text is ‘awkward’, and Ala uses words which sound odd in particular sentences. For example, she says “Jestemurodzona w Polsce”, whereas it would be more expected to say ‘Urodziłam się w Polsce’ or ‘Pochodzę z Polski’ in this context. Her sentence literally translates to English “I am born in Poland”, whereas Urodziłam się w Polsce would translate: “I was born in Poland”.

We sequentially numbered every participant as they entered into action and marked them as ‘F’ (female) or ‘M’ (male). 34 participants only commented once. Some of them commented as a reply to the event, others only replied to one of the sub-actions. 4 people stood out with their number of comments: Ala (F) posted 24 times on different entries; Participant3 (F) commented 11 times, but all of this as part of the complex discussion following of action 2. Participant4 (M) engaged in the conversation 11 times throughout the event; and participant13 (F) engaged 15 times, all of it in actions 2 and 6. 8 other people commented at least 5 times (Participant6 (M), Participant14 (F), Participant30 (F), Participant31 (M), Participant33 (M), Participant53 (M), Participant57 (M), Participant60 (M)). 19 people commented more than once, but less than 5 times. In general, different actions and sub-actions trigger different participation frameworks. The change is clearly visible, but overlap is present as well.

¹¹ The translations from Polish into English were very challenging, due to (a) the features of online SNS writing (abbreviations, erratic case usage and punctuation, emoticons, slang); (b) the thematic salience of ‘correctness’ in Polish language display in these data, which caused participants to edit their comments or willfully play with it. Since this thematic issue is not the core of our argument here, we decided to render the essence of the utterances in our translations, but without trying to reproduce the grammatical errors in English.

3.1 A complex, nonlinear social event made up of diverse actions

The event is nonlinear. There are thematic shifts, main lines of interactional activity interrupted by stand-alone dyadic interactions, and gender balance shifts. The first part of the event, actions 1-8, is dominated by female participants; actions 9- 34 shows a more gender-balanced profile, while from action 34 up until the final action 79, the interaction is dominated by male respondents.

It is also nonlinear in the sequential sense: people sometimes reply to comments, and thus perform responsive actions to ulterior actions, long after posterior actions had been performed. This is one of the particular affordances of SNS, and the clearest example of it here is the main action itself. Ala posted her original update at 12.37pm on March 14, 2016. This instantly triggered a heated discussion about the spelling and other errors in her text, starting with action 2 at 12.43. Ala edits her update about one hour later, after 16 turns in the discussion, which partly takes the sting out of the discussion on her language proficiency.

This brings us to the issue of actions in need of more precise descriptions. Ala's update is, as we said, the main action. It introduces a thematic domain and an action format: she launches a request or invitation to Polish people working in Dutch greenhouse industries, to participate in a TV program she intends to make. The thematic domain, from then on, defines what is 'on topic' or 'off topic', and in that sense establishes the benchmarks for what we could call legitimate participation; the action format – a request – further establishes such benchmarks. The most 'normal' response to such an action is to accept or decline the request.

The main action, we can see, draws the main lines of the normative framework that will be deployed in judging the conduct of participants. The main action, in that sense, is always a normatively ratified action frame in which a preferred participation framework and preferred modes of activity are inscribed: people who collaborate with it (respond supportively and stay 'on topic') are welcome and legitimate participants; people who deviate from it are unwelcome and illegitimate participants. And at the end of the event, Ala can be satisfied. Of the 79 actions following her request, 31 are cooperative.¹² Participants either straightforwardly volunteer, add encouraging comments or offer further suggestions for developing Ala's TV program.

But this is not all. Consider Figure 1, a graphic representation of the different actions that occur in the event:

¹² Actions 1, 7, 10-13, 15-19, 23-29, 31-32, 34-35, 42-44, 48-49, 60, 74-75, 77.

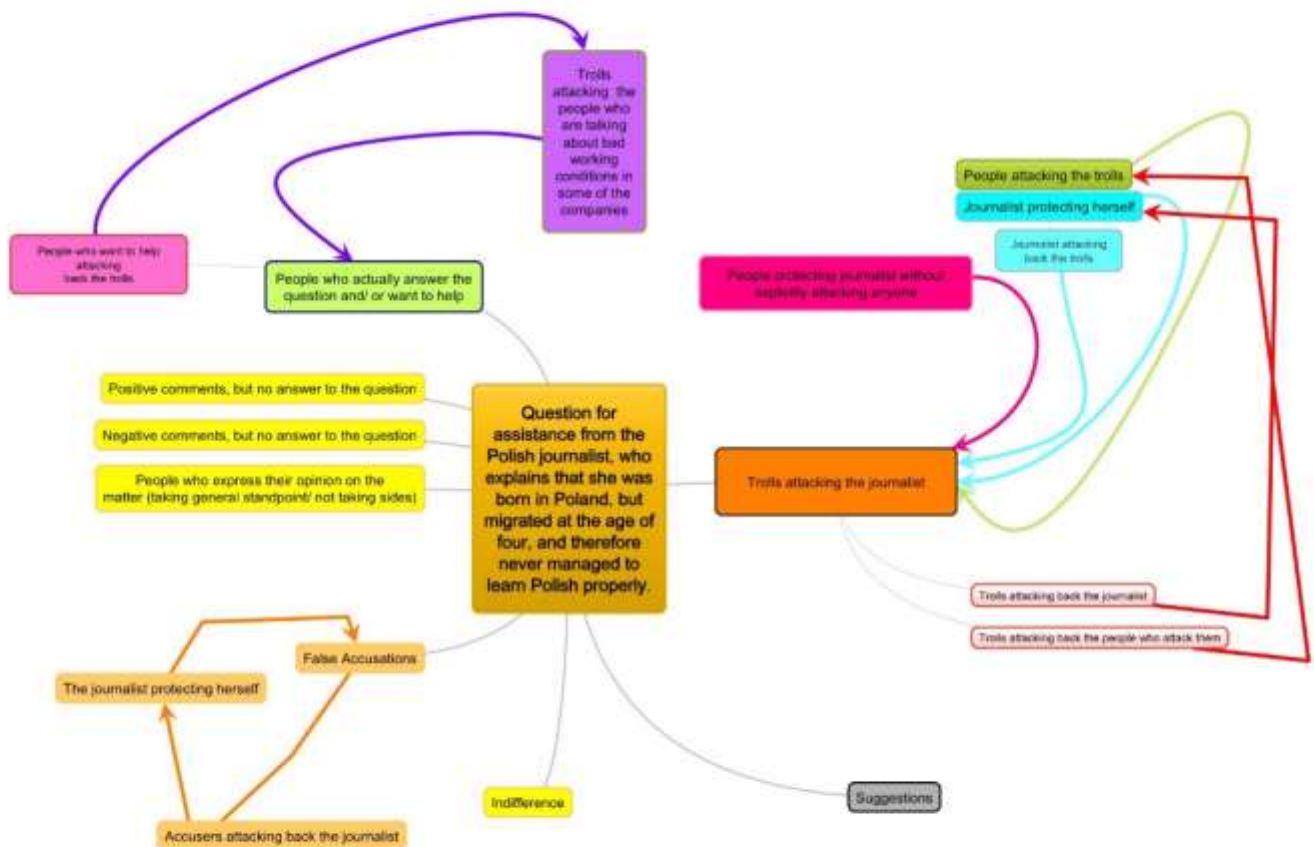


Figure 1: actions in the event.

We can see how the main action sets in motion not one line of action, but several: the event is a complex, nonlinear and composite event, made up of highly divergent actions, legitimate as well as illegitimate ones. And two lines of illegitimate divergence should be highlighted, for both can be said to originate, nonlinearly, from Ala's main action.

One: Ala's main action, we have seen, establishes the normative action and participant framework for the event. It is, however, also an *action in its own right*, the features of which are socio-semiotically salient as reflexive indexicals of identity. Thus, one very salient line of illegitimate participation revolves around the *metapragmatics* of Ala's update. And this starts very quickly. After one first collaborative comment (action 1), a female participant (Participant 3) launches a direct attack on Ala's update in action 2, just a handful of minutes after Ala's update appeared online:

2. Participant3 (F): Zajebista dziennikarka co bledy w pisowni robi..

Translation: Fucking great journalist who makes spelling mistakes...

Date: March 14 at 12:43pm Likes: 26

The comment, observe, receives 26 likes. In addition, it triggers several things. It triggers the longest series of replies to comments, 57, turning it into a 'discussion-within-a-discussion'. We get a flurry of 48 replies in the hour following Participant 3's comment; lower intensity

interaction resumes later that night and continues until March 19.¹³ Next to that, it also establishes language and identity as a separate line of activity throughout the event. Issues of orthographic stability and language competence are raised throughout this long discussion, and 13 actions directly or indirectly raise issues of language proficiency.¹⁴ And finally, it triggers action censorship as part of the discussion: respondents are identifying linguistic errors of one another, but they are also engaging in self-correction by editing their original messages. Thus we can see that the formal, *indexical features* of the main action, apart from its thematic contours and action-and-participation frame, become a theme that informs all sorts of other actions,¹⁵ including general disparaging meta-commentaries such as in action 33:

33. Participant45 (F): Jakby tak dokładnie przepytac zasad gramatyki jezyka polskiego tych, co maja zawsze na ten temat duzo do powiedzenia....

Translation: If we only could test the knowledge of the Polish grammatical rules of those who always have so much to tell on this topic...

Date: March 14 at 4:02pm

Likes: 2

Or consider the actions 38 and 39 (and observe the expletives in 38, quite a frequent feature in the more heated parts of the event):

38. Participant48 (F): Przeczytałam wszystkie te komentarze i dawno się tak... nie zdenerwowałam. Wstyd Wam powinno być wredne i zawistne baby!!! Ala Powodzenie i duzo sukcesów w pracy 😊

Translation: I read all the comments and it has been a long time since i got so frustrated. Shame on you disgusting and envious chicks!!!Ala good luck and lots of successes at work 😊

Date: March 14 at 6:36pm

Likes: 5

39. Participant49 (M): To własnie robi holandia z polakow

Translations: This is exactly what Holland makes of Poles

Date: March 14 at 7:06pm

Likes: 2

Two: The topic proposed by Ala for her TV program – Polish workers in Dutch greenhouse industries – likewise becomes a self-standing motif provoking a range of comments and discussions. In several collaborative responses to Ala's request, participants volunteer information about the labor conditions in such segments of the market, as in action 24:

¹³ This observation points to a different feature of SNS interaction: the fact that phases of high-velocity interaction are alternated with phases of slower and more fragmented interaction. We must reserve a fuller discussion of this feature for later work.

¹⁴ Actions 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 22, 27, 33, 36, 41, 60, 65, 72.

¹⁵ At one or two points in the discussion, participants suggest that Ala is not a journalist at all, that she is a fraud, an unreliable person and so forth. We did not include those items in our count of actions related to language proficiency and its relationship to Polish identity, although there might be a case for seeing it as a further branching of the same theme. As noted earlier, the broad theme of Polish identity (and its defining forms of conduct) is a recurrent one in this Facebook group, and this is where we observe the broader context seeping into this particular event, creating indexical links across separate events (cf. Wortham & Reyes 2015).

24. Participant36 (M): dalbym ci jeden temat jak lokuja ludzi jak swinie w oborach gdzie strumyk gównapłyniesrodkiem pokoju

Translation: I can give you one topic about how they locate people like pigs in barns where a stream of shit flows through the middle of the room

Date: March 14 at 1:53pm

Likes: 0

Such collaborative responses are complemented by general remarks on The Netherlands, the Dutch people, and the Polish workers as well, and in the second part of the interaction a full-blown discussion develops on what we could call the ‘ethos’ of being a Polish immigrant worker in The Netherlands.¹⁶ Consider the exchange in actions 45-47:

45. Participant54 (M): skoro wam tak zle to dlacze zgadzacie siewciaz na takie traktowanie? zmiana pracy, poprostu. da sie inaczej troche wiary i samozaparcia a nie tylko narzekac

Translation: If it is so bad why do you still agree to be treated this way? Change job, as simple as that. You can do it differently, a little bit confidence and determination and not only complaining

Date: March 14 at 11:41pm

Likes: 3

46. Participant38 (F): Dokładnie zgadzam się całkowicie, trzeba pamiętać gdzie chciałoby się być i dążyć do tego małymi krokami.

Translation: Exactly I agree completely, you need to remember where you would like to be and to pursue one’s aim step by step.

Date: March 15 at 6:04am

Likes: 1

47. Participant55 (F): wystarczy się nauczyć holenderskiego i trochę postarać, ale wielu polakom się po prostu nie chce i wolą narzekać zamiast się ogarnąć

Translation: One only needs to learn Dutch and needs to strive a bit, but many Polish people simply do not feel like it and they prefer to complain than to get a grip.

Date: March 15 at 9:12am

Likes: 3

Ala is rarely addressed in those exchanges; in that sense they are illegitimate forms of participation in which participants ‘hijack’, so to speak, the broader thematic range of Ala’s update to engage in a discussion among themselves.¹⁷ Such ‘nested’ discussions-within-discussions involve specific participation frameworks. Usually, a handful of participants dominate such divergent lines of action, excluding Ala and others. Yet, it is important to observe that this diverging line of discussion still has its roots in Ala’s main action; it is in that sense a nonlinear extension of it.

In sum, what we see is that over a period of five days, in 193 separate action, a complex social event unfolds in which varying groups of participants create a nonlinear web of

¹⁶ A Total of 28 comments (not counting replies) can be listed in this category: actions 15, 19-21, 23-28, 30-31, 39-40, 42-47, 51-52, 54-58, 74.

¹⁷ Similarly, the actions 2.38-2.47 are a self-standing, quite combative discussion between a male and female participant in gender issues in the discussion.

actions, most of them rooted directly or indirectly in the main action but several of them involving important thematic and participation framework shifts. If we convert this now to the discourse of context collapse, we see different ‘audiences’ drawn from ‘networked publics’ engage in the interaction, jointly constructing something that looks quite chaotic and may yield confusion and tension. Let us now turn to this issue.

3.2 *The rules of a complex game*

The question is: given the chaotic mess of diverse actions and shifting participation frameworks, how do participants find their way around all of this? We shall address this question using the simple four-step interactionalist-sociolinguistic methodology mentioned above, and begin by a brief precision to the well-known notion of ‘contextualization’ (Gumperz 1982, 1992; Auer & DiLuzio 1992). Participants in interaction establish the meaning of what goes on in a particular situation by giving off and picking up ‘contextualization cues’. Such cues can be lodged in any and every aspect of communicative behavior: from language or language variety choice, register, style, genre and sequential organization to body posture, pitch, gestures, facial expression and gaze in spoken interaction. In *written* communication such as the ones we face on SNS, language and language variety (as we have seen) play a role, alongside specific orthographic (or heterographic: Blommaert 2008; Lillis 2013) forms of sign deployment including abbreviations, slang, emoticons and so forth.

Much of what these contextualization cues effectively do is to establish clarity about *the action in which one is involved*, and more specifically *the chronotopic characteristics of the action*: the ways in which different actions revolve around different thematic domains, include different kinds of participants and impose different normative patterns of actual conduct (cf. Goodwin & Goodwin 2004; also Blommaert 2015). This is not always a straightforward thing; in a celebrated article, the Goodwins quite long ago (Goodwin & Goodwin 1992) pointed to the fact that quite often, multiple interpretive frameworks (aka ‘contexts’) offer themselves in events, for “within actual interaction it is rare for only a single activity at a time to be on the table. Moreover those present may have competing agendas even within a single activity.” Therefore, according to the Goodwins, “[t]here are great analytical gains to be made by looking very closely at how particular activities are organized” (1992: 96; see also Rampton 2006 for elaborate illustrations). Needless to say, SNS interaction offers its own challenges in this respect, and the event we examine here is a case in point.

Yet, participants appear to be able to draw on a large and quite effective repertoire of forms of interactional conduct for sorting out what really goes on, and for ‘organizing’ their specific parts of the activity, to adopt the terminology of the Goodwins. So, too, in our example. Let us list some of the resources deployed by the participants in our event, starting with the simple ones.

Platform affordances

Facebook, like other SNS, offers a range of technologically configured tools for establishing ‘order’ in interactions. Two such tools demand particular attention here:

- The system of comments and replies to comments, structuring both a sequentiality to FB discussion and a scaled hierarchical order of superordinate and subordinate comments.

- The system of name tagging, enabling participants to select and identify direct addressees of an utterance and/or mention indirect addressees.

Both tools have disambiguating functions. The former enables participants to signal thematic coherence and scaled interactional roles. Posting a reply to a comment, for instance, signals a specific (subordinate, low-scale) reaction to the one who posted the (superordinate, higher-scale) comment, while it still, in a more flexible sense, remains inserted in the entire (highest-scale) discussion launched by the update. The assumption in comments and replies is that the superordinate participant is the addressee. Thus, if we go back to the examples above, action 24, the “you” is clearly Ala; and Ala is also the “fucking great journalist” in action 2.

The latter, evidently and explicitly, serves the direct function of addressee selection: from the potentially infinite ‘networked publics’, specific individuals are identified as the direct addressee in interaction. This does not prevent others from interfering, so to speak; but the function of name tagging is obvious, straightforward and effective, as we can observe here:

5.2 Participant22 (F): Participant3 powalamnie Twoja POPRAWNOŚĆ JĘZYKOWA.. A takszczerze to współczujętakimludziomjak Ty i Participant13. Mięgowieczoru

Translation: Participant3 I’ am absolutely blown away by your LANGUAGE CORRECTNESS... But honestly I feel sorry for people like you andParticipant13. Have a nice evening

Both tools are abundantly used in our example. We shall discuss an example in which we see both tools in practice in a moment. Let us note, at this point, that while both tools are clear in design and prescribed functions, deviations can be observed. In the event we examine here, people do not always move to the reply-to-comments tool for direct dyadic interaction – see the example of actions 45-47 above in which participants use comments for direct responses and additions to previous turns. And the example of action 38 above shows us that just naming or nicknaming people, rather than tagging them, serves the same function of addressee selection (“Ala” in action 38). Observe also, that the sequentiality offered by these tools may be undone by the non-sequentiality of real actions: a response to an utterance may come several turns after the utterance – other participants having responded more rapidly – which can give rise to misunderstandings as to addressee. We see very few instances of this in our event; one will be documented in the sample analysis below. In general, thus, we do not witness much ‘context collapse’ in our data, and these tools are a major factor in this.

Those platform affordances are technological resources specific to SNS; participants, however, also draw on *cultural* resources in the organization of their activities.

Policing

Goffman’s work is replete with descriptions of how people who are not necessarily profoundly acquainted with each other construct, observe and police rules for engaging in interaction (e.g. Goffman 1961, 1971, 1981). As soon as people have established the nature of a particular social action and the situation in which it will develop, such rules are used continually to maintain ‘order’ in the event. The most common way of doing that is by simply observing the rules of the game and adjusting one’s conduct to the chronotopic normative framework which has been ratified in the action. A more exceptional way is by ‘policing’ the event: explicitly stating or emphasizing the rules, especially when they have been violated, emphatically pointing to more appropriate modes of conduct for transgressing

participants, outright excluding them, or qualifying them with labels flagging illegitimate participation.

In our data, a good deal of such policing occurs. Above, we already pointed to the fact that the event consists of a variety of activities, some directly responding to Ala's main action (and, thus, 'legitimate') while others took a more divergent path only indirectly related to the main action. The latter activities, of course, are possible targets for policing, and Ala does quite a bit of that, particularly when she judges participants to be off-topic or negatively biased towards her:

6.9 Ala (F): jak Pani sie nic nie ma do powiedzenia, to proszę sie nie mieszac

Translation: If you do not have anything to say, then please do not interfere

Date: March 14 at 2:02pm Likes: 0

Other participants do the same; here, Participant 4 directly addresses Participant 3 in response to action 2 (see above):¹⁸

2.13 Participant4 (M): Co sieczepiasz? nudzi Ci sie to pozmywaj gary.

Translation: Why are you picking on her? If you are bored, then clean the dishes.

Date: March 14 at 12:54pm Likes: 31

A little bit further in the same part of the event a female participant 'rectifies' a male one about gender bias in interactions such as those (the start of a self-contained 'nested' interaction on gender issues, ultimately involving four participants, 2.38-2.47):

2.38 Participant6 (M): Jakoś mnie wcale nie dziwi, że same kobiety komentują ten wątek;-)

Translation: Somehow I am not surprised that only women comment on this thread.

Date: March 14 at 3:31pm Likes: 0 Edited: 2

2.39 Participant13 (F): Participant6 wojnę chcesz rozpętać? O co cho?

Translation: Participant6 would you like to wage war? What's your problem?

Date: March 14 at 3:32pm Likes: 0

We note frequent meta-commentaries dismissive of deviant conduct by participants, such as those:

2.50 Participant4 (M): Adek jak siewyrwał.hehe

Translation: Adek how you blurt out. Hehe

[Adek is Participant18 who posted a reply earlier and who supposedly changed his name through the course of the conversation, eventually deleting his profile]

Date: March 15 at 6:09am Likes: 1

¹⁸ Observe the number of 'likes' attached to 2.13 in spite of the gender bias of the utterance. The term for '(nit)picking' introduced in this utterance was adopted by several other participants in later actions.

2.51 Participant20 (M): nie umiesz czytać idiotko? chyba dziewczyna wyjaśniła czemu popełnia błędy. niektórzy polacy całkiem zapominają swojej ojczystej mowy!

Translation: Can't you read idiot [*idiot is in its female form*]? A girl explained why she makes mistakes. Some Polish people completely forget their native speech!

[*This comment does not have a direct addressee, but most likely it is directed to Participant3, as the comment appears as a reply to the original post of Participant3*]

Date: March 15 at 9:49pm

Likes: 0

Adding to that, participants appearing overly aggressive or persistently uncooperative are labeled as 'trolls' – a well-known category of illegitimate participants on SNS:

48. Participant57 (M): Taktak pochwal się jak załośnijesteście że was biura wala w rogi. Ale oni walały tylko tych co sobie pozwalają na takie traktowanie. Jakiś jest sierota w życiu to trzeba to w tw pokazać.

Translation: Yes, yes, boast about how pathetic you are because the offices put something over you. But they only deceive those who allow them to be treated in this way. If someone is a wimp in life, it is necessary to show on TV.

Date: March 15 at 12:48pm

Likes: 1 Edited: 2

48.1 Participant53 (M): Taki w gębiemocyjesteś? Widać żeś robionynapróbę a starzy zapomniał cię udusić. Internetowy trollu.

Translation: This is how big mouth you have got? It is clear that you have been made in a practice run and your folks forgot to suffocate you. Internet troll

Date: March 15 at 10:38am

Likes: 3

48.2 Participant52 (M): Pewnie koordynator pierdolony, który sam ródaków w dupę ruchenahajs. Participant57 korwapozał się boże

Translation: Probably fucking coordinator, who fucks his compatriots in the ass for money himself. Participant57 [*addressed with first name*], fuck, pathetic.

Date: March 16 at 7:14pm

Likes: 0

We also see participants informing others of mistakes in perception, i.e. reshaping a 'correct' universe of interpretation for the interaction:

2.53 Participant20 (M): Adeksamwalisz literowkicy a innych uczysz

Translation: Adek you make spelling mistakes yourself loser, and you try to teach others

Date: March 15 at 10:01pm

Likes: 0

2.54 Participant13 (F): Participant20 post Aliby łedytowany

Translation: Participant20 the post by Ala was edited

Date: March 16 at 8:43am

Likes: 0

A final form of policing is *redirecting interaction*. As soon as certain boundaries of information are judged to be reached, instructions are given to move to another form of interaction. When participants respond positively to Ala's invitation to participate in the TV program, she redirects them towards the personal messaging function of Facebook; in a number of instances, this redirection is proposed to Ala by participants themselves, and of course there may have been people who did not participate in the discussion but contacted Ala directly through personal messaging. This function – another technical affordance – is well known and Ala, in the example below, can use slang to identify it:

7. Participant25 (F): Ja chętnie opowiem 😊 :) mam ciekawe doświadczenia:)

Translation: I will gladly tell my story 😊 I have interesting experiences 😊

Date: March 14 at 12:49pm Likes: 1

7.1 Ala (F): chetnienapriw

Translation: Willingly on priv

Date: March 14 at 12:49pm Likes: 0

Participants insisting on proof of Ala's authenticity as a Polish journalist equally get redirected to the personal messaging tool; clear boundaries are being marked between what is allowable and what is not in specific formats of interaction:

76.3 Participant63 (F): jezeli jestes uczciwa to podaj swoje nazwisko nie tylko Ala

Translation: If you are honest then give your surname not only Ala.

Date: March 19 at 10:25am Likes: 0

76.4 Ala (F): Kto do mnie pisze dostaje

Translation: The ones who write to me get it.

Date: March 19 at 12:26pm Likes: 0

Thus, a very broad and powerful range of norms appears to be at play in this complex event, guiding and directing actions, both specifically in themselves and in relation to more general line of action – Ala's main action, conventions established within the Facebook group, or rules projected onto appropriate interactional behavior on SNS in general. The event is extremely complex, but not unregulated – on the contrary, there is a continuous articulation, implicitly as well as explicitly, of norms of legitimate participation. And there is an across-the-board exploitation of the platform affordances available to participants, supporting the organization of actions. All of these elements serve the purpose of contextualization, of helping participants understanding what goes on in such complex interactions.

3.3 *Navigating multiple contexts*

Let us now close this empirical examination with a sample analysis in which the comments and observations made above can be synthetically combined.

Recall the warning provided by the Goodwins: we rarely see just one action in real bits of interaction; more often we observe people making sense of complex overlapping and interlocking activities, through elaborate work of contextualization. We have already seen the particular complications generated by SNS interactions: it is scripted discourse, the sequential occurrence of it does not necessarily mirror the interactional sequentiality. Add to this the diversity of participants and the lack or fragmentation of mutual knowledge among participants, and we get an idea of the tasks of contextualization confronting participants.

In our data, the actions 2.26 to 2.36 generously illustrate the complexity of interaction on SNS such as Facebook. Remember that this fragment occurs in the long interaction following action 2 (performed by Participant 3), quoted earlier. Let us look at the full transcript of this part of the event.

Fragment 2.26-2.36

2.26 Participant15 (F): Participant 3 [*Adressed with Miss and onlyfirstname*], pisze się "nie rozumiem", a nie "nie rozumie" 😊 to tak w gwoli ścisłości co do Pani znajomości języka polskiego. Pozdrawiamserdecznie

Translation: Miss Participant3, you write ["nierozumiem"] and not ["nierozumie"] I do not understand ☺ This is to the preciseness of your Polish Language competences. The warmest greetings

Date: March 14 at 2:36pm Likes: 10 Edited: 2

2.27 Participant16 (F): A ty Participant3? [*Adressed with the first name only*] może pochwalilibys się znajomością holenderskiego??? Wstyd robisz jadąc po kimś kto wyemigrował dawno temu i być może nie miał styczności w dużej mierze z językiem polskim. Znam wielu takich ludzi... Ala życzę powodzenia!!! I wybacz tym zawistnym ludziom.

Translation: And you Participant3? Maybe you would like to boast about with your knowledge of Dutch??? It's a disgrace to besmirch someone who emigrated long time ago and maybe was not heavily exposed to Polish language. I know many people like that... Ala I wish you good luck!! And forgive these envious people.

Date: March 14 at 2:35pm Likes: 10

2.28 Participant10 (F): Participant15 przeczytaj swój ostatni komentarz i zastanów się nad sobą i nad tym co piszesz. Nie widzisz czubka swojego nosa a innym błędy wytykasz. Straszne chamstwo tutaj. Z pustakacegłysięniezrobi.

Translation: Participant15read your last comment and rethink your own actions and what you have been writing. You cannot see an inch beyond your nose, but you point out others' mistakes. Terrible boorishness here. You won't make a brink out of a cinder block

Date: March 14 at 2:38pm Likes: 2

2.29 Participant14 (F): Czubka swojego nosa to nie widzi Pani Participant3. Polecam przeczytać sobie posty od początku, bo chyba jakieś nieporozumienie zaszło. Pani Participant15 wypowiedziałasiętreściwie I kulturalnie.

Translation: Mrs Participant3 is the one who does not see an inch beyond her nose. I recommend to read the posts from the beginning, because I think that that some misunderstanding arose here. Mrs Participant15 expressed herself concisely and politely.

Date: March 14 at 2:41pm Likes: 3

2.30 Participant13 (F): Participant14 ale napisała "w gwoli" i czar prysł haha 😊☐

Translation: Participant14, but she wrote preciseness "w gwoli"[*it should be written gwoliscislosci*] and the spell broke hahah

Date: March 14 at 2:42pm Likes: 0

2.31 Participant15 (F): Pani Participant10, dziewczyna napisała posta, radzi sobie jak radzi w języku polskim, ważne jest jednak, że sobie radzi. Wytłumaczyło się bieżącego nawet na wstępie dlaczego pisze tak, a nie inaczej. Została zaatakowana i wyśmiana przez innego członka grupy, który niestety ani poziomem elokwencji, ani poprawnej pisowni poszczycić się nie może. Pani więc wybaczy ale zastosowałam stare powiedzenie: kto jest bez winy niech pierwszy rzuci kamień. Pozdrawiam

Translation: Mrs Participant10 [*addressed with first name only*], the girl wrote this post, she manages the way she can in Polish language, the important thing is however that she manages. She explained right from the start why she writes in this fashion and not differently. She was attacked and derided by another member of this group, who unfortunately cannot pride oneself with the level of eloquence nor correct spelling. You forgive me miss, but I will use here an old saying: the one who is with no guilt should throw the stone first. Greetings.

Date: March 14 at 2:43pm Likes: 5

2.32 Participant10 (F):Przepraszam, źle zrozumiałam, myślałam że Pani atakuje Alę. Przepraszamrazjeszcze

Translation: I am sorry, I misunderstood, I thought that you were attacking Ala. Once again, I am sorry

Date: March 14 at 2:45pm Likes: 0

2.33 Participant15 (F): Mea culpa Mrs Participant13 😊☺ gwoliściskości 😊☺

Translation: Mea Culpa Mrs Participant13 ☺gwoliscislosci☺[*corrects her spelling error*]

Date: March 14 at 2:46pm Likes: 1

2.34 Participant13 (F): Participant15 Amen! Pozdrawiam 😊;)

Translation: Participant15 Amen! Greetings ;)

Date: March 14 at 2:47pm Likes: 1

2.35 Participant14 (F): Participant13, również należę do osób, które lubią ogładę wypowiedzi i ortograficzno-gramatyczną poprawność. Ale nienapastujmytych, którzytakpisaćniepotrafią.

Translation: Participant13, I also belong to people, who like neat utterances and orthographic-grammatical correctness. But let's not harass those, who cannot write like that.

Date: March 14 at 2:47pm Likes: 0

2.36 Participant13 (F): Participant14 zgadzam się. Nie napastujmy. W ogóle nikogo nie napastujmy. Ale dla mnie było niejasne jak osoba, która nie potrafi pisać jest dziennikarką. I wyjaśnił się. Dlatego cofnęłam mój wstępny hejt 😊😊

Translation: Participant14 I agree. Let's not harass them. In general, let's not harass anybody. For me it was unclear how a person, who cannot write can be a journalist. And it explained itself. That's why I took back my initial troll message.

Date: March 14 at 2:54pm Likes: 1

There are four main participants (all of them female) in this bit of interaction: Participants 10, 13, 14 and 15. The interaction starts with two consecutive direct reactions to action 2, in which Participant 3 is directly addressed; in 2.26 Participant 15 reacts, and in 2.27 Participant 16 joins in; both get a large number of likes. Action 2.26 the becomes the object of a response (2.28) by Participant 10, directly addressing Participant 15. Both participants will continue their exchange in 2.31 and 2.32. This, we could say, is one conversation.

But in between the turns of the interaction by Participants 10 and 15, Participant 14 has placed a reaction to 2.28, attacking Participant 3 and defending Participant 15. Again, we can see this as an attempt at 'correcting' the context, as a form of policing in other words. This intervention, however, is immediately followed by a riposte in 2.30 from Participant 13, pointing out to Participant 14 a writing error in Participant 15's earlier utterance. This, we could say, is a second conversation.

Action 2.30, next, becomes the point of departure for two more conversations. Participant 15 responds in 2.33 to Participant 13 with "mea culpa", to which Participant 13 adds "Amen" in 2.34. Remember that participant 14 was mentioned in 2.30, but was only an indirectly addressed participant in that sense. The direct addressee of 2.30, Participant 14, responds in 2.35, and this conversation ends with conciliatory words from Participant 13 in 2.36. Observe how in 2.36 mention is made of a feature of SNS interaction we already encountered: Participant 13 refers to an earlier comment she had removed from the interaction.

Each of the four participants is involved in two separate conversations in this fragment, and the response in one conversation (viz. 2.28 and 2.30) can serve as the point of departure for another one – thus action 2.30 is the point of departure of two separate conversations. Shifts from one conversation into another are swiftly made, mostly by means of name tagging, and no misunderstandings occur, in spite, even, of the odd sequentiality of written texts in the reply tool.

Graphically, the different actions – four interlocking conversations, in which each participant is involved in two of them – can be represented as follows:

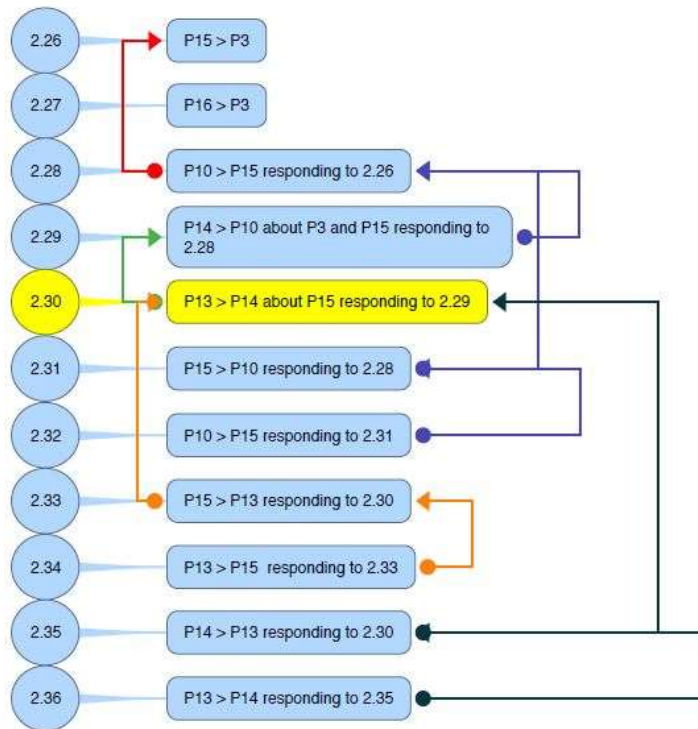


Figure 2: Four interlocking conversations

Each conversation, needless to say, demands its own small chunk of specific context (and, thence, its specific forms of contextualization); each one needs to be marked indexically by participants as separate from others, while still in some way connected to higher-scale ones; and all need to be sustained and concluded in collaboration with people who might be, and often are, strangers in offline life. This complex work is done by the participants without much apparent difficulty. The participants in this bit of SNS discourse (of whom we cannot assume much mutual knowledge) successfully navigated multiple contexts activated in overlapping, interlocking actions, awkwardly occurring as written signs on a screen.

4. Does context really collapse?

Let us summarize what we have seen in our case analysis.

1. We have observed a complex and compound social action, the ‘event’ as we called it. This event is non-homogeneous thematically, in terms of modes of interaction and styles of expression, and in terms of participation frameworks.
2. This means that this event was made up of an intricate web of nonlinearly organized sub-actions: comments, replies to comments and so forth;
3. This web of actions displayed specific interaction modes and participation frameworks, all demanding normative enactment. Participants appeared to have a high awareness of the rules of the game, most clearly when they explicitly policed parts of it.

4. Each of these actions showed a relatively unproblematic ‘context’: participants used various mechanisms to solve possible complications in addressee selection, provided useful correcting information to each other, and completed complex interactional tasks.
5. All in all, participants displayed an acutely accurate sense of the *specific actions they were involved in*, adjusted their conduct accordingly and sanctioned that of others.

The event, recall, did not take place on a personal Facebook wall; it happened on a forum serving a large community, and it is safe to assume that the administrators of the forum do not personally know every member of the forum. In that sense, the case we have analyzed could have been sensitive – even typically so – to context collapse as a feature of SNS communication. We did not see any evidence of that; we saw a good deal of evidence to the contrary: that participants have a pretty well developed sense of what they are involved in, with whom, and how – their contextualization skills were rather advanced and did not seem to slacken in the face of a lengthy, meandering and often high-tempered SNS discussion. Contexts did not collapse; if anything, they multiplied and expanded into a mountain range.

They are, however, *specific* contexts characteristic of *specific* forms of action. Responding to a question involves a different kind of context than launching expletives to a participant whose conduct was judged to be inadmissible; and volunteering to collaborate with Ala in her TV project involved yet another context than challenging her credentials as a Polish journalist. Regarding SNS interaction, to repeat Goodwin & Goodwin’s (1992: 96) words, “there are great analytical gains to be made by looking very closely at how particular activities are organized”. Too general a picture leads to superficial, and sometimes factually unsubstantiated claims and insights. We found such aims and insights in studies on context collapse.

As we said at the outset, it is not our intention here to dismiss or disqualify what scholars have described as context collapse. Our intention was to bring a more precise picture to the table, and what we hope to have shown is that the term perhaps stands for a smaller set of actual SNS communication phenomena than often suggested. Yes, there may be moments where SNS users experience discomfort by the indeterminacy of addressees and that issues of privacy determinate the choice of modes of interactions and of participation frameworks. Let us use the term context collapse for such phenomena. But let us remember that in the data we presented here, addressee selection as well as the segmentation of, and shifts between, participation frameworks did not lead to substantial difficulties. People do usually not address “audiences”, they select specific addressees and, depending on the specific nature of the action they are involved in, are not overly disturbed when others join in.

Let us therefore not use context collapse as a general feature – a defining feature – of SNS communication. Even if the Web 2.0 has shaped tools affording the construction of terribly complex modes of interaction (such as the one we documented here), and even if such degrees of complexity have no equivalent in the offline world of interaction, people actually appear to know their way around. They appear to have built forms of competence for maneuvering such complex interactions, and for determining their possible (and desired) roles in them. The sociation processes shaped by SNS are new and have no precedent. But they can still be described as forms of social action collaboratively performed by people drawing on the available resources and the normative expectations they hold with regard to specific forms of social action. It is this capacity that we call ‘contextualization’, and this

capacity appears to be quite flexible, expandable and dynamic when we look at actual instances of SNS communication.

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Chapter 4

Invisible lines in the online-offline linguistic landscape

Jan Blommaert & Ico Maly

Introduction

Ethnographic Linguistic Landscape Analysis (ELLA) was developed as a way of addressing in a more satisfactory way the structure and significance of linguistic landscapes as an object in the study of sociolinguistic superdiversity (Blommaert & Maly 2016). The effort was inspired by a refusal to perform ‘snapshot’ linguistic landscape analysis based on hit-and-run fieldwork and yielding a Saussurean synchrony as analytical outcome. Instead, we wanted to emphasize the dynamic, processual character of superdiverse linguistic landscapes through a combination of longitudinal fieldwork, detailed observations of changes in the landscape, and an ethnographic-theoretical framework in which landscape signs are seen as traces of (and instruments for) social action (cf. Blommaert 2013).

It is the latter point that we seek to examine more profoundly in this paper. The aspect of social action remains, in general, an underdeveloped aspect of Linguistic Landscape research (LL), and here, too, the Saussurean synchrony can be identified as an underlying sociological imagination in much work. Social action, it seems, is located within a geographical circumscription – a neighborhood, a street, a town – which is seen as the locus of action of a sedentary community. LL signs are routinely interpreted as reflecting, in some way, the linguistic repertoires of those who live in the area where the signs have been emplaced. This, then, enables LL researchers to make statements about the demographic composition of such areas of emplacement, projected into statements about the sociolinguistic structures in that area.

The concept of social action, thus interpreted, remains highly superficial and deserves and demands far more attention. The question that needs to be raised is: *who* is involved in social action in such areas? And what is the *locus* of such actions? Linguistic landscapes in superdiverse areas often offer clues that significantly complicate the assumptions about sedentary populations mentioned above. A simple example can be seen in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Antwerpse Algemene Dakwerken. © Jan Blommaert 2018

This picture was taken in the inner-city district of Oud-Berchem, Antwerp (Belgium) in the summer of 2018; we see a van with a Dutch-language inscription “Antwerpse Algemene Dakwerken” (“Antwerp General Roofing Works”), but with a Polish license plate locating the van in the area of Poznan. While the inscription suggests locality – a reference to Antwerp on a van emplaced in Antwerp – the license plate suggests translocality. Thus, building work performed in Antwerp appears to be connected to actions performed in Poznan – recruiting a workforce, manufacturing bespoke materials, warehousing heavy equipment and so forth. In an era of transnational mobility, such things are evident, but they raise the fundamental questions outlined above.

Such questions, we believe, are becoming even more pressing and compelling as soon as we adjust our baseline sociological assumptions and accept that contemporary social life is not only played out in an ‘offline’ physical arena of copresent participants encountering each other in public space (the focus of Goffman 1963), but also in *online* spaces crosscutting the online ones in complex ways (cf. Blommaert 2018). We live our lives in an online-offline nexus. This simple observation renders us aware of the fact that social actions can be organized, set up, “staffed” and distributed in online as well as offline spaces; and it helps us realize that much of what we observe in the way of social action in superdiverse (offline, geographical) areas has, at least, been *conditioned* and perhaps even *made possible* by online

infrastructures, in terms both of *actors* and of *topography*. This point we intend to illustrate in what follows.

A focus on action

Before moving on towards these illustrations, we must briefly clarify the focus on action we shall bring to this analysis. Our own view of action is deeply influenced by an older tradition of action-centered sociology, of which Goffman (1961, 1963), Cicourel (1972), Blumer (1969) Strauss (1993) and Garfinkel (1967, 2002) can be seen as co-architects (see Blommaert, Lu & Li 2019 for a discussion).

A number of principles characterize this tradition.

1. The first and most important principle is that of *interactional co-construction of social facts* – the assumption that whatever we do in social life is done in collaboration, response or conflict with others. In fact, the people mentioned above argue that one can only talk of social action when it is *interaction* (e.g. Strauss 1993: 21), and for Blumer (1969: 7) “a society consists of individuals interacting with one another”.
2. Interaction, in turn, is “making sense” of social order in concrete situations – this is the second principle. For the scholars mentioned, social order and social structure does not exist in an abstract sense but is enacted constantly by people in contextualized, situated moments of interaction. In Garfinkel’s famous words (1967: 9), in each such moment we perform and co-construct social order “for another first time”. The social is *concrete*, ongoing and evolving, in other words.
3. The third principle is derived straight from Mead and can be summarized as follows: “we see ourselves through the way in which others see and define us” (Blumer 1969: 13). Somewhat more precisely, “organisms in interaction are observing each other’s ongoing activity, with each using portions of the developing action of the other as pivots for the redirection of his or her own action” (Blumer 2004: 18). This is the essence of Mead’s understanding of the Self: it is greatly influenced by anticipated responses from the others, and adjusted accordingly. The Self can thus never be an essence, a fixed characteristic, an a priori attribute of people: it is a situationally co-constructed performance ratified by others. Of course, Goffman’s work has greatly contributed to our understanding of this.
4. Fourth, we do this interactional monitoring and anticipating of the others’ responses on the basis of an assumption of *recognizability*. When we experience something as meaningful, as something that “makes sense” to us, by recognizing it *as something specific* (cf. Garfinkel 1967: 9), a token of a type of meaningful acts which we can ratify as such. These types of acts can be called “genres” (Blommaert 2018: 51); Garfinkel called them “formats” (2002: 245), and Goffman (1974) theorized them as “frames”.
5. Fifth, all of the preceding has a major implication for how we see the Self, how we theorize it and address it in research. Rawls’ (2002: 60) comment on Garfinkel nicely captures it, and the point can be extended to almost all the work in the tradition addressed here. Individual subjectivity, she writes,

“which had originally been thought of as belonging to the actor, [was relocated] in the regularities of social practices. (...) [A] population is constituted not by a set of individuals with something in common but by a set of practices common to particular situations or events”.

The latter point is of crucial importance here. It emphasizes that actions generate those who are involved in them, or to quote Rawls again, we see “situations that provide for the appearances of individuals” (2002: 46), and not vice versa. Converted into the vocabulary of this book: *identities, individual and collective, are effects of social actions* and not their ontological and methodological point of departure. They constitute, as it were, the “personnel” of social actions, and in an online-offline nexus, identifying this “personnel” is the challenge: who is actually and concretely involved in social action as actor? Who actually contributes to the actual form and structure of social actions? To these questions we can now turn, and we shall use ELLA as our tool.

Invisible lines

The method we employ in ELLA is very simple: we observe *everything* we notice in the way of publicly displayed language material. But we do not stop at the level of language – even if that language is, evidently, an important clue for locating e.g. diasporic audiences – but we look at what is actually contained in the signs. And one feature of a great number of publicly displayed signs nowadays is *online information*: references to websites, social media accounts and so forth. This already directs us towards a highly relevant insight: that “public” as a feature of sign emplacement now has at least two dimensions: the *local public emplacement of signs* – the concrete place where signs are put and shown to potential audiences – as well as a *translocal, online public sphere* with which the local signs are profoundly connected. This insight, in our view, forces us out of the local area and out of the customary modes of LL fieldwork: we have to move from the street to the computer, and we follow the online information displayed in the signs.

The superdiverse area of Oud-Berchem counts a large number of new shop-window evangelical churches catering for specific diaspora audiences from Africa, Latin America and parts of Asia. One such church is located in premises previously occupied by a Chinese restaurant. A couple of posters are affixed to the austere front of the building; Figure 2 displays one of them.



Figure 2: services at the Latin-American church. © Jan Blommaert 2018

The poster offers mundane information: the weekly organization of services in the church. We notice that the information is bilingual, in Dutch and Spanish (here is the level of language), and we already know from previous fieldwork that the church is run by pastors from Peru and caters for a relatively small congregation of faithful hailing from several parts of Latin America.

At the very bottom of the poster, however, we notice a web address: www.bethel.tv. When we follow that link, we enter a very different sphere (Figure 3).

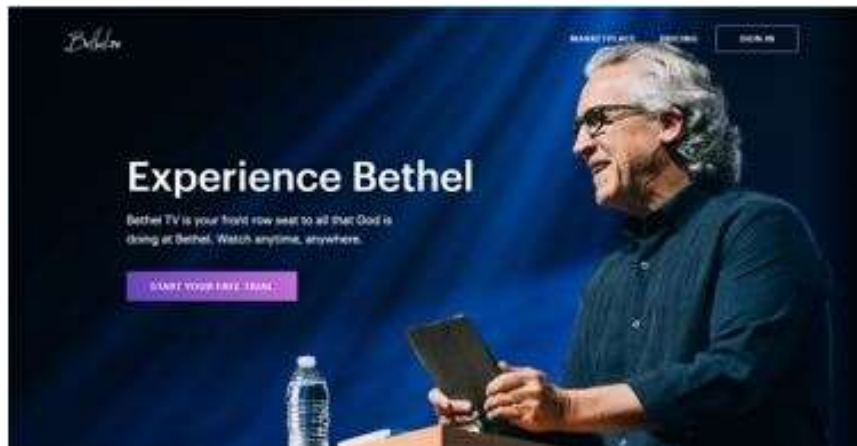


Figure 3: Experience Bethel

Bethel TV is a globally active religious enterprise, based in California, and offering for-money religious services and commodities to a very wide audience of customers around the world. The Bethel TV website contains all the features of commercial websites, including the “free trial” offer, preferably followed by the “premium” subscription (Figure 4).

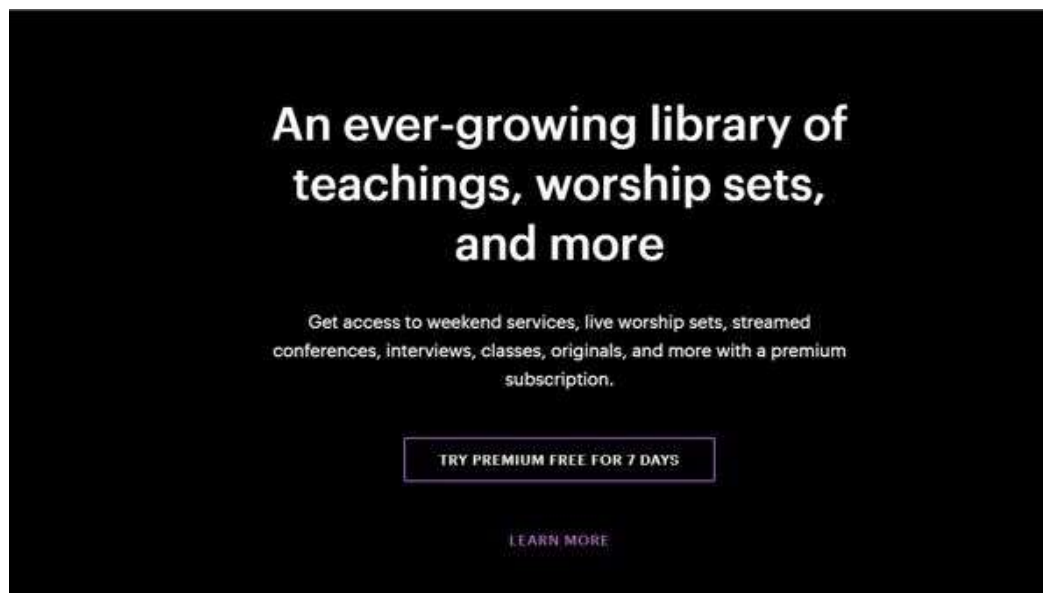


Figure 4: Bethel Premium

Note the implications of this. We have moved from a sociolinguistics of offline areas and communities into a sociolinguistics of digital culture, and both are inextricably connected in a locally emplaced sign. That we find ourselves fully in the realm of digital culture becomes

clear when we follow some more links. Bethel TV is active on a great number of social media platforms, and prominently on YouTube, where its channel has almost 150,000 subscribers (Figure 5).

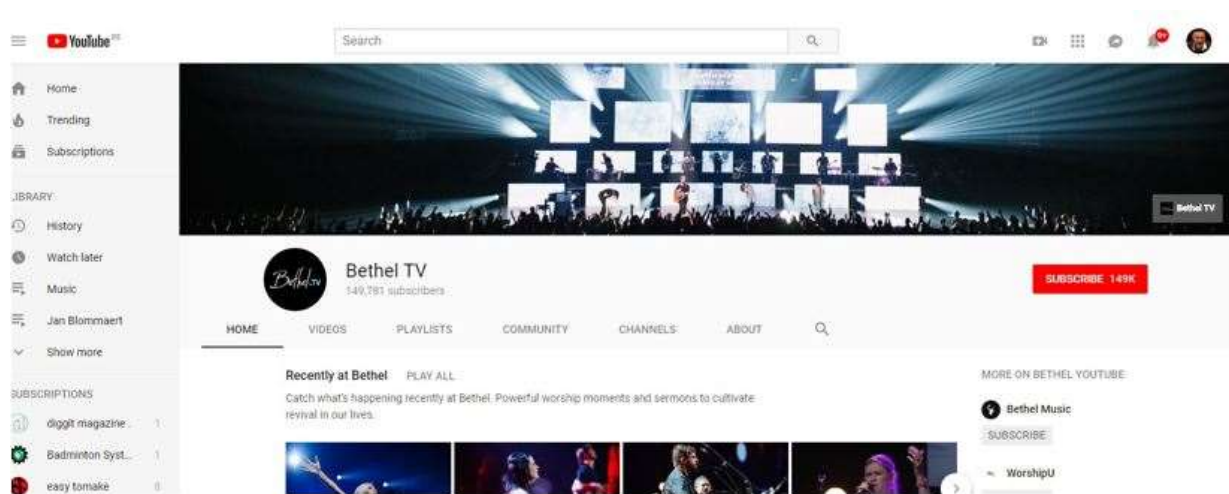


Figure 5: Bethel TV YouTube channel

YouTube channels along with other social media activities, let us note, are a frequent feature of the new evangelical churches in Oud-Berchem. Thus, Apostle Johnson Suleman, the pastor of a church serving a small West-African congregation in Oud-Berchem, is far bigger online than offline. His YouTube channel has over 106,000 subscribers and shows footage of services held in Belgium, Switzerland, Canada and several other countries (Figure 6).

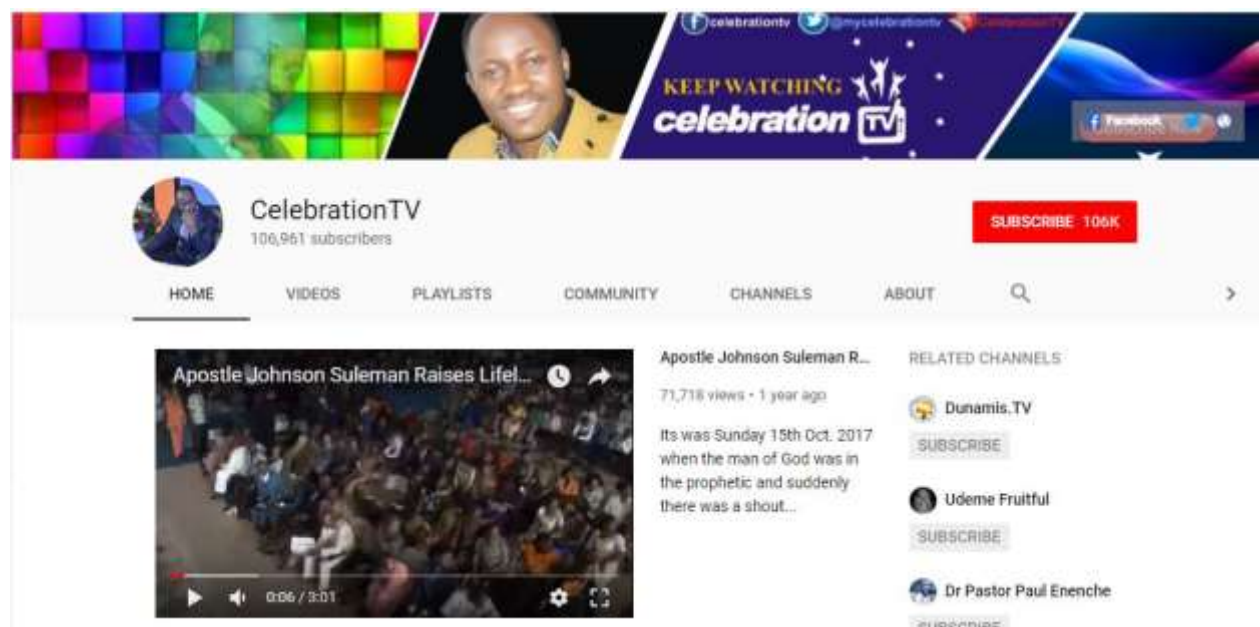


Figure 6: Apostle Johnson Suleman online

The case of Apostle Johnson Suleman suggests a slightly different analysis than the ones we provided in earlier work: the church in Oud-Berchem is not connected with the “homeland” of its founders (Nigeria in this case), as a kind of “station” in a network of diasporic

community members seeking to worship. It is a node in a transnational network of actions, performed by an *itinerant* pastor-entrepreneur. The center of this network is not Lagos or Abuja: its center is *online*, it is the YouTube channel that ties together a range of activities and actors dispersed over several countries. And the case of Bethel TV shows how local churches are resourced by religious multinationals also connecting a multitude of small local nodes in a global network.

We see now, through this online-offline ELLA, how lots of invisible lines run to and from a local area – Oud-Berchem – and how explaining what goes on in this local area demands attention to what the invisible lines bring and take in the way of resources and “personnel” to concrete, situated actions such as Sunday churches, and to concrete, situated modes of community-making. Members of the congregation have 24/7 access to some services of “the church”, regardless of where they are physically stationed. Figure 7, from the website of yet another evangelical church located in Oud-Berchem, illustrates this.

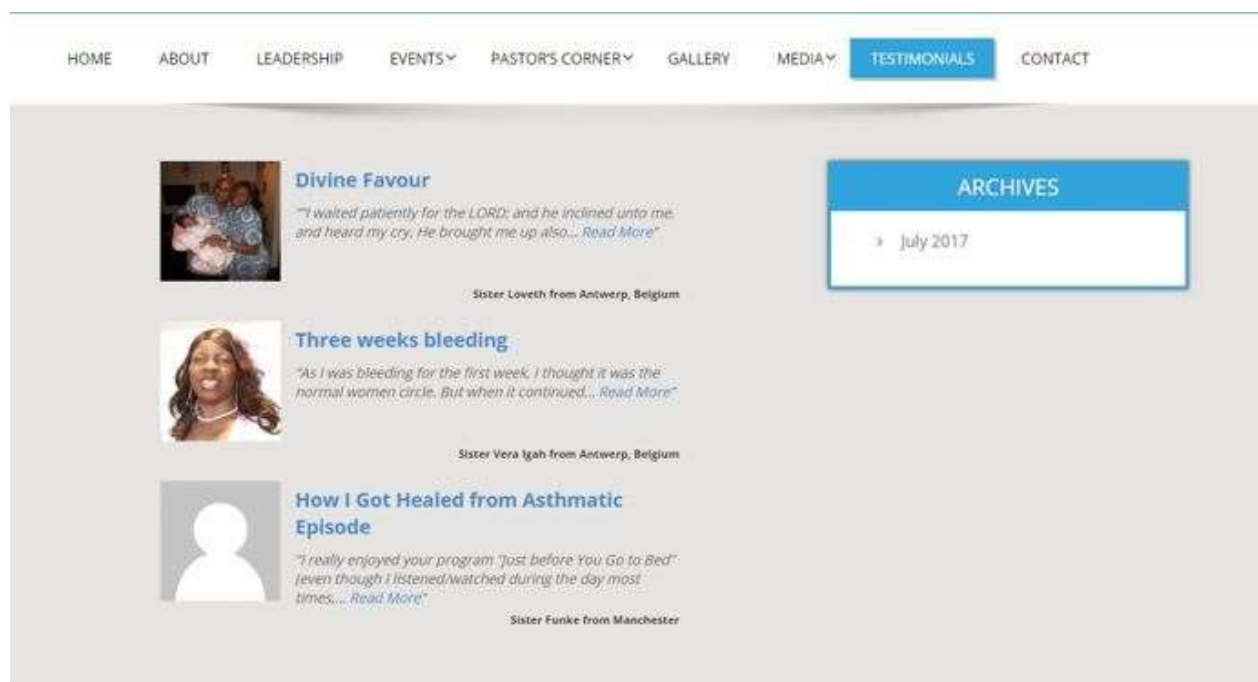


Figure 7: Web testimonials

The website offers a page for “testimonials”, and apart from two Antwerp-based members, we also see a testimonial from a member based in Manchester, UK. Members not present in the actual physical locale of the church can watch the services on YouTube and draw similar spiritual satisfaction from it.

Conclusion: ELLA 2.0

When we follow the leads from locally emplaced signs towards the online sphere they point towards, we begin to see vastly more. This move from offline to online and back, we consider to be of major importance for ELLA, for it directs us towards a far more precise view of *actors* and *topography* of action. As for actors, the actions performed in specific offline places are dispersed and operate locally as well as translocally. The “personnel” of locally performed actions, thus, is far broader and more diverse than what an exclusively offline LL

analysis would show. As for topography, we see invisible lines connecting places as far apart as Oud-Berchem and California, and resources, formats and personnel are provided in all these places and made available for local enactment.

We thus find ourselves in an ELLA 2.0, an online-offline ethnography starting from linguistic landscapes and taking us to the structure of social actions in superdiverse neighborhoods. Its findings inevitably distort the acquired imagery of sedentary diaspora demographics as the cornerstone of superdiversity studies: “multi-ethnic” neighborhoods as the locale within which social actions by their populations must be confined, or privileged analytically. The online-offline nexus no longer affords such views.

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Chapter 5

Collective action in hashtag activism

Jan Blommaert

In today's multilingual city, a lot of communication is done in online environments. In fact, even in places that do not, perhaps, see themselves as multilingual, it is online communication that makes them multilingual (as much of the work on rural provinces in The Netherlands performed by my good Tilburg colleague Jos Swanenberg has demonstrated). The argument is not new, I know, and it has been reiterated at this conference as well. But let me nonetheless repeat it, for it underlies what follows: **contemporary sociolinguistic environments are defined by the online-offline nexus**, and this propels us towards two analytical directions: **complexity** and **multimodality**. I shall engage with both in this talk.

My engagement with these phenomena has pushed me, of late, to reflect on a very broad social-theoretical topic. That topic is: **“what are groups”**? Who actually lives in these multilingual cities?, and how do people whose social lives are continually dispersed over offline and online context arrive at forms of collective action?

Note that the question “what are groups” has been a recurrent one in social thought throughout the past century and a half. It always accompanies major technological and infrastructural transformations of societies: the breakthrough and spread of printed newspapers, the telegraph, cinema, telephone, television kept Weber, Durkheim and Simmel busy, as well as the Frankfurt School, Dewey, Lippman and later Giddens, Habermas, Bourdieu and Castells. New technologies each time called into question the very nature of what it meant to be social. That is: **what it meant to form communities and collective action**, using instruments not previously available. The question “what are groups” is, thus, inevitable when we consider the online-offline nexus that characterizes our societies at present.

In addressing the question, [I take my cues from Garfinkel](#) and other Symbolic Interactionists (including the Goodwins, I must underscore), for reasons that will be made clear in due course. Let me say at this point that **contemporary social and sociolinguistic complexity creates a serious degree of unpredictability**, in that we cannot presuppose, let alone take for granted, much of what mainstream social theory has offered us to conceptualize communities, identities and social life. What Garfinkel offers is a rigorous, even radical, action-focused perspective on society, **in which groups are seen as *EFFECTS* of specific forms of social interactions**.

EFFECTS, not GIVENS that determine and define the interactions. I underscore this for it isn't what we normally do: we tend to take groups and group identities as pre-given when we consider interaction, and then observe what such groups and identities “do” in interaction. For Garfinkel this is not an option. He argues that **social collectives are the product of collective social action** – which is always *interaction* of course. And when is such action collective? **When the activities deployed by participants are *RECOGNIZABLE* to others in terms of available cultural material**. It is as soon as we recognize someone else's actions

as meaningful in terms of available (and thus recognizable) resources for meaning, that we engage in collective social action, display and enact the formats we know as characterizing the specific social relationships possibly at play, and operate as a group.

In the online space, we have no access to the embodied cues that offer us pointers to the interlocutors' identities in offline talk, but we can still observe social interaction and the ways in which it points us to groups. **Groups cannot be an a priori, but they can be an a posteriori of analysis.**

Methodologically, this is how I reformulate Garfinkel's focus on action. I use a very simple, [four-line set of principles](#). ONE: whenever we see forms of communication we can safely assume that they involve meaningful social relationships as prerequisite, conduit and outcome. TWO, such relationships will involve modes of identity categorization. THREE, observing modes of interaction, thus, brings us at the very hard of what it is to be social. And FOUR, we must be specific and avoid quick generalizations, for differences in action will lead to different outcomes.

In what follows, I will take these simple principles to a typical online phenomenon: **memic hashtag activism**. Memic hashtag activism has become, rather quickly in fact, a major new format of political activism, certainly where Twitter is concerned. And even if it is by definition an online form of action mobilizing the now-typical online multimodal resources for interaction, there are clear offline effects too.

The particular case I have chosen here is Dutch, and it revolves around the former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, mister Halbe Zijlstra. Let us quickly provide some general informative points.

Zijlstra was until very recently a rising star in Dutch politics, climbing fast through the ranks of the ruling liberal party VVD due to a very close relationship with Prime Minister Rutte. When the most recent Dutch government was formed, Zijlstra got the plum job of Minister of Foreign Affairs. So far so good.

Now, Halbe Zijlstra had for years been telling a story. The story was that, in a pre-political capacity, he was present at a party at Vladimir Putin's *datcha*, where he overheard Putin saying that Ukraine, Georgia and other former Soviet stations should become part of a future Greater Russia. He had heard Putin saying something that could, in other words, be an indication of Russian imperialist ambitions.

In February 2018, while Zijlstra was preparing to meet his Russian counterpart Lavrov, a newspaper reported that all of this was a lie. Now, you must know that the relations between The Netherlands and Russia are delicate due to the incident with a Malaysian airliner shot down in 2014 over the Russian-occupied part of Ukraine, killing 193 Dutch nationals. Zijlstra's talks with Lavrov were announced to be tough, and just as that was about to happen, Halbe Zijlstra's credibility got shot to pieces.

There were two problems. ONE, it was shown that Zijlstra was never present at that party. A top executive of oil company Shell was there, and Zijlstra had heard the account second hand, from him. The SECOND problem, however, was that this Shell guy came out saying that Putin had actually argued something else: Ukraine, Georgia and so on were past of Greater Russia's *past*, not its *future*. Halbe Zijlstra, in short, had been caught "pants down", lying quite nastily about the people he now had to do business with.

Social media went bananas, and on Twitter a meme-storm started, which lasted for 24 hours and operated under the hashtag #HalbeWasErbij – in English “Halbe was there”. A hashtag, by the way, is a framing device that ties large numbers of individual messages thematically, pragmatically and metapragmatically together within a common broad indexical vector. And in this function, it is of course an online innovation.

Let’s now have a look at the meme-storm.



Obviously, Halbe’s claim that he WAS THERE with Putin became a meme theme. Hilarious parodies of this theme, preposterously suggesting intimacy between both, started circulating. Zijlstra was with Putin on a trip into the woods.



His photo dominates the Kremlin.



And Putin supports Zijlstra in the Dutch Parliament.

Those are straightforward memes, even to some extent logical and expected permutations of Zijlstra's claims. But "Halbe Was There" can of course be made more productive as a motif. And this is what happens in meme-storms: the productivity of the theme is exploited, leading to ever more absurd extensions of "Halbe Was There".



Halbe was there when Napoleon marched his victorious troops through Europe.



He was in Dallas in 1963



He was there when Martin Luther King had his dream.



There cannot be any doubt that Halbe was one of the Beatles.



Whenever history was made, Halbe was there. So when Charles and Diana got married, guess who stood next to them.



And since this guy is now the biggest maker of history, he too must be connected to Halbe.

The meme-storm went on, relentlessly, for hours on end. And in this new information economy of ours, [new and old media do not operate in entirely separate spaces](#) but are profoundly networked. So what is “trending” on Twitter tends to become headline news in the traditional mass media too.

IMPACT

The screenshot shows a news article from NOS. The main headline is "Zijlstra mikpunt van spot op sociale media: #HalbeWasErbij". To the left of the headline is a red quote: "Zijlstra target of ridicule on social media". Below the headline is a sub-headline: "MA 12 FEBRUARIJ, 10:17 AANGEPAST MA 12 FEBRUARIJ, 10:52 POLITIEK, TECH". The article features a photograph of Mark Rutte and Astrid van Heiden in a car. Below the photo is a tweet from Astrid van Heiden (@AstridvanHeiden) that says "Halbe was erbij" and "11:35 - 12 feb. 2018 - Utrecht, The Netherlands". The tweet has 55 likes and 51 replies.

Such a scale jump from small levels of new media circulation to larger mass media ones generates a tremendous impact. Soon, the Dutch national broadcasting system made an item of the #HalbeWasErbij phenomenon, substantially adding to the public pressure on Zijlstra by complementing more strictly political arguments against him with ludic ones ridiculing him, entirely undercutting his credibility and, consequently, his political reliability.

The screenshot shows a Reuters news article. The main headline is "Dutch foreign minister quits after lying about Putin meeting". The author is Anthony Deutsch. The article is dated February 11, 2018, at 5:17 PM. The article is 4 minutes long. The article is categorized under "World", "Business", "Markets", "Politics", and "TV". The article is also categorized under "Pyongyang 2018", "The Trump Effect", "Politics", "North Korea", "Elections", and "Mossad".

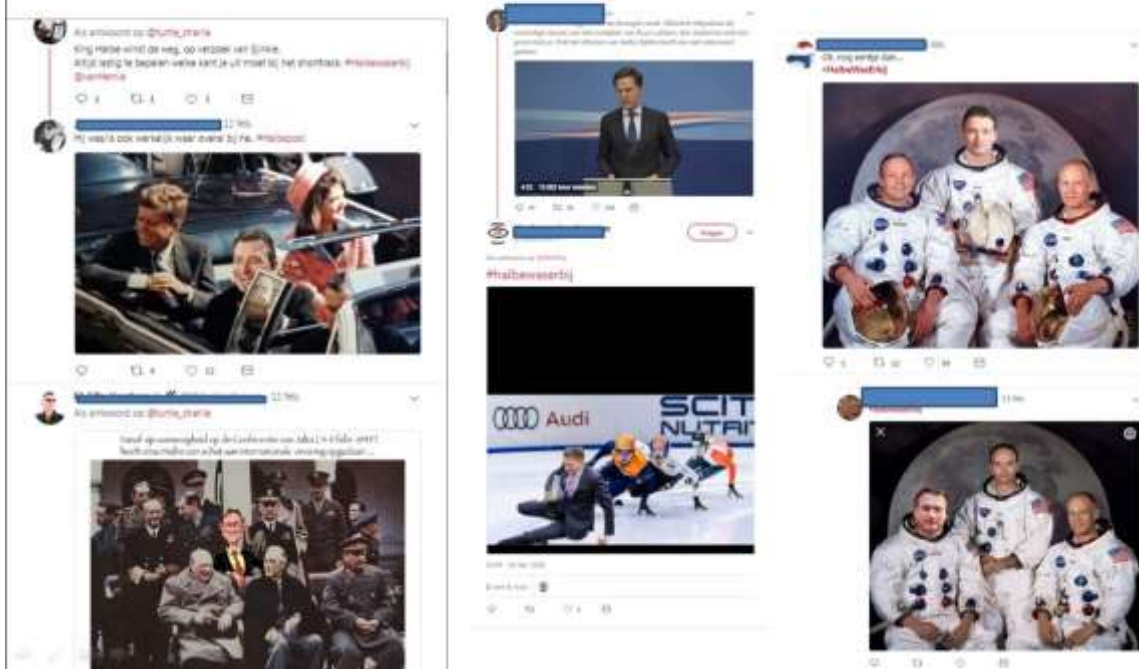
And so, by the time Halbe Zijlstra was forced to resignation about a day after the start of the meme-storm, this was world news. Memic hashtag activism is effective because of the impact it has on mass media.

This impact has not necessarily to do with the masses carrying so-called “public opinion”. I mentioned “trending” here. Now, usually when we say “trending” we imply “viral”. And “viral”, in turn, is somehow strongly associated with large numbers. (Think of Trumps tweets which get hundreds of thousands of “likes” and retweets.)



In this case, however, “viral” is in actual fact “LOW VIRALITY”. Consider the images on this slide. On the left, we see the most popular meme of the entire meme-storm. Yes, it received almost 900 retweets, but compared to the heavy artillery of, for instance, Trump, Taylor Swift, or your average Premier League star, this is peanuts. The virality in the #HalbeWasErbij in effect amounted to a handful to a few dozen of retweets. That’s strange, isn’t it?

A small, intensely engaged community



Unless we consider the kind of community behind it. This community is, whenever we count heads, small. But it is **relentless and profoundly committed to what it practices**. The memes were used as instruments in dialogue, in the form of ludic replies to wordy statements as well as to other memes – causing genre shifts in Twitter threads from one type of debate format into another one. And above all, what we saw was unending creativity, with continuous transformations of memes in a kind of saturation bombardment on the topic of Zijlstra’s politically consequential lies.

And the latter point is very interesting, for what characterizes memic hashtag activism is that **it occurs not necessarily on the basis of a pre-existing community of experienced activists, but in an ephemeral, open, “light” community tied together by a set of formatted practices**. I mean by that: the idea is to make more memes and new ones, and anyone joining the community is welcome as long as he or she steps into this format.

It’s an easy and cheap format in addition. The skills needed are widely available – you just need inspiration and some photoshopping technique, and you will have the time of your life. And for those who lack the photoshopping skills, other members step in. At one point during the afternoon, someone tweeted this image:

Ludic knowledge community



This is a photoshopped section of this picture, where we see Halbe Zijlstra athletically jumping over a fence.



And the photoshopped section is offered, in a sort of ludic instruction mode, as raw material to people lacking some necessary skills but desiring to enter into the #HalbeWasErbij meming activities.

Now, this actual, slightly awkward pose of Zijlstra's became the most popular one in the meme-storm.



Dallas, 1963



Normandy 1944



Berlin 1989: Halbe Was There, each and every time, in this photoshopped capacity.



He was even there when Leonardo painted La Gioconda. And of course, Halbe was on the pitch when Holland had its finest moment:



When they won the European Cup in 1988: Yes sir, Halbe Was There.

We can conclude now.

It is through paying attention to what people DO that we can get to what and who they ARE – this is what Garfinkel and his associates emphasized.



Adopting, converting, sharing, redesigning within a structured rhizomatic community

Recognizability: hashtag, cultural conventions of Twitter, and of meming



We have seen how the hashtag #HalbeWasErbij connected a very large set of transformed, morphed, memes in what Anselm Strauss famously called “the continual permutation of action”. This continual permutation is the core of interaction here: we see on this slide how

three different memes refer to the same moment in history, a World Cup game between Spain and Holland, which Holland won. Those involved in the meming activities interact through [small but profoundly creative and ludic transformations of particular signs](#), all of them connected and all of them separate. **Those involved in it are form a loose, rhizomatic community without fixed boundaries, but with – surprisingly perhaps – a pretty robust structure revolving around shared expectations, shared cultural material and shared norms of engagement.** It's all about learning, showing, trying, sharing, and having politically informed good laughs. And it proceeds within the constraints of what Twitter affords (the so-called platform affordances) as well as within the boundaries of what is recognizable in terms of the formats of action.

This explains the “low virality” issue: **not MEMES go viral, but MEMING as an activity goes viral and shapes a viral community** (another term for “rhizomatic”, perhaps). We can say here that **“virality” is not a quantitative matter, but a qualitative one** that has to do with **the intensity of interaction** within particular formats of social action. This interaction, we have seen, is characterized by tremendous variability, yet it is tied together by a hashtag, which gives it **a specific INDEXICAL VECTOR: any and all individual tokens of the hashtag point towards the same thematic complex, connect a community in the activity, and shape networks of communicability to other actors in the field of the shaping of public opinion.** The national broadcasting system in The Netherlands, let alone Reuters, has a much wider audience than the individual hashtag activists. But the latter's relentlessness and intensity became the stuff of higher-scale political expression by so-called “influencers” and mass media.

This evidently complicates our understanding of “public opinion”. We see that small and “light” but nonetheless structured communities can, through networked upscaling effects, become tremendously influential in the public sphere. Those involved in various forms of local urban activism are doubtlessly already familiar with such unexpected high-scale effects of small-scale action. Such effects shape forces of collective meaning-making and understanding in our societies, in ways that we still largely need to find out. But while doing so I would propose to start from action, not from groups. Because as I hope to have demonstrated here, the effects of the actions cannot be predicted from the features of pre-existing groups, however we wish to imagine them.

Chapter 6

Ergoic framing in New Right online groups: Q, the MAGA kid, and the Deep State theory

Ondřej Procházka & Jan Blommaert

1. Introduction

Conspiracy theories have had a long life in social research (e.g. Hofstadter 1967), and they have more recently become conspicuous as a topic of research on online social and political action.¹⁹ The relationship between the online world and conspiracy theories is often described as synergetic:

Conspiracy theories, defined as allegations that powerful people or organizations are plotting together in secret to achieve sinister ends through deception of the public (...), have long been an important element of popular discourse. With the advent of the Internet, they have become more visible than ever. (Wood & Douglas 2013)

The Internet is also seen as *influential*: it is the place where conspiracy theories emerge and grow, before being moved into mainstream media:

However, as the Internet developed into a major form of communication, its function as a medium for the spread of conspiracy theories began to exhibit some important characteristics. Most obviously, ideas that in the past would only have reached the small audiences of conspiracy publications and late night talk radio now could potentially reach many more. Less obviously, it became clear that once fringe ideas appeared on the Net, they could eventually migrate into mainstream media (Barkun 2016: 3).

Conspiracy theories themselves are often left undefined, and remain caught in moralizing – usually dismissive – but analytically superficial discourse:

"In *Conspiracy Theories and the Internet – Controlled Demolition and Arrested Development* (Clarke, 2007) he argues that many contemporary conspiracy theories suffer from vagueness. Looking at the development of conspiracy theories on the Internet, he argues that such theories have fared badly, since it does not take long for them to be analysed and subsequently shown to rely upon shaky or shakily interpreted evidence. As such, conspiracy theories online are now phrased in vague and less precise ways in order to avoid being easily falsified" (Dentith 2014:162)

¹⁹ We are deeply grateful to our colleague and friend Piia Varis for inspiration and guidance in the field of conspiracy theories. Piia's work (e.g. Varis 2018) sketched the direction and raised the issues we try to address in this paper.

In what follows, we intend to engage with conspiracy theories in a way that does justice to their complexity as a *social fact* in the online-offline nexus characterizing contemporary social life (cf. Blommaert 2018). Examining a recent case of online group activism, we will focus on (a) how a particular form of reasoning is consistently developed and maintained, a form we shall call *Ergoic* (after Latin *ergo*, “therefore”), and (b) how such a form of reasoning generates and sustains a particular type of community, which we call a *knowledge activism community*; (c) we shall do this from a specific angle, which is *action-centered* rather than content- or identity-centered.

The latter point demands some clarification. The specific case we shall examine in this paper instantiates a central analytical problem of online research: that of people performing social actions online anonymously, under an alias or using avatars. This simple and widespread given has momentous consequences for analytical approaches of online social action: we cannot reliably assume participants’ identities and use them as a priori categorizations in the analysis (cf. Blommaert, Lu & Li 2019). We cannot, for example, use particular demographic and sociological diacritics – gender, age, even nationality or place of residence – in the analysis, since none of these data are available to the analyst, except when advanced software tools and analytics can be deployed. What we do have, however, are data documenting specific social actions – online interactions in which specific normative codes evolve and circulate; in which particular epistemic, affective and ideological stances are being semiotized by means of specific resources; and in which we see, through all of this, the emerging *communities* whose collective work (or, in Garfinkel’s 2002 terms, “congregational work”) generates sometimes considerable social effects. The communities are generated by the actions they are involved in, which is why we privilege these actions as the objects of inquiry. We shall see how this action-centered approach enables us to be very precise in the identification of the communities: specific forms of action generate specific forms of community.

We shall examine a particular conspiracy-theoretical event in which an online New Right activist community called Q used the mainstream media reports of an incident involving a white student (the “MAGA kid”) and an elderly Native American man to produce elaborate reframings of what happened, using “ergoic” arguments grounded in a conspiracy theory which we shall call the “deep state theory”. In the next section, we shall briefly introduce the incident; the subsequent sections will discuss, the nature of the congregational work performed within the Q community and the structures of the ergoic argumentative work they display in their online actions. In our conclusions, we shall return to the main themes of this paper and connect them to some major issues in research on online communities such as Q.

2. Q and the MAGA kid incident

In January 2019, two marches clashed on the Mall in Washington DC: the pro-life *March for Life* and the *Indigenous Peoples’ March*. While the first one could be roughly described as politically conservative, the second could be said to be politically liberal within the US political universe. One incident from the meeting of both marches went viral as a short video clip on social media: an encounter between a young white Catholic high school student called Nick Sandmann, wearing the iconic “MAGA hat” (the emblem of Donald Trump’s *Make America Great Again* campaign), and an Omaha elder called Nathan Phillips.

The clip itself circulated in a variety of versions and these versions became a topic of heated controversy. Initially, the dominant reading of the clip opposed a dignified Native American

elder and a “smirking” white chauvinist kid. The “smirk” was read as an expression of disrespect, racism and white supremacy, thus strengthening the theme of the Indigenous Peoples’ March. The fact that Nathan Phillips was also said to be a Vietnam veteran highlighted the inappropriateness of his attitude: veterans command respect, period. Memes were made in which this reading was codified (see Figure 1), and mainstream media broadcasted the story in these terms.



Fig. 1: “No apology” meme

Nick Sandmann’s MAGA hat (by means of which he is identified in Figure 1) evidently laid a strong indexical link between Sandmann, the incident and Donald Trump, and in online discussions this connection was elaborated (see Figure 2).



Fig. 2: “Donald Trump defends Nick Sandmann” meme

A New Right forum (or *hivemind*) called Q also immediately picked up the incident, and in the remainder of this section their reactions and reframing attempts will be central.

Q is an online activist collective in which a particular vocabulary is being used, including one for identifying the hierarchical levels of members and the specific activities they undertake, as well as the themes they mobilize around and the opponents they choose to fight. Q operates at different levels, with ingroup core actions confined to the relatively marginal user-generated imageboard platform 8Chan, while actions reaching out to a broader network of

(potential) followers being performed on Facebook. More specifically, Q is believed to be a high-ranking individual or a small group of individuals operating in Trump’s administration with Q clearance, a level at which top secret and restricted data can be accessed. Based on their insider knowledge, Q post semi-coded messages (“crumbs”) on *8chan*, which are compiled and discussed by their followers (Anons), who organize themselves in what they call ‘Great Awakening’: “an organic information and truth-seeking campaign, the goal of which is to help President Trump peacefully Make America Great Again, and by extension to make the world a better, safer place for all to live in peace” (Anons 2018: 1)²⁰. This involves identifying and exposing both domestic and foreign enemies of Trump with a particular focus on what they have done (false flags operations, corruption, misdirection, cover ups, mind control etc.) what they do and will probably do with regard to current and past events.

Q’s first wave of Facebook responses consisted of *rejections of mainstream media’s version of the events*, swiftly followed by avalanches of messages offering *the truth* about what happened (cf. Figure 3).



Fig. 3: “hate hoax” Facebook update

In the days and weeks following the incident, ‘evidence’ was accumulated showing that Nathan Phillips was not a Vietnam veteran, that he had participated in several other public protests and activists’ meetings, that he could be identified as affiliated to organizations run by George Soros, and so on. The initially dominant frame was effectively turned upside down. Now, images of the incident should be read as involving an innocent, ordinary white kid being the victim of aggression by a professional activist claiming fake credentials. And from there onwards, the small incident became understood as a mere illustration of the big problem providing the *raison d’être* for Q: systematic anti-Trump machinations planned and performed in the US and elsewhere. The way the incident was cast in mainstream media, so argued Q members, was just another “hate hoax” – the fake news often qualified as “an enemy of the people” by Donald Trump.

²⁰In our description of Q, we draw on Q guides made by Q and his followers (Anons or alternatively QAnon/ QAnons) that we obtained from the source section of Q on *8chan* (‘qresearch’).

The lines of action performed by Q in the wake of the MAGA kid incident have been sketched. We will proceed to deepen it, focusing on an examination of the particular ergoic knowledge regime developed and articulated within Q.

3. Ergoic reasoning: the Deep State theory and the MAGA kid incident

In order to understand what follows, we need to return to an old ethnomethodological principle: that people are *reasonable* whenever they try to make sense of social life, and that “reasonable” should not be confused with *rational* as conventionally used. Being “rational”, conventionally used, stands for the strictly regimented, detached, facts-only and evidence-based epistemic modality that characterizes, in the Enlightenment tradition, scientific reasoning and other modes of fact-based knowledge work such as journalism and forensic-legal inquiry (cf. Popper?).

Being “reasonable”, in contrast, consists of the construction of plausible explanatory formats in which details of everyday life can be related to some “theory” as proof of that theory (hence *ergo*, since the detail is explicable *because of* the theory). The theory – similar to what Goffman (1974) described as an overarching “frame” organizing experience – consists of general propositions of “how the world is” and how, consequently, everyday events can be made sense of as “logically” explicable with reference to the general propositions. The conventional understanding of being rational, then, is just one specific (and specialized) mode of being reasonable (Garfinkel 1967).

We can take this one step further. One can be “reasonable” precisely by *disqualifying* rationality in its conventional sense. The propositions of “how the world is” have the status of truth, and when this truth is contradicted by “hard facts” (of science, journalism or the law), such facts can be dismissed as fallacies or lies. And what we seen in conspiracy theories is exactly that: an antirational mode of arriving at reasonable explanations grounded in ergoic relations between specific events and a general theory or masterframe of “how the world is”. The latter has the status of truth, and – here comes the conspiracy – this truth is typically *hidden* by powerful opponents and demands to be *revealed* through the actions of the conspiracy theorists.

The masterframe within which Q performs its actions can be sketched as follows; we shall use the Q jargon discussed earlier.

1. Q explicitly claims to work for *Donald Trump*. In that sense, it can be set apart from most other conspiracy theorists, who identify with the margins and pose as powerless voices. In the case of Q, there is an explicit alignment with the President of the US. The president, however, is described as locked into battle with what Q calls the “Cabal”. The Cabal are an alliance of several actors also qualified (by Trump) as “the swamp”: the real powers that control the US and the world. Q explicitly inscribes its actions in Trump’s plan to “drain the swamp”. Q members join Trump’s battle as “patriots”, self-qualifying as “We the People” (with its intertextual resonances firmly rooted in the foundational texts of US democracy). And they undertake “research” – knowledge practices aimed at publicly revealing a truth deliberately hidden by the Cabal.
2. The Cabal is – in practice – organized around four major actors. The first is *Hilary Clinton*, Trumps opponent during the 2016 presidential elections and seen as guilty of a protracted conspiracy to weaken the position of Donald Trump and, thus, to undemocratically regain the power that she was democratically denied in 2016. Clinton

is described as an active opponent who, through the machinery of her Clinton Foundation and related charities and NGOs, as well as through her connections with the DC elites, sets up an unending sequence of attacks on Donald Trump. Trump systematically used the epithet of “crooked” for Hilary Clinton.

3. A second major Cabal actor is *Barack Obama*. Obama, in Q discourse, represents the “deep state”; in that sense he is rather a passive opponent whose harmful influence is felt through the actions of state agencies such as the CIA, the FBI and the Supreme Court, all of which have been organized by Obama in such a way that they serve the interests of the Cabal.
4. The third major actor in the Cabal is billionaire entrepreneur *George Soros*. Q describes Soros as a “puppet master” who actively finances and implements the plans and schemes of the Cabal, usually through the NGOs and networks he runs. Soros is also a “globalist”, whose activities have a scope far beyond the US. Which is why Trump needs to develop a new international policy and new international partnerships.
5. Finally, there are *MSM*, the mainstream media, seen as the public outlets of the Cabal and therefore the main direct opponents of Q’s fact-checking and debunking online actions. The media, so it is argued, are the tools of propaganda and disinformation of the American public, happily transforming meticulously crafted anti-Trump hoaxes into major news stories.

We can call this the “deep state theory”, and summarize it schematically as follows:

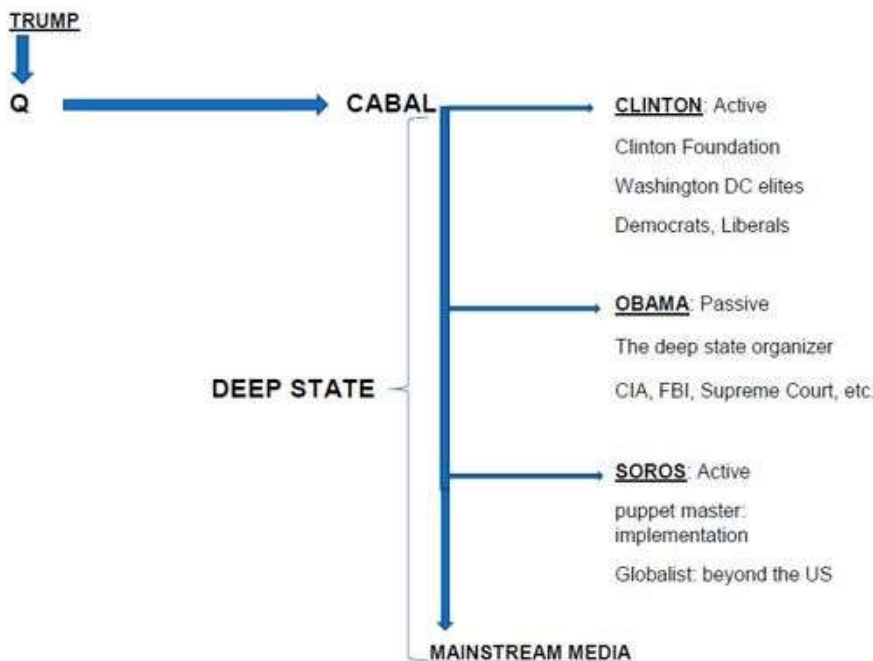


Fig. 4 Deep State Theory schema

This deep state theory provides the dominant ergoic logic for all of Q’s actions. Whenever a case is opened by Q, the direction in which ‘research’ is taken is scripted in the terms of this masterframe. The first step, therefore, is the instant assumption that mainstream news is fake,

after which the detailed fact checking must reveal the direct or indirect involvement of the various actors in the Cabal.

In essence, the masterframe pictures an all-powerful, totalitarian state undemocratically controlled by the Cabal and shaped so as to serve their interests. The term “deep state” stands for exactly this: a state the organization and functioning of which have been profoundly adapted to serve particular elite interests rather than those of the masses (“We, the People”). The all-powerful nature of that state is reflected, according to Q members, in the level of meticulous planning of hoaxes and the never-ending, massive supply of such hoaxes, suggesting top-level organization, phenomenal resources and investments made available, and the mobilization of the “best and brightest” in the efforts of the Cabal. There are obvious pointers towards George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984*, where *Newspeak* took the place of today’s “fake news” and where Big Brother sees all, knows all, and shapes a reality which is, in actual fact, a totalized lie intended to safeguard the power of the state from any unwanted form of interference. In the “MAGA kid” incident, the reference to Orwell is explicit in this meme:



Fig. 5: Reference to Orwell

Entering into greater detail, we see how the elements of the deep state theory serve, ergoically, as directives for practices of “research”. These practices are diverse and range from the constructions of “true” memes as didactic tools, over more elaborate explanatory practices in which features of evidence are being discussed, disassembled and reconstructed, and interactionally constructed modes of learning, mutual ratification and correction.

3.1. Data

The data were gathered from a Q-based Facebook group *QAnon Follow The White Rabbit*, which had roughly 37,000 members at the time of the incident. We joined the group several months (October 2018) prior to the incident to conduct a systematic ethnographic observation without active participation (commenting, liking or sharing). There are four main reasons why we selected this group in particular: i) the group is highly active (usually dozens of posts per day) and with a relatively high level of engagement from its members, ii) the group is sufficiently representative of the Q phenomenon in view of its gatekeeping mechanisms – it is

a closed group (access is granted upon answering relating to Trump in which the applicant must show alignment with the Q masterframe), iii) the group shows little or no signs of content filtering or censoring activities and the vast majority of posted content is Q related; iv) the group has enabled a search function that helps us to laser in on its reception of the MAGA kid incident as it unfolds in a number of contexts which we will describe below.

We shall limit our analysis to QAnon's reception and re/de-construction Nathan Phillips' media image based on the memes and comments as reactions to posts containing links to various media informing of the MAGA kid incident that had posted in the group between January 20 and 25. The data were collected in March 2019 after the activity pertaining the incident had ceased. To gain a better understanding of the networked chronotopic conditions in which our data emerge, we cross-checked and consulted our data with other Q-based platforms and websites, including q-research section on *8chan*, Q-related data aggregators (e.g. qmap.pub/info) and other Q-related groups and pages on Facebook.

3.2 Analysis

We will focus on the following aspects of QAnon's knowledge activism in debunking of the (mainstream) media image of Nathan Phillips: 1) exposing his true military credentials and 2) dispelling his authority as a native elder, which provides basis for 3) revealing his ties to the Deep State, and finally 4) his complicity in more grand conspiracy theories connected with the Cabal, namely its crusade against Christianity. But let us not forget that our analysis is not aimed to (dis)prove conspiracy theories propagated by QAnon. Our goal is ethnomethodological: we look at how the members of the QAnon make sense of the MAGA kid incident through interaction; or more precisely, how their interactional engagement marks a congregational work producing conspiracies as social facts and conspiracism as a default mode of reasoning. On that note, we begin with a brief outline of the most circulated memes illustrating the masterframe with regard to each line of debunking, and then we proceed to the discussion of the comments along the line in question.

Nathan Phillips is not a Vietnam veteran

Phillips' military credentials were immediately questioned and invalidated in the wake of media's reporting on the MAGA hat incident and subsequent interviews in which Phillips mentioned his military background and alleged service in Vietnam. QAnon's 'research' (comparing Phillips' earlier media appearances and other available information about him) shows discrepancies in his claims as well as questionable sincerity in his performance, which subsequently serve as ergoic arguments in undermining his account. The discrepancies are also documented in a number of memes circulating in the group.



Fig. 6: Phillips' discharge papers accompanied by an explanatory caption



Fig. 7: Age discrepancy in Phillips' account



Fig. 8: Phillips and other 'fakes'

Fig. 6 features Phillips' discharge papers (released under the Freedom of Information Act) indicating a number of AWOLs (absent without official leave) and no evidence of his Vietnam service. Its explanatory caption indicates that while his military service is honorable (even for QAnons), his personal integrity is not; and therefore, he cannot be trusted. This creates an aura of unbiased and rigorous 'research' or 'fact-checking' in addition to constructing a sense of epistemic superiority (having access to classified or hard-to-get information) on the basis of which QAnon makes its 'evidence' more compelling.

Other memes point to discrepancies in Phillips' account (fig 6.) or mock Phillips by putting him on par with another "fakes" gaining a status of a meme (fig. 8). These memetic figures include a NBC anchor Brian William (on the right) falsely claiming to be a wartime correspondent in Iraq and a survivor of Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, David Hogg (on the left), who is believed to be a crisis actor.²¹ Memes propagated by Qanons inform and are informed by the masterframe of "how the world is"—the event was staged, orchestrated or simply 'fake'. This is also reflected in the vocabulary resonating with the imperative to expose the role of Nathan Phillips played in the event.

- (1) NATHAN PHILLIPS FAKETRIOT.. ""LOWLIFE""
- (2) The old bloke is a FAKE - PAID ACTOR !!!!!!!
- (3) He is a paid protester.
- (4) Nathan Phillips is a fake and a plant. He was never in the service. Says he was a veteran. The Indians don't like him, He gives them a bad name. He is a professional victim and a POS!

[\(4.1\)](#) Lets not forget stolen valor. Having never served as a "recon ranger" (no such job exists in the Marines) and never served in vietnam (As he professed to CNN)

Commenters frame Phillips along the same lines of ingenuity: as a fake patriot 'FAKETRIOT', paid actor and protester, an activist, a plant (i.e. a planted undercover agent) and a professional victim. Full or partial capitalization and overpunctuation frequently mark the urgency and insistence of highlighting the superiority of the epistemic regime pertaining to the Q masterframe.

The last two comments show how 'evidence' can be further specified and elaborated by QAnons. While (4) outlines the baseline 'facts' about Phillips, (4.1) answers by a more nuanced expository account of the claims Phillips "professed to CNN" (see the full transcript in Sidner 2019). In this vein, Phillips is not just a mere 'fake' – he is charged with 'stolen valor' (lying about military service), which is arguably a higher offense earning him more deplorable status of a 'LOWLIFE' and 'POS' (piece of shit). Apart from his military records, his self-reference 'recon ranger' (presumably part of special operation forces generally known as Army Rangers) is what gives him away, as it, according to 4.1, does not correspond with the Army register (nor with his expertise as refrigeration mechanic, fig. 5). We thus see that QAnon brings together people with different levels of knowledge and expertise from a wide array of domains which they utilize in concordance in their pursuit of 'the truth'.

²¹QAnons believe that the shooting was staged with crisis actors (i.e. volunteers or role players playing victims in emergency drills). In addition, David Hogg (a son of a retired FBI agent) has later become a gun control activist, further cementing the belief in the staged nature of the mass shooting as a part of elaborate scheme of the Deep State to limit the right to bear arms.

When the discrepancies became evident to general publics, CNN amended their report with the following note attached to the end of the transcript: “*Correction: After this interview was conducted, Phillips told CNN he was Vietnam-era veteran. He did serve in the military during the Vietnam War, but according to his service records, he was not deployed to Vietnam*” (Sidner 2019, n.pag). Commenters expressed both surprise and pride in furthering their endeavor in enacting the ‘Great Awakening’:

- (5) I can't believe that CNN have started telling the truth..
- (6) Good news of the day - It's getting harder and harder for the MSM [mainstream media] to dupe us anymore. It's almost like a majority of us are waking up!

We now turn to another mode of ergoic reasoning related to identity work. In the next section we will see how the Q masterframe drives the scrutinizing and meticulous invalidation of another aspect of Phillips’ media image – his respectable rank among Native Americans.

Nathan Phillips is not a true representative of Native Americans

According to the research conducted by QAnons and testimonies of its members who identify as Native American, the Native American community is presented as ambivalent toward Nathan Phillips at best. Another series of memes and comment testimonies question the sincerity and authenticity in Phillips’ behavior. Instead of promoting Native American traditions and culture, Phillips’ presence in mainstream media reporting on the MAGA kid as well a past incidents shows ‘evidence’ that it has been in fact an intentional provocation falling in line with his previous public stunts that expose his true nature of an agent provocateur with a political agenda.



Fig. 9: Phillip’s former media appearances



Fig 10: Phillips as the 'most interesting man in the world'



Fig. 11: A screenshot of a Tweet from a Lakota representative

In this vein, fig. 9 captures and comments on Phillips' earlier media presence tailored in a coherent frame that de-constructs his image as a respectable elder of the Omaha tribe, and re-constructs it as a provocateur political activist with ulterior motives. This includes, apart from the MAGA kid incident, a 2015 interview with Phillips following a similar confrontation with white students from the Eastern Michigan University (EMU) allegedly dressed as Indians in which Phillips claims that the students had approached him and eventually launched racist remarks on his address. Similarly to the MAGA kid incident, Phillips seeks moral vindication

in the interview: “Whoever would sit judgement [sic] on them [the students], the university the law, society, that is their job” (Spencer 2015: n. pag.). The final fragment at the bottom of fig. 9 shows Phillips posing for a photograph in 2018 while being situated in the context of the Dakota Access Pipeline protests²². Being equipped with an eagle staff and jacket with Indian tribal patterns, Phillips’ posture with his head not facing the camera, dark glasses and folded hands emanate a conceited look of a poseur or a model, and do not add up with the supposed protests that ought to have been going on. The composition of the photo thus does not speak of authenticity – it is taken as yet another piece of ‘evidence’ of the spuriousness behind his victim image presented by the mainstream media. Once again, Phillips’ identity performance is mocked through semiotic work superimposing his head into another memetic format ‘the most interesting man in the world’ (fig. 10) that is supposed to convey an avuncular life advice from a refined gentleman. In the same vein, Phillips gives advice on how to exploit a disadvantaged racial background to your benefit by playing a victim. Finally fig. 11 shows that screenshot Tweets can also operate as memes, which, in this case, questions Phillips’ representativeness of the Native American community by its own members.

Commenters attach great importance to Phillips’ representativeness of the Omaha tribe as well as Native Americans in general. We can notice processes of ratification in the comment section when it comes to extending the blame to the entire tribe, in which Phillips is taken as an elder.

(7) If he's their elder what does that say about them?

(7.1) [referring to5]Don't lump them all together. There are many elders in tribes. Elders mean older people .His tribe is probably embarrassed by him. Most Natives are good kind people. And will admit when someone is wrong.

Interestingly, Phillips is immediately reproached as an isolated individual whose actions do not represent the views or position of his tribe. On the contrary, the leading and authoritative connotations behind his rank of an elder are invalidated (“Elders mean older people”) and severed from his identity (“His tribe is probably embarrassed by him”) in addition to being attributed several qualities incompatible with an imagined ‘Native’ (Phillips is evil, unkind and intentional liar). Other commenters anticipate similar lumping statements and preemptively intervene with an apology.

(8) I am Native and this guy has done nothing good for native people.
I am assuming that because of his actions there is big money involved.
I will Apologize for his actions
But with this I am putting this out here too.
We do all really need to learn to get along or the groups
wanting to keep everyone fighting so we can't gang up on them

By identifying himself as a ‘Native’, he presents an insider view on Phillips, confirming that his interests align with the Cabal (i.e. ‘big money’) rather than with the Native Americans. What can be also noted is the imperative for maintaining social cohesion of QAnons in the face of provocateurs like Phillips and “the groups wanting to keep everyone fighting” and

²² The protests lasted from April 2016 to February 2017 when National Guard and law enforcement evicted the protesters’ camp. Phillips, however, briefly visited the former camp site in 2018, taking the photo in question (Bengal 2018).

limiting the QAnons' options to "gang up on them". This brings us to the collective enemy, the Deep State.

Nathan Phillips is an agent of the Deep State

Having outlined some of the aspects behind QAnons' 'evidence' debunking Phillips' mainstream media image, it is no surprise that the inconsistencies and discrepancies in his statements and inauthenticity of his self-presentations are associated with the conspiratory scheming and machinations of the Deep State.

Now it makes sense.

Donors:

- Tulalip Tribe Charitable Trust
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- Honor the Earth: Building Resilience in Indigenous Communities Grant Program
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- Seventh Generation Fund for Indigenous Development
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- Freedom Forum
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Fig. 12: Exposing Phillips' *Native Youth Alliance*



Fig. 13: Warren as Liawatha/Pocahontas



Fig. 14: Phillips with Warren as con-men

Before we address more general connections with the Deep State drawn in the fig 12, let us first discuss another frequent type of memes (fig. 13 and 14) associating Phillips with a current prominent representative of the Deep State – Elizabeth Warren, a Democratic Senator, 2020 preliminary presidential candidate and a staunch supporter of Hillary Clinton. Warren has been consistently mocked by Trump and his supporters as ‘Pocahontas’ (or ‘Liawatha’²³ and the like) due to her purported Native American heritage she claimed after releasing results of her DNA test. Similarly to Phillips, she has been caught in a controversy, whereby their actions are perceived as political stunts and repudiated by the representatives of the Native American community. It comes as no surprise that when Warren praised Phillips’ endurance over “hateful taunts” on her Twitter account (Warren 2019), the

²³ Liawatha is play on Hiawatha – a precolonial Indian leader and the main figure in a well-known epic poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

compromised credibility she had accrued in the QAnon discourses was immediately transferred onto Phillips via memes as useful instrument.

Both memes possess captions drawing connection to the usual suspect of the Deep State (i.e. Soros, fig. 13) or evoking a sense of fulfilled anticipation, empowering and reinforcing the Q masterframe (fig. 14).

On a more general level, connections between Phillips' *Native Youth Alliance*²⁴ and the Deep State are more didactically outlined in a diagram on fig. 12, which marks another line of 'evidence' that invalidates the institutional legitimacy of the organization that Phillips openly represents and promotes. This is done in a typical fashion – by following the financial trail or the ubiquitous question 'cui bono?' (who benefits?) which becomes pressing after Phillips' purported identity virtues (a respectable elder with a noble cause) and credentials (Vietnam veteran) are dismantled. Exposing Phillips as "fake" is not enough – the 'reason', 'motivation' or generally 'the truth' behind his spuriousness must be explained. It is thus no surprise that QAnons' research discovers financing by the crown members of the Deep State (i.e. Soros and his Open Society in conjunction with other compromised foundations marked by red squares), indicating their vested interest which will be discussed in the following subsection. The need for rendering the event meaningful for the QAnon community is explicitly articulated in the caption "now it makes sense" (top left) – the meme then provides a direct visualization of the conspiratorial masterframe applied in the particular chronotopic configuration of the MAGA kid incident.

More specifically, making sense is here guided by a number of visual devices, namely red arrows, boxes and careful distribution of additional semiotic fragments (list of donors/supporters, logos, portraits, headlines and sub-headlines presumably from a website of or related to *Native Youth Alliance*) in a circular composition – a frequent visual trope in conspiratorial discourses drawing ties between different individual and organizations (Byford 2011: 74). The geometrical shape often evokes order and coherence to otherwise seemingly random patchwork of 'evidence'. As far as the comments are concerned, commenters seem to be readily accepting the ties between the Deep State and Nathan Phillips.

- (9) ANOTHER LIB ACTOR BEING PUT IN HIS PLACE!!!
- (10) Soros paid puppet
- (11) And finally, the TRUTH !!! A Soros paid instigator.
- (12) Chief smoking crack is a scum bag bought paid for by Democrats
Video clearly shows him walking to confront kid.
Kid did nothing wrong.
And once again CNN and the corrupt media spin it off against the kids
Promoting false propaganda
Again Media is AMERICAS ENEMY
CNN THE MOST TRUSTED IN FAKE NEWS

The associations between Phillips with the Deep State point to its multi-layered and vague structure of that Popper describes as "a kind of group-personality" operating as "conspiring agents, just as if they were individual men" (Popper 1972: 125). In this regard, Phillips falls

²⁴According to its website (nativeyouthalliance.blogspot.com), *Native Youth Alliance* is a non-profit religious organization founded in 1990 to secure the continuity of the Native American cultural and spiritual traditions for the future generations by organizing activities for children and the youth.

in line with the usual suspects of the Deep State: liberals (9), Soros (10 and 11), democrats (12), and of course the mainstream media (most notably CNN, 10). The act of exposing Phillip’s true motivation often sparks a conspiratorial *jouissance*— satisfaction in furthering QAnons’ agenda (9) and a fulfilling sense of closure (11), but also a call for more elaborate explanation (12) re-energizing the purpose and validity of QAnon’s enterprise. On that last note, 12 attempts to extract a ‘take-home’ message situating the MAGA kid incident into a larger perspective. The decisiveness in Phillips movement towards the group of students have been interpreted as a sign of premeditation rather than coincidence (because he was paid to do so), which the mainstream media attempt to “spin” in promoting their own “propaganda” and the agenda behind it reaching and affecting the whole of ‘AMERICA’.

Consequently, there is a larger agenda to be discovered or exposed through the prism of everyday public events and encounters. Note that the perceived relationship between Phillips and the Deep State is of subordinate nature; Phillips is a mere instrument – a “puppet”, “actor”, “instigator” (provocateur) in a more grand scheme of things. This brings us to the overarching narrative in the Q masterframe – its millennial alignment with Christian morality and values against which the Deep State conspires.

Nathan Phillips provoked the standoff in a conspiracy against Christianity

To understand QAnon’s preoccupation with Phillips’ complicity in a conspiracy against Christianity, we have to reiterate that the whole incident took place in a clash between a catholic high school students participating in a *March for life* and *Indigenous’ peoples March* led by Phillips. Having revealed the true intent in Phillips’ engagement in the *Indigenous’ peoples March*, the conflict is quickly translated into a millennial fight between good (catholic MAGA hat kids) and evil (Phillips as an agent of the Deep State). Here we shall limit ourselves to the most prominent line of interpretation – staging the incident as a bid of the Deep State to incite anti-Catholic sentiments in order to weaken Trump’s sway over the Supreme Court of the United States.



Fig. 15: A wake-up call

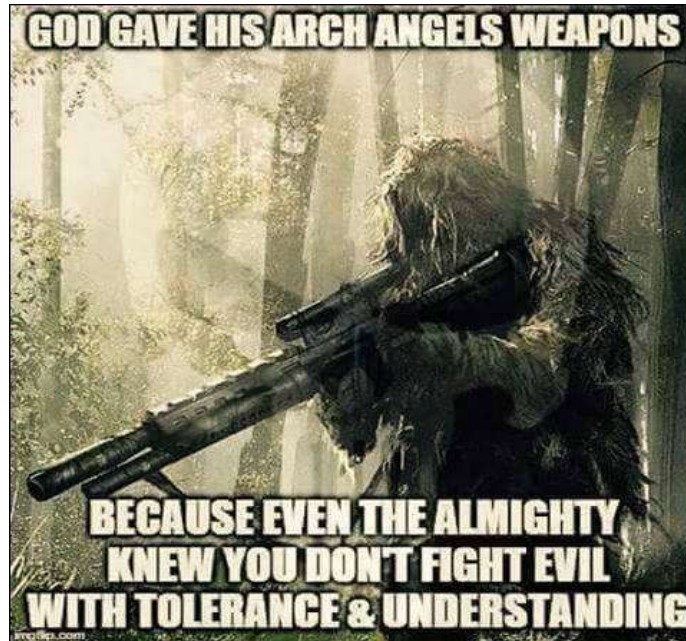


Fig. 16: QAnon's self-righteous fight with 'evil'

Nearly three months before the MAGA kid incident, an associate judge of the Supreme Court, Ruth Bader Ginsburg (RBG), had suffered a multiple rib fracture demanding surgery and considerable medical care, and vanished from both public and professional life to recover from the incident. This led QAnons and other germane groups to believe that she is in fact dead, and negotiations are taking place regarding her replacement. Memes in this respect point to an elaborate scheme (fig. 15) to thwart or delay the nomination of Amy Coney Barret – Trump's potential Supreme Court candidate and an openly faithful Catholic. Remembering that the ultimate goal of the QAnon community is the "Great Awakening", the memes in this regard also aim for a general galvanization of the QAnon to wake people up in the course of fighting the 'evil' (fig. 14). The incentive resonates strongly in the comment sections.

(13) This tells me that he is being paid to slury the media message about Catholics. Yep. Getting ready for [RBG]

(14) This is to get people riled up and anti catholic for the next Supreme court nominee once they announce Ginsberg is dead

(14.1) That is exactly the reason they are doing all of this. It is planned and paid for folks. Wake Up. The replacement for Ginsberg is going to be a Catholic female. They are trying to get the public up in arms about Catholics! It is called brainwashing the sheep!

(14.2) yes, I believe that is a piece of the puzzle

As previously noted, Qanons are convinced that RBG is dead or her death will be announced in a near future (indicated in the QAnon code by a kill box [name] surrounding a given target, as used by 13). Once again we see a call for unity against the divisive subterfuge and scheming of the Deep State "to get people riled up and anti catholic" (14). Looking at some of the reactions to 14, commentators do not perceive the incident as isolated; it is "a piece of the puzzle" (14.2) or a larger effort in "brainwashing the sheep" (14.1). A frequent attempt to realize or uncover the bigger picture consists of drawing parallels among similar events in order to ergoically infer the mechanisms or strategies deployed by the Deep State.

(13) The Democrat Party Their sycophants Of The Main Stream Media And the Holly's Wood elites, have become toxic... they have no respect for Christians or Catholicism ...they have escalated the false narrative about the incident instigated by Nathan Phillips, to the same level as "Obama and Hands Up Don't Shoot"...this fake news has been used by the Democrats and their sycophants of the MSM to sow Racial and Religious Division among Americans...

(14)OK, this POS is obviously paid off to attack all things Catholicism..Hmmm...I wonder why??? Nothing to do with RBG and the new projected SCOTUS [Supreme Court of the United States] judge right? They are not even clever.. Their playbook is simple. You are a racist, sexist with masculine toxicity, homophobic committing face crimes while smirking. Don't worry, I see some of my liberal friends starting to question and see the light. The BS is so thick right now that you would have to be mentally compromised or a victim of mind control to buy what the media is selling. Its bombastic and even more sophomoric than before. Doesn't seem possible but it happens.

In this regard, 13 draws parallel to the 2014 shooting of Michael Brown who had been allegedly killed by a police officer while surrendering. The event gave way to 'Hands up, don't shoot' – slogan/gesture gaining media traction and quickly spilling into protests and activist moments (e.g. Black Lives Matter) against police violence. In the wake of the event, then-president Obama responded with sympathy for Brown and called the Americans to remember him through "reflection and understanding" (Obama 2014: n. pag.; cf. fig. 14) – a move which is now perceived as part of preparing fertile ground for contemporary division along the racial and religious lines, especially in the light of the controversy²⁵ that surrounded the shooting soon afterwards.

On the other hand, 14 tailors an ergoic frame laced with irony in a series of rhetorical questions, pointing to a ready-made scenario presumed to be enacted by the Deep State on similar occasions. The obviousness ("you would have to be mentally compromised or a victim of mind control to buy what the media is selling") behind perceived behavioral order attributed to the Deep State seems to be the driving force reifying not only the Q masterframe, but also their knowledge activism gradually leading to fruition ("Don't worry, I see some of my liberal friends starting to question and see the light"). Although the notion of the Deep State is rarely explicitly mentioned, it functions as a codification of discursive properties or chronotopic conditions that organize and ratify meaning-making processes related to mediated events, whereby 'the truth' can be discerned as a historical contingency in which its individual parts (Obama as its architect, democrats – including Clinton and Warren – as the enactors, the mainstream media as its instruments, Hollywood's elites as its promoters, and Soros as the financial engine) work in conjunction to manipulate the public against Trump.

To summarize, we see knowledge activism of the QAnon community as not just exposing or spreading 'the truth' in 'Great Awakening', but rather as an effort to instill a specific ergoic mode of reasoning to be applied in everyday life (alternatively described as 'metapolitics' (Maly 2018), 'conspiracism' (Barkun 2016; Byford 2011) or 'paranoia' (Hofstadter 1967)). The recipients or target audience are not categorized in terms of specific social or identity diacritics, and even the ideological opponents are not excluded – simply everyone "see the light". QAnon's knowledge activism strives to reach beyond echo chambers of the Q related groups and platforms – it is to be enacted both online and offline, but with a constant recursion to the source of Q and QAnons. In this sense, knowledge activism constitutes the

²⁵In 2015, the Department of Justice released a report from the investigation concluding that Brown had never made an attempt to surrender according physical and forensic evidence, thus clearing the shooting officer of all charges, corroding the cause of ensuing protests, and fueling conspiracy theories about its staged nature.

main organizing principle of the Qanon community, it secures its social cohesion in the face of a great internal diversity as well as dispersed and disembodied character of social media giving rise to temporal and loosely connected light forms of sociality in the online-offline nexus (Blommaert and Varis 2015; van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2019).

4. Conclusions

The different actions documented in the preceding section are all guided by the “truth” inscribed in the deep state theory; details of the event can be ergoically connected, through “research” by Q members, to features of the theory – which is thereby continually confirmed and reiterated as *the* truth about “how the world is”. The actions we observed are all oriented towards knowledge, and Q can, as a community, be described as profoundly involved in knowledge activism. This knowledge activism is “reasonable” while it is profoundly antirational: it operates according to a compelling logic, the validity of which resides in the quality of the theory. When the quality of the theory remains unexamined and unquestioned, it is very hard to dislodge the specific ergoic arguments produced in the process. Conspiracy theories, we can see, are powerful *argumentative* tools.

It is through attention to concrete actions performed by members that we get a glimpse of the structure of an otherwise elusive community such as Q and of the ordered, patterned character of their actions. We are not observing an accidental congregation of people misled by first impressions and fake facts: we see a regimented community collectively performing a set of well-defined and ‘specialized’, genred actions, in a way that combines a light organizational structure with massive algorithmically mediated message circulation and considerable impact on public opinion, by systematically (and reasonably) dislodging and reframing what is widely accepted as the truth. This is serious business, and it is hardcore contemporary politics.

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Chapter 7

Formatting online actions: #justsaying on Twitter

Jan Blommaert

1. Translingualism in the online-offline nexus

Three substantive claims underlie the argument in this paper.²⁶ *One*: in considering contemporary forms of translingualism one can neither avoid online sites of scripted interaction as loci of research, nor the online-offline nexus as an area of phenomenal innovation. *Two*: approaching such online forms of translingual interaction can benefit substantially from a radically action-centered approach, rather than from an approach privileging participants and their identity features, or privileging the linguistic/semiotic resources deployed in translingual events. And *three*: addressing online forms of translingual interaction from this perspective can reveal core features of contemporary social life and serve as a sound basis for constructing innovative social theory.

Of the three claims, the first one is by now widely shared (see e.g. Li Wei & Zhu Hua, this volume). There is an increasing awareness amongst students of language in society that the online social world has by now become an integrated part of the sociolinguistic economies of societies worldwide, and that the zone in which we situate our investigations should now best be defined as the online-offline nexus, with phenomena from the online world interacting with those of the offline world and vice versa. There are the specific rescaling and chronotopic features of online communication, where interaction is, as a rule not an exception, no longer tied to physical co-presence and effectively shared timespace; and where interactions as a rule not an exception include translocal and transtemporal rhizomatic uptake (cf. Tagg, Seargeant & Brown 2017; boyd 2014). And there are the outspokenly multimodal default characteristics of online communication. Taken together, it is evident that online communication must be the locus of intense translingualism. My first claim gestures towards the theme of this collection: the online-offline nexus must turn translingualism into the *rule*, the normal, ordinary and unremarkable sociolinguistic state of affairs.

The two other claims might demand somewhat more attention. The second claim – an action-centered perspective on online interaction – is grounded in (but transcends) a serious methodological problem complicating research: the indeterminacy of participant identities online. Given the widespread use of aliases and avatars on, for instance, social media platforms, nothing can be taken for granted regarding who exactly is involved in interactions.

²⁶ I dedicate this paper to the memory of Charles Goodwin, a source of inspiration and an engaging interlocutor for several decades, who sadly passed away while I was developing the analysis reported here. This paper is part of a project I call “Online with Garfinkel”, in which I explore the potential of action-centered analyses of online-offline communication. A precursor of the project is Blommaert (2018). I am grateful to Piia Varis for feedback on a draft version of this text.

Whether we are interacting with a man or woman, a young or an old person, a local or nonlocal one, someone communicating in his/her ‘native’ or ‘first’ language: none of this can be conclusively established. This straightforward feature of online interactions destabilizes much of what we grew accustomed to in social studies, including sociolinguistic research. It makes us aware that our sociological imagination strongly hinged on the self-evident transparency of who people are, the communities they are members of, the languages that characterize them ethnolinguistically and sociolinguistically. The sociological sample – one of these key inventions of 20th century social science – cannot be reliably drawn from online data.

Thus we find ourselves in a research situation in which little can be said a priori about participants and resources involved in social action. The action itself, however, can be observed and examined, and my second claim is to put the analysis of actions central in online-offline nexus research as a firm empirical basis for theory construction (cf. Szabla & Blommaert 2018). My third claim tags onto that: it is by looking at actions, and at how such actions effectively *produce* participants and resources, that we can get a glimpse of elementary patterns of social behavior through interaction – an opportunity for retheorizing our field. The target of this paper is to empirically demonstrate that.

I shall do so by looking at a common feature of online interaction: the use of hashtags, in this case on Twitter. The point I am seeking to make is that hashtags, as an entirely new feature in interaction interfering with established ones into a translingual whole, can be shown to be subject to rather clear and strict functions and norms of deployment. In Garfinkel’s (2002) terms, they can be shown to involve *formatted actions* with a high degree of normative recognizability, turning them into transparent framing devices in Twitter interactions.

2. Hashtags and translingualism

If we see translingualism (*pace* the editors of this collection) as the fluid movement between and across languages or – more broadly – semiotic systems, hashtags definitely can serve as prime instances of translingualism. As a feature of social media scripted discourse, the construction “# + word(s)” is a 21st century innovation. Surely the sign “#” itself was used before the advent of social media: it was, for instance, a symbol on dial phones and was widely used elsewhere as a graphic symbol indicating numbers or, in old-school proofreading practices, indicating a blank space to be inserted in the text. But as we shall see, the social media use of hashtags cannot be seen as an extension of those previous forms of usage. When social media emerged, the hashtag was a free-floating resource that could be functionally redetermined and redeployed in a renewed sociolinguistic system. The fact that the symbol was not tied to a particular language or graphic system such as English or Cyrillic script made it, like the “@” sign, a polyvalent and user-friendly resource, capable of becoming part of global social media discursive repertoires – a process I called ‘supervernacularization’, (Blommaert 2012).²⁷ This means that such symbols can be incorporated – by translanguaging

²⁷ The point that the widespread availability of online technologies has reshaped the sociolinguistic system is missed by some critics of notions such as translanguaging, who point to the prior existence of formally similar or identical forms of language and/or script to argue that there is nothing ‘new’ happening. In such critiques, Hymes’ (1996) important warning is disregarded: that the study of language is not merely a study of the *linguistic* system – the formal aspects of language, say – but also and even more importantly the study of the *sociolinguistic* system in which language forms are being distributed, functionally allocated and deployed in concrete social circumstances. The arrival of the internet has caused a worldwide change in the sociolinguistic system, provoking enormous amounts of sociolinguistically new phenomena. And even if such phenomena have *linguistic* precursors, they do not have any *sociolinguistic* ones. See Blommaert (2018) for a discussion.

actions – in a nearly unlimited range of language-specific expressions while retaining similar or identical functions.

While the use of hashtags has by now become a standard feature of several social media applications (think of Facebook and Instagram) its usage is most strongly embedded in Twitter. Hashtags there tie together and construct topical units: within the strict confines of message length on Twitter, Hashtags enable users to connect their individual tweets to large thematically linked bodies of tweets. In that sense – but I shall qualify this in a moment – their function, broadly taken, is *contextualization*: individual tweets can be offered to audiences as understandable within the topical universe specified by the hashtag. Thus, the “#MeToo” hashtag (one of the most trending hashtags since the 2017 Harvey Weinstein scandal) ties together millions of individual tweets, produced in a variety of languages around the world, within the topical universe of gender-related sexual misconduct and abuse. As a consequence, within Twitter analytics, hashtags are used to define what is “trending” or “viral”, and other forms of big data mining on social media likewise use hashtags as analytical tools for modeling topics and tracking participant engagement and involvement (e.g. Wang et al. 2016; Blaszka 2012).

There is some work on what is called hashtag activism (e.g. Tremayne 2014; Bonilla & Rosa 2015; Jackson 2016; Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2018) but qualitative sociolinguistic or discourse-analytic work focused on hashtags remains quite rare (but see e.g. Zappavigna 2012). In a recent study, De Cock & Pedraza (2018) show how the hashtag “#jesuis + X” (as in “#jesuisCharlie”) functionally shifts from expressing solidarity with the victims of the terror attack on the Charlie Hebdo editorial offices in Paris, 2015, to expressing cynicism and critique about hypocrisy when such forms of solidarity are being withheld from the victims of similar attacks elsewhere (as in “#jesuisIstanbul, anyone?”), or jocular and nonsensical uses as in “#jesuisCafard” (“I am a hangover”). Observe that the corpus used in De Cock & Pedraza’s study was multilingual, and that the “French” origins of “#jesuis + X” did not impede fluency of usage across language boundaries – the hashtag operates translingually.

We can draw a simple but fundamental insight from De Cock & Pedraza’s study: the functions of hashtags are unstable, changeable and dynamically productive. The same hashtag can be functionally reordered and redeployed whenever the topical field of the hashtag changes (or can be seen to be changing). In the analysis of De Cock & Pedraza, “#jesuis + X” shifts from an emblematic sign of (emotional and political) alignment to one of disalignment and even distancing. This shift in function instantiates *mature enregisterment* in that it offers different but related interactional stances to users; the hashtag “#jesuis + X” has become a lexicalized but elastic signifier enabling and marking a variety of forms of footing within a connected thematic domain (cf; Agha 2005). It is, to adopt Goffman’s (1975) terms now, a *framing device*, enregistered as such within a globally circulating and, of course, translingual, social media supervernacular. De Cock & Pedraza call the functions they described for the #jesuis + X hashtag “pragmatic”. As framing devices, however, hashtags are *metapragmatic* as well, they are interactionally established elements of voicing (Agha 2005). And the latter takes us to the core of my argument.

Functions of hashtags are interactionally established and should not be seen as simply the activation of latent and stable meaning potential. Seen from an action perspective, the different forms of footing enabled by a hashtag such as “#jesuis + X” represent different forms of communicative action within what Goffman called a “realm” – a “meaningful universe sustained by the activity” (1975: 46). At first glance, the difference between this formulation and the prior ones centering on contextualization, (dis)alignment and

enregisterment seems minimal; in actual fact, the shift is quite substantial. We now move away from an analytical perspective focused on participants and resources (as in De Cock & Pedraza's analysis) to one in which concrete actions are central and seen as the points from which both the participants' roles and the values of the resources used in interaction *emerge* (cf. also Cicourel 1973; Garfinkel 2002; Goodwin & Goodwin 1992, 2004; Szabla & Blommaert 2018). Enregisterment, from this action perspective, does not only stand for the formation of registers-as-resources but also as the emerging of *formats for communicative action*, in which such formats also include the ratification of participants and the concrete mode of effective deployment of semiotic resources. Formats are framed patterns of social action, and I believe I stay very close to what Goffman suggested when I define framing as exactly that: the ordering of interactional conduct in ways that value both the roles of participants and the actual resources deployed in interaction between them.

3. #justsaying as action: basics

I will illustrate this by means of examples of the interactional deployment of the hashtag #justsaying. This hashtag – manifestly English in origin – is widely used on Twitter (also in variants such as #JustSayin, #justsayingg), also in non-English messages.²⁸ And contrary to most other hashtags, it is *not* a topical marker but an explicitly metapragmatic one. The expression “just saying”, in offline vernacular interaction, often indexes consistency in viewpoint and factual certainty in the face of counterargument (Craig & Sanusi 2000). Let us take a look at what can be done with it on Twitter, and concentrate on the types of action it can contribute to. In what follows, I shall use examples of #justsaying deployed in Dutch-language tweets from Belgium and The Netherlands, followed by approximate English translations. Note that there is no Dutch equivalent to #justsaying used on Twitter: it is a fully enregistered element in “Dutch” Twitter discourse.

I must first identify some basic actions performed and performable by means of #justsaying.

3.1. Standalone act

A first observation is that #justsaying is very often used for a *standalone communicative act*: a tweet which is not part of a Twitter “thread” (a series of interactionally connected tweets) but which appears as an individual statement, as in example 1.



Example 1: After weeks of only pictures about the heat, all media are now swamped with pictures and videos with rain, thunder and lightning. #justsaying

Those are standalone communicative acts, but evidently they are not without contextualization cues. In this tweet from early August 2018, the timing is the cue, as the

²⁸ I collected a small corpus of #justsaying examples from my own Twitter account between March and August 2018 (N=186), and found the hashtag incorporated into English, Dutch, Danish, Spanish, Hindi, Bulgarian and Arabic tweets. Hashtags are also (and increasingly) used offline in marches and other forms of public demonstrations, and in advertisements.

author refers to the end of the heat wave that swept over Western Europe in that period. Contextualization can also take a more explicit shape, as when authors use topical hashtags tying their standalone statement into larger thematic lines (example 2).



Example 2: suggestion for #fgov ... reinstate national service to enable our children to defend themselves against the aggressive #islam in our #europa. Matter of time before our #democracy has to be defended #manumilitari²⁹ #justsaying

In example 2, we saw that the standalone statement has an indirectly called-out and identified addressee, the Belgian Government, hashtagged as #fgov. Specific addressees can of course be directly called out through the use of the standard symbol “@”, and tweets by default have the author’s followers as audiences. Thus, a standalone communicative act does not equal a decontextualized act nor an act that doesn’t invite uptake from addressees. On social media, standalone communicative acts are *interactional* by definition, for the congregation of one’s Twitter followers (or a section thereof) will see the tweet on their timelines anyway, and they respond by means of “likes”, “retweets” or “comments”, as we can see in examples 1 and 2. I shall return to this point of addressee responses in greater detail below and underscore its importance.

The main point here is: such standalone tweets are, thus, *framed* in Goffman’s sense. They engage with existing “realms” and select participants. And what they do within such meaningful units and in relation to ratified participants is to signal a particular footing: a self-initiated, detached, factual but critical, sometimes implicitly offensive statement not directly prompted by the statements of others and often proposed as the start of a series of responsive acts by addressees. They trigger and flag from within a recognizable universe of meaningful acts (the registers we use on Twitter and the communities we use them with) a specific *format of action* involving particular forms of “congregational work”, the work we do in order to make sense of social actions and establish them as social facts (Garfinkel 2002: 245). We can paraphrase the format as:

“here I am with my opinion, which I state in a critical, sober and detached way unprompted by others, and which I offer to you for interactional uptake”.

Let me stress this point once more: standalone acts such as those are not *isolated* or *non-interactional*, they are fully social acts performed in a collective of participants who know how to make sense of #justsaying action formats and their concrete contextualized instances. They merely *initiate* such action formats and, in that sense, provide an initial definition of their main ordering parameters.

²⁹ “fgov” is the Twitter name of the Belgian Federal Government; “manu military” means “by the use of military force”. The author of this tweet is a former MP for a Flemish extreme right-wing party.

3.2. Sidetracking and reframing

When #justsaying is interactionally deployed in a thread, we see partly different things. What remains stable is the sober and detached footing we encountered in the standalone instances. But very different formats of action are triggered and flagged by it. And before we engage with these formats of action, I must return to a particularly important feature of the examples that will follow: the duality of addressees. In a thread, an author responds directly to previous tweets and to those identifiable participants involved in those previous tweets. But the individual response tweet also attracts responses from other addressees: the likes and (sometimes) retweets and comments from participants not directly operating within that specific thread. Consider example 3.



Example 3: (response to @X and @Y): I'm not saying that something is wrong with large farms. Just pointing out that 200 cows are peanuts compared to the numbers in Canada. No attack. No judgment. #JustSaying³⁰

While the author directly responds to two other participants (@X and @Y), her tweet receives a retweet and two likes from different Twitter users. This is important, for we see *two separate lines of congregational work* here: one line performed between the author and her two called-out and identified interlocutors, the authors of previous tweets; another line performed between the author and addressees not involved in the thread but responding, very much in the way described for standalone acts, to the author's specific tweet. Two frames co-occur here, and this is important for our understanding of what follows.

A format of action frequently triggered and flagged by #justsaying in Twitter threads is "sidetracking", or more precisely, *opening a second line of framing*. The thematic universe of the thread is disrupted by the introduction of another one, initiated on the same detached and sober footing as the standalone cases I discussed above (example 4):

³⁰ One can note the explicit description of the footing for #justsaying statements here: "No attack. No judgment. #JustSaying".



Example 4:

(participant 1) Can anyone ask @X whether she can unblock me?

(participant 2, responding to participant 1) Me too ... I don't think I ever reacted against her ... strange bitch

(participant 3, responding to participants 1, 2) Calling women 'bitch' seems to me to be cause for blocking. #justsaying

(participant 2, responding to participant 3) strange madam ok then?

The topic launched by participant 1 is not uncommon among active Twitter users: a complaint about being blocked by someone, @X, articulated here as an appeal to others to help being unblocked by @X. The direct response to this comes from participant 2, who endorses what participant 1 says by expanding the case: he, too, was blocked by @X, apparently for no good reason. In this response, participant 2 uses the term 'bitch' ('wijf'), and this leads to the #justsaying reframing action by participant 3. From the actual case proposed by participant 1 as the topic of the thread, participant 3 shifts to an entirely different one related to the use of derogatory and sexist terminology within the moral framework of 'proper' Twitter usage. The shift, thus, is more than just topical: it reorders the entire normative pattern of interaction. Participant 2 immediately responds defensively by offering an alternative, only slightly less derogatory term. A new frame has been introduced and a

new format of action – from collaborative work on one topic to oppositional work on another – has been started.

In opening a second line of framing, the participation framework is also redefined. In example 4, participant 1 is sidelined as soon as the #justsaying remark is made, and the direct interaction in the thread is reordered: it becomes a direct engagement of participant 3 with participant 2, and what started as a one-to-all thread becomes a one-on-one thread. A new line of action is generated by the #justsaying statement.

4. #justsaying as complex reframing

We have come to understand some of the basic actions in which #justsaying is used. Now look at example 5, an interaction started by the Mayor of Antwerp (participant 1 in the transcript) tweeting from his holiday site in Poland about the Gay Pride held in his town that day.³¹ His tweet is meant as a public, one-to-all statement, and it has the expected effects: it goes viral with hundreds of “likes” and a large number of retweets. Apart from these forms of response, the tweet also develops into a thread: the Mayor gets several “comments” from participants addressed by his tweet.



³¹The Mayor is a controversial, very outspoken right-wing politician. The “victory” icon he posts at the end of his tweet is a campaign emblem of his party, and the phrase “being yourself safely” is a direct reference to the Mayor’s re-election program.

Example 5

(Participant 1) I'm still in Poland but I wish all the participants in Antwerp a great Pride. [icon]Being yourself safely and freely, that's what matters today. [icon]

(participant 2) I find the cultural promotion of extra-natural behavior not suited for a conservative party.

I have nothing againsts LGBTs, have something against their bashers, but also against publicity.

(participant 2) I grant everyone their freedom, but I find the promotion of counternatural acts entirely unacceptable.

(participant 3) Let's also prohibit publicity for traveling by plane then. People flying is a counternatural thing as well. To give just 1 example. But I'll happily provide more examples if you wish. #justsaying #WearWithPride #antwerp Pride #NarrowmindedPeople

The Mayor's public salute to the Antwerp Pride (interestingly, without any topical hashtags) is critically commented on in two turns by participant 2, someone who clearly aligns himself with the right-wing conservative forces opposing the Pride. Observe that participant 2 addresses the Mayor in his responses and comments on the topic initiated by the Mayor. He stays within the frame of the initial activity, and his comments receive a number of likes as well as comments. The #justsaying comment by participant 3 is of particular interest, for it opens a new line of framing and reorders the participation framework. The Mayor is eliminated as a relevant direct addressee and the frame he started is dismissed, as the #justsaying statement by participant 3 is targeting the anti-LGBT turns made by participant 2. In addition, participant 3 connects his tweet explicitly with the Antwerp Pride by means of a string of topical hashtags. The tweet is shifted to another universe of meaning and another audience.

Like in example 4 above, the shift in participation framework is effective: participant 3 gets a reply from participant 2 after his #justsaying statement (example 6).



Example 6

(participant 2) There are less people throwing up when they see a plane, than people feeling sick when they see homosexual acts.

(participant 3) Because it suits them well. The reason ensures that a message can be shared. Now that is zum kotsen (sic). Tells a lot about people. But feel free to move to Russia if it annoys you that much.

A new format of action has been started: an escalating, one-on-one fight between both participants, on the issue of what constitutes or doesn't constitute "counternatural" conduct.

But there is more. The topical hashtags in participant 3's tweet caused a bigger shift in audience and universe of meaning, and so we get different lines of congregational work here. While participant 3 enters into an argument with participant 2, his #justsaying statement gets eight "likes" and a retweet from Twitter users not otherwise active in this thread. So, parallel to the one-on-one thread developing within a one-to-all interaction started by the Mayor, another one-to-all thread emerges, inviting very different forms of response.

We see the full complexity here of the actions involved in reframing, and we can represent them graphically (Figure 1). On Twitter, what we see is a thread opened by the Mayor's one-to-all tweet which triggers collective as well as individual responses, all of it within the frame initiated by the tweet (Frame 1 in figure 1). The thread, therefore, is a unit of action, but a composite and unstable one.³² Because the #justsaying comment by participant 3 shapes, within the thread, a different frame (Frame 2 in figure 1). In Frame 2, we also see collective as well as individual responses – we see the same genres of action, in other words – but they

³² In Szabla & Blommaert (2018) we analyzed a long discussion on Facebook and called the entire discussion (composed of the update, comments and subcomments) the "main action". In a more traditional sociolinguistic vocabulary, one can also see the overall unit of action the "event".

are performed in a frame shaped by the #justsaying statement by participant 3. This frame is only indirectly related to Frame 1, and it draws participant 2 – who reacted initially within Frame 1 to the Mayor’s tweet – into a different role and position, with a different interlocutor and with (partly) different audiences, on a different topic. The reframing of the actions means that they are thoroughly *reformatted*: while, formally, the participants in Frames 1 and 2 appear to do very similar things, the difference in frame turns their actions into very different kinds of normatively judged congregational work, creating different social facts.

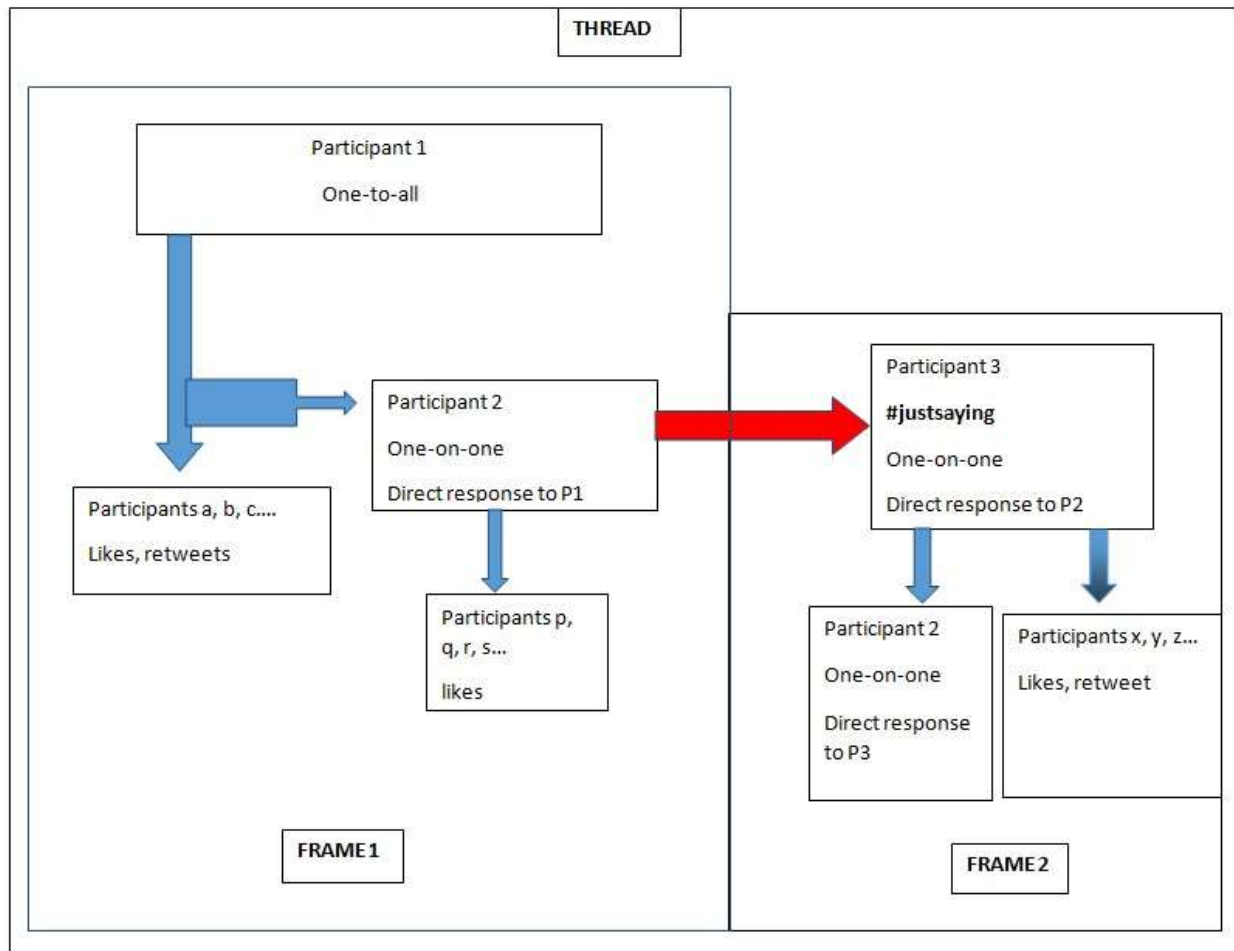


Figure 1: complex reframing actions in examples 5-6

What we see in this examples is how the hashtag #justsaying appears to “open up” a seemingly unified and straightforward activity to different forms of social action invoking, and thus proleptically scripting, different modes of participation and different modes of uptake, appraisal and evaluation. It interjects, so to speak, entirely different formats of action into a Goffmanian “realm”, enabling the shaping of very different “meaningful universes sustained by the activity”. As a framing device, #justsaying is thus more than a pragmatic-and-metapragmatic tool. It is something that proleptically signals various allowable modes of conduct and various forms of ratified participation and congregational work in social activities that appear, from a distance, simple and unified.

5. Hashtags and translingualism revisited

The latter remark takes us to fundamental issues in methodology. Many years ago, Goodwin & Goodwin (1992: 96) told us that “there are great analytical gains to be made by looking very closely at how particular activities are organized”. They made that point in a paper that demonstrated that what is usually perceived as one activity – a “conversation”, for instance – actually contains and is constructed out of a dense and complex web of distinct smaller actions, all of which have important contextualizing dimensions and many of which reorder the patterns of roles and normative scripts assumed by the participants. About participants, the Goodwins (2004) later also observed that the frequent use of generalizing category labels such as “speaker” and “addressee” again obscure important differences and shifts in the actual actions performed by participants in social interaction. One is not always an “addressee” *in the same way* during a speech by a “speaker”, for instance: sometimes one is a distant addressee, at other moments an involved one; one’s response behavior can be cool and detached at times and deeply engaged and emotional at others, positively sanctioning specific parts of the talk and negatively sanctioning others. The appeal launched (and continuously reiterated) by the Goodwins was for *precision in analyzing social action* as a key methodological requirement for discourse analysis, something they shared with the likes of Garfinkel and Goffman, and something that motivated my efforts in this paper. I tried to demonstrate that the interactional deployment of the hashtag #justsaying involved multiple and complexly related forms of social action, including the profound reframing of activities in such ways that morphologically similar actions (e.g. “likes” or comments) are formatted differently – they are part of different modes of making sense of what goes on.

The complexity of such discursive work, performed by means of a hashtag productive across the boundaries of conventionally established languages, to me demonstrates advanced forms of enregisterment and, by extension, of communicative competence (cf Agha 2005, 2007). This implies – it *always* implies – advanced forms of socialization, for enregisterment rests on the indexical recognizability of specific semiotic forms within a community of users who have acquired sufficient knowledge of the normative codes that provide what Goffman called “a foundation for form” (1975: 41). Translated into the discourse of translingualism, the complexity of discursive work performed by means of #justsaying demonstrates how translingual forms of this type have acquired a “foundation”, in Goffman’s terms, and operate as enregistered, “normal” features of semiotic repertoires within a community of users. Such users are able to recognize #justsaying (even across language boundaries) as indexing a shift in interactional conduct, introducing a different frame and allowing different forms of footing in what might follow. Translingual practice of this kind is an established social fact.

But recall the compelling appeal by the Goodwins: we must be precise here. The rules for such translingual practices as were reported here are not generic, they are *specific* to concrete chronotopically configured situations of social media communication: interactions on Twitter. The community of users, likewise, is ratified as competent in the use of such forms of discursive practice only within that area of social life – the valuation of their competence cannot be generalized or extrapolated without elaborate empirical argument. And so the translingual practice I have described here is a *niche* social fact, part (but only part) of the communicative economies of large numbers of people occasionally entering that niche.

The niche is new: at the outset of this paper I insisted that the use of hashtags in the way described here is a 21st century innovation, an expansion and complication of existing communicative economies. Which is why I find it exceedingly interesting, for novelty means

that people have to *learn* rules that are not explicitly codified yet; they have to actually engage in the practices and perform the congregational work required for an emerging code of adequate performance, in order to acquire a sense of what works and what doesn't. They cannot draw on existing sets of norms of usage. My analysis of #justsaying has, I believe, shown that the use of hashtags cannot be seen as an extension and continuation of prior forms of usage of the symbol “#” – the symbol is used in ways that are specific to the social media niche that emerged in the last couple of decades, and the rules for its deployment are, thus, developed through congregational work performed by people who had no pre-existing script for its usage. As mentioned before, the value of semiotic resources (such as the hashtag) and the identities of its users (as competent members of a community of users) emerge out of the actions performed.

In that sense and from that methodological perspective, the use of hashtags directs our attention to fundamental aspects of the organization of social life, of meaning making, of interaction, and of language. There is room now for a theorization of translanguaging in which, rather than to the creative bricolage of cross-linguistic resources, we focus on complex and niched social actions in which participants try to observe social structure through their involvement in situations requiring normatively ratified practice – I'm paraphrasing Cicourel (1973) here – in emerging and flexible communities populating these niches of the online-offline nexus.

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Chapter 8

From the Self to the Selfie

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Introduction

The central thesis of this chapter is that, since the beginning of the 21st century, we live in a social and cultural environment that has undergone fundamental and unprecedented changes due to the integration of online infrastructures in the patterns of everyday life conduct.³³ Since then, we inhabit the online-offline nexus, and while both zones have characteristics of their own, both have deeply influenced each other and must be seen as one sociocultural, economic and political habitat. This habitat is as yet poorly theorized, since we continue to rely largely on social theories and methodologies developed to account for patterns and structures characterizing offline conduct: theories of the Self. Such theories now need to be complemented by theories of the “Selfie” – the online configurations and performances of identity observable as normal, default modes of identity work in the online-offline nexus.

In what follows, we shall present a number of proposals for addressing the Selfie. These proposals will be grounded in an action-centered perspective on identity – to be explained at length in the next section – which, in our view, is necessitated by a fundamental feature of online social life: the absence of physical copresence in interaction situations, leading to a lack of the mutual monitoring work which was so central in, for instance, Goffman’s work as a means to achieve *knowledge of the other* (e.g. Goffman 1966). The other appears online, as all of us know, as a technologically-mediated avatar of which the “real” features cannot be established through the cues we so generously display in offline interactions. In examining online social conduct, consequently, knowledge of who the interlocutor is never an a priori but *an effect of concrete social action*, and while performing such actions knowledge of the other is *presumptive* or even speculative. Such action – interaction, to be precise – needs to be central in any methodologically safe approach to online identity.

We shall illustrate these proposals by means of two analytical vignettes, both taken from research on online identity practices on the Chinese internet. China, it must be underscored, offers the student of digital culture perhaps the richest panorama of phenomena and processes presently available. This is due to the massive spread of online (and mobile) online applications, the highly integrated and powerful nature of such applications, and the extraordinarily intense usage of these applications by a very large population. Details on this will be offered below. There is another advantage to working on online data from China: the advanced surveillance culture that pervades the Chinese internet and which has often been

³³We dedicate this paper to the memory of our colleague Fons van de Vijver, who passed away in 2019. The paper was written for a volume he had been co-editing. We gratefully acknowledge the input of the subjects discussed in this paper for their permission to use data from their performances in this paper. Piia Varis’ constructive criticism was crucial in getting the argument of the paper right.

critically commented upon by outside observers. But while this surveillance culture is known and visible in the case of China, it is not exceptional at all. Surveillance culture is omnipresent in the online sphere wherever it occurs, to the extent that Zuboff (2019) speaks of “surveillance capitalism” as the system which we now inhabit.

This omnipresent surveillance culture has an important effect for what follows, since online identities – Selfies – always have two major dimensions: an “inside” one, referring to the identity work performed and inhabited by participants in online social action; and an “outside” one performed and ascribed by algorithmically configured data fed into user profiles. While all of us perform intense identity work whenever we operate online, all of us are simultaneously identified – through data aggregations – by surveillance operators active on a metalevel. There, we get an inversion: while the other is often unknown to everyday actors in everyday online interaction, the data-generated metaconstructions of profiles are all about *full knowledge* of the actor. While in what follows we shall be concerned mainly with the “inside” dimension, one should keep in mind that both dimensions of identity need to be addressed in order to get a comprehensive picture of the Selfie.

An action-centered perspective

Let us reiterate the main reason why we opt for an action-centered perspective on online identity work, for it is of great significance methodologically. In online social environments, the “true” identity of actors involved in some form of social action is, by default, a matter of presumption. We assume that we are having a “discussion” with our “online friends”, and we notice comments from online friends X, Y and Z. X, Y and Z may not (and very often *are* not) be people we encounter in the offline sphere; consequently, the only identity we can attribute to them is based on what they themselves show and display to us while we engage in interaction with them.

Such online interaction, as we know,

- (a) is mostly *scripted-designed* and multimodal interaction;
- (b) performed by people we can identify only on the basis of what their *profile information* reveals; this information can be restricted by privacy settings, it can be misleading or outright fake;
- (c) it is *curated* in the sense that the actor can modify, edit, reorganize and even remove the messages deployed in the interaction and
- (d) *technologically mediated* through the algorithms of the application we are using, ensuring continuously adjusted “bubbles” of participants selected for involvement on data-analytical grounds. So even if we wish to direct our message to, say, all 2536 of my “friends”, we can never be sure that all of them will see that message, and we ourselves (the “senders” of the message in traditional communication theory) cannot see who can see our message. Thus, while we are directly chatting with X, Y and Z, a few hundred others – whom we do not (and cannot) know – may be witnessing the exchanges.
- (e) It is *archivable* in several ways: one, as part of our own archive of stored interactions; two, converted into user data gathered, ordered, kept and transformed by app providers, network owners, hardware manufacturers and security agencies; and dispatched to a market of customers interested in what Zuboff (2019: 8) calls “behavioral futures”. The latter form of “recycling”, note, is constant: all online actions are converted into behavioral-predictive data.

Online interaction, seen from that angle, is *nonlinear* and defies common models of communication dependent on the transparency of the communication and its resources, including the participants' identities (individual and collective), the nature of the interaction and the message and their trajectories as consequential or inconsequential communicative events. Online interaction, we can see, is characterized by complexity, uncertainty and low predictability, which makes it hard to squeeze into ideal-type theoretical models.

Online interaction, however, remains observable *as social action*. And while we can say very little with any degree of a priori certainty about the nature of the interactions, the resources deployed in them and the individuals and collectives involved in them, the actions themselves can be used as a lead into all of this enabling *post hoc* statements on these aspects of action. Put simply: if we want to know online identities, we need to closely examine online actions.

This heuristic puts us firmly within a long lineage of interactionalist work – a tradition of social thought and methodology with roots in American Pragmatism and Phenomenology, mediated by George Herbert Mead (1934) and Alfred Schütz (1967), and developed by scholars such as Erving Goffman (e.g. 1966, 1974), Herbert Blumer (1969, 2004), Aaron Cicourel (1973), Anselm Strauss (1993), Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966), Harold Garfinkel (1967, 2002) and many others.³⁴

A number of principles characterize this tradition.

6. The first and most important principle is that of *interactional co-construction of social facts* – the assumption that whatever we do in social life is done in collaboration, response or conflict with others. In fact, the people mentioned above argue that one can only talk of social action when it is *interaction* (e.g. Strauss 1993: 21), and for Blumer (1969: 7) “a society consists of individuals interacting with one another”.
7. Interaction, in turn, is “making sense” of social order in concrete situations – this is the second principle. For the scholars mentioned, social order and social structure does not exist in an abstract sense but is enacted constantly by people in contextualized, situated moments of interaction. In Garfinkel's famous words (1967: 9), in each such moment we perform and co-construct social order “for another first time”. The social is *concrete*, ongoing and evolving, in other words.
8. The third principle is derived straight from Mead and can be summarized as follows: “we see ourselves through the way in which others see and define us” (Blumer 1969: 13). Somewhat more precisely, “organisms in interaction are observing each other's ongoing activity, with each using portions of the developing action of the other as pivots for the redirection of his or her own action” (Blumer 2004: 18). This is the essence of Mead's understanding of the Self: it is greatly influenced by anticipated responses from the others, and adjusted accordingly. The Self can thus never be an essence, a fixed characteristic, an a priori attribute of people: it is a situationally co-constructed performance ratified by others. Of course, Goffman's work has greatly contributed to our understanding of this.

³⁴ The work of scholars listed here has become known under a variety of labels, from ‘grounded theory’ (Strauss) and ‘social constructivism’ (Berger & Luckmann) to ‘symbolic interactionism’ (Blumer), ‘cognitive sociology’ (Cicourel) and ‘ethnomethodology’ (Garfinkel). To all of them, the label ‘ethnography’ can equally be applied. By using the term ‘interactionist’ we point to the fact that these disparate efforts are tied together by the shared basic-theoretical principles to be discussed next. The work of Anne Warfield Rawls (e.g. 2002; 2004) is exceptionally insightful in sketching the bigger picture of action-centered epistemologies connecting such different schools.

9. Fourth, we do this interactional monitoring and anticipating of the others' responses on the basis of an assumption of *recognizability*. When we experience something as meaningful, as something that “makes sense” to us, by recognizing it *as something specific* (cf. Garfinkel 1967: 9), a token of a type of meaningful acts which we can ratify as such. These types of acts can be called “genres” (Blommaert 2018: 51); Garfinkel called them “formats” (2002: 245), and Goffman (1974) theorized them as “frames”.
10. Fifth, all of the preceding has a major implication for how we see the Self, how we theorize it and address it in research. Rawls' (2002: 60) comment on Garfinkel nicely captures it, and the point can be extended to almost all the work in the tradition addressed here. Individual subjectivity, she writes,

“which had originally been thought of as belonging to the actor, [was relocated] in the regularities of social practices. (...) [A] population is constituted not by a set of individuals with something in common but by a set of practices common to particular situations or events”.

That means that actions generate those who are involved in them, or to quote Rawls again, we see “situations that provide for the appearances of individuals” (2002: 46), and not vice versa. Converted into the vocabulary of this book: *identities, individual and collective, are effects of social actions* and not their ontological and methodological point of departure. They constitute, as it were, the “personnel” of social actions.³⁵

Having sketched the main principles of the action-centered approach we shall use here, our task is now to link it to the specific characteristics of online interactions, as reviewed earlier. Specific forms of interaction will demand and afford specific forms of identity work and yield specific identities; the specific nature of online interactions, thus, may compel us to focus on identities that are not often seen as essential, “thick” or enduring. But they are identities, to be sure – Selfies rather than Selves. That means: they are concrete, interactionally ratified (and thus *relational*) inhabited-and-ascribed roles in online social action, recognizable as such by others and constituted out of a number of specific identity dimensions.

Our analytic vignettes will provide arguments.

Becoming an expert user of memes.

The internet is a mammoth informal learning environment, and *learning* practices, broadly taken, are among the most frequently performed online social actions. Search engine commands are of course cases in point, but even when people engage in discussions, chats or other forms of “ludic” activities, learning appears as one of the main dimension of action. Since online environments are also sites of extremely rapid innovation and change, continuous learning needs to be done in order to enter specific groups of users or remain a ratified member of such communities.

We enter the realm here of so-called “light” relationships, identities and communities, carried along and given substance by means of “light”, ludic practices of the kind so often described by Goffman (e.g. 1961, 1966) – practices not often attributed too much importance when

³⁵To make this point very clear, observe that all of this evidently excludes methodological individualism from the theoretical repertoire of the interactionist tradition. See Blommaert (2018: 36-37) for a discussion.

seen from the outside, but often experienced as highly salient by participants and worthy of very considerable efforts (Blommaert & Varis 2015). Attention to such light phenomena is not a mainstream tactic in disciplines explicitly interested in identities. Yet it connects with the interactionist tradition we chose to align our approach with, and in which there was an outspoken interest in the mundane, routine phenomena in which social order could be observed and made palpable. We adopt from this tradition the view that the big things in society can be observed and understood in seemingly small and innocuous events.

Let us now turn to some data gathered from Sina Weibo and WeChat, China's largest social media providers. As mentioned earlier, China's online infrastructure offers a fertile terrain for the study of digital culture, unmatched perhaps by any other area in the contemporary world. The reasons for this are manifold and range from the sheer scale of the infrastructure (with nearly a billion people using online tools); the level of sophistication of social media platforms in which functions elsewhere requiring dozens of separate apps are integrated into one platform; the intensity of use of online infrastructures, notably of social media; and the specific features of Chinese language and culture played out in online activities (Du Caixia 2016; Li Kunming 2018; Wang Xuan 2018; Hua Nie 2018; Lu Ying 2018). The latter is of special interest when we feed it back to one of the core features of online interactions: their scripted-designed multimodal nature. The specific characteristics of Chinese script constitute tremendous affordances for wordplay, neologisms and graphic design based on scriptural elements (Hua Nie 2018).

Several such affordances are played out in what is known elsewhere as “memes”, and as “Biaoqingbao” in online China.³⁶ Biaoqingbao are (like memes) compound signs consisting of an image and – usually – a caption. Images can be summary, like line drawings, but also intricate and manipulated, as when a celebrity's face is pasted upon a panda bear's head; in every instance, such doctored images convey interactionally recognizable and ratified emotive meanings – anger, surprise, laughter, aggression, but also more finely tuned emotive responses. Captions often use existing Chinese characters with a twist – playing into the homophony of characters to produce sarcastic or ironic wordplay, obscenities or covert sociopolitical critique, and they sometimes acquire a long and fruitful life as constantly morphing, multifunctional signs (cf. Du Caixia 2016; Hua Nie 2018). Memes can become extraordinarily popular with millions of shares and instances of use, and Biaoqingbao designers can become minor online celebrities with a large cohort of followers whose electronically transmitted cash donations turn Biaoqingbao design into a profitable business venture (Lu Ying 2018). One specific mode of usage of Biaoqingbao is in what is known as “emoticon fights”, in which interactions are organized around the exchange of Biaoqingbao, each time trying to trump (or “defeat”) the opponent.

We have, in this brief survey of Biaoqingbao, already identified identity effects. Highly talented Biaoqingbao designers can acquire celebrity status and function as the recognized leaders of a community of followers. In addition, such success can move them into a more prosperous socio-economic position in Chinese society, outside of the formal economy and labor market. Manufacturing complex, witty and appealing Biaoqingbao is, thus, an activity that can shift positions in a field (to use Bourdieu's 1993 well-known terms here), and such position shifts are, in effect, identity shifts as well.

³⁶What follows is based on Lu Ying's online fieldwork, part of her ongoing doctoral research on Biaoqingbao, its modes of usage and community of users.

But there is more. The relationship between Biaoqingbao makers and their followers, and among members of the users' community as well, is characterized by *hierarchies* within a learning community. An example can make this clear.

In 2016, a complex and composite meme appeared on Weibo, displaying fragments of nine classic paintings in a certain sequence (figure 1).



Figure 1: “posh” Biaoqing

The captions added to the painting fragments describe the emotional value attached to them, in phrases such as “Rembrandt style fright” and “Dutch mannerism onlooking”. And in her post, the maker of the Biaoqingbao wrote “please help yourself to Biaoqingbao” – an explicit invitation to start using the memes in the ways she had described.

What followed was a stampede towards these “posh Biaoqingbao”, with many thousands of people expressing an interest in them and inquiring about specific ways to use them. Such ways, the Biaoqing maker explained, would bespeak a cultured and sophisticated stance: using them in online exchanges would suggest an advanced level of education, erudition and taste. People quickly followed, reposting the original meme, designing and submitting some of their own making, and commenting extensively on the qualities and defects of all of them and offering informed suggestions as to their interpretation and potential of use in emoticon fights. In Garfinkel's (2002) terms, we were observing “instructed action”, in which people tried, explored and implemented each other's suggestions – and most prominently those of the Biaoqingbao maker – in discussions, negotiations and trials.

Let us rephrase some of what we have encountered so far. We observe how, around the new Biaoqingbao, a *knowledge community* is formed in which different levels of knowledge define the relationships between members. The Biaoqingbao maker is the instructor, so to speak, and within the community of followers definite differences could be noted between more and less “experienced” commentators. Newcomers in the rapidly expanding community had to submit to processes of learning-from-scratch or acquire a place as a competent member by displaying relevant experiences with similar signs and practices. *Rules were made, learned, deployed and modified* throughout the process of community formation and consolidation. And an online practice that had no previous history of usage quickly became a

normatively ordered, mutually ratified and regulated mode of interaction. This process of normative ordering and mutual ratification, in addition, enabled the display of a sophisticated, cultured and educated persona in online interactions. The hierarchical internal structure of the learning community, thus, enabled new forms of outward identity work in confrontations with non-members.

The amount of energy used in this process of formation and consolidation of an online learning community are tremendous, and the magnitude of the efforts can be measured by the money donations offered by grateful followers to Biaoqingbao makers. Thus, even if what we observe here is easy to dismiss as mere entertainment and innocent just-for-fun interaction, elementary processes of social ordering, identity formation and group construction are being shown in the process. This process, let us note and emphasize, is a process of *action construction* – the joint construction of a specific genre of online social action – and the way in which the process develops is through a wide and layered variety of learning practices, of which individual and collective identities are an outcome. Such identities, note, are exclusively *online* identities, and their construction, elaboration and development require the specific infrastructures of online social spaces.

The care of the Selfie

The same goes for the phenomena we now turn to. One of the features offered on Chinese social media platforms is a live streaming app called Zhibo, and this function has become widely used for the development of new, informal forms of online economy. Goods and services are traded via online streaming platforms, and mobile money transfer (another function of the platforms we consider here) enables swift and safe transactions.³⁷ Li Kunming (2018: 129) reports more than 200 livestreaming platforms, with an audience estimated, in 2016, to have reached 325 million – half of the Chinese online population.

One particular commodity has become widely popular on Zhibo: female beauty. Women open online chat rooms where they entertain a male audience; income is generated by “gifts” that can be purchased through the app and sent in real time to the chatroom host. Chat room apps would offer a range of such gifts in various price categories, from a relatively cheap “kiss” to an awfully expensive “Ferrari” or “diamond”. Before we move to consider some aspects of identity construction in such chat rooms, a more general observation has to be made with respect to the characterization of online interaction we provided earlier.

In Goffman’s terms, much of what we observe in the way of online interaction would be *disembodied* communication (1966: 14), and scripted messages or memes, such as the ones we surveyed in the previous section, would be typical instances of such disembodied communication. Obviously, interaction through livestreaming is *not* disembodied, and there is even copresence enabling the kind of give-and-take of visual clues in realtime that Goffman described in such detail. In livestreaming events, we can speak of real encounters in the sense of Goffman (1961). There is a twist, however, and the twist is significant. First, while we obviously observe embodied interactions here, the communicating body is technologically mediated, and the same goes for the aspect of copresence. The women in the chat rooms appear on a screen – usually that of a handheld device – and they usually are visible only from the waist up. And their bodies are just part of what is displayed on the

³⁷ What follows is largely based on Li Kunming’s (2018) PhD research (cf. also Li & Blommaert 2017). Additional information was obtained from Lin Jie through her ongoing fieldwork, and we gratefully acknowledge her input.

screen, as we can see from Figure 2. Next to the woman's face, icons and message balloons constantly appear, and they are crucial parts of the interaction.

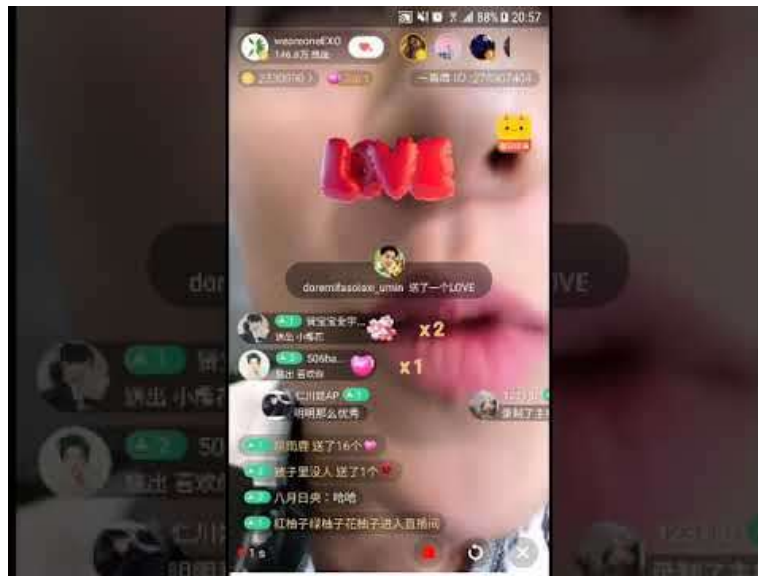


Fig. 2: Yizhibo chat room. © YouTube 2017.³⁸

The embodied interaction, thus, is scripted, edited and curated, and it is multimodal and asymmetrical: while the woman can be heard by her audience members, the latter can only communicate to her by means of scripted messages; and while the woman is visible, her audience members remain invisible – their presence is attested through the messaging and the sending of gifts. The broad genre in these interactions can be described as flirting. The women show themselves, they move, talk, sing and respond to messages and icons of their audience, by expressing affection and gratitude. Thus, the woman in figure 2 kisses her webcam as a reward for a gift just received from one of her audience members. And this is the point where we see a tremendous amount of identity work being performed.

The women do not come online unprepared. There are certain normative templates for expressing femininity, and Li (2018) elaborates on the template called *Baifumei* – a Chinese term composed of “white-attractive-wealthy” and widely used to describe a particular ideal of feminine beauty. *Baifumei* are women with a pale skin, an oval-shaped face, eyes somewhat bigger than average, and “Western” in looks and preferences. Such looks can be acquired by elaborate and detailed make-up schemes, using specific brand creams, lipstick shades, eyeliner and mascara; and also by using electronic filters contained in the app for making the eyes look somewhat bigger and for adjusting the outline of the woman's face. What audiences see in such chat rooms is clearly a Selfie – an electronically mediated and configured self-representation, necessitating great care whenever we refer to “embodiment” as a feature of these interactions.

Intricate behavioral scripts also need to be deployed and followed in interacting with the audiences as well. While a degree of vulgarity – expressed, for instance, in jokes, songs or wordplay – is not discouraged, obscenity clearly is. Women can present themselves as erotic, but they should not, and do not, undress in front of the camera, and too overtly sexualized moves or utterances would also be discouraged. The point is to be *attractive* to the men with

³⁸ This image is a still from a YouTube clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WlYkXNIt3yc>

whom they interact, to show attention and affection to them, to even express love to them – but all of this in ways that steer clear of associations with pornography and prostitution. The latter, of course, are criminal offences in China, and it is vital for the women to remain within the boundaries of what is politically, culturally, socially and legally acceptable.

This is important for several reasons. One – the obvious one – is that no one searches for trouble with the Law. But two aspects are equally important. There is the economic aspect, enabling the women to earn very considerable amounts of money (and to become financially independent that way) as long as their online performance satisfies the various normative expectations articulated and imposed by audiences, providers and authorities. And there is a social aspect to it as well: women can be free to flirt with men online in ways that, in offline China, could be perceived as deviant or offensive, and could have a range of undesired consequences. In other words: it is crucial that the women *only* perform their flirtatious practices online, as it keeps them safe and autonomous socially as well as economically. No wonder, then, that almost all women operate under an artist name: what they do online has to be and remain exclusively online.³⁹

Let us summarize what we have covered in this vignette. The self-presentation of women in Zhibo chat rooms is governed by an elaborate “care of the Selfie” (a term obviously inspired by Foucault 1986, 2003). This care of the Selfie consists of a very wide range of normatively ordered actions aimed at creating and performing an identity *exclusively designed for the online environment* in which it is played out. It is *proleptic* identity work, anticipating the criteria of one’s audience and adjusting one’s appearance accordingly prior to seeking the audience’s uptake. The actions consist of preparatory practices organizing the presentation of the body online, as well as of interactional practices aimed at successfully performing the identity for which men are ready to present gifts. All of them combined are very real forms of identity – critical identities that enable women to acquire an income and a degree of autonomy hard to acquire elsewhere in society.

Conclusions

Our two vignettes showed how *specific online actions generate specific online identities*. These identities bear similarities, naturally, with other known forms of identity, especially when we compare them with the “light” but socially important identities described by Goffman, Garfinkel and others. At the same time, when we look at the details of identity construction in the cases we discussed, the influence of the online technological infrastructure is compelling. We are facing identity work here that is partly recognizable in terms of older established categories of identity, but which is at the same time entirely new in its loci and conditions for production.

The scale of such phenomena, and the pace of their production, circulation and change are tremendous, and this was one reason why we chose to illustrate our general points with examples from online China. Both the routine and ritualized exchange of Biaoqingbao, and the Zhibo chat rooms where female beauty is played out for male audiences, are very

³⁹ Li Kunming (2018) observes that many of the women who run such chat rooms hail from remote and socio-economically marginal areas in China. They very often lack the qualifications for upward mobility in the formal labor market, and their online economic activities are one way of compensating for such disadvantages. Note that successful women in this business can make millions and acquire the status of celebrity in online China.

widespread phenomena involving hundreds of millions of individuals. These, in other words, are not marginal phenomena, they are *structural* ones.

Addressing them, however, demands an action-oriented approach in which the specific forms of online social action are examined in a search for their “personnel”, for the identities they allow, invite, enable and ratify. An approach in which we start from what is known about offline life risks bypassing the crucial effects of the online infrastructures on what is possible in the way of social action. It so risks to overlook the most important insight to be gathered from cases such as these: the fact that people have integrated online environments into their everyday social worlds, and that they have become fully competent members of a changed society that way, doing and being different things than before, and attaching great value to those things.

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