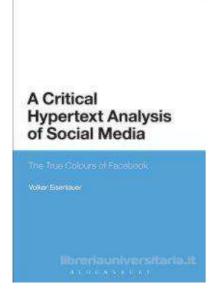# A Critical Hypertext Analysis of Social Media. The True Colors of Facebook

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Since the spread and popularization of the Internet made Computer-Mediated-Communication (CMC) a mass phenomenon in the past couple of decades, theoretical and empirical research in the field has grown substantially. Multiple perspectives and approaches have been adopted from multiple in order to describe and analyze the many facets of virtual interactions and their consequences for the formation and maintenance of human relations. Indeed, the peculiarities of CMC and of virtual environments have influenced the way people project their own identity in such spaces. Participation in Web 2.0 social spaces, and Social Network Sites specifically, is different both from traditional communication and from other virtual communicative spaces such as newsgroups, discussion boards or chats.

This volume adds new insights and contributes to gain a deeper understanding of the mass phenomenon of social media use online from a perspective that studies the influence of the software service on the textual actions performed by participants to social media sites, specifically Facebook[2]. Interpersonal relationships and presentation of one's identity online are mediated by the automated functions of the software: the book "puts the focus on the more or less motivated discursive choices when users present themselves and communicate within Social Media" (iii). The software on which Facebook is built affects the users' "textual performances" (xv); the volume aims at identifying how this happens in relation to content, form and context.

The first Chapter sets the context of the study quite clearly, by providing thorough descriptions of the key concepts involved in the creation of a methodology framework and in the analysis of both Facebook as a software service and the empirical corpus. The author introduces the notion of Web 2.0 as well as Social Media and Social Software, highlighting a number of related key concepts: interactivity of new web spaces;

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[2] www.facebook.com

focus on network-building and self-presentation, and how both elements are managed.. The author's own basic stance on technology and society is made clear: drawing on both the notions of technological and media determinism and social constructionism, Eisenlauer positions himself between these two poles as he "supports the notion of a mutual influence of social and technological factors" (13). A definition of Social Network Site (SNS) is provided as well as a description of the characteristics that typify SNS. A narrower definition exists alongside an expanded one, which may include other Web 2.0 spaces that are more oriented to data sharing (e.g. Flickr; YouTube) and support different kinds of social relations: business, romantic, etc. The attention then shifts to Facebook, of which the main social aims and elements are illustrated with the aid of visuals or simplified graphics. The influence of the software service into the users' discursive practices is clarified within this chapter, as the software service is identified as a third author who "gradually intervenes in the communicative flow between profile owners (first authors) and profile recipients (second authors)" (42).

The users' text actions on Facebook are therefore not neutral, but on the other hand, directed, sometimes heavily, by the structure and constraints of the software itself.

Chapter 2 provides more theoretical background and introduces the framework of Critical Hypertext Analysis (CHTA), which draws from Computer-Mediated-Communication. The CHTA framework is a model devised and proposed by the author himself specifically for the analysis of the SNS Facebook. However, while the methodology was developed with Facebook in mind, "is well suited to assess the medial impact of various other Social Media environments" (98). This is an added value to the book, which, in addition to a thorough theoretical and empirical analysis of Facebook, provides readers with a sound analytical approach that may be applied to other Social Network Sites. As the model is based preeminently on the concept of hypertext, the chapter provides a contrastive definition that highlights the difference with the traditional notion of text as well as the dynamic and interactive qualities of hypertexts. The reader is led through the process of identifying and defining the criteria that constitute the basis of the CHTA framework, namely "*multilinearity, fragmentation, interactivity, and multimodality*" (63, emphasis in original), which are interrelated. Hypertexts are analyzed according to the textuality standards introduced by Beaugarde and Dressler (1981), which are in turn applied to the specific nature and contexts of use of hypertexts. At the end of the Chapter the author wraps the discussion on hypertexts by presenting 13 vital questions emerging from the features and criteria illustrated in the previous pages: these research questions constitute the core of the CHTA framework (94-98) that the author employs for his analysis in the following chapter. Indeed, Chapter 3 is dedicated to the Critical Hypertext Analysis of Facebook as a software service. It builds on the notion of hypertext defined in the previous chapter, and it illustrates how "the specific functional properties of the Fb platform condition the semiotic choices of a Fb participant" (99). The questions introduced in chapter 2 are answered one by one in a clear and straightforward fashion.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus of the analysis from Facebook as a software service to the examination of empirical data: the author selected two small groups of Facebook users to monitor their activities on the social network and determine how often and how the 'third author' acted on behalf the users themselves.

The analysis includes an ethnographic element, as a questionnaire was administered to the subjects, and was carried out through a mixed approach, involving both quantitative and qualitative analysis of the data. Once again, Eisenlauer draws from traditional notions of linguistics, in this case pragmatics, and adapts them to the context at hand to create an analytical framework to examine Facebook's impact on user text action and acts of positioning and expression of identity. The application of speech act theory to Fb-bound actions allows the identification of categories that "account for the service's gradual impact on performance of user text actions" (159). Findings eventually showed that both groups perceived a loss of control "over their textual self-presentation" (201), part of it relating to activities by their contacts (second authors) or to Non-intended Text Actions that are automatically generated by processes of the software.

In Chapter 5, the author, draws conclusions from the findings illustrated in Chapters 3 and 4, putting emphasis on three main elements. Facebook may be conceived as an ideological tool, in the sense that it influences activities, introducing a new understanding of social reality as well as of time and space, of which

users are not fully conscious. Secondly, Eisenlauer highlights that the main function of Facebook, which is developing and maintaining social relations among users, is achieved through a standardization of the communicative actions. Pre-set templates and Automated Text Actions, "such as clicking the Like button" (212) shift agency from the user to the software itself, which in turn limits user activity. The third observation is directly linked to the second one and relates to the impact of standardized communicative actions on identity construction, with empirical data showing the existence of an ongoing conflict between pre-set templates and the user's own self-conception.

The volume is a valuable contribution to the road to deeper understanding of SNS and how they impact and change the way humans relate to one another in virtual environments. From the first to the last page, the writing is clear and accessible, allowing readers who are not necessarily CMC specialists to follow the development of the CHTA framework and its practical application in a straightforward, step-by-step way. Eisenlauer provides a sound and interesting model for the analysis of Social Networking Sites that may be applied outside the specific context of Facebook and which makes the book an extremely useful read for scholars working in this field.