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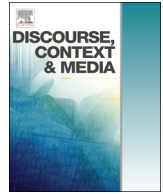
Power relations in social media discourse: Dialogization and monologization on corporate Facebook pages

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ABSTRACT

Social media have inspired optimistic claims of empowerment of consumers vis-à-vis corporations; however, an ongoing commercialization of online contexts may compromise such equalization. This study takes a critical discourse studies perspective and contributes to a nuanced understanding of discursive power relations between companies and consumers on social media by analyzing the possibilities that corporate Facebook pages provide for consumer participation and criticism and for corporate manipulation of discourse. To do this, the study draws from Bakhtin's view of dialogue to shed light on contextual and discoursal features which operate to either promote or silence voices. We show how the features of Facebook provide methods for "monologization" making the discourse appear participative while still controlling which voices are heard.

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1. Introduction

The current popularity of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, has resulted in the widespread use of these online media by companies for their public relations and marketing activities (Barnes et al., 2015; Barnes and Mattson, 2008; Verhoeven et al., 2012). As social media enable and emphasize interaction, corporate use of these media has often been discussed from the point of view of "dialogue" with consumers—the claim often put forward is that "[d]ialogue and participation is what social media is all about" (Baird and Parasnis, 2011). This typical feature of social media also means that an increasing number of people are able to publicly voice their opinions to and about companies and their activities. It has been argued that, in this way, interactive online media can empower consumers who have traditionally had little clout when dealing with large companies (Cova and Pace, 2006; Füller et al., 2009; Shankar et al., 2006). Such public discourse is potentially significant if it draws attention to or influences corporate activities that impact for example the environment, health or culture.

While consumers may be empowered in some ways, companies are still powerful players on the increasingly commercialized internet. New online communication technologies have a central role in contemporary capitalism (e.g. Fairclough, 2002; Thurlow, 2013), and indeed, as Fairclough (2002) argues, commercial interest has turned online media into a key context for "processes of economic calculation, manipulation and design" of semiosis. Arguably, then, there is an ongoing power struggle taking place between corporations and consumers in online contexts.

Such power struggles have been investigated through critical discourse studies (CDS), which is fundamentally interested in the analysis of "structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language" (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). CDS also provides a useful perspective for examining power in online discourse (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014). A common view of power within CDS is that social power, increasingly manifested in and through language (e.g. Fairclough, 1989), is based on "preferential access to public discourse and communication", for example through mass media (van Dijk, 1996). This access to participation is a highly relevant perspective in online contexts, as the interactivity of current online media can widen access to public discourse (e.g. Gee, 2015). In contrast, some studies point to corporate manipulation (i.e., illegitimate control by means of discourse; van Dijk, 2006a) in online contexts. Thurlow (2013), for example, argues that corporate social media, rooted in neoliberal ideologies of commerce, can be more aptly described as "synthetic media" as these types of media are based on highly stylized, commoditized notions of language and communication and, instead of generating real interaction or dialogue, foster a kind of "pseudo-sociality". Some researchers also criticize social media for

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their potential to exploit consumers as a type of free labor (Comor, 2011; Fuchs, 2014; Kozinets et al., 2008).

In the present article, we contribute to a critical line of discourse research in online contexts by examining power relations between companies and consumers on corporate Facebook pages. In particular, we focus on consumer access to the production of public discourse and resources for corporate manipulation in online contexts. To do this, we draw from Bakhtin's view of dialogue to examine the rather vague notion of "access" (van Dijk, 1996) as the presence of multiple independent voices in a text (polyphony) (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1986). This approach asserts that polyphonic dialogue involves, firstly, basic interactive or responsive properties of language and, secondly, a less common process, carnivalization, which is the discursive equivalent of the medieval carnival; it overturns the rules and power relations of ordinary life (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984a, 1984b, 1986). Through this framework, we focus on the struggle between two contradicting tendencies: how these "dialogizing" discursive tendencies—together with the opposite, "monologizing" tendencies—operate to either encourage or silence voices in this online context. Our study aims to show how, through what discursive features, divergent voices are promoted and silenced on corporate Facebook pages. The data consist of two sets: (a) textual material collected from four corporate Facebook pages and (b) semi-structured interviews with six professionals who work on those specific pages. The interviews were conducted to increase our understanding of the context of the discourse. We adopt the discourse analytical framework presented by van Dijk (2009, 2014) which covers context as well as semantic and formal discourse structures. Throughout, we locate and zoom in particularly on the Bakhtinian aspects mentioned above.

Applying this theoretical framework, we are able to show how the features of a social media platform, Facebook, can influence access to discourse production and provide methods for manipulating it, making the discourse appear participative while still controlling which voices are heard. This demonstrates that social media platforms do not necessarily provide a level playing field for discourse participants, but instead help to skew power relations in favor of one side.

2. CDS and power

Power relations are a central concern in the field of CDS. In this field, a primary aim is to describe and explain how social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted in text and talk (e.g. Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 2001; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). The interest is not in the power of individuals, but in social power which may be defined as control by members of one group on the actions or minds of another (van Dijk, 1996). Through discourse, powerful participants may control the contributions of non-powerful participants, constraining their freedom of action or influencing, for example, their attitudes or ideologies (Fairclough, 1989; van Dijk, 1996). Power relations are not immutable or merely one-sided, however, as there is always a possibility to resist (Foucault, 1976)—power and resistance appear as a complex mixture, as struggle (e.g. Fleming, 2007). This is why we choose to look at both the features that enable and those that hamper the discursive power of consumers.

Underlying CDS views on power are such theoretical underpinnings as Lukes's (1974) view of power as the discrete shaping of agendas and people's wants and preferences, not only as observable conflicts. In fact, in democratic societies power is often persuasive and manipulative instead of coercive (using force) or incentive (using commands, sanctions) (van Dijk, 1996). Manipulation is a form of illegitimate mind control by means of

discourse, which serves the interests of the manipulator while usually acting against the best interests of the recipients (van Dijk, 2006a).

Power is based on a privileged access to valued social resources such as wealth or public discourse, which means that dominant groups may influence others for example through their access to media (van Dijk, 1996, 2006a). The producers of media discourse exercise power over its consumers as "they have sole producing rights and can therefore determine what is included and excluded, how events are represented, and […] even the subject positions of their audiences" (Fairclough, 1989). Mass media and their role in "manufacturing consent" (Herman and Chomsky, 1988) has indeed long been a key concern of CDS. With the advent of interactive online media, however, a clear division between producers and consumers of media discourse is blurring (e.g. Comor, 2011; Deuze, 2007; Kozinets et al., 2008). Kelsey and Bennett (2014), for example, argue that the internet has a potentially liberating power in certain cases; even though institutions exert power in social media, the interactive environment may cause that power to be less monolithic and produce oppositions, resistance and negotiated power.

In research on online media, it is important to avoid deterministic and simplistic representations of discourse (Thurlow, 2013; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011) and a single-minded focus on medium specificities. Instead, it has been argued that it is important to conduct more contextualized studies, with the aim of making connections between communicative events on these media and larger economic, political and historical processes (Georgakopoulou, 2006; Kelsey and Bennett, 2014). A CDS and power perspective is appropriate for bringing these kinds of macro-level contextual processes into light; at the same time, attention to micro-level contextual features is needed, because dimensions of power "shift according to the contextual environments in which they are produced and consumed" (Kelsey and Bennett, 2014).

3. Bakhtinian dialogue as an approach to power in online discourse

In building a theoretical framework that allows us to shed light on discursive power relations in the interactive social media environment, we draw from Bakhtin's ideas on dialogue. Although originally developed for literary studies, this theoretical approach has been usefully applied to various contexts such as studying organizations (Belova et al., 2008) or second language learning (Hall et al., 2004).

From this perspective, one way to conceptualize dialogue is to see it as polyphony, where differing voices are particularly apparent and show the diversity and complexity of human experience (Bakhtin, 1984a). Bakhtin considered polyphony desirable, as opposed to monologue or monologization, which fixes meanings and accepts only one perspective: "Monologue is finalized and deaf to other's response, does not expect it and does not acknowledge in it any force" (Bakhtin, 1984a). Monologue objectifies others instead of accepting them as another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities (Bakhtin, 1984a). Dialogue, in contrast, leads to discourse that is relativized, de-privileged, and aware of competing definitions [Holquist, in Bakhtin (1981)]. Therefore both acceptance of the presence of other voices and openness to the possibility of being influenced by them are central characteristics of Bakhtinian dialogue.

Dialogization is supported by carnivalization, which refers to adopting, in a text, the central features of the carnivalistic world view of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance (Bakhtin, 1981, 1984a). The carnival, a play without a separation between performers and audience, turned ordinary life with its rules and hierarchies upside down: it was characterized by alternation,